

LIVING ARCHIVE MK

WOMEN'S EUROS PROJECT

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Today's date is the 13th June 2022. My name is Victoria Holton and I'm interviewing the Women's Euro's Project. And I'm interviewing...

Sam Raja.

Right, could you tell us, a little bit about where you were born and when you came to Milton Keynes. Or if you were born or from Milton Keynes.

Sure. So, I was actually born in Luton, Dunstable in Luton. I've been living in Milton Keynes for probably about thirty-eight or forty years now, I think. So, I've been here quite a long time. Quite a long time.

So, when did you first...what interested you in football, when did you first start in football?

So, I've always had a passion in football from young age. I used to be one of those, you know, young ones, that used to be on the playground with the boys. During most of my, probably until, about twenty-one years old. You know, playing with the tennis ball in the playground, because we weren't allowed to play with footballs. And it's actually my next-door neighbour, believe it or not, who used to be the goalkeeper for MK Wanderers, at the time. She saw me play my brother-in-law, he used to have a massive interest in football. So, I used to be playing around with him just outside, in the front of the garden. And she saw me once, and she said 'do you play for a team?' And I was like 'oh, no I don't. I play with the boys at school'. But we weren't allowed to play with the boys in an actual team at that point. So, we didn't even have a lady's team then, so it was just you know very, it was a very known for a female/lady to be playing football back then. But now we know, it's obviously picked up. But back then, it was just a case of, you know, me being a little tomboy, back in the day [laughs]. Enjoying the football with the boys. So, that's how I kind of got into it.

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What year was, what year was that?

We're going back to, I think probably about fifteen, maybe sixteen years old. I do remember I was doing my GCSE'S at similar sort of time when we started getting into football, up to about eighteen years old. So, we're going to go back to about, what, '99, 1999, maybe just before. So, yeah, I've been in there since then.

And what kit did you wear in those days?

The kit was MK Wanderers, who I used to play for. It's a black and sort of green sort of colour, back then. So, we were in a League in Milton Keynes, that was the first sort of League that I got into. And the funny thing is, how I actually got into it. As I mentioned, my next-door neighbour was a goalkeeper. So, she said come, see if you enjoy it. So, I went along, the coach, you know, the coach at the time, and I went with one of my colleagues from work, because he wanted to get into football. So, we...so he said, 'can I just see what you're like with the ball?' Have a little touch. We were literally just in our jeans, you know like normal wear, not in any football gear or any, you know, sportswear. And he said 'can I just see what you're like with the ball?' And he said, 'right I need you to play this weekend.' And I was like...and I did not realise my, believe it or not, my first debut game was straight into an FA Cup game as well. So, not only was it a League game but it was only the FA Cup. So that was absolutely amazing. We were actually we actually played the Luton Town, my home city, where I was born in the FA Cup game! So that was an absolute just, amazing for me, to be there. And not only that, I actually scored the goal, which took us to extra time as well, so, unbelievable.

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And what does, and what position did you play?

I was striker, striker.

So, was there a good record with that time, the MK Wanderers in those days?

Yeah, so I they had a good...I believe they did quite well.

[Interrupts] *It was the MK Wanderers, sorry?*

MK Wanderers, yes. Sorry, yeah, they were quite well known back then. With regards to the League, I think they were doing, quite, fairly quite well. There was another lady who used to be like a striker, who played up front with me. So, I played a few games with them. And unfortunately, was a stage whereby I went into my

career, I was working in the Network Rail industry, the rail industry. So, I was having to run projects up and down the country. So unfortunately, there was a point where couldn't commit to the full sort of training sessions and games, after a while. But the first few sessions I had with them was absolutely amazing. I scored a goal from the half-way line in the second, sort of, game. Unfortunately, I couldn't pursue it as much as I would have liked to have done, just purely because of my career.

