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CONSTANCE COLE – THE SECOND SCORER

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Abstract

This article covers the initial development of women’s association football using the biography of Constance Cole as an entry point to explore the birth of the women’s game in more detail. The first public match globally of women’s association football took place in Edinburgh in 1881 just over a decade after the sport had been established as a male bastion during the early 1870s. The impetus for the first association matches came from the entertainment industry with many of the organisers and players having a prominent role in theatre or popular entertainment. This article will focus on the relationship between popular entertainment and women’s football and the environment in which women’s sport was conducted, to gain an insight the experience of performers and managers on the periphery of popular entertainment.

Keywords

Sports Entertainment; History; Entrepreneurs; Theatre; Women’s Football

Introduction

There is an adage in sports that states: 'first is everything and second is nowhere' (Ogley, 2024). In the first woman's association football match played in Edinburgh on 7 May 1881, Lily St Clare is recorded as the first goal scorer with Louise Cole making the second. In terms of biography, very little is known about Lily St Clare outside of contemporary speculation that she was a stage performer. By contrast, there is a sizable amount of biographical detail relating to the second goal scorer Louise Cole. Her real name for instance was Constance Cole, and her story offers a unique insight into the emergence of women's association football. This is significant as many historiographies of women's football are limited in scope regarding the game's origins. So, in presenting a biography of Cole and a more detailed picture of early women's football, this paper will break with convention and concentrate on second place.

The early historians of the women's game such as Williamson (1991) cite 1894 and the formation of the British Ladies Football Club as the starting point for women's association football. Other scholars such as Lopez (1997), and Pfister (*et al.*, 1999), followed this line, by contrast, Lee (2008, p. 8) references women's football matches played in Scotland in 1888 and 1892. J. McBeth (2007, p. 7) appears to be the first scholar to detail the debut of women's association football, but she only focuses on the Edinburgh match. It was not until a year later that Brennan (2008) established that the 1881 match in Edinburgh was part of a two-month tour which visited towns such as Blackburn and Liverpool. More contemporary scholars such as Jenkel (2021) follow a continuation of previous work on early women's football whereas Skillen and Bolton (2021) do cover the early game, including folk football and the 1881 association matches, the primary focus of their study is the interwar years and the effects of the Football Association's embargo on women's football in 1921 and the similar move by the Scottish Football Association in 1947. Fraser (2020, p. 458) and James (2019, p. 19) have also touched on women's football's early development, but their primary study area is the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Williams (2022, p. 7-8) covers the 1881 tour and Wrack (2022) provides some detail for the organisers of these matches. Even so, there is still a large knowledge gap surrounding the early years of women's association football.

As part of the methodology for this paper, newspaper sources from Glasgow, Edinburgh, and titles from other parts of Scotland were consulted. As the tour moved south to areas such as Liverpool and Bradford reports in the Scottish press on these matches were less detailed, so it was necessary to examine publications based in the northeast and Yorkshire. Specialist sports, theatrical papers, and genealogical sources such as census returns, and birth records also proved invaluable to this study. Although much of this study has been electronic-based research other primary source material has come from bound volumes and microfilm provided relevant information. The *Yorkshireman* for example gives useful background detail and insight not only on the players taking part but also the spectators that followed the matches. Insights that are not available in digitised material. Johnes and Nicholson (2015) point out that although a large amount of material has been digitised there are still gaps in the coverage and the approach to accessing microfilm and bound volumes is still relevant.

Women and sports entertainments in the nineteenth century

In assessing women's football as a sports entertainment, it is necessary to consider how sports entertainment developed in popularity in the mid-19th century. Female competitors were a popular attraction for events, and the women involved were mostly working class. For example, Violet Mitchell made her name as a professional swimmer, or natationist as they were commonly known, and they appeared at venues such as the Westminster Aquarium in London. Annie Luker specialised as a high diver drawing large crowds to her performances, swimming was seen as an acceptable pursuit and many female spectators were attracted to events. This helped to establish swimming as a popular pastime for women (Day, 2018). Boxing promoters like Alf Ball often presented women competitors such as Violet and Rosaline Mills, the 'Muscular Maids from Mexico' as part of his touring boxing booth. Women's boxing also had strong links to the theatre with performers such as Selina Seaforth, Maude Pearce and Rosie Danvers making regular appearances on the music hall stage during the late 1890s (Cox, 2024).

