

FARRER&Co

How do we get more women on sports boards?



Guests

Michelle Bowie Krige, Non-Executive Director, Lewes Football Club

Monique Choudhuri, Non-Executive Director, Brentford Football Club

Chris Grant, Independent Board Member, Sport England

Josie Jones, Diversity & Inclusion Lead, Women in Sport

Kate Nicholson, Acting CEO, Women in Sport

Jane Purdon, Chief Executive Officer, Women in Football

Janice Shardlow, Director, Governance United

Julian Pike, Partner, Farrer & Co

Katie Lancaster, Partner, Farrer & Co

Emily Jamieson, Associate, Farrer & Co

Sally Mantell, Associate, Farrer & Co



Julian Pike

It is an exciting time for women's sport. Audiences are growing fast. Some 11.7 million people watched the recent England versus USA game, up from 6.1 million for the England versus Scotland game, figures that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago.

The public profile of women's sport grows ever higher: this summer the BBC launched its ChangeTheGame initiative to showcase female sport, and The Telegraph now has a dedicated online space for women's sport.

We also know that there has been progress in terms of diversity on boards of national governing bodies who receive funds from Sport England, with organisations reaching a 30% target for gender diversity in recent years, although notably the picture is different on boards of professional clubs which do not receive funding.

As the audience grows so too does the commercial opportunity. We've recently seen Barclays agree a game-changing £10m sponsorship of the Women's Super League. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of deals in women's sport went up by 47%, and the average value of those deals went up by 38%. Prize money at this year's World Cup sits at \$30m, up from \$6m in 2007. So, we're seeing considerable growth and progress, albeit from a low base.

At Farrer & Co we are interested in the way the leadership of sport and elite sports interact to increase participation, achieve more diversity on boards and attract greater investment into sport. In the midst of the excitement of the Women's World Cup, we brought together a group of leaders from across women's sport. Every member of our panel is a passionate advocate for women's sport.

Our panel discussed this moment of real opportunity for women's sport, as those involved across the sector seek to increase participation, deliver greater commercial success and push for better diversity and inclusion at all levels.

We hope you find the discussion both enlightening and inspirational.

Julian: What do you believe is the single biggest challenge for increasing the percentage of females on boards?

Monique: Ultimately, perspective. As a woman on the board of a football club, for me the most important thing is to know that when I'm with the people on my board, I'm not viewed as a woman, rather, I'm seen as an equal in making decisions which support the governance of the business, that I'm a critical friend of the business and I make decisions which work for them.

Jane: Another real barrier is when we look at organisations that are not subject to the Code for Sports Governance, as there is no threat of withdrawal of funding and ultimately no lever we can pull. So, it has to come through other sources. I think political pressure can still be applied and there are certainly areas of sport that simply don't get public money, which are beginning to look behind the times, not just compared to national governing bodies, but compared to FTSE companies and the charity sector. It's about applying pressure, and making the case for change.

Julian: It's true, it's very much an issue that professional clubs are getting absolutely nowhere near a balance.

Kate: There is sometimes a pervasive culture or entrenched attitude that can be really hard for some women to overcome. To be the only woman on the board, or to be one of only a few, is a challenge and you need people around you who are keen to embrace change and welcome a plurality of inputs. If we can unlock that attitude and make inclusivity really live then we will see even quicker and more meaningful change. If the entire board is not receptive or the club does not accept or believe in that inclusivity, then it's not going to accelerate. We need to change the mindset.

Jane: A football club chairman I once worked with said "I like having women in the club. I like having women on the board and I like having them in my leadership team." It is great when you have individuals with that attitude, but the issue comes when you don't. Frankly, too much still relies on the attitude of the individual at the top.

Michelle: It's true of any organisation though. Your culture comes from the top and real change needs to be led from there.

Janice: The problem with board composition is that if you're not careful, you recruit the same sort of person time and again, because a lot of these positions are unpaid, which immediately applies an age or wealth filter that can skew talent acquisition. On top of that, boards tend to recruit in ways that attract people like them. If you recruit in a way that attracts a certain sort of person, people who don't fit that mould can be slightly fearful and lack the confidence to go forward. That then perpetuates the issue. I hear a lot of boards say, 'We'd love to recruit more women. We'd love to recruit more ethnic minorities, but they never apply.' Then you look at the job adverts and where they are placed and they are really prescriptive. For example including a requirement such as 'must have a history in club rugby' or the equivalent in another sport immediately narrows the field!

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Julian: Should we have a Rooney Rule like the one used in American Football to increase the proportion of black coaches?

Janice: I think the issue starts well before the interview process because you won't get to the desired shortlist unless you advertise and set your specification in a way that is attractive to a wider range of candidates, drawn from a more diverse talent pool.

Kate: I completely agree. You have to think right back to the start of the process because nobody wants to get somebody who's not right for the job. If you look very narrowly, you're not going to necessarily find the right person for the job. We had people contact us to say, 'It's been difficult because they now want an all-women shortlist.' We say, 'Go right back, where are you actually recruiting?' If you haven't found the calibre of people there, it isn't because they don't exist, it is because you haven't run the recruitment process correctly.

Monique: We are also battling a differing gender mindset. If you put out a job advert and a man and a woman are looking at the job specification, 70% of men apply even if they can't do the job. They tend to have more confidence. You may well find that for the same role only 30% of women would apply.

Josie: While women will tend to see the gaps in their skill set, men will be more inclined to see the opportunity.

Julian: Of course, it doesn't have to be a 'rule' – organisations, individual clubs, could make a decision to set themselves targets when they have decisions to make on appointing new members of the board or senior executives.

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Julian: How do we change the system to encourage a wider diversity of board candidates?

Josie: Practical support is key. The Sport England initiative for 'board-ready candidates' is a genuinely positive step forward, but the issue is that it is rooted all the way back to education. The problem is that we can't wait fifteen years for the next generation to come through.

Katie: Professional development is so important. Advice I received at a 'Women on Boards' event gave me the confidence to apply for a board role at a charity I was interested in, even though I was not a match for every one of the requirements. The process was a really great experience for me.

Kate: The point about having to have played the sport in order to be involved in its management is something we have also uncovered. Even if it's not explicit, sometimes the sporting ability or the level that a candidate achieved, actually trumps everything else and that significantly impacts on diversity, especially in more male-dominated sports. I was talking to an organisation who, when announcing new board members, always talked about their sporting history or prowess first. They have recently changed this and now the view is 'You know what, we're going to showcase their skills because this is why we hired them.'. Before that, the focus would have been on whether they'd achieved county or national level in the actual sport.

Chris: For me, introducing the Rooney Rule, or an equivalent, around gender at this stage would actually be a backwards step because that's just about shortlisting. We've actually got a more robust system already in place where funders can say 'If you haven't got the right gender balance on your board your funding is at risk.' For me, the biggest barrier now relating to gender is around inclusion, not diversity. It's not about the Rooney Rule. It is about individuals and organisations learning to be more inclusive.

Monique: Inclusivity is key and I don't think it has moved on much in the commercial and corporate worlds either. I've just completed a master's in leadership and my dissertation was on the factors that promote and prevent inclusive leadership in a financial organisation. You have to look at all the different cultures, ideas and mindsets as assets. To keep your competitive global advantage, you have to draw on these assets to ensure you include a whole range of thinking, no matter who is the source, whether they are female, brown, black, white, green or yellow! You also have to consider sexuality. Well run organisations realise everyone has got something different to say. Give people a voice and ensure they are heard.

Kate: The fact is, that while you can measure diversity relatively easily, it is a lot harder to measure inclusivity. It is far harder to pin down and that presents a bit of a challenge as it makes it difficult to benchmark and monitor. We really need to establish an effective way of measuring inclusivity and making it more tangible and therefore measurable.

Julian: What impact has the gender target of 30% on sports governing bodies had on culture? Are people seeing better decision making?

Josie: A further challenge is that if you've got a board of ten people, nine of them are men, and you measure inclusivity with them, it's probably really high. The problem is that the person who is in the minority experiences the situation very differently. It is difficult to avoid any measure becoming skewed.

Monique: At the end of the day, board members want to know that their opinion will be asked for and valued, and that they can properly contribute to the big decisions.

Kate: In recent research we undertook on culture at Women in Sport, we found that 40% of women felt that they were less valued simply because they were a woman. In contrast, only 9% of men felt the same way. That is a shocking statistic because it highlights the very real gap in how people feel the contribution they make is viewed. It begs the question, why would you volunteer to join a board if this how you feel?

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The biggest barrier and opportunity with regard to gender at this point is around inclusion, not diversity.