I did also have some challenges, along with that, in terms of the cultural sort of background, which I'm from. I'm a Muslim, a Pakistani player myself. Obviously, back then, it wasn't really socially accepted for females to be playing football, let alone to just sort of playing sports. Although, my siblings and the rest of my family have been absolutely amazing. You know, there always there at the matches, like, supporting me. I think it's more so the older generation, they were kind of used to women playing football and playing with the boys, etc.

So now, obviously, it's a lot more socially accepted and my dad my parents, are all for it, absolutely love me playing. And, I think back then, it was kind of, my dad or parents was, you know, a little bit with regards to, you know if I had a serious injury, obviously, that you have the racism side of it as well as unfortunately, gives the game a bit more of a...not a very nice feeling to play, when you're actually playing, you know, being the person that's actually affected on the other side. So, unfortunately it did have its challenges. But, back in it now, I'm forty-four years old, re-joined, playing with MK Wonderers now, so absolutely amazing. I'm actually enjoying football more than ever now.

Now, at my age, you know, people always think you know, your fitness level may not be as much as it was when you were younger. Or you might be a bit too old, oh my fitness isn't there anymore. But it's actually amazing. You know, the ladies I'm playing with are absolutely brilliant.

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So you had the duality really, of being a female footballer, and obviously being a non-white footballer.

Yes.

So, was that a double, sort of, issue? In terms of other people?

I mean, for personally myself, you know, I think a lot of my female friends, you know, a lot of my friends I used to socialise with, they were from different backgrounds, very diverse in terms of cultural background we have. But I was the only Asian female player at

the time. Even when we were playing with other teams at the time. You know, it was pretty much a lot of them were like, British or English. But now, I can see that sort of, you know, developing there's people from all walks of life getting involved in the game, which is absolutely beautiful to see.

But I did have, you know, obviously 'Bend It Like Beckham' sure, who hasn't seen that movie? And whenever you take the free kicks in MK Wanderers, was sometimes you'd get a bit banter, even with other teams, like 'Bend it Like Beckham'. But for me, it was the banter and the fun part of it as well. And it's, I mean, it was just a good feeling, you know. But you do have it, it's just how you deal with it in a professional way. It...but you know, you see it in the game today unfortunately, it's just that racism side. I think, its kind of, doesn't, a lot of people could potentially go on to become much better players or make it look professional level, but purely because of these little challenges they face in their lifetime, or during their playing or the performance, unfortunately it's one of those things that does get in the way with some people.

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So, in terms of the strip... did you wear, sort of, short-shorts like the men, back in those days? Did all women wear that?

Yeah, so with myself, unfortunately, because within the Muslim community, we're...the females aren't meant to be showing their legs. Obviously, you know, everyone's different, like, get some stricter families compared to others. Myself, I can't remember if I actually wore shorts, or longer shorts, but maybe did wear shorts at the time. A lot of people may disagree with that, whatever. But we're all kind of different in other ways, even in training sessions maybe times when I wear like the leggings, in training like underneath, you've probably seen the wearing nowadays. So, it's not as if 'oh god, I feel out of place' because all the professionals are wearing them. So, it's kind of like, you know, like a level that I do in training and then wear the shorts on top.

But it's almost, I think, I want to kind of still have, I still have that cultural background within me, but it's kind of doing it in terms of accepting, as well in that respect for that culture as well. But, like I said, everyone's different every individual is different depending on individual.

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So, can you tell us more about the MK1 Wanderers, and what went on?

Yeah, so we used to play our matches on a Sunday. I think that's when that's when most ladies play their matches nowadays as well. So, for playing League it was every Sunday, the ladies were

from, like I said, all backgrounds. Age wise, it was very, you know, mixed. So, you'll have some older women and then you have younger, varying between, like you know, eighteen, going all the way up to sort of forty. And back then, absolutely amazing. We used to have quite a few social events here between us, as well. You know, if it was someone's birthday, you'd go out. And a lot of the days and the training you have to be committed and your heart has to be in it, to actually be able to enjoy the game which is something I've always had throughout career, you know, throughout my performing, sort of, with the teams there. And other sort of teams I played for after that as well, so.