The entertainment entrepreneur, Joshia Ritchie staged women's professional cycling events at the Royal Aquarium from 1896 until the end of the nineteenth century. Audiences were attracted by the novelty of seeing women compete in a high-performance sport. Monica Harwood, for instance, was one of the many riders that featured in the press. She was also a rare example of a female competitor receiving more money than her male counterpart (Simpson, 2007). Where they competed as individuals, women were more readily embraced in sporting activity. Team sports, by contrast, were considered a masculine pursuit and were often a product of the public school system designed to promote the male ideal in mainstream society (Hargreaves, 1994). Cricket was one of the few combination sports where women and girls could be accepted, and the professional teams of the Original English Lady Cricketers toured extensively during 1890 and 1891. They attracted large crowds to their matches, but research shows that the Original English Lady Cricketers received press criticism due in part to the professional nature of this organisation (Threlfall-Sykes, 2015, p. 73).

Football for female competitors was similarly viewed as entirely inappropriate; the number of high-profile injuries and even deaths in men's league football gave the sport a bad reputation and was certainly considered far too rough for women (Park, 2001). Regardless, entrepreneurs were determined to field women's football sides. For instance, in 1891, an attempt was made to establish women's rugby in New Zealand through theatrical connections (*Auckland Star*, 1891, p. 4). The venture failed to get off the ground, but another sports entrepreneur, Daniel R. McNeill, successfully hosted women's association matches in San Francisco in 1893 (*San Francisco Morning Coll*, 1893). The organisers for the 1881 tour, Alec Gordon and George Frederick Charles, had careers in entertainment management (Wrack, 2022, p. 17). Frederick Charles for instance, was born George Imbert in Bethnal Green, London on 30 November 1822 ('George Imbert', 1822). He had a career not only on the stage but also as a theatre manager in London in the 1860s before relocating to the North of England and becoming manager of the St Helens Theatre Royal, and later as a publicity agent in St Helens for visiting performers such as Powell's Circus (*St Helens Examiner*, 1880). Alec Gordon, in publicity relating to the 1881 football tour, was born in Edinburgh but records to support this are vague. However, an A. Gordon appears promoting stage shows, alongside the actor W. H. Pitt during the late 1870s (*Era*, 1878). The Pitt and

Gordon Company enjoyed modest success, but when Pitt died suddenly in 1879, Gordon's career began to falter.

Constance's early life and stage career

The backgrounds of the 1881 squad were a source of conjecture with some in the contemporary press suggesting that they were ballet girls (*Irvine Times*, 1881). Conversely, a local theatrical paper maintained that players often frequented the Parisian Temperance Café (*Quiz*, 1881). Contemporary scholars have also struggled to uncover any biographical details about the players. For example, Tate (2013) conflates the 1881 teams with Mrs Graham's XI, a later women's side which operated from 1895 to 1896 and has no connection to this study. A breakthrough came when Roberts (2019) identified two of the 1881 squad Louisa Cole and Carrie Baliol from the 1881 census return ('Louisa Cole', 1881) and when this lead was examined, Louisa Cole was born Constance Louisa Cooper Hodgson in Greenock in 1863 ('Constance Louisa Cooper Hodgson', 1863). In assessing Constance Cole's significance within the historiography of women's football, it is important to discuss her early career in which she was living in Barony Parish a semi-rural district to the north of Glasgow (Constance Hodgson, 1871). Towards the end of the 1870s, Constance moved onto the stage where she formed a partnership with James Cole, a Perth-born comedian. They married sometime during the early 1880s but the marriage record has not survived. This suggests that it was an irregular marriage under Scots Law, although a record of the marriage could exist in the minutes of the sheriff court (Gordon, 2015).

Little is known about James Cole, and it may be that his early career was largely nomadic as part of the travelling fairground entertainment which was still popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. The music hall developed in Scotland from Tavern concerts in the Saltmarket area, in venues such as Haggart's Tavern on King Street in Glasgow or from 'free and easies' such as White's on old Bridge Street in Edinburgh (Maloney, 2003). Other places of entertainment included unlicensed venues known as 'penny gaffs' and travelling booths known as 'geggies'. In these settings, the programme was more mixed with melodrama, pantomime and cut-down plays and sketches (King, 1987). Constance and James Cole's act seems to cross these differing performance spaces appearing as the 'Comical Coles' but also in dramatic sketches such as 'The Drunkard's Reformation'. In April 1881 the Coles' and Carrie Baliol toured rural Scotland as part of Harry Siddons Company, performing sketches such as 'The Artful Dodge' (*Campbeltown Courier*, 1881). In Glasgow, the 'Comical Coles' appeared at the Scotia and the Star Theatre of Varieties, two of the four music halls in operation in the city during the 1880s (*Glasgow Evening News and Star*, 1884).

The Cole's had two children, Louise born in 1884 and James in 1886, but the couple separated sometime in the late 1880s with the marriage likely to have been declared void by a Scottish court ('Louise Cole', 1912; *Dundee Courier*, 1894). Following the couple's separation, Constance adopted the stage name Louie Lyndhurst during the late 1880s and early 1890s (*Morpeth Herald*, 1889). After marrying another performer, Clarence "George" Smythson, Constance received a higher profile as part of the 'Smythson's' sketch trio, an act, rather like the one she and James Cole toured with in the 1880s (*Sheerness Guardian*, 1904). She also had a prominent role on the Music Hall Ladies Guild committee during the late 1900s. Attitudes towards theatre performers changed, whereas earlier in the century

they were not particularly revered, by the late 1870s they had become more respectable (Baker, 2016, p. 21).

The industry could still be caught up in salacious scandal and in the early months of 1910, Constance was at the centre of the notorious murder of Music Hall Ladies Guild member Cora Crippen by her husband Dr Hawley Crippen (Cullen, 1977). Following Dr Crippen's dramatic arrest, Constance was one of the main witnesses for the prosecution at his subsequent trial, giving her stage name Louise Smythson to the court (*Morning Leader*, 1910). Press reports confusingly give her address as Caister Road, Brixton Hill. In contrast, the 1911 census lists the Smythsons as living at 38 Craister Road, Brixton Hill, and they are recorded at the same address in the 1909 electoral register. This confirms that newspaper reports were in error, with details in the 1911 census further establishing Constance's background, giving us a complete biography of one of the 1881 players ('Constance L C Smythson', 1911). Considering her lifelong connection to the stage, it should not be surprising that Constance was involved in sports. In the next section, I will examine her involvement with football as sports entertainment.

Constance and the first women's Football Association side

Unlike many of the women's football sides of this era, there were no published adverts to attract participants; this suggests that the organisers used their contacts in the industry. Constance and Carrie Baliol are most likely to have joined the venture via word of mouth, taking part in training at a drill hall on Glasgow's Trongate (*Glasgow Evening News & Star*, 1881). The organisers had arranged to host the side's debut at Rangers' former ground at Kinning Park on 7 May 1881. However, the Glasgow Cup replay arranged for that day at Kinning Park, caused the ladies' match to be switched to Hibernian's old Easter Road Ground in Edinburgh (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 1881). At least 2000 spectators were attracted to the event, although it was noted that very few women were among the crowd. Following Lily St Clare's opening goal, Constance scored the second early in the second half, and the combined play of Isa Stevenson and Maud Rimeford secured the third goal, giving the Scotland side a 3-0 win (*Scotsman*, 1881).

The next match was held in Rutherglen at the Shawfield Athletic grounds on 16 May 1881. About 3000 paying spectators were in attendance, but a large mob, including local mill girls, gathered on Rutherglen Bridge outside and in the second half, they breached the barriers and poured into the ground. The large number of people pushing into the arena was such that the front of the mob was forced onto the pitch and the situation quickly got out of hand (*Oban Times*, 1881). This seems to suggest that the mob's action was a protest at the one-shilling entry fee which was, for this time, quite expensive for a football match. The players were jostled as they left the ground, but reports suggested that passers-by aided their escape and may also have been helped by the paying spectators. This seems likely as there were only three policemen on duty to quell the disturbance (*Scotsman*, 1881).

Following the incident, a court ruling prohibited the consortium's remaining matches and the sides had to continue the tour in England. They attracted a crowd of 4,000 for their English debut at Blackburn Olympic's ground and in Sheffield over 1,000 spectators saw the sides at the Queens Hotel Athletics Ground (Hessayon, 2023). A match played at the Stanley Athletics Ground in Liverpool on 3 June 1881, saw Constance score another goal in a 1-1

draw. In a match report, England players such as Eva Davenport were commended for their dribbling skill while Constance and Maud Rimeford for Scotland were noted for their 'combined game'. In the early 1880s, English sides still employed the tactic of dribbling while the passing game was perfected in Scotland. It seems that the organisers were mimicking the increasingly popular Scotland v England internationals, and this included the playing styles of both teams (*Athletic News*, 1881).

When the sides appeared at the Free Wanderers Ground in Halifax on 6 June 1881, they again attracted a large crowd, but it was also noted that the players were subjected to some ridicule (*Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 1881). The reaction to the sides' appearance at the Cheetham Ground in Manchester on 20 and 21 June 1881 was more extreme, with ground invasions similar in nature to the Shawfield debacle. A third match had been planned but this was soon abandoned. However, the lady players did have some fans. At the Windhill Cricket Ground, for instance, a section of the paying crowd escorted the players from the ground to a nearby tavern. This was to protect the players from being jostled by the local cricket fans aggrieved at their ground being used to host such a novelty event (*Yorkshireman*, 1881). The teams received their best reception in Liverpool which is interesting as it had yet to develop as a centre for association football. When women's football, matches were held in common settings for sports entertainment such as the athletics ground, it seemed to receive a reasonable response however when the women's game was presented in the home of the 'manly' games such as rugby or association the developing football culture was not willing or ready to accept women participating on 'their' stage. The organisers of early women's football frequently desired to host their events in accepted football venues, in a bid to maximise profit. But this insistence may have alarmed and antagonised the traditionalists within football and may account for the wide variation in response to the women's matches.

After the tour and Constance's later career

Brennan (2008) notes that further research is required to establish what happened to the players and organisers following the completion of the tour. From theatrical trade papers, it can be established that Alec Gordon and George Frederick Charles returned to theatre management. Using the proceeds from the football tour Gordon was able to refurbish the Queen's Theatre in Dublin and Frederick Charles became the licensee of the Theatre Royal, St Helens (*Era*, 1881; *St Helens Examiner*, 1881). As discussed earlier, Constance returned to the stage where she resumed her career as a performer. Following the Crippen affair, the Smythsons' relocated to the northeast where Clarence ran an entertainment agency in partnership with Reg Campkin out of Quin's buildings on Pink Lane in Newcastle (*Era*, 1914). The couple returned to London in the late 1920s and lived at 149 Hampden Way in East Barnet which they shared with their younger offspring Indiana and Clarence Horatio ('Constance L C Smythson', 1939). In Ancestry's synopsis of this entry for the 1939 register, Constance is recorded as 'Caroline L C Smythson', but a close inspection of the digitised document shows that the listing of 'Caroline' is a transcription error. George resumed his theatrical agency but was forced to supplement his income with other work such as appearing as a film extra. During the filming of one production, 'The House Opposite' George collapsed with a suspected heart attack and was treated in the Elstree Studios hospital (*Daily Mirror*, 1931). The couple remained in London until both passed in the early 1940s and when Constance died in 1943, women's football, the game she helped pioneer

was still going strong ('Constance L C Smythson', 1943). It had come to prominence during the Great War which was followed by a boom in the early 1920s, it had survived FA sanctions and with the conclusion of the Second World War, it would enjoy a second post-war boom.

Conclusion

Constance Cole's biography is interesting in that it offers an entry point for a closer examination of the women's football tour of 1881. Many historiographies of sports entertainment have generally focused on male entrepreneurs; by contrast, this paper presents a detailed background study of a female entertainment practitioner and one of the first women to play association football. Recent biographical studies have revealed more details relating to the playing squad of the British Ladies Football Club (1894-1906). The most recent addition is Ellen Dunn who played for the British Ladies under the name Ruth Coupland and later had a successful stage career as Lily Flexmore (*Lily Flexmore Welcomes You*, 2023). More research is needed to uncover similar biographical evidence relating to the 1881 squad. Roberts identified Carrie Baliol as another subject for investigation, as she is identified as a Scotland forward and lodged at the same address as Cole. Having the biography of a second player would be significant and may lead to further breakthroughs. However, her birthplace is listed in the 1881 census as 'England' and finding an exact match in the records may prove to be difficult. It may be worth considering a closer examination of the theatrical industry particularly in Glasgow during the 1880s. For instance, some press coverage for the 1881 tour suggested that the side had some connections to ballet. Lizzy Gilbert a prominent organiser of youth ballet was in Glasgow at the time of the 1881 tour, working with Charles Bernard's production of *Les Cloche de Corneville*, and performers' surplus to requirement may have played in some of the football matches. A report on the 1881 tour's debut in Edinburgh noted that the players' ages varied between 12, 16 and 17 years which was certainly in the age range for youth ballet (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 1881, p. 3). More work is needed to develop this subject further, and there is scope for future research.

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