

## TURNING PRO: 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY WOMEN'S CLUB FOOTBALL

Women's sport, including football, continued to grow in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Despite the failure of the Women's United Soccer Association (2001-2003) - the first fully professional women's soccer league - and Women's Professional Soccer (2007-2012) to establish a foothold in the USA in the shadow of the 1999 World Cup, eventually the [National Women's Soccer League](#) (NWSL) emerged in 2012 as a popular and more sustainable professional league. To help support the payment of top players, the three North American FAs - Canada Soccer, the Mexican Football Federation, and US Soccer - [originally agreed to cover the salaries](#) of national team members involved in the league. US Soccer governed the league until 2020, with the eight original teams independently owned. Now a [fully self-sustaining franchise system](#) modelling other North American professional leagues, the addition of Angel City FC in Los Angeles and the San Diego Wave in 2022 pushed the competition to 12 teams - with another 2 (Bay FC and Utah Royals) [expected to join in 2024](#).

Although the NWSL primarily serves as a league to develop a pool of elite American players (and to a lesser degree, Canadian and Mexican national team members) international stars, including Brazilian Marta and Australia's Sam Kerr, have regularly moved to the United States to play in the NWSL. Part of the reason for the [NWSL's global appeal](#) is its [professional infrastructure](#) - particularly in comparison to other top tier women's domestic club leagues. For the 2023 season, salaries are capped at \$200,000 US - a significant increase since 2013 (\$30,000) but paling in comparison to elite men's compensation. The NWSL also includes a [salary minimum](#) of \$36,400 (up from \$6000) and provides healthcare and other supports including housing. Globally, very few fully professional leagues exist for women, with most domestic clubs providing minimal support. In an article published by *The Economist* before the start of the 2019 Women's World Cup, the average salary for professional female footballers was reported as [\\$7000 per year](#).

Across the United Kingdom and Europe, the slow move to professionalize women's football has finally gained momentum. Although most [bans on women playing](#) on FA affiliated pitches were lifted in the early 1970s, the game still struggled for gender equality. England's FA, for example, lifted their field ban in 1971, yet only fully assumed a leadership role in women's football in the early 1990s. A separate Women's FA established in 1969, took the lead to create amateur (and eventually, limited semi-professional) opportunities for women to play in organized, elite football leagues. The [FA took control](#) of the Women's FA Cup for the 1993-94 season - although, reportedly, with limited interest.

By 2006, however, a [British government report](#) lauded the English FA's role in the [growth of girls and women's football](#). With an increasing number of powerful male football clubs adding women's team, a promotion-relegation structure first developed in the 1990s grew substantially, and in 2011 a [fully professionalized Women's Super League \(WSL\)](#) became the top-tier in advance of the London 2012 Olympics. Originally a mix of semi-professional and professional clubs (with a limited number of players considered "full-time"), the 2022-23 WSL season included 12 fully professional clubs - notably linked with major men's power clubs including [Arsenal](#), [Chelsea](#), [Manchester City](#), and, belatedly, [Manchester United](#). As the WSL increasingly professionalized, it became a viable option to the American NWSL for elite players globally. Increasingly, domestic and global media coverage - both in terms of live television and secondary analysis - of the WSL continued to grow the English women's game. [BBC and Sky](#), in 2021, agreed to pay £8 million per season to broadcast the WSL - providing both financial backing and prime visibility for the women's game. Corporate investment, including [Barclays bank's £30 million title sponsorship](#) of the WSL, have further enhanced the league's standing as an elite, professional sporting league.

Like most of non-North American sport leagues, the WSL uses a promotion/relegation system. At the end of each season, top teams in each of the [English women's football pyramid](#) move up a level, with the bottom teams dropping down. For the WSL, the bottom team moves down, while the champion of the second tier - called the "Championship" - moves up. The consequences of relegation from the WSL, however, are immense. Reading FC Women, relegated at the conclusion of the 2022-23 season, recently announced [a move to a semi-professional model](#) due to revenue losses and the fiscal disparity between the top two tiers of English football.

A further incentive to WSL teams, other than avoiding relegation or winning the championship, is qualification to the [UEFA-sponsored Champions League](#). At the end of each season, the top 3 WSL teams earn the opportunity to play additional matches in next year's tournament featuring 16 of the most successfully clubs representing leagues across Europe. The Women's Champions League has generated a global following and [increasing revenue source for UEFA](#); and for several clubs, provides the only opportunity for high level competition. Across Europe, huge resource gaps exist between teams - with most leagues consisting of a mix of professional and semi-professional clubs. For example, well-resourced professional women's teams [Olympique Lyonnais \(Lyon\)](#) and [Paris Saint-Germain \(PSG\)](#) compete with the world's best in the UEFA Women's Champions League - then dominate part-time players with their international-laden squads in the Division 1 Féminine. Similarly, FC

Barcelona's women's team - [Champions League victors in 2022-23](#) and 2020-21 - dominate Liga F in Spain, ending last season with [118 goals scored and 10 conceded](#) across the season.

Massive disparities between club resources provided for women's teams globally and within domestic leagues continues to be a problem. But the accelerating interest in the women's game is steadily leading to increased professionalization - structurally, fiscally, and attitudinally. Beyond the NWSL in the USA and emergent WSL in England, [Italy's Serie A Femminile](#), [China's Super League](#), Brazil's Brasileirão Feminino, [Spain's Liga F](#), and [Japan's WE League](#) became fully professionalized leagues in the past few years, with plans for similar advancements announced in Australia, [Canada \(2025\)](#), and France (2024).