So, what was the training schedule with MK Wanderers?

So, the MK Wanderers, it was a once-a-week training sessions, which I believe was every Wednesday or Thursday, I don't know, one of the days. And every Sunday was a matches, so it would either be a home match or an away match. The one thing which I've found made a massive difference was that at MK Wanderers, so obviously our home ground used to be in Coffee Hall, I believe back then. Obviously, well you had the, you know, the little well you have a little bit of a ditch going into the pitch, so it's not as straight and as professional as you get in the games, you know, in the stadiums, you know, lovely pitches.

But, I noticed when we say the FA Cup game we actually had, I think it was a home match that particular one. But we went and played, it was Sheffield Wednesday, the men's had their match before. On the Sheffield Wednesday pitch, I can't remember what their stadium is called now. But in their stadium, during their half-time, or I think it might have been straight after their game, the men's game. We had a match with the lady's team and the pitch, because it's absolutely spot on, absolutely amazing to play on. I just felt the performance of all of us guys in the MK Wanderers, is just so much better, just because of the surface of the pitch as well, you know, it makes so much of a difference. Because we're obviously, you know, not used to having that standard of pitches we're gonna play that home matches, so just to be there was absolutely amazing. Although we got thrashed, basically, but the actual being a part of that, was actually really good, really good.

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So how long were you with MK Wanderers for?

In total, I don't know, I don't think it was that long, to be fair, I think it was only about four years. So it wasn't that long at all. Until then I, you know, due to work commitments, I stopped, sort of, playing. And so, I wasn't there very long. And there was a big part whereby

I had a massive break in between them, unfortunately. And then obviously, I moved into, I went onto Dubai, for a year or so. Which then made me think, 'oh my god, I actually really miss this sport.' And I've got back into it from other angles.

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Let's start talking about Dubai then. How you got into that and what you did over there?

So that was actually quite a funny little story.

Yeah, so, I moved to Dubai in 2016, I think it was, for about a year. I actually got the job there as a football coach. So, my sister actually lives in Dubai at the moment, and my brother lives out there as well. So, half my family kind of, you know, is based there. They were all born and bred here. However, I thought, you know, let me see what it's like to...because I'm a qualified football coach. So, I wanted to give it a go, in Dubai. You know, the lifestyle out there, the weather is absolutely amazing. Like I said, half my family is out there. So, I thought, let me give it a go.

So, I actually went out there initially to have a like a little trial session with the actual person, when I applied for the job. And it was actually at one of the schools where my nephew goes to, so their teachers quite familiar with my sister and my family already. So, these were kind of like age group was up to about I think, six, six years old. So, they're quite young kids and you know, the one on the ball and you know, training with the kids and you know, 'you've got the job, can you start'. And I was like 'amazing'. And then things kind of turned a little bit because my sister got her AI, you know, a recruitment company back then. And I actually, I think after doing a few training sessions, I really wanted to get back into the sport, like I wanted to play again.

So, I think there's one where you do the coaching side, but it's kind of like I wanted to kind of play again. And there was, you know, added a little look around to see what lady's teams there were there, there were one of two ladies I met out socially in Dubai as well. They said 'oh we play for a football team, why don't you come and join?' And I was like 'oh really?' 'Oh brilliant.' Being in Dubai, UAE, I wasn't too sure how strict it was with regards to, you know, football in general. I was actually shocked to hear that they have a mixed team that play at a League level there, in Dubai as well. So, although I could commit to both ladies League and the mix League, I did play with the ladies League, I think Marvels – that was the name of the team there. And the mixed League, I used to train with them, you know, in friendly matches, or just do

the training with them, because I couldn't commit to two, because obviously, it will mean four, five days a week just training with both. But I met loads of ex-pects out there. A lot of them were ex-pects that played football there. It's very big in Dubai as well, where I was based. So, that was just really, really good to meet people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. So, that was really good.

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So, tell us then about MK United.

