

# Sportsbars to Sportsbras

## Women as World Cup soccer fans

Worldwide women are taking more interest in soccer. Yet, as **Margo Ruben** highlights, the traditional male soccer world is struggling with this idea.

***“Football as a game is first and foremost a demonstration of masculinity as we understand it from our traditional view of things and as produced in part by our physical constitution (through hormonal irritation). No one has ever been successful in getting women to play football... Kicking is thus presumably a specifically male activity; whether being kicked is consequently female – that is something I will leave the reader to answer”. (Dutch philosopher FJJ Buytendijk, 1953)***

In 2002 over one-half to two-thirds of people attending the Korea-Japan Soccer World Cup were women. At the 2006 German World Cup almost 20% of people at the games, almost 40% of people at the fanfests, and 50% of people watching from a distance, at pubs and sportsbars or in their own homes were women. This is not to mention that women are making up

a growing percentage of fans for local and national leagues.

The rise in the number of women as spectators and football players has been met with quite mixed responses. Women who play soccer face taunts of trying to be men, accusations of not being ‘real’ women and consistent assumptions that women in sport are lesbians. Spectators and fans are often treated with equal suspicion. The 2002 and 2006 World Cup provide examples of how women are treated, by male fans, the media, and academics when they decide to ‘invade’ a man’s world and enjoy the game of soccer. The question then has to be asked, what is likely to happen to and with women at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa?

### 2002: THE ‘FEMINISED’ WORLD CUP

The 2002 World Cup in Korea and Japan saw the highest number of female fans of any World Cup event. Women lined the streets, and the stadia, they formed fan-groups, sang anthems and supported their teams and their favourite players with unprecedented conviction and visibility. The Local Organising Committee and FIFA praised their presence, saying that the number of women kept down the incidences

of violence and the use of foul language.

Other fans were not quite as complimentary and Korean men termed the female fans “ppasun-i’s” or soccer groupies, who were there simply to lust after the athletic figures of their favourite players. Korean and Japanese academics agreed and argued that the huge turn out of women was due to this being the first time that Korean women could openly express their sexuality. Women were not that interested in the game or the match but rather it was an opportunity to openly look at men as sexual objects that appealed to the masses of women.

This approach seems unfair and ignores the idea that women can actually be interested in the game itself and appreciate the technicalities of the sport. Given evidence from other sports and football events, there is a strong argument to suggest that male and female fans have exactly the same amount of knowledge of the sport they are watching, and spend equal amounts of time, effort, and money learning about their sport and attending matches. Women, however, are made out to be highly sexualised creatures, unable to be

real fans as their interest lies in lusting after the players more than anything else. It seems difficult for men to conceptualise women as being able to enjoy the competitiveness, aggression and sheer skill that soccer expresses.

The idea of Korean women being sexualised was reinforced by their portrayal in the media. According to T Tanaka who wrote an article on the 2002 World Cup and the 'feminised fan' in Japanese soccer culture, "... The shots (television and print media) focusing on the women's bodies are almost exclusively the ones that highlight the bare skin of their breast, groin, hip, and legs. Compared with the actual fashion of women in the stadium, which colorfully varies, the representation of the female fans in the newspaper and on television is the surprisingly and uniformly similar clothing of 'exposing' fashions." So women at the so-called 'feminised' World Cup were presented in a sexualised way, not as real fans, but as sexual predators or as sexual objects within the stands. Female fans, as just ordinary fans seems to be absent from the event.

#### 2006: WOMEN AS PROSTITUTES OR FANS?

The 2006 German World Cup seemed to follow the same pattern. For months before the 2006 World Cup the media published reports of 40 000 prostitutes who were going to invade Germany and provide services for all of the visitors demanding commercial sex. A group of American lawmakers accused the German government of being "an official pimp". It immediately took action broadcasting huge publicity campaigns about forced sex workers and borders were reinforced and

***"She (assistant referee Amy Rayner) should not be there. I know that sounds sexist, so I am not going to be anything other than that... bringing women into the game is not the way to improve refereeing and officialdom. It is beyond belief. When do we reach a stage when all officials are women, because then we are in trouble... This is Championship football. It is not park football, so what are women doing here?"***  
(Mike Newell, Luton manager, November 2006)

brothels were raided. The 40 000 sex workers, however, failed to arrive and the local industry was hardly surprised. Indeed a number of prostitutes went on holiday during the 2006 World Cup and described the news frenzy as nothing more than media hype.

In direct contrast, however, the actual women who attended the World Cup, as opposed to the fantasy of prostitutes, were almost ignored. Women who attended were cast as WAGS (Wives And Girlfriends) who were only there as part of a family unit or to support their partners.

The marketing campaigns both in Germany and on television were aimed at men. The marketing gurus did not know how to sell items to fans who were not men, and who were not taking on the traditional roles of mother and help-mate. The end result was that the media and the advertising sector took refuge in the traditional way and advertised a number of holidays for soccer

widows wanting to get away from it all. The Swiss Tourist Authority came up with a cheeky campaign, showing a number of good looking young men in a variety of Swiss locations, bearing the tag line, "Dear Girls, why not escape this summer's World Cup to a country where men spend less time on football, and more time on you?"

#### CONCLUSION

The idea of female soccer fans seems in some way disturbing for the majority of people. As if the very idea of women enjoying a male dominated, rough, competitive and aggressive game is far too strange and threatening to contemplate. Thus women who do attend cannot possibly be 'real' fans even in the face of evidence to the contrary. It would seem that we are still so bound up in old ideas about gender that we find the idea of 40 000 imaginary prostitutes easier to deal with than the reality of a few hundred thousand female soccer fans.

Well what does this mean for South Africa, a country in which 40% of women have experienced some form of violence or abuse? And at a time when FIFA is trying to make fans and female soccer players more 'feminine'? The short answer is that it could mean anything we want it to, with some effort, combined goodwill and foresight, the 2010 may just be the World Cup for everyone.

LE

*This article is from a longer paper presented at a WISER/CUBES Conference "2010: and the life of the City". Margot Ruben is a researcher for the Centre for Urban and Built Environment Studies.*