



## It's Showtime! PR Goals for Women's Football

This month sees the Women's Euros kick off – held in the UK. Comms around major women's football tournaments have historically been lacklustre and chaotic but can the FA buck the trend and get that 'bounce' factor back? Ryan Herman finds out ...

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If you were one of the 11.7 million UK TV viewers who got caught up in the drama of England's defeat to the USA in the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, you would concur with FIFA's view that the tournament was 'an unprecedented success'.



It was, without question, a pivotal moment for the women's game both technically on the pitch and commercially off it.

A tangible legacy of that tournament is that when England hosts the Women's Euros this month (July) attendances could break the 500,000 mark. That would more than double the previous record for the Euros set by the Netherlands in 2017 and would put the Euros roughly on a par with the people who attend the Lawn Tennis Championships at Wimbledon.



We want the Euros to move women's football forward and host record-breaking crowds. This sport is on the cusp of greatness.

A pre-tournament impact report, produced by EY, has estimated that the Euros will also generate around £54m of economic activity – we could certainly do with that right now.

One could, however, also reasonably argue that the 2019 Women's World Cup's other significant legacy was to provide a blueprint on how not to host a major women's football tournament.

There were shortages relating to public transport, female stewards, food and drink, and merchandise.

There was also poor PR around ticketing. A small number of fans who'd purchased several tickets for one match when they first went on sale, later discovered those tickets were in different parts of the stadium. That would be annoying if it was a group of adults, but in some cases, this meant splitting up a parent and a child.



UEFA via Getty Images

FIFA's initial response was people should have read the small print before eventually addressing the problem.

It's kind of impressive just how much FIFA, along with the French Football Federation and the local organisers in France, managed to get wrong around the matchday experience.

In Paris, you could see plenty of posters and promotional material for the French Tennis Open, which finished just after the tournament had started, but scant evidence of an international football match being played.

"I travelled the length and breadth of the country covering (the 2019 World Cup) and there wasn't any of that sort of fanfare that you would expect in and around a stadium for a major tournament," says Claire Bloomfield, Head of Women's Football at the European Club Association (ECA).

When the impact study was published a year, FIFA's 'executive summary' focused on the positive economic and environmental impact of the tournament, which FIFA understandably wanted to shout out. However there was nothing in terms of whether it is increased participation or attendances for women's football in France, or how many more women became involved in the game at all levels, beyond kicking a ball. Plus the full report was only published in French. Zut Alors!

### A once-in-a-generation opportunity

Bloomfield covered the 2019 Women's World Cup for *The Sun* and was the *Daily Mail's* women's football correspondent before joining the ECA in 2020.



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"There wasn't a 'bounce factor' in France," she says. "Average attendances for league matches haven't grown significantly. There aren't any lucrative sponsorships outside of the biggest clubs in France (PSG and Lyon Féminine). There wasn't a sense of really building on the tournament's success."

Although the biggest women's matches in domestic leagues across Europe this year have set attendance records, week in, week out, crowds are still small for women's matches, albeit the game is still in its infancy as a full-time, professional sport.

In her current role, Bloomfield represents the interests of women's clubs across Europe and is a key figure in growing the game commercially throughout the continent. She cites FI as an example of how a sport has successfully managed to promote itself to a new audience, through the Drive To Survive series on Netflix.

Bloomfield also says that the Women's Euros present what could be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to grow the women's football in this country; the earliest chance that an English or UK-wide bid could host the FIFA Women's World Cup is 2035.

"There are big expectations about what the FA will be capable of," she says.

"Everyone will talk about attendances and participation in terms of how many girls and women play football and trying to ensure they come from a variety of backgrounds. But this is also an opportunity to get more girls working in football, both men's and women's football, and thinking it is a viable career choice. For me, that's a very important point."

There has been definite frustration within the game that too many key decisions are taken not just by men but more importantly by people whose only experience of women's football will be from the corporate seats at a major event. To give one example, a host nation will get at least seven years to prepare for a FIFA Men's World Cup, whereas it currently stands at three years for women.



