



BEND IT LIKE BRONZE
SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY
ARE FEELING THE EFFECT OF
THE LIONESSES' EUROS WIN

FOLLOW THE LIONESSES

In the footsteps of the victorious England women's football team, girls are taking to the sport at school in greater numbers

As the whole nation cheered England's historic win against Germany at the UEFA Women's European Championships in front of a full-capacity crowd at Wembley stadium this summer, the hard work and the training of its talented squad – AKA the Lionesses – came to a glorious finale.

Up and down the country, this dedication to the sport and its growing popularity can be seen in schools, where girls are embracing the skills and fast pace of football. At independent schools, where hockey, lacrosse and netball have dominated girls' sport for decades, football has made great strides in recent years, with former professional coaches recruited to achieve the highest of standards.

The girls at Repton Prep in Derbyshire started playing football in the 2020/21 season and at its senior school the following season. The girls' and boys' prep teams share coach, Ian Clarkson, a former professional footballer who played 450 career games and became Birmingham City's ►



PHOTOGRAPH: MARK PAIN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



PITCH PERFECT
SCHOOLS LIKE REPTON ARE OFFERING GIRLS FOOTBALL AS ONE OF THE MAIN SPORTS OPTIONS
LEFT: FRANCIS HOLLAND SCHOOL PUPILS ARE ALREADY PLAYING FIXTURES AGAINST LOCAL SCHOOLS

youngest-ever captain. After retiring from his playing career, he became fully involved in the coaching and development of young players and holds a full FA Youth Award-licensed coach status as well as UEFA B qualification. He leads all football coaching at Repton Prep, taking both the girls' and boys' teams to the ISFA regional and national finals. In addition to his role at Repton Prep, Clarkson is the ISFA National Team U14 coach and sits on the ISFA Executive Committee. At the senior school, the girls' coach is Molly Holder. Holder plays for Stoke City FC Women in the FA Women's National League North (the third tier of women's football).

"The fact that every girl from years 3 to 8 at Repton Prep is playing football as one of our major sports at school is very satisfying and only the beginning of their journey," says Clarkson. "I've always encouraged equality in sport at Repton and any girl who has shown an aptitude for football has always had the opportunity to join training sessions, and where possible, teams. However, taking a formal approach to girls' football in 2020 has enabled us to nurture a successful squad, with several girls playing for academies and feeding into the grass-roots game – which is fantastic."

More and more schools are looking to play. Repton plays in the ISFA Midlands League, which includes schools the school would also play against in hockey and netball. To challenge players, they also play less 'traditional' opposition – most local state schools have girls' teams so they will play them in friendlies and cup competitions.

All the girls from year 2 play and from year 3 up they play in competitive matches. At Repton, 50 girls (12 per cent of the whole school population) are training and playing. At Repton Prep, there are five girls playing for Leicester City and Derby County academies, and many more coming through. At the senior school, two 2022 leavers played for Burton Albion U18s. One girl has been

signed for Derby County Women's U18s for next season. One girl played for the boys' U15s last season and will look to progress to a local club next season, having joined the school part-way through the year.

"I'm hugely proud of how far girls' football has come here in a very short space of time," says Clarkson. "I envisage that with the Lionesses recent win, more

schools will develop an appetite for girls' football so our fixture list will be even broader, exposing the talent coming through to more experience."

London schools are also taking to the football pitches in greater numbers. At Francis Holland School Regent's Park, head of sport Stephanie Kyprou-Westwood is responding to the increased appetite for the sport. "We're introducing a morning football club for U12/U13 as we've seen a rise in interest from our students, and also will hopefully be introducing football into more of our Lower School lessons this term. Years 10 to 13 have a football option during their PE carousel lessons. We already play football fixtures against other local schools and are hoping, following the success of the Women's Euros, to secure more fixtures this term." ■ repton.org.uk; fhs-nw1.org.uk

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