Yes, so like I said, I wanted to get back into football. So I went to Facebook, of all sources. And just went in there, tapped in 'Football', see what they've got for ladies. Obviously I've played I played FA Cup level, I've played with MK Wanderers, and I played at League level in Dubai. And now it's a case of, I used to go to the gym, and fair enough, gym is one of those things where it's almost as though, I have to do it, I need to do it. But I still wasn't getting the enjoyment that I wanted to get from playing sports. It would be y'know, my passion for the football.

So, I had a look on Facebook, and just tapped it in 'women's football'. And it came up with this recreational group. And I messaged the manager straightaway, who was Kate, who was the marketing manager, it was a WhatsApp Group. And she goes 'yeah, you know, thank you for getting in contact, come along, we do training sessions, every Tuesday at Fairfield's, and there's also other elements where MK Dons arrange a team thing as well, on a Friday.' Which I also attend, which is basically, turn up and play.

So, initially joined January, again this year, and every single Tuesday, without fail, it's one of those things I really look forward to in between my work, my job, because it can be quite, you know, quite challenging and stressful. But, every Tuesday and every Friday, the one that MK Dons do. But I think the one thing I love about this team is everyone is on the same sort of level, you know, some of the girls used to play at their level before, at, you know, quite a high level. And now they just want to do it for the fun side of stuff. So that's what I absolutely love, one it's great fitness, great for mental health and it's just great being part of the team, who are all in the same boat as well so.

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Have you got any memorable games? Or any memorable incidents you would like to tell us about to do with women's football?

The games are memorable. Memorable incidents.... memorable....

Or good times?

Yeah, I mean, I think I've had a lot of good times. I think for me, the biggest thing I've always wanted to do, and I think even to date. I do think it's never too late. I was sometimes think, you know, I'm forty-four, the most memorable thing I think is, is playing a sport, I think despite, despite all the challenges I've faced, you know, I've come through it all. And I've broken through the barriers and it's one of those things which I would love to kind of inspire other women to do. No matter what challenges you have, always pursue with your dreams.

And that's something, I think, if I did more of, and kept to it and believed in myself, I could have gone a lot further than I did. And it's just one of those things, you know, when you just almost think cause the memorable side for me is having a family and my siblings there, supporting the matches and encouraging me to just keep going, keep going.

Unfortunately, there was other elements of, you know, where the cultural side does actually get in the way of certain things and obviously, work commitments as well. But, I think memorable, like, you know, playing with the MK Wanderers team was amazing. For me, being involved with all those boys back in school, you know, because I was always one of those, like, you know, when they pick the team, I was never the last person, it's always one of the first people if not the second. So, for a woman to be, you know, like that, to actually get picked on the team and not feel 'oh my god, I'm not very good because I'm a woman or whatever', but that was just for me, it's that this is all the memories I've had. Y'know, being brought up around that atmosphere to where I am today as well.

And I think even MK United, so we have the manager and we also have our coach which is Fraser, and I think, just to have him take me to side and say 'can I just ask why you're not playing at a higher level now?' And I basically said 'oh its my fitness and I'm a bit to old'. And he says 'you're never too old'. And just to have that even feedback from somebody now is amazing, because you know I think, I'm a bit passed it now.

But, one of my biggest things to any woman that would like to get football is, you know, you're never too old, you know. Don't ever think about the fitness side, that's something can always develop. But I think, like I said, this MK United team is just an amazing team. And it's a perfect thing for me to just enjoy what I do. And the passion I have and that we can share with the rest of the team.

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So what made you change from, well, being a footballer, to being, you know, a coach? What was that journey like?

Yeah, so for me, because I always have that footballing side to me, in terms of interests, I've always sort of had in me. So, I felt as though my fitness level isn't to what it was back then, you know, like I said, you kind of age in time, etc. I thought coaching was something I really get involved with, because in theory, I'm still involved with the sport, in what way I can. But, like I said, when I started doing little bit of coaching, it kind of made me, you know, want to play again. So, I think, for me, