



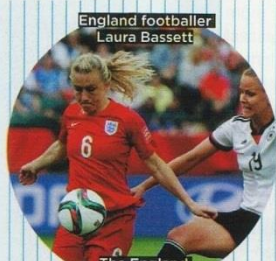
It's been long overdue and long deserved, but 2015 is the year women's sport has finally made it to the big time. Girl power!

WORDS: Becky Fletcher

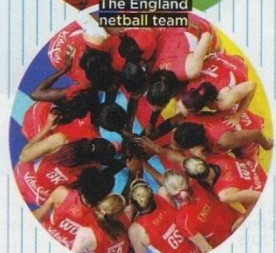




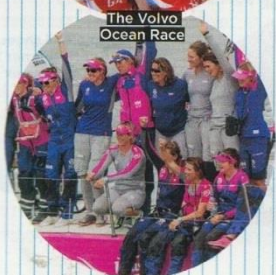
**M**en's sports, from football to cricket, and their stars, have long been revered and thought of as 'cool.' We bet you know someone who had a poster of their favourite team on their bedroom wall. The constant stream of football coverage and familiar roar of F1 cars on TV at weekends, the big fashion campaigns featuring the biggest sporting names – you can't escape the popularity of men's sport. In contrast, many women's sports and their stars, despite their talent, drive and capabilities, have, historically, failed to get much of the recognition of their male counterparts. But things are changing, and fast...



England footballer  
Laura Bassett



The England  
netball team



The Volvo  
Ocean Race

## THE SUMMER OF SPORT

This year has seen women's sports hit headlines in all the right ways. Our finest sportswomen have graced the front pages of the newspapers and magazines, getting more coverage than ever before and felt a wave of support from the country. Stylish, suitably kick-ass, with buckets of talent, women in sports are finally getting the acknowledgement they deserve. But what's caused this tipping point?

'The performances of elite sportswomen in this country have inspired the nation,' says Christopher Scott, media and PR manager at Women in Sport ([womeninsport.org](http://womeninsport.org)). 'Our national women's teams and individual athletes are consistently putting in spectacular performances which, in turn, have given media outlets and commercial organisations alike the wake-up call a number of them needed to invest in and commit to women's sport.' Companies such as Vitality (England Netball), SSE (Women's FA Cup), Newton Investment Management (The Boat Races), Investec (Hockey) and SCA (The Volvo Ocean Race)

are just some of the brands that have recognised the sizeable opportunity and value in investment. 'Huge strides have taken place in the last two to three years, and I'm sure that further progress will also come at a pace,' explains Charlotte Edwards, England Cricket Captain. 'We are fortunate enough to be sponsored by Kia [[kia.co.uk](http://kia.co.uk)] as our first stand-alone sponsor, and hopefully that will encourage more companies to get behind women's sports.'

### THE BIG EVENTS

So what were the events that got the ball rolling? First up was cycling as the Aviva Women's Tour grabbed our attention from June 17-21. After a highly successful inaugural edition in 2014, the five stages of racing returned this year and attracted the big names, with five jerseys up for grabs at each stage. A daily programme was broadcast for an hour on ITV4 with highlights on British Eurosport. British Olympic silver medallist, Lizzie Armitstead, won the first stage. Unfortunately, though, she had a bad crash soon after her win and was ruled out of the rest of the racing.

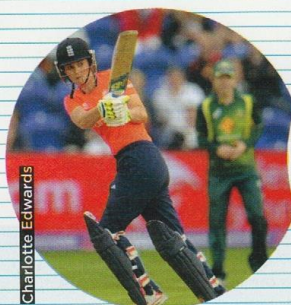
On top of cycling triumph, June saw one of the most memorable sporting events – the FIFA Women's World Cup football. This year, England had their most successful competition in decades becoming bronze medallists, after a nail-bitingly close match against Japan. Not only were they the highest performing European team in the tournament, but it marked the best performance by a senior English team (male or female) since the 1966 World Cup. TV coverage attracted a record number of viewers for the tournament, according to FIFA, with England's opener against France drawing 1.5 million viewers to BBC2. The final, won by the US, was the most watched football game in American history, with 25.4 million people tuning in. Total attendance in Canada was nearly 1.3 million – a new record, too. On Aug 1, and for the first time ever, the Women's FA Cup final was played at Wembley – another huge milestone for women's football.

The end of the summer saw the women's Ashes cricket. Although the series saw England lose to Australia, there was another victory for the sportswomen with Sky Sports providing live television coverage of every ball.

And it wasn't just team sports that stole the limelight – we also witnessed incredible displays of athleticism and sports performance in everything from Serena Williams's sixth Wimbledon win to Jessica-Ennis Hill's incredible return at the athletics World Championships.



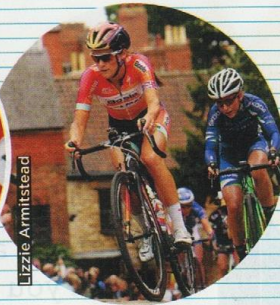




Charlotte Edwards



Jessica Ennis-Hill



Lizzie Armistead

It's not just the sportswomen paving the way for this change. 'We have some really trailblazing people behind the athletes,' explains Jeanette Kwakye, Olympian, journalist and trustee of the Women's Sport Trust. 'Journalists such as Clare Balding, Jacqui Oatley and Anna Kessel are all making a difference. Coaches such as Judy Murray, business leaders such as Helena Morrissey, media decision makers such as Clare Connor and the new Sports Minister, Tracey Crouch, are also making a serious impact.'

## THE HASHTAG FACTOR

On top of a rise in TV coverage, the England women's football team, or the Lionesses, as they are known, received support from many in the public eye. Everyone from the Prime Minister to Prince William paid homage to the talents and courage of the World Cup squad, but it was the many past and present sportsmen who regularly used social media to demonstrate their backing of the England footballers. Rio Ferdinand tweeted 'Beautiful to see the women's game get the exposure it fully deserves here in the UK... inspirational squad' and Gary Lineker tweeted: 'Despite the gut-wrenching nature of the defeat, England's women were terrific and should hold their heads high. Great effort!'

Another way in which social media has pushed the prominence of women's sports is the

award-winning This Girl Can campaign, developed by Sport England and a wide range of partnership organisations as 'a celebration of active women up and down the country who are doing their thing no matter how well they do it, how they look or even how red their face gets.' The inspired concept uses empowering imagery, adverts with catchy beats (Missy Elliott's Get Ur Freak On) and slogans such as 'hot and not bothered', 'my game face has lipstick on it' and 'I jiggle and therefore I am'. 'The This Girl Can campaign is working wonders to break down the fear of judgement barrier, giving women and girls across the country a whole new lease of life in sport, away from a feeling that it isn't for them – it most certainly is and everyone can participate in any sport,' says Scott. The realness and wide appeal has encouraged a social movement of 122,000 people posting #ThisGirlCan images on Instagram, depicting them getting hot and sweaty, but more importantly, enjoying being active.

## STYLE SWAPS

Men have long idolised their favourite sports people (we're looking at you, David Beckham), emulated their looks and kept up with the coolest sports clothes on offer, whereas style has been less synonymous with the sportswomen's kit – often being seen as dowdy or unfeminine. But, as we've witnessed in recent glamorous photoshoots, it seems as if women's sport is

## NOW YOU TRY

### TRY RUGBY

Pitch Up and Play is the RFU's new campaign aimed at getting 10,000 more women into rugby. Rugby clubs across the country have been offering free sessions this summer, open to women of all abilities. The sessions build confidence and contact, fitness and femininity while providing a place for women and girls to discover what makes them strong. Visit [englandrugby.com/rugbywomen](http://englandrugby.com/rugbywomen).

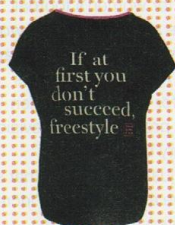
### #HELPOUT

Ahead of BBC Sports Personality of the Year, volunteering charity, Join In patron Eddie Izzard and Tanni Grey-Thompson launch #BigHelpOut with BBC Get Inspired. Join in wants to find 10,000 helpers for local sport. Seven out of 10 local sport clubs and groups in the UK say they need more volunteers. Visit [joininuk.org/join-in-bbc-big-help-out/](http://joininuk.org/join-in-bbc-big-help-out/).

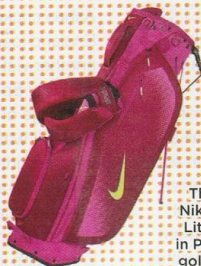
### GET INTO CRICKET

The England Cricket board has plenty of initiatives, including club cricket, indoor cricket, easy cricket, coaching or umpiring. Check out [ecb.co.uk/development/get-into-cricket/](http://ecb.co.uk/development/get-into-cricket/) for more information.

## GET KITTED OUT



The slogan tee.  
This Girl Can T-shirt, £16;  
[marksandspencer.com](http://marksandspencer.com)



The golf bag.  
Nike 2015 Sport  
Lite Stand Bag  
in Pink Volt, £90;  
[golfbidder.co.uk](http://golfbidder.co.uk)



The cycling top.  
Dhb Wiggle Honda Pro  
Short Sleeve Jersey 2015,  
£50; [wiggle.co.uk](http://wiggle.co.uk)



The football shirt.  
Nike Women's 2014 England  
Stadium Football Shirt, £55;  
[store.nike.com](http://store.nike.com)



The netball shoes.  
Asics Gel-Netburner 17 D,  
£90; [asics.co.uk](http://asics.co.uk)





also getting the makeover and cool factor it deserves. 'I think the cooler image that women's sport is finally portraying is exciting, passionate, gutsy and more athletic than ever,' says Laura Massaro, professional squash player. 'I love that a lot of female athletes are staying very feminine-looking and bringing fashion and make-up to the sport. Whatever their sport, more can bring a bit of who they are to what they do,' she adds.

The new wave in popularity for fitness and activewear on the high street is also helping to make sports 'cool' to young women. People not only idolise their favourite fashionista or celebrity, but women who perpetuate a strong, fit, healthy lifestyle. The popularity of the 2012 Olympics helped massively with this, too. 'The change in image in women's sport is hugely positive,' says Amy Wilson Hardy, England Rugby Player and ambassador for Pitch Up and Play. 'The term "strong is the new skinny" has meant girls want to gain a fit, healthy physique, which encourages them to take up a sport, such as rugby!' Kwaykye agrees. 'There are some great role models who're having an impact beyond sport to influence health, lifestyle and aspirations.'



The England rugby team

## THE SIGNS OF CHANGE

This expression of personality and style, a boom in media coverage and help from social media has paved the way for women's sport to become cool but, more importantly, normal, and for young girls to have a wide range of role models. 'Sport is definitely on the way to being normalised for women and girls in the UK and a number of sports have worked incredibly hard to professionalise women's disciplines – cricket, rugby and football teams all now have central contracts and competitive leagues,' says

Scott. To keep up momentum and to close the gap in participation rates between men and women (1.8m less women than men aged 16+ currently participate in sport once a week), he recommends either getting involved in the sport or attending women's sporting events. But don't compare it to men's sports. 'It's important that not too much comparison is drawn with the men's games,' says Kwakye. 'Women's sport should be respected for what it is. It's not better or worse – it's just different.' That sounds pretty good to us. ■

### WHAT WE THINK...

Three of the UK's top sportswomen give their verdict on the change in women's sport



'I think the cool image is fantastic. As a former PE teacher, ensuring young girls have realistic role

models to inspire them is extremely important to me. The rise in people wanting to be fit and the fact toned, strong women are no longer being seen as 'butch' but 'fit for life' is refreshing and something that my teammates have welcomed!' *Natasha Hunt, England Rugby Player and ambassador for Pitch Up and Play*



'We had an interesting summer with the Women's Ashes, which had a huge amount of print and broadcast

coverage and there's definitely been a shift in how these things are reported. There wasn't 'fluffy' reporting about how nice it was to see women playing cricket. Instead, when we played poorly, it was reported like that, and that's progress in itself.' *Charlotte Edwards, England Cricket Captain*



'We still need to focus on more coverage and media attention for women's sports, and on successful athletes,

no matter their age, background or sport.' *Laura Massaro, England Squash Player*