

A different ball game

On the eve of one of the greatest sporting events ever hosted in Australia, football player Steph Catley and Optus Sport host Amy Duggan champion a new era of visibility for female sport. By Hanna Marton.

When Steph Catley was six years old, she tagged along to her brother's football training sessions. She'd run along the sidelines and kick the ball in front of the parents to "show off". "They said, 'Oh, she can *play*. Why doesn't she just play with the boys?'" Catley, 29, recalls. Her mum yielded, she became the sole girl on her big brother's football team, and that's where she stayed. For years.

Catley didn't play with other girls until she joined a representative team at 13 – the "big league" for kids. "When my dad told me about the representative team," she says, "I broke down in tears because I thought the boys didn't want me to play anymore!" Growing up in Melbourne's south-east suburbs, which she says were dominated by St Kilda devotees, Catley idolised male Australian Rules players. "That was sort of the only sport that I could access on TV," she says. Besides watching *Bend It Like Beckham* religiously – "I was obsessed with that movie" – she never saw female footballers on TV.

Twenty years ago, a prevailing myth that viewers didn't want to watch women's sport stopped it from getting any airtime (or decent sponsorship). Today, that fallacy has been blown out of the water. In the UK, where football is life, the average time people spent watching women's sport on TV increased by 131 per cent between 2021 and 2022. Closer to home, a staggering 4.3 million people tuned in to watch tennis legend Ash Barty's triumphant final match at the Australian Open. More than a billion people watched the last FIFA Women's World Cup in 2019.

This month's tournament, hosted by Australia and New Zealand, will likely attract even more eyeballs, when all 64 matches are available exclusively on Optus Sport live and on-demand. Defender Catley, also vice captain of the Australian Football Team and an Optus ambassador who plays for Arsenal in the UK, will reunite with her teammates as they strive to win on home soil. It's an honour that she couldn't have envisaged as a child in Moorabbin. "I had no idea that there was even a pathway for me to the national football team," she says.



Steph Catley wears a ROMANCE WAS BORN X PAUL YORE knit, \$790. FENDI top, worn underneath, \$1,590, and pants, \$2,890.

Catley started training with Melbourne Victory in the W-League (now A-League) at 14, which Catley muses would be weird today. "If I saw a 14-year-old coming into my team and training with me, I'd be like, 'Wow, you are way too young. How is this even a thing?'" Although she was phenomenally talented and would eventually captain Melbourne Victory, Catley concedes the pool was smaller back then because women didn't have the luxury of focusing on football full-time. They also had to work. "In the A-League now, women are usually paid at a rate where they might not need that second job and to juggle a million things. There are more professional footballers honing their craft. Back then, that was not the case. I was obviously a young player who was just at school."

By the time the adult Catley had kicked off her pro career, the needle had moved. "It was the end of that era," she says. "As a full-time professional footballer, I get paid by my national team, I get paid to play at Arsenal. We're selling out big stadiums. We're catching up to the standards that the men are at, and the pay is slowly coming to a point where it's much better." Better, but not the same. And despite clocking as many hours on the pitch as male pro footballers – including her own fiancé, Dean Bouzanis, who plays for Reading – Catley believes



Far left: Catley playing for UK's Arsenal Women's team and, top centre, as a young girl in Melbourne. Left and above: Amy Duggan during her eight-year career as an Australian football player.

women's teams aren't afforded the same level of medical support, which is causing a "bit of an injury crisis".

"The pressure's high, there's attention, there are people judging us. And I think we're starting to see a breakdown in female athletes' bodies," says Catley, who recently had a stress fracture in her foot. "So many top players have hurt their knees, which can mean almost a year out." Access to better physio and recovery services is the next step towards equality, she says and, "what most women's footballers would say is their hope for the future".

The strides taken already are largely thanks to former players such as Amy Duggan (nee Taylor). While young Catley was kicking around with the boys, Duggan was determinedly chipping her way through football's glass ceiling to become one of the first Australian Football Team players to get media attention. Duggan represented Australia from 1997, at age 17, to 2005, including being on the Olympic team in 2004.

"Our games weren't televised. We were super excited if the score was printed in those tiny little results columns in the newspaper," laughs Duggan. Football, she says, "was not a legitimate or financially achievable career for me". At her career peak, Duggan often hit the gym in the morning, worked all day as a civil servant in Canberra, changed out of the car boot into a kit she "hoped she'd washed the night before", then hightailed it to training. "I'd go home, have dinner, wash the clothes and do it all again the next day."

Her mission to bolster women's sport didn't stop when she retired in 2005. After moving to Wollongong on the New South Wales south coast, Duggan helped launch the Illawarra United Stingrays, a representative football club, and more recently, the South Coast Flame FC. She pivoted into journalism, sports reporting and eventually, football commentating. "It was the next dream for me." Duggan was on the female-led Optus Sport commentating team for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup. Optus "treated the Women's World Cup like the Men's World Cup for the first time ever," Duggan shares, "investing in the

game, giving it the respect it deserved." This in turn leads to brand awareness, increased sponsorship, better facilities, better pathway development, and on and on – but it all starts with platforming women's sport on television for all to see. Today, she sits on the Football Australia and Venues New South Wales boards and somehow finds the time to coach her son's under-9s football team. (Duggan has three children with husband, Matt.)

Does Duggan consider herself a role model to younger athletes? "That's such a weird question because most young players coming through now probably don't even know that I played football," she quips. However, as a mentor with the Minerva Network, which supports women in sport, and through her work with Optus Sport, with its goal to inspire the next generation, Duggan thrives on seeing young women succeed. "If I'm asked, I have some wisdom. It's always great for someone to be able to learn from both your success and your failure. Sport is an education that you can't pay for."

Duggan's 12-year-old daughter plays representative football, at a similar young age that Duggan first picked up a ball. But there's no pressure from Mum. "I just love watching them learn and make friends. I love knowing that there's an opportunity for her to play football as a career, if she wants to." A career that comes with more stress now – thanks to big crowds, travel, social media – than it did 20 years ago. Was football more fun then? "Gosh, I hope our national players are still having fun out there! I know they are," says Duggan. "This is a home World Cup. That comes with joy and opportunity but also pressure."

Duggan will be in Sydney on July 20 to host the opening World Cup match between Australia and Ireland live on Optus Sport. Catley will be lacing up her boots, preparing to hit the field. Among the 32 teams competing, dreams will be realised, hearts will be broken and new stars will be born, inspiring the next generation of young footballers watching at home. Because they can.

Optus Sport is the official Australian broadcaster of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023. Find out more at subhub.optus.com.au.