



Sterling Athletic Ladies Football Club, 1917 © LBBD Archives

# FOOTBALL, FACTORIES AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In 1915 the Football Association ruled to disband professional men's football indefinitely. Whilst the professional paid game had finished, amateur football continued. Two new leagues were formed. The first was the Combination League and was mostly occupied by the professional and semi-professional clubs. The second was the Munitions' Workers League and saw the sport return to its industrial roots. It was in the Munitions' Workers League that women's football would exceed the popularity of the men's game.

"These ladies are splendid specimens of British Womanhood who keep the flag flying until their 'boys' come back"  
 – Ilford Recorder, February 1918



Sterling Athletic Ladies FC against Vickers Ladies FC of Dartford playing in Southend-on-Sea, 1918



Vickers Ladies FC of Dartford, 1918

Women's football, usually played by factory workers as a means of keeping fit, provided a number of different roles throughout the war. The East and South East London Munitions League saw some of the most successful teams in the country develop.

These were only rivalled by some of the more established teams from the North like the revered Dick Kerr Ladies from Preston. Captains like Maud Smith for Sterling Dagenham, Dorothy Sutton for AEC Walthamstow, and Ada Moss for Woolwich Arsenal all oversaw the development of successful women's teams.

"The Sterling Ladies were thanked for their fine sporting manner and congratulated their success"  
 – Ilford Recorder, December 1917

With the popularity of the women's game jeopardising the men's game and conservatism from the FA, in 1921 it was ruled that football was inappropriate for women to play. Women were no longer allowed to play on the pitches of any club belonging to the FA as a contingency of their membership. Whilst the ban lasted until the 1970s, many women continued to play at amateur level often in factories.

"I played football for Lesney's Matchbox Toys. We actually had a women's team against the the factory workers... it was actually in Hackney, near Conservancy Road and we had a floodlit football ground just outside the factory."  
 – Mary

Other sports like cricket and hockey also became popular pastimes for female factory workers. Sports offered women the chance to socialise with each other and exercise as well as entertaining spectators. Almost all women's sporting events were charitable and were used as fundraisers for the war effort. The charitable nature and fine sporting manner meant the women's game became popular public sport.



Sterling Athletic Ladies against the Marconi Ladies FC, Ilford 1918



Sterling Athletic Ladies Football Club, 1917 © LBBD Archives

An Eastside Community Heritage exhibition. Visit our website [www.hidden-histories.org.uk](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk)