



Gerd von der Lippe

Female football players don't have balls

You need balls to play football. So it is obvious that being a girl just won't do as far as the guys are concerned, says Gerd von der Lippe in a devastating critique of the state of affairs in the reporting and support of women's football in Norway.



As if it was the most natural thing in the world, the then Norwegian prime minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, arranged a trip to Spain when Molde, who at the time were ranked second best in the Norwegian Premier League, were playing a Champions League match there in 1999. This was done in the same spirit he had planned a meeting with the French prime minister to coincide with Norway's world championship match against Morocco the year before.¹ The minister for culture, Trond Giske, went on a lads' trip with the manager of the national football team, Åge Hareide, and parts of the financial elite to watch Rosenborg play out a draw with Chelsea at Stamford Bridge this last autumn. You see, there is an über-tolerance for men and football in Norwegian society. This is why Bondevik becomes a man of the People and charmingly boyish when he attends football matches at the expense of the tax payer. And nobody bats an eyelid if the minister for culture hitches a ride with the financial elite when he gets the chance to go to a football match.

The unnatural media coverage

That football is the country's biggest sport is well known. That Norwegian sportsmen and –women also take part in at least 60 other types of sports is less so because sport in the media is almost totally dedicated to men's football: football took up 36 per cent of all broadcasts on TV2, Zebra, NRK1, NRK2, TVNorge, and TV3 in 2006. In reality, NRK1; the Norwegian Broadcasting Company and main public TV station, shows a wide spectrum of sports if we don't look at it from a gender perspective. But there can't be any sort of football fever on NRK as long as the commercial channel TV2 has all the rights to the sport.

Thus, female football players don't get more than 7 per cent of total sports coverage on any of the major TV channels. And it's a fact that the presenters and guests in the TV studios generally consist of men, with the exception of the odd occasion when women are playing football.

Sports coverage in newspapers and on the Internet mirrors the TV trend quite well. In 2001–02, men's football made up 52 per cent of the sports coverage in the Norwegian print media.² Women's football didn't even register. Handball received 8 per cent, as did skiing and other winter sports in a year when the winter–Olympics took place. Without handball and skiing, women's sports would just about remain at a straight zero coverage. Collectively in the print media, 8 per cent was dedicated to women's sports, 80 per cent to men's, and 12 per cent to mixed–gender sports.

But during the big games, women's football becomes visible. On 12 September 2007 both the women's and the men's national teams played important matches. The women had their opening match in the World Championship, and the men were playing a European qualifying game. This provides a good starting point for comparison within Norwegian media coverage. TV2 broadcast men's football for two hours and five minutes, while NRK1 aired women's football for a duration of three hours and five minutes, including re–runs and the World Championship (TV) magazine.

The national newspapers³ had overall three times as much men's football the next day; 16 pages against 5 pages of women's football.

Statements made from 1970 till 2005

At the beginning of the 1970s, parts of the feminist movement and young women interested in sport inspired the sports editor of *Dagbladet*, Leif Isdal, to initiate a debate about football and gender. Women in Norway were late to get involved in club–football, especially compared with Italy and Germany, but also seen in relation to Sweden and Denmark. Women's football in England, with its 150 teams, came to an abrupt end in 1921 due to the refusal by the Football Association to let them play on their football pitches.⁴ In Norway, the newspaper *Dagbladet* and the sports club Frigg arranged the first unofficial Norwegian football championships for women in 1971. The sports reporter from *Aftenposten* seemed to remain sceptical to this first bit of women's football three years later, in 1974:

The Norwegian Championship in women's football is unofficial, and should remain so. For how long will the ladies themselves decide? There are those who wish to give the title of "Norwegian Champion" to the winner of this tournament. They can't have any respect for the matter. We visited the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences yesterday, and what we saw on two different pitches was enough to conclude that practice with a ball, and the understanding of the game, was at a beginners' level [...] It's not easy to win a gold medal, and it should most definitely not be handed out when the result is limited by the abilities of those taking part.⁵

The journalist assured readers that he was not against women's football in principle. The participants were just not worthy of the title "Norwegian Champions". According to him, both he and the photographer were duty bound to cover the story, and therefore they were just doing their job when they wrote about what they saw out there on the pitch. Regardless, the statement that things went a bit "arse over tit" symbolises women's football in 1974 seen through men's eyes.