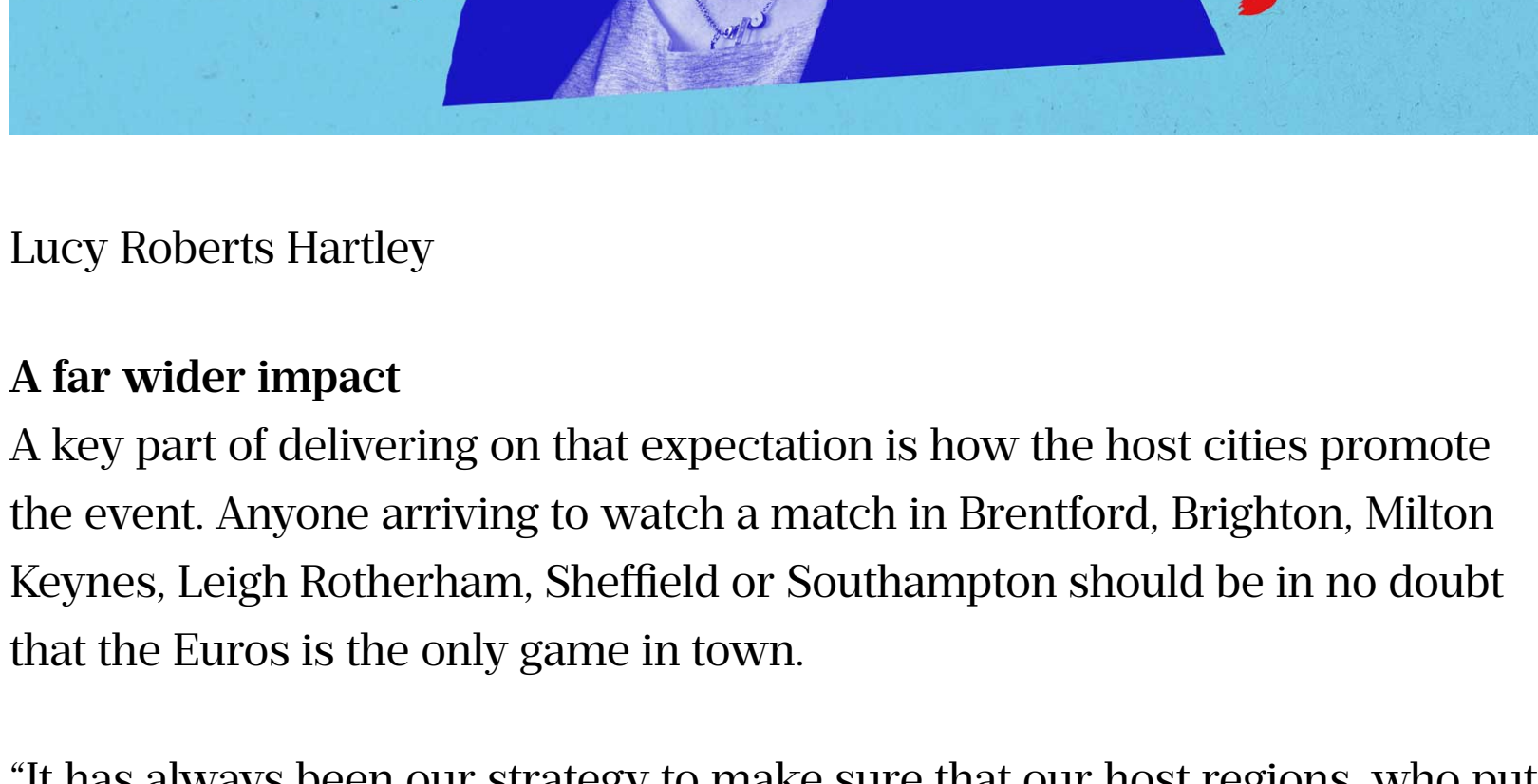
Our creative line is 'It's Showtime'. There are three main pillars around that line. One is showing up for your nation: England is hosting the biggest women's sporting event in our history.

Lucy Roberts-Hartley is the Marketing and Communications Lead for the Women's Euros 2022. She previously had six years working on the FA Cup before becoming Head of Marketing for the ICC Cricket World Cup in 2019. She explains that the PR strategy behind the Euros began with creating a sense of spectacle.

"Our creative line is 'It's Showtime'. There are three main pillars around that line. One is showing up for your nation: England is hosting the biggest women's sporting event in our history.

"The next is showing up for your city – tapping into local pride and passion and getting people involved on the local level. And then showing up for the game, and really getting behind women's football in and around the grounds.

"And through those three pillars, we want really strong messaging in terms of affordability, accessibility, experience. 'Record breaking' has been a real part of that message as well, because we want the Euros to move women's football forward and host record-breaking crowds. This sport is on the cusp of greatness."



Lucy Roberts-Hartley

### A far wider impact

A key part of delivering on that expectation is how the host cities promote the event. Anyone arriving to watch a match in Brentford, Brighton, Milton Keynes, Leigh Rotherham, Sheffield or Southampton should be in no doubt that the Euros is the only game in town.

"It has always been our strategy to make sure that our host regions, who put in successful bids for the tournament, are fully immersed in the Euros," she explains.

"We formed host city working groups, and we work with them daily. We basically couldn't deliver the tournament without these regional partners. So that immersion and collaboration with those host venues involve local grassroots and professional football, local government, and other bodies within those cities who are experts in their areas.



We've certainly taken from learnings from previous tournaments, both within and outside of women's football.

"We've done trophy tours. In mid-June, our host city 'dressing' started to go up. We've had loads of lovely emails, which show those local communities are really excited to be part of this. And we'll also hold fan festivals to bring football, music and entertainment."

She adds, "We've certainly taken from learnings from previous tournaments, both within and outside of women's football. The biggest takeaway from my perspective, or from a marketing communications perspective was how the nation got behind the tournament in France." In the UK, 28.1 million people watched BBC's coverage of the Women's World Cup on TV and online.

Those host cities will also play a leading role in the FA's strategy to create a nationwide legacy programme.

"The overall objective is to create 500,000 new opportunities for women and girls to get involved in football. Playing is obviously a really key part of that. But coaching, refereeing, volunteering and leadership in football are just as important. No matter what your background is, we need to provide an opportunity."

A series of milestones have been set to be reached by 2024. They include 75% of schools providing equal access for girls to play football in PE lessons, 2,777 registered female referees across England, and 5,400 female coaches developed by 2024 across recreational football.

"We've also developed a schools programme with free curriculum-based resources for all schools to get involved. The schools whether they can choose to have one lesson or a whole term time of Women's Euros-based activities to really inspire that next generation.

"And we also have a clubs and communities programme. Women's football is for the whole nation. We must get communities involved in men's and women's football clubs. Ultimately, the legacy programme is all about increasing involvement in the game, irrespective of whether you play football."

There's also an opportunity for the FA to create a far wider impact and provide a blueprint for other governing bodies and inspire other footballing nations, as well as organisations like the ECA, on how to increase engagement in the sport, as well as how a tournament should be delivered ranging from marketing to PR to legacy.

As somebody who says her 'major events are in my blood' there's a tangible sense of excitement from Roberts-Hartley about working on this tournament. "We're not asking for permission anymore. Women's football is both progressive and progressing to the point where a tournament can be a global, major sporting event.

"It's an amazing time to be involved in this game."

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