OCTOBER 2019

Improving opportunities for professional women’s football

Discussion Paper

Women in Football Australia Inc
Introduction

The purpose of this discussion paper is merely that: to highlight some issues and to start a conversation around the W-League and the further development of professional or semi-professional women’s football.

Obviously, these are primarily matters for the day-to-day concern of football’s stakeholders such as the Australian Professional Football Clubs’ Association (APFCA), state member federations, FFA and their Women’s Council, Professional Footballers’ Australia, the Association of Australian Football Clubs, and the Football Coaches Association.

But they are also of interest to members of Women in Football and to the broader football community, and are presented here for debate, comment and feedback.

Women in Football Australia (Inc) is a network of women and men working in and around the football industry in Australia, either professionally or voluntarily, who support and champion women and girls in the game. For further information, see www.womeninfootball.org.au.
Current Status

Women's football today

Women’s football has never been bigger, both in Australia and globally.

In 2019, FIFA doubled the prize money at the World Cup to $44 million and they have indicated they will double it again to $88 million in 2023. This is also off the back of record television viewership and engagement in the 2019 World Cup in France announced by FIFA in October 2019.

The number of players is increasing at grassroots, semi-professional and professional levels worldwide.

In Australia, there were almost quarter-of-a-million adult women playing the game at grassroots level in 2015 and 165,000 girls aged 5-14 years.

The standard of the game at the elite level globally is going ahead in leaps and bounds.

In commercial terms, the average increase in sponsorship deals for women’s sport is around 37% and the share of sponsorship for women’s and girls’ football in clubs, federations and associations is estimated to have increase from around 13% to 19% in the past six years.

In Australia, there are more professional team sports for women than ever with eight competitions across Australian Rules, rugby league, cricket, netball, hockey, basketball, rugby and football.

Television viewership and attendance are increasing for most of these competitions, with women’s competition receiving positive media coverage underpinned by high profile women athletes, such as Sam Kerr, Ellyse Perry and Tayla Harris.
The metrics are also good and improving for football in Australia.

- Finals attendance for the W-League last season (2018-19) was 19,000 with a W-League grand final record of 6,000.
- All 57 games of the W-League were available live through SBS, FOX Sports and the My Football Live app in 2018-19; with the ABC taking the place of SBS in 2019-20.
- The Matildas participated in their seventh consecutive World Cup tournament, and have been ranked in the top 10 teams worldwide since 2011.
- Five Australian players were named in The Guardian’s top 100 players for 2019 with Sam Kerr named at number 2.
Earning a Living

However, despite an increase in salary for W-League players in recent years, the W-League average salary remains low and uncompetitive. Data from Sporting Intelligence as shown in Figure 1 shows that average salaries in comparable overseas leagues are all higher than Australia. What this means is that the top Australian W-League players are forced to play in an overseas league to receive a total salary approximating Australian Average Weekly Earnings (~$85k).

The NWSL in the USA has become the second league of choice for many W-League players because the seasons are aligned, and there are fewer hurdles in terms of culture and language differences.

However, it also means that players who play in both competitions are playing competitively around 46 weeks of the year which, in turn, leads to player burnout, fatigue and injury which, arguably, may have had an impact on the overall performance of the squad at the 2019 World Cup.

There were 42 players who played in both the W-League and NWSL in 2019 including 12 Matildas from the 2019 World Cup squad.

In addition to the financial issues and making a 'living wage', the Australian players need to play more games than the current W-League season entails also to maintain match fitness and peak performance levels, as the W-League has an insufficient number of matches.
Average salaries

Figure 1:
Comparison of average salaries in women's leagues

France: $75,000
Germany: $50,000
England: $25,000
USA: $0
Sweden: $0
Australia: $0
Playing Options

Earning a decent living without burnout

The options for players who do not wish to play 46 weeks a year are to:

- remain in Australia and play WNPL during the Australian winter;
- play in the W-League and an Asian League where currently only Japan, South Korea or perhaps China would be of sufficient standard;
- play in the W-League and Scandinavia, whose season is also complementary with the W-League;
- not play in the NWSL OR the W-League, but in the UK or continental Europe which has more money and stronger competition.
Tipping Point

We suggest that the W-League faces a threshold issue about its purpose.

1. Should the W-League compete with other high level women’s leagues and be amongst the best of the best? OR
2. Should the W-League be a development league to give as many young women players as possible an opportunity to play and to prepare them for possible national team duty?

While we appreciate the W-League’s future is now in the hands of APFCA, this is a mission critical issue for FFA and football’s stakeholders, and is an issue of relevance and interest to the broader football community.

In a nutshell, if it is to be one of the best leagues in the world, the W-League needs significant investment and attention from APFCA members – not just for the sake of the competition itself but also for Australia’s top players.

For example, Australia’s top players - bearing in mind we have five who are ranked in the top 100 players in the world – are likely to feel obligated to play in the W-League rather than join elite European competition because the W-League needs them.
However, the latter would arguably be a better move for them in terms of football - financially and performance-wise - than playing in the W-League in its current form.

Without improvement to the W-League, it is also likely to be the only way that players of the calibre of Samantha Kerr will receive just attention, recognition and reward internationally (eg. 'The Best' or Ballon d'Or awards).

If it is to be a development league, then we should:

- encourage our top players to take part in the best leagues,
- better integrate the W-League with other playing opportunities in Australia,
- introduce a nationally competitive second tier competition for women.
Issues

We highlight four issues below that we suggest need to be addressed, to a greater or lesser degree in the context of the decision about the type of league the W-League should be.

1. Play more games
   For the W-League to be competitive with the top European leagues, the long-term objective must be to increase the quality and attractiveness of the league by extending the W-League season and introducing more competitive opportunities.

   This could be achieved by:
   - a full home-and-away series with finals from 2020-21.
   - ensuring that all existing A-League licensees are required to have W-League teams by 2020-21 for Central Coast Mariners, Wellington Phoenix and Western United, and 2021-22 for Macarthur FC.
   - ensuring that all future A-League licensees are required to have W-League teams enter the competition in the same season as the A-League team.
   - advocating for an Asian Champions League competition for women. (In this regard, we welcome the recent announcement by the Asian Football Confederation to trial a mini-version of a women’s Asian Champions League).
   - increasing the number of visa players per squad. (If the W-League is a development league, we would advocate reducing the number of visa players).

   To support further development of the W-League and women’s football more generally, we would also like to see:
   - all future National Second Division licensees required to have women’s teams enter a NSD for women in the same season as the NSD commences.
   - the introduction of a FFA Cup for women.
2. More consistent match schedules and more competitive games

Another aspect that we believe requires addressing concerns the scheduling and location of matches, both from a fan perspective in terms of knowing where and when they can see a W-League match and from a player perspective in terms of a more professional league which helps attract and retain players.

Generally speaking, interest levels are higher in women’s sport when played together with the men’s equivalent. Evidence to support this includes cricket, athletics, tennis, football and Australian Rules.

An examination of W-League attendances in 2018-19 shows that attendances were better on average when there were double-headers with the A-League, as well as the Thursday night fixture. The latter is of interest because there is very little other professional sport happening midweek and it presents an opportunity to make that day and timeslot one that belongs to the W-League.

Outside of these occasions, the W-League should be afforded a regular and consistent day, timeslot and venue for their matches, and a venue that provides good quality facilities for players and fans.

The peripatetic nature of home games for some W-League teams is not professional, it is not fan-friendly, it does not contribute to building a core group of home supporters for every fixture, and it treats women players as if they are second class citizens.
3. **Knowing your fans**

Another key question for women’s football is who are the ‘natural’ fanbase and the target audience.

Is it other adult women who play? Is it girls? Girls and boys? Men?

While we do not know the answer to that – and expect, in part, it’s all of the above – we are clear that, if more adult women attend a sport, then more people in total attend.

This may sound obvious, but adult women tend not to attend a sporting event alone and will generally be accompanied by friends (mixed group) and/or children.

The most recent available ABS data shows that approximately 33% of all football attendees are women, while 41% of all Australian Rules attendees are women. Assuming the 33% ABS figure is an average across all forms of the game, if football was to improve the proportion of women attending matches to 40%, then for example, A-League attendance would have tipped 1.7 million in 2018-19 without taking into account any multiplier effect, and W-League would have been closer to 120,000.

We suggest that research be conducted on who are the key target audiences for the W-League and align the marketing and digital strategies across the league and clubs.

We also believe that to help build engagement, viewers and club loyalty that clubs should not have dual social media channels for the men’s and women’s competitions. Having these separate gives the impression that the W-League is not as important as the A-League.
4. Investment

The pushback on the issues we raise is anticipated to be around lack of finances.

However, with the increased interest in, and scrutiny on, women’s sport, we suggest there is enormous scope for improvement in the level of sponsorship for the W-League, the Matildas and women’s and girls’ football more broadly that could help lead to improvements in salaries, marketing, digital engagement and broadcast potential.

The A-League licensees should also be prepared to improve their level of investment in the W-League, not merely from an equity perspective but from a business perspective and broadening the offering to the football community.

Football has had a natural competitive edge compared with other women’s sports for some time simply because it is global and offers the best athletes unparalleled opportunity to compete at a high level, including both the World Cup and Olympic Games tournaments.

This position has been eroded over the past five or more years, as other sports in Australia catch-on to the need to have a women’s ‘version’ of their game – not solely to tick a box for gender equity purposes, but because it makes sound business sense.

Women’s football has all the attributes to continue to be the leader and, indeed, to break away from the pack, but that will not happen without unity of purpose and vision and an appropriate level of investment from Australian football’s stakeholders.
Closing

This is the first in a series of discussion papers we will be preparing over the next 12-18 months as football in Australia recalibrates.

We welcome feedback and comment from the football community by 30 November 2019 to info@womeninfootball.org.au.