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Overshadowed by their male counterparts

In June the Swiss women will take part in the World Cup for the first time in the history of football. Yet this success has not brought them much money or attention.

CLAUDIA SCHUMACHER

It is hammering down on the pitch. The women are battling valiantly while the men suppress a smile. FC Zurich's women's team are playing against the ladies from BSC Young Boys of Berne. There are also three internationals out on the pitch. They will travel to Canada for the World Cup in June – Fabienne Humm and Cinzia Zehnder from the Zurich-based club and Florijana Ismaili from Berne. It is the first time in footballing history that Switzerland's women have reached the World Cup finals.

A small group of the players' relatives sit amongst the spectators at Zurich's Heerenschürli field sports centre to watch this game on a Saturday in March. Women's football in Switzerland has continued to receive little media coverage in the last few weeks before the World Cup despite the historic success. On the sports desk of a leading national newspaper, nobody volunteers when asked who will go to Canada to cover the World Cup. The magazines, which report on male footballers' every romance and new car, make barely a mention of the ladies' team. Even "Playboy", which featured the German women's team, has not been in touch despite the fact that some of the Swiss women would undoubtedly look good in it.

As exciting as the lottery draw

Why, you might ask, does the female team in a football-crazy nation like Switzerland continue to remain overlooked? "The bottom line is that the game is about as exciting as the lottery draw when you haven't bought a ticket," a columnist on the "NZZ am

Sonntag" once wrote about the spectator experience at women's football. The ladies are slow and not strong, including technically. There are around ten missed passes to every one which goes to a team mate. This rather scathingly sums up the commonly held misgivings and prejudices about women's football. Many people also find it an unattractive spectacle. The sport still has a reputation for being a playground for aggressive lesbians with hair on their upper lip.

But does this image reflect reality? During the rain-swept match in Zurich, FCZ captain Humm scans the pitch. She is in possession, lifts her right leg in the air, misses the ball and trips. Two men in the stand laugh. But only briefly before biting their lips as they are aware of what is politically correct. Shortly afterwards a mishit ball lands in the refuse beyond the pitch. Another hits a spectator on the shoulder causing her to drop her hotdog.

But there are also players lacking concentration and sliced balls when the men are in action. Some female footballers are probably on a par with the men technically. The standard of women's football nevertheless varies widely. This is also explained by the fact that the sport is still largely amateur. There are currently just three Swiss women on professional contracts and none of them play for a Swiss club. Lara Dickenmann from Kriens was for seven years with the French side Olympique Lyon and plays now for VfL Wolfsburg, Ramona Bachmann from Malters plays in Sweden and Vanessa Bürki from Grenchen is under contract at FC Bayern Munich.

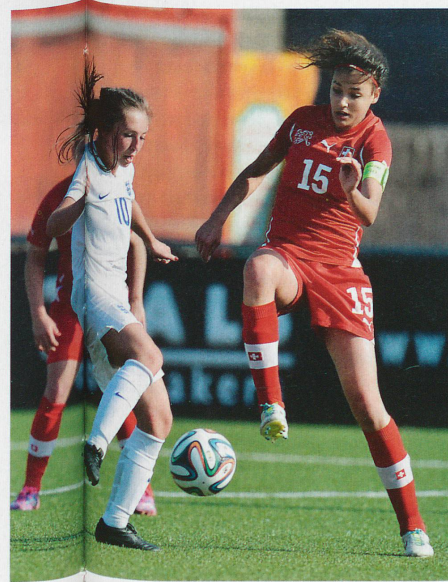
No reason to look away

The women are certainly not as fast or powerful as their male counterparts, and that will probably never change. But this alone does not explain the lack of popularity of women's football. In athletics nobody cares that it takes women a second longer to race 100 metres or that their descent is a metre below the height reached by the men in the pole vault. In some Scandinavian countries, in Germany, the USA and Japan, women's football enjoys a different status to that in Switzerland. Football is actually perceived as more of a female sport in the USA.

Female players have been endeavouring for some years to shake off the image of manly women which makes the sport unappealing for many people. The women appear very feminine. The proportion of those with long hair amongst the Swiss women's team is higher than in the rest of society. Some players have a small frame, and many wear make-up on the pitch and move gracefully. In this respect, there is no reason even for more sensitive male eyes to turn away.

Full-time jobs on top of training

The match between the teams from Zurich and Berne proves very entertaining after a while, watching the very direct Humm with her clean, incisive style of play. Then there is the talented, 17-year-old Cinzia Zehnder, who seems rather awkward on her long, slim legs and looks as though she is constantly wearing a question mark on her forehead. But then she scores a goal. And after the Bernese ladies equalise in the 70th minute, Zehnder channels her frustration into produc-



Cinzia Zehnder (right) battling with England's Katie Zelem

Facing the world champions in Vancouver

The FIFA 2015 women's World Cup will take place in Canada from 6 June to 5 July. The Swiss face a stern test from the outset. In the first match on 8 June, they will play the reigning world champions Japan in Vancouver. More than half of the Swiss players have contracts

with clubs abroad. FC Zurich, the best Swiss female football club, nevertheless provides the largest contingent of players to the national team. Fabienne Humm, Cinzia Zehnder and Nicole Remund are highly likely to be on the plane to Canada, and Selina Kuster also stands a good chance. If they reach the knock-out stage, the Swiss ladies will have achieved their goal.

ing a second goal which proves decisive in a 2:1 victory.

Zehnder still attends the cantonal school and is due to sit her Swiss school-leaving exams in the summer. She can, however, postpone them owing to the World Cup. Humm held a full-time position in business until recently. She has now reduced her level of employment to 80 % in the run-up to the World Cup in order to prepare better. The sport, which has thus far provided the national team players with little money and only marginal attention, makes great demands of them. It is a time-consuming pastime. They have to train five times a week and do everything for themselves. After the match, they

have to put the goalposts away before they can leave.

"She's great, she believes in us"

The biggest problem facing Swiss women's football is its financial position. It is lacking in money. Women do not receive much support at the clubs. Even though girls increasingly enjoy playing football and fathers no longer kick up a fuss, they are still not fully fledged members. Talented young female footballers often do not even have their own showers at the local clubs. Such structural weaknesses have a very discouraging impact. The football association's reluctance to invest in women's football means the girls do not feel very highly valued.

At least the Swiss women's national team has received greater support since it was confirmed that they would take part in the 2015 World Cup in Canada. "Many female players have been given an individual training programme," explains Zehnder after the match. At 1.8 metres tall and weighing 60 kg, she will focus on building muscle. This means a protein-rich diet and sessions in the gym. Others have to work on their athleticism or fitness levels. The players have been given lectures on nutrition. They also receive psychological input, which has long been commonplace in elite sport.

The national team manager, Martina Voss-Tecklenburg from Germany, who has coached the Swiss ladies since 2012, takes care of the rest. Voss-Tecklenburg also once played herself. She made 125 international appearances, was crowned German female footballer of the year three

times and was a runner-up at the World Cup with Germany in 1995. Outlining her coaching ethos, she remarks: "I was an aggressive player myself and I like to see an aggressive style of football." Fabienne Humm says of Voss-Tecklenburg: "She's great, she believes in us." She has instilled "the German mentality" into the team, reveals Humm with a grin. The positive message she conveys is to never give up, chase every ball and believe in your own abilities. "She has shown us that we are a force to be reckoned with." The coach has turned a group of uncertain girls who enjoyed kicking a ball around into a team.

And what is a realistic goal for the World Cup? "Getting out of the group into the knock-out stage," indicate Humm and Zehnder.

Provocative advertising

Female footballers promote themselves and their sport on YouTube and come across as brazen and bursting with energy. They pull tractors on a rope and shout across to the male professionals: "Do you have the balls to take us on?" This is despite the fact that it is precisely comparison with the men that has damaged women's football in the past.

Women's football still has a long way to go in Switzerland before it is taken seriously. Even if FIFA President Sepp Blatter recently proclaimed his intention to make women's football as big as the men's game, the 79-year-old will probably never see that day.