Chris: In the 1980s, a lot of the work was done around what was then called equal opportunities, back then terms like diversity and inclusion weren't even used. There was quite a lot of progress made in a number of organisations, in the private, public and the voluntary sector. Ultimately, there has been slippage since then. I think one of the ways of making sure that the current figure on gender equality is seen as a stepping stone to proper equality, rather than the end goal, is this: men and women need to step up and see how they can make their organisations more inclusive. As more women and younger people get involved, there is a massive opportunity to push forward on this front.

Kate: We all know that there's better decision-making on diverse boards but I think there is something about sport that values quick decision-making. Having more diversity doesn't necessarily mean quicker decisions but it does often result in much better, deeper, sounder decision-making. Our research has shown that if decision-making slows, it is seen as a negative - which might be to do with the fact that so many sports are focused on going the fastest! We need to change this mindset and ensure people appreciate a more considered approach.

Kate: It's interesting because a lot of the research that makes this connection between diversity, inclusion and commercial success, exists in the US. People want to see that demonstrated a bit closer to home. This isn't about getting women on the board or increasing diversity for the sake of it. It is actually about doing this because it will have a much broader commercial impact.

Katie: What we have seen in other sectors, for example in banking and finance, is that regulators are saying, 'When we look at a board and it's all, or majority, white men, the risk profile is higher'. If the board are from the same social background, with the same experiences, they are likely to be looking in the same direction and not as good at anticipating risks. It's interesting to see that same insight translate across to other sectors.

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Julian: What is the link between women on boards and greater female participation in sports? Which should take the lead?

Jane: You've got to look at both issues. You've got to start at the top and remember the phrase 'You can't be it until you can see it.' So, we've got to showcase the role models and the women doing these things. You've also got to work hard to develop the talent pipeline and have those conversations with women, saying, 'Just apply for the board role, it is for you.' Work to build up their confidence, enable them to go through personal development and career development courses.

Kate: I agree. It is about developing a virtuous circle. You can't just focus on one element; more women on boards and more girls participating in sport are two ends of the spectrum. We also need to focus on all the things that go on in the middle. We need to be thinking about everyone that works in the sports sector, both on a paid and volunteer basis and increase diversity and inclusivity at all levels.

Michelle: One way of getting more women on sports' boards is by looking beyond the sport itself as the talent pool. In terms of increasing participation for us (Lewes FC) it's about making our space accessible for women, so that they come to games and can be part of the community. By focusing on the issue, we have achieved a fourfold increase in women's attendance over the last two years and we've had attendance of over 2,000 at some of our women's matches recently. My main mission is to get us more money, so that we can raise the bar even higher and shout from the rooftops: when you do the right thing, you get more money and better on-the-pitch results!

Chris: We have to show the significant potential in women's sport. Currently less than 1% of commercial sports revenue is going towards women's sport. This means that there is a huge opportunity and we need to tell this story and highlight what a fantastic investment chance there is. It is about showing that the people who have got in early to these more progressive spaces are the real winners.

Janice: Everyone is missing a trick, because if you are a serious commercial person, what you want is audience reach. Women are a massive audience, but nobody is really selling the commercial appeal of access to this audience perhaps because there is a tendency in sport to go for old sponsorship models.

Michelle: Also, there is a tendency to view the audience for the women's games as existing male fans. They don't see that it's actually people who haven't been interested in football at all in the past, which represents a brand new market.

Katie: In Australia the AFL was a completely saturated market and incredibly expensive in terms of advertising. The only way of growing the market was by investing in the women's game, which is what they did. Interestingly, the first thing they found is that it was mainly men watching. However, they're getting a bigger audience and they're reaching those men, for a far cheaper rate.

Monique: Until we have women's sport as regular prime time TV, we won't change the zeitgeist. In Mexico, in order to get sponsorship working, they made women's football one night of the week, which was a Monday. Matches now see 50,000 attendees and Monday has become fixed as women's football night. We see men's football every single week however, we only see women's football at the big tournaments. It needs a more regular platform.

Kate: We did some research on this issue last year and looked at the regularity of women's sport. We saw that the international games attracted interest and were of great quality but they didn't happen on a consistent enough basis. So, fans were saying, 'I don't know where to go to look for it.'

Julian: How should women's sport evolve and go about securing greater commercial revenues?

Monique: The fastest-growing sport at grass roots level is rugby, for both women and girls. It's exciting watching women's rugby and this should become a regular TV fixture. Essentially, if we saw regular sport, any women's sport on TV on a regular basis, we would definitely see increased sponsorship deals.

Julian: Outside of football, women's cricket and women's rugby have become completely mainstream now, not something that looked possible twenty years ago. People are seeing the huge commercial opportunity there, and the growth in participation by women – at the same time as male participation has plateaued.

Jane: At the women's FA cup final there were 40,000 in attendance. What really staggered me was there must have been thousands of kids there. There isn't a sport in the world that doesn't want its stadiums full of kids right now. The only one that is doing it is women's football. It has the venues and it needs to fill them so can use discounted tickets to attract a whole new generation of fans.

Chris: There is certainly a real opportunity around women's sport over the next five years, both in terms of the commercial opportunity and overall participation.

Monique: It isn't just about increasing female participation and encouraging more children into playing and watching sport. We want to increase diversity in the broadest sense. Our country is changing, there are more people of colour, more immigrants, more refugees, the fastest growing communities are Romanians and Somalians. These people often don't have the money to go and watch sport and we potentially run the risk of some sports becoming 'white' sports. We've got to move to be more inclusive in sport as a whole.

Katie: There are interesting lessons to be learnt from other sectors. What Dame Fiona Reynolds did with the National Trust provides a great example of what can be achieved. She came and assessed the National Trust from a totally different perspective. As a mother of two children, she loved the National Trust but she realised it could make families feel really unwelcome. So, her big vision was 'the National Trust is for everybody' and in doing so she changed the dynamic and encouraged more people in. There is the same opportunity with women's sport. We also need to think about what we can learn from the American model that appeals to the whole family.

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Julian: What does success look like and how long will it take us to get there?

Janice: Success will be when we no longer have an issue with any aspect of diversity, it will be when we have boards that are truly diverse without our even having to think about it. Timing? To achieve true equality across all forms of diversity we have to assume a ten-year minimum. We have hardly even started talking about LGBT and, at present, we have no effective ways of tackling ethnic imbalance.

Chris: The signal of success is that career structures will shift so that women, regardless of what happens in their lives away from work, can continue to progress and be welcomed in their careers. There's an amazing generation of women in sport, many of them former athletes, who could come in from outside, who are ready to lead. They'll hopefully be running the show soon and I would be really happy if we were talking about not having enough men on boards in ten years' time.

Michelle: For me it will be about the money. When we have equal pay, we'll have equal representation. Yes, to some extent, there has to be a balance between the commercial revenue coming in to justify remuneration, but let's take Diet Coke as an example. Coke invested in this product, when there wasn't a market place, and it created a massive industry. At Lewes FC we're entrepreneurs, we're building a space that people want to invest in.

Kate: I think success, for me, is when we don't have to sit and talk about the measures of different people being represented. We can just get the best people for the job and we automatically get that representation coming through. In terms of timescale, it's in our hands.

Monique: I think success will be when we don't have to talk about it, when there's just parity, when it's equal and that we're not having to amplify women's stories, amplify women's pay, where actually we look back and we see our success, we feel our success and we're not having to fight harder to get it. That will mean being represented in everything from viewing figures to all sports, to everything, to pay.

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Julian: Is football going to lead or is it going to follow?

Jane: In my brighter moments, I think women's football is unstoppable. I don't think it's a question of "is it going to be big?" I think the question is how big is it going to be? I'm already trying to move the conversation onto, 'What should the governance of it look like? What do we want to take from the men's game and what can we do better?' So will football lead or will it follow, probably as it has done through its entire 150-year existence, a little bit of both. Women's football could represent a new model for sport. It is a very exciting time.

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Our Farrer & Co Sports Practice are passionate about helping to improve the culture and diversity of sports boards. We are committed to bringing together elite athletes and leading figures across sport to continue discussing these issues further.

If you would like to know more about our Women in Sport activities, please get in touch with Julian, our Head of Sports or [visit our webpage](#) for more details about our Sports practice.

Julian Pike, Partner
julian.pike@farrer.co.uk
+44 (0)20 3375 7217

With thanks to Farrer Kane.

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Well run organisations realise everyone has got something different to say. Give people a voice and ensure they are heard.

Farrer & Co LLP
66 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London WC2A 3LH

+44 (0)20 3375 7000
insights@farrer.co.uk
www.farrer.co.uk

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Co