"Football–ladies' fury against *Aftenposten*" was one of the headlines in *Dagbladet* the next day. And here, Isdal reveals the journalist behind the signature "Ra.L.". According to the sports editor, he only watched the matches for 20 minutes. The football manager at Frigg called it "a mean form of journalism".

This article completely ruined the entire event for us, the organizers; the radio, for instance, refused to air the results on Saturday evening though NRK has announced the results in the three previous years. The article also ruined the final yesterday. I should think it cost us a few thousand kroner — but worse is the negative exposure of the girls. This championship has actually shown a clear improvement in their standard.⁶

Finally, in 1976, club football became organized, if after a lot of noisy disagreements.⁷ There was no end to the arguments against women's football. We were told everything from "women's football is idiotic" to the claim that "female football players attempted to seduce" the wife of a club leader, and also that hard footballs could ruin the women's breasts.⁸ The first official Norwegian Championship was played in 1978. Thirteen years later, in 1991, the national team won the unofficial world championship, and in 1995 they won the first official World Championship for women. The sports section in *Dagbladet* acclaimed the winners thus:

The girls have been compared to the boys for 25 years. Now it is over. Yesterday, women's football became more than just a little TV distraction for old age pensioners. Hege Riise and the rest of the football girls have entertained us all.⁹

The men's national team was interviewed about the girls' chances on national TV before their departure for the championships in Sweden. It turned into quite a spectacle, with a grimacing team around goal keeper Frode Grodås who could barely stay serious as he attempted to muster a few polite words and encouragement as a send-off. And not all were equally excited after the games, even though Norway had become world champions. The editor of the financial magazine *Kapital*, Trygve Hegnar, published the article "Bloody awful football women":

Norwegian female football players score from corners because female goal keepers are like strung up sacks of potatoes. They don't catch anything which doesn't come straight at them [...] the ball is kicked chaotically here and there. It is shovelled forward in the hope that someone will find it [...] Not many will want to pay to see clumsy ladies running confusedly around without the power to really kick the ball.¹⁰

The financier rounds off the article as follows: "Women's football, sorry to laugh. They get paid for their effort. Full stop." Yet Hegnar didn't stop there. After the national team had a 3–2 win over Sweden in the European Championships in England in 2005, he re-ran his comments. This time as a commentary in *Finansavisen* (Norwegian FT). Because women's football was as exciting as watching paint dry. He also recruited Vålerenga supporter and *Klassekampen*'s writer Arild Rønsen, who stated that women's football is ok, as long as it isn't an "official phenomenon".¹¹

But something has changed since the seventies. Women play better football, and this is something most sports journalists have realized. The sports editor at *Aftenposten*, Bertil Valderhaug, replied thus to Hegnar's article:

As sure as mosquitoes on a hot summer's night you get aggressive critics turning up when Norwegian football girls fight for medals in the World Championships, the European Championships or the Olympics [...] Yesterday's thriller at Halliwell Jones Stadium was in any case many times more entertaining than many of the matches I've yawned my way through with the men's national team over the past few years.¹²

On the other hand, Hegnar would more than likely receive a great deal of support from various sports bloggers. During the World Championships in China in September 2007, Esten O. Sæther wrote a challenging article under the heading "Only the girls count in the Olympics".¹³ It is, according to Sæther, women that should receive the money to prepare for Beijing '08. He highlighted, among others, handball and football. Here, he said, one found international top level performance. The article caused strong reactions on the net, of course. A man from Oslo wrote:

[The women's national football team] are good within their own league. Sadly, it's the case that few are interested in handicap-leagues. Whether it's about basketball for people who can't walk, skiing for the blind, or football for women, it's ok for people to be impressed by the talent displayed in spite of physical shortcomings. It is still only the very best practitioners one wishes to observe; women's sports, as with other disabled sports, can therefore never reach the same level of interest, prestige, and admiration. That's just the way it is!¹⁴

Another man wrote this ironic post under full name, Ola Ranheim, the same day:

You never see a female left-wing getting tackled, get back up, collect the bloody remains of her feet from the grass, stuff them back in her shoes, and continue to run, or a forward with a broken skull heading the ball into the back of the net. You can give the girls a ball to play with, but never BALLS.¹⁵

And here's a third man:

One can't say that girls play good football. Entertaining, yes. But not in the same way as the guys. Entertaining because you never know what's going to happen. I'm thinking in particular of instances where the goalkeeper saves a goal, but also passes that don't quite measure up.¹⁶

The three bloggers are sharing in an old-fashioned way of making themselves feel like men. It's called essential masculinity, because the essence — the core — of this type of man relates to the idea of the invincible, original Neanderthal-man.¹⁷ It's a male ideal which expresses mythical abilities in heroes, big fights, and can give spectators and readers a feeling of shared belonging. Since football in most countries is connected to male cultures, the most efficient way to humiliate the opposition is through the use of homosexual and feminine metaphors.¹⁸ In this way the image of the male is

frozen in a changing world: the male body is the norm and the starting point. To belittle women's football seems to have become a male sport among many bloggers. Through the power of their gender they have a legitimate right to own football. And thus it is also a man-thing to have an opinion about this sport. Here it is appropriate to use Pierre Bourdieu's thesis that "the masculine order's strength becomes visible through its appearance as neutral".¹⁹ Everybody can see that male football players run faster than female ones, and that they shoot harder. The young, male bloggers have adopted a die-hard masculine order of the sexes where images of men as a group are not just the norm, but outrank women as a group — regardless of what these might achieve and represent. Men have balls. Women don't. Ergo have women inferior bodies.

Stereotypes in today's media sports

Trygve Hegnar is not alone in representing middle aged men with macho-complexes. Since taking over as the Norway men's coach, Åge Hareide has distinguished himself through his use of the female physiology as a source for swear-words.

In the autumn of 2004, the male national team still had the possibility of qualifying for the World Championship finals of 2006. They had to beat Scotland, and if the Norwegian players were to succeed in this they had to be a team of real men. "We need to turn up in Glasgow with a bit of stubble", Hareide said, and added:

We may have to put aside our wish to be ambitious, to be good-looking on the pitch [...] To offer resistance at Hampden Park, to have a bit of rod, that is incredibly important.²⁰

To play with a "rod" was to distinguish the men from the boys. When questioned by *Verdens Gang* what he means by the expression, Hareide explains that it's about inserting "an iron rod through the body, from the neck to the balls. It makes you a bit stiff, but if you're still standing you've got a rod".²¹ There are a lot of associations connected with a straight back and masculine dominance in many cultures and through many ages. At the end of the eighteenth century, such a back was considered an ideal in sports. It was expressed in cycling, rowing, and in ski-jumping. "Stand to attention!" is an important command in the army. Bourdieu shows how different ways of moving the body is aimed at enforcing masculine honour and feminine subservience.²² A straight back and confrontational stare stands as a contrast to the female lowered head and soft posture. But to Hareide it's not enough to have associations with the straight back. One year later, after the Norwegian defeat against the Czech Republic, he expands on the idea that only "real men" play "real football". And the reason why the national team lost was that they didn't behave like real men. "We were simply too girly at Ullevaal. We tip-toed around on high heels and allowed ourselves to be pushed around much too easily."²³ So the Norwegian team didn't lose because they were badly organized, lacked precision when passing the ball, or met a technically better opposition. They lost because they weren't men enough. Or rather: they lost their male-ness when they lost the match, and the greatest insult you can inflict on a loser is to de-genderize him through the application of feminine attributes.

The Norwegian national men's team only managed a draw against Turkey on 15 August 2001. John Carew missed a penalty. Worse was that Tore André Flo

shot over an open goal from three meters. At *Dabladet*, the sports section came up with this ironic heading:

Now look, MISS NORWAY. This is a ball... This is a goal...
You've gotta work the rest out for yourselves

Old statements become like new

The bollocking of poor performances by male football players are made effective through the use of metaphors such as "miss Norway", "too girly at Ullevaal", and "old hags". The bloggers take it one step further with "handicap-league", "have no balls", and "physical shortcomings" so that football is held up as a sport for men and not for women. It's that easy to turn the clock back one hundred years. Because women don't have what it takes since, sadly, they are born and trapped in the wrong gender.

This is so obvious to some — a doxa — because some agents don't reflect on what is said or written. But when they do so knowingly, such as the bloggers, I would use the expression macho masculinity. Here, the idea of "carpe phallum" (seize the penis), about the man who performs continuously, is worshipped.²⁴ The male body is worshipped for its elevated sports- and colonial history. Here are ways of turning oneself into a man which suit a group of men with little social power in the official sphere, and who both play with, and quite sincerely work hard at, being politically incorrect. They can belong to marginal groups in society, but not necessarily. Hegnar's macho masculinity may first and foremost represent the elite which in its youth were active sportsmen. The relationship of the elite with the "people" can, as Bourdieu points out, be determined by their position in the power field.²⁵ Those involved can use their interest in, for instance, sports to gain influence within certain areas of the elite. If one wants to get it right, one has to know what is popular among common folk. Hegnar writes for those working within the financial field. The value of gold medals in sports would, as I interpret him, drop considerably when female goalies are like "sacks of potatoes" and the play is dominated by the ball being "shoved forward". He might as well have copied the article from *Aftenposten* in 1974: "It's not easy to win a gold medal, and it should most definitely not be handed out when the results are limited by the abilities of those present." But Hegnar misunderstood what was negative and positive to "normal folk" both in 1995 and in 2005: the sports journalists had changed their attitude since the 1970s. Something Hegnar had clearly not grasped.

Many women replied to the blog-posts during the World Championships in China. One argument which was frequently repeated was that the difference between men's and women's football was the same as the difference between Norwegian men's football and that of the top European teams. This is not highlighted in Norwegian press as it would undermine some of the interest in Norwegian, male football players. And in that case, both TV2 and Norwegian sports journalists would have to change their views on what constitutes newsworthy in sports. A lot of the male bragging would be left for dead, and the many declarations of "unique" goals, saves, and tactics and technique would decrease in frequency. In order to keep football strongly connected to traditional male identity, more of those who utter opinions have to maintain the difference between the two sexes. When elite sports women in athletics, skiing, handball, weight lifting, and wrestling compete internationally, they are rarely or never compared with their male counterparts. But this is still happening in

football, even if, luckily, there is some movement in the way female footballers are described. However, using male metaphors to describe the elite of female football players is a familiar touch. The best technical player of the World Championship, Marta Vieira de Silva from Brazil, was described in a headline: "She plays like a man".²⁶ National team player Lise Klaveness plays for the same club as Marta. For her, to make the statement that the Brazilian player plays like a man is to flatter the opposite sex.²⁷ The difference between the genders in football is, for Klaveness, more about physical abilities than about mentality and technique. What about this headline? "Marta played as only a woman can."

Men who talk about men

Men's football dictates the sports agenda. Those who control the keys to Norwegian sports journalism, and especially football related journalism, form a "masculine exposure industry",²⁸ a network of men who talk about men and as such advertise other men in sports.²⁹ This is detrimental to women's football seen from a feminist viewpoint and can be described as the gender biased rhetoric of silence.³⁰ Women are virtually invisible in the sports media: since most editorial boards are domineered by middle aged football interested men, we have seen few female sports commentators presenting football matches. In 2007 on the show "4-2-2 Backroom Football Magazine" on NRK2, women's football was not a topic. To the editor, this is totally natural because men's football is understood to be the knowledge itself — *nomos* — of football journalism. Susann Michaelsen, sports journalist at NRK, led me to understand that it is pretty much the guys who decide who covers what in sports.³¹ Then again, they have a male chief editor, three male senior editors and eight male shift managers.³² There is little doubt that the "boys" have the power to define what news is most important seen in this light.

Davy Wathne, appearing on a radio show last winter, felt that it was risky for a commercial channel such as TV2 to markedly profile the best female footballers. The head of sports at the same TV channel, Bjørn Taalesen, had this comment:

[Female football] has a long and hard road to travel, hard because they have already delivered the goods. The commercial wheel [makes it] twice as hard to be a girl in the male dominated football field.³³

This is to be understood as: they are among the world's best without having received the media attention or the financial reward they had hoped for. The sports editor specified that the national team had achieved very good results, "but that it turns out to be difficult to utilize this in measurable results in attention at home"³⁴.

According to the head of sports at *Verdens Gang*, Trond Johannesen, one of the aims of the paper has been to focus more on women's football, but "[...] we are influenced by history, how it has been, and it's difficult to just turn it all around"³⁵. Out of six heads of sports at NRK, TV2, *Aftenposten*, *Verdens Gang*, *Dagbladet*, and *Dagsavisen*, only TV2 and *Dagbladet* characterized sports as conservative. Tormod Brenna from *Dagbladet* added: "It's not our job to create new trends. Sport itself has to create a product which will sell, the way biathlon did for skiing."³⁶

Dagbladet puts ever more emphasis on men's football in a difficult financial situation, thus making women's football and other sports virtually invisible. The sports editors at TV2 and *Verdens Gang* further complicate the possibility for change and point out that history dictates the present, and that financial reality doesn't make it easy for women.

As long as the newspapers were connected to political parties, the demand to make a profit was small. After they gained their "freedom" they got forever more dependant on advertising and readership. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, journalism has lost a lot of its autonomy because it is now more closely connected to high finance, and not least the demand to satisfy shareholder interests and achieve acceptable viewer- and readership numbers.³⁷

Keeping up the hegemony

Football can be seen as men's last stance in society, where they can display their sovereignty and act out their emotions without interference from the opposite sex. The sworn fan can worship his masculinity, not through violence but through his dedication to the man and his ball.

In a changing world where women are forever gaining access to new areas, where more men take part in care-giving, and where male footballers play with their hair styled, a great number of guys cling to football as a frozen part of their identity. They can share this part of their identity with women, but those women have to first and foremost worship male football.³⁸ When traditional male ideals are threatened, many tend to highlight the male physical strength so that the hegemony can be retained. Hegnar's and Rønsen's attitudes do seem old-fashioned, if not totally outdated. Expressions such as "we should have been eleven tigers, but were eleven old biddies", are perhaps on the wane, but it is by no means to be taken for granted as long as a man in Åge Hareide's position makes the statements he does. As manager of the national team he is a central role model, not least to many young football boys. When he makes the point that one has to be a real stubbly guy — with rod and no handbag — to play football, he adds fuel to the many prejudices against women in general, and against female football players. He is the one person in Norwegian elite football who most clearly mark football as male territory: he collects his troops. And in that platoon there is no place for anything which could be suspected of being civilized.

¹ Bratholm, Eva: "The über-tolerance for men and football", *Dagbladet* 13 September 1999. Bondevik planned his sports-trip long before the meeting with the prime minister according to Bratholm.

² Monday Morning. "Industry or independence?" Special print. Media conference: *Play the Game*, Copenhagen, 10–14 November 2002. *Aftenposten* and *Verdens Gang* attended from Norway, as well as four Danish and two Swedish newspapers. The sports coverage of 255 newspapers was analyzed for the period of 8 April 2001–27 August 2002.

³ The newspapers were *Aftenposten*, *Verdens Gang*, *Dagbladet*, and *Dagsavisen*.

⁴ Skogvang, Bente Ove die: *Toppfotball -- et felt i forandring*. Doctorate, the Norwegian Sports Academy: 45, 2006.

⁵ Ra.L: "Jentene begynte svart, men" from *Aftenposten*, 31 August 1974.

⁶ Isdal, Leif: "Fotballdamene raste mot *Aftenposten*" from *Dagbladet*, 2 September 1974.

⁷ Lippe, Gerd von der: *Idrett som kulturelle drama*. Cappelen Akademisk Forlag, Oslo 2001, p. 174.

⁸ As part of "Idrettsaksjonen" I was one of those campaigning to have women's football recognized in the NFF, the Norwegian football union.

⁹ *Dagbladet*, 10 December 1995.

- 10 Hegnar, Trygve: "Jøvla dårlige fotballdamer". *Kapital* 12/1995.
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- 12 Valderhaug, Bertil: "Gode som gull" in *Aftenposten*, 17 June 2005.
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- 19 Bourdieu, Pierre: 17, 2000, mentioned earlier.
- 20 Rasmussen, John: "Hareide varsler stygg football" in dagbladet.no, 9 September 2004.
- 21 Johannessen, Trond: e-mail to Cathrine Sandnes, 16 October 2007.
- 22 Bourdieu, Pierre: *Den maskuline dominans*, Pax Forlag, Oslo 2000, p 36–37.
- 23 *Verdens Gang*, 16 November 2005.
- 24 Lippe, Gerd von der: *Endring og mostand mot endring av feminiteter og maskuliniteter i idrett og kroppskulturer i Norge: 1890–1950*. PhD. Institute for social science. Norwegian Sports Academy, 1997.
- 25 Bourdieu, Pierre: "The use of People" in Pierre Bourdieu [red.]: *In other words*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1990.
- 26 Enerstvedt, Vidar: " – Hun kan spille som en mann". *Verdens Gang Nett*, 25 September 2007.
- 27 Enerstvedt, Vidar: " – Carew ikke i nærheten av Marta". *Verdens Gang Nett* 25 September 2007.
- 28 Knut Helland was the first to use the expression "exposure industry" in *Sport, Medier og Journalistikk*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen 2003.
- 29 Only nine per cent of the Norwegian sports journalists were women as at March 2007 according to Reidar Sollie. This is a European trend. "Sports, Media and Stereotypes"; this is where newspapers and TV from Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Austria, and Italy are analyzed. The undersigned was responsible for the Norwegian analysis. www.gender.is/sms.
- 30 Berit von der Lippe coined this phrase.
- 31 Lecture given at the College of Journalism, Oslo, May 2007.
- 32 E-mail, 10 October 2007.
- 33 Taalesen, Bjørn. Interview 27 June 2006.
- 34 E-mail, 10 October 2007.
- 35 Johannessen, Trond. Interview 2 June 2006.
- 36 Brenna, Tormod. Interview 1 June 2006 and phone conversation 5 October 2007.
- 37 Bourdieu, Pierre: "The Political Field, the Social Field, and the Journalistic Field". In Nenson, Rodney & Erik Neveu [red.], mentioned earlier.
- 38 Johnsen, Elisabeth Skoglund: *Den kollektive kroppen. En antropologisk studie av kropp blant norske fotballsupportere* (The collective body. An anthropological study of the physical body among Norwegian football supporters). MA thesis. Institute of social anthropology, University of Oslo, 2007.

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