

Key Considerations for Women's Football (Soccer) Sponsorship



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Prepared By:
Laura Harris, M.A. Candidate



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Our Goals and Objectives



To take these four professional women footballers' stories of their experiences with marketing portrayal and sponsorship, and turn them into **actionable steps to achieve more gender equity in sport**



The Research



4

Women football players

From the NWSL (US), WSL (UK),
and Women's Championship (UK)

12

Athlete interviews

Three with each woman

4

Major findings

Clear themes across the women's stories

12

Key takeaways

For leagues, teams/clubs, and sponsors





The Women



THIS SECTION INCLUDES A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS, AND THE MAIN FINDING THEIR PROFILES WILL DEPICT

PLAYER	LEAGUE	STORY
ANNA (REAL NAME)	WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP	ANNA'S STORY OF SEEKING SPONSORSHIP: THERE'S A LOT OF GAPS IN THE MARKET
OLIVIA (PSEUDONYM)	WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE	OLIVIA'S STORY OF PERFORMATIVE SPONSORSHIP: HAVING THE SPONSORSHIP PULLED
MORGAN (PSEUDONYM)	WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE	MORGAN'S STORY OF EXPLOITATION: WE HAVE TO REALLY PROVE OURSELVES
NATALIE (PSEUDONYM)	NATIONAL WOMEN'S SOCCER LEAGUE	NATALIE'S STORY OF RESISTANCE: WE'RE NOT JUST PAWNS TO SELL YOUR STUFF

Anna ● Women's Championship (UK)

I'm 26, but this season is the first opportunity I've had to play full-time professional sport. The funding was never there before, so **I'd juggle a full-time job with training three nights a week.** However, over Christmas we got put into liquidation. We were given a deadline of two weeks to find a new owner or we'd fold.

During that time, we had coverage on Sky Sports and BBC News which boosted our public support, and followers on social media. That's actually how our new owner saw our story. **He saw our story on social media and tweeted back and from there he was put in touch with our general manager.**

On the flip side, **we also received more comments slating women in sport.** We would just screenshot it and put it in our group chat for a laugh. When you've grown up with it, it doesn't mean anything.

It's good to see top athletic brands invest more in the women's game, but you do notice that some players at the highest levels still don't get any sponsorship deals while the top three tiers for men get sent new boots every couple of months. **Nowadays the price of good football boots is 250 pounds.** It's ridiculous, but you've gotta pay for it if you want the best. Sports bras are a massive one as well.

Really, **there's a lot of gaps in the market** for companies to step into but it's just a case of hoping they do.



Olivia ● Women's Super League (UK)

Right now, **I currently don't have a sponsor.** in women's soccer it might only be the top, top players that do.. By having some deals with female athletes, the top brands are showing they're investing in women's sport.

I don't know if it's that genuine though. Is it because they really want the women's game to thrive and to support it? **Or is it because they don't want to be seen to not be supporting it?** Either way, I guess it's helping in some form to propel women's sport. But **now they should be taking that next step and act on equality** rather than just saying we're equal.

I've been quite fortunate because when I signed my first professional contract, I did gain a two-year shoe deal. That being said, **I remember I was trying to get shin pads for the season, and it took about three months just to get a pair.** On Instagram they were like Olivia this Olivia that, but I'd wait a long time for the essentials.

The next season I moved teams, and they pulled the sponsorship. **They said the team I was playing for wasn't what they would class as "tier 1" football, even though it was.** They were a second-tier club in the men's game, but the top in the women's league.

I wasn't expecting it to end, and it was brutal. **You've gone from not having to worry about where you're gonna supply your gym wear, to having nothing**

I just wish I could've done more to use the platform for good. But, I felt like, **I just had to feel grateful for what I've been given** because I wasn't even sure I would've had that opportunity at that time in my life anyway.

Morgan ● Women's Super League (UK)

At the moment I don't have a massive sponsorship deal. Recently I did have a food sponsorship, you know that meal prep stuff? **It wasn't paid, but I just needed to post twice a month when I received the food and I got to keep all of my meals for free.** I actually thought they would make me still pay, but instead they gave me a discount code to give out.

Before I had a sponsorship deal, I thought you had to have the perfect body. But that's changed, it's more how good you are at your actual sport, and how active you are on social media. **If you have a bigger following, it's a lot easier to negotiate how much you want in return for the post.** It's mad to say, but **having the blue tick always helps** them actually consider you. I've got it through the national team but that took a while to get.

So far, they've been happy with what I'm doing and repost what I do since **it's easier for them to not have to make their own content.** Sponsors are starting to like reels and videos so I had to learn how to add the music to it or make it quicker, speak over it, all that stuff.

At the moment **we have to really prove ourselves to get recognized.** So, when we do get media opportunities it's something everyone jumps at, even if it's a two-hour drive away. Most players I know are really happy doing it. I think it's because when you make it professional, you look back and think about how you never had women's sport role models. So, you have to strip back all your tiredness.

Yeah, it's strenuous, yes, it's stressful, yes, I get tired all the time, but, again, I go out and play football which is something I love.



Natalie ● National Women's Soccer League (US)

I personally have a sponsorship with a recovery equipment brand. **I love being sponsored by them because it's run by a bunch of powerhouse women.** Even when I unfortunately got injured, they called me right away and were like we can't wait to do a story on you and your comeback.

I think it's important for people who are asking for deals with athletes to treat us as humans first. **We're not just pawns to sell your stuff. I feel empowered when people write about my story.** I think if you're just gonna sell the product and not sell what female athletes have done for the sport and having the empowerment in it, you're gonna lose a huge part of the audience, which is still lacking.

When I was growing up, I was able to look up to incredible female soccer players. But honestly, I was really naïve to the professional environment. We live in a society where **men's soccer has been dominant over women's for so long, and now we need to build our image out of that.**

We need to continue to be role models, which female athletes are actually doing right now, but it's not being promoted. And I don't think it should just be promoting athletics. **We are women, and there's different products we use compared to men.** Even just tampons, like girls need to use them and we should be able to promote them because that's our body and **we're promoting, essentially being a woman.**

We don't have to be just our sports. So, if we can grow in that then I think the women's game in general, is gonna grow. It's not gonna take a week, it's gonna take years, but there's always a starting point.



Main Findings



- 1** The lack of commercial sponsorship limits career growth
- 2** Performative partnerships perpetuate inequities
- 3** Women athletes are being objectified through labour exploitation via the necessary burden of self-commodification
- 4** The women's limited agency restricts their ability to make their desired changes to the current structure of sport sponsorship



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League Takeaways

- **Push for the social media verification** of your clubs and athletes
- **Create policy for equitable club-sponsor partnerships** amongst clubs that include both a men's and women's team
- **Market a breadth of players** - there are more stories beyond the elite national team players that fans of women's sport will relate to and celebrate
- When marketing the league, focus on the women's talent, and **share athlete stories** as opposed to on-field drama

Ensure each woman has a level playing field to be commercially successful if they so desire

Team/Club Takeaways



Advocate for your *full team* to receive opportunities associated with a professional athlete career



- Push for the social media verification of your athletes
- Seek equipment sponsors that are willing to invest in the full team, not just your most marketable star. This will help your women from a performance and relational standpoint which will boost your club's reputation
- Consider what club amenities are available to your women athletes and make sure they are given the opportunity to thrive in their role





Sponsor Takeaways

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- There are **many gaps in the market** you can fill to build brand recognition and affiliation
- **Women want to be partnered with** brands of athletic gear, women's health, make-up, fashion, cars, etc.
- **Take an interest in the athlete's holistic self**, and create campaigns around those considerations
- **Create a genuine relationship** with the athlete
- **Invest in multiple women**, not just the top elite athletes in order to create diverse relatable stories/campaigns

Women athletes are waiting to celebrate brands that invest in their holistic selves, and amplify a variety of athletes' stories

Conclusions



Professional women footballers are still experiencing a dearth of sponsorship opportunities

The performative nature of partnerships that do occur allows for the perpetuation of sponsorship inequities

Women athletes are experiencing a shift from sexual objectification to labour exploitation

The women's limited agency restricts their ability to create the equitable change they desire to see enacted

As key stakeholders in women's football, you have both the power and opportunity to create positive change for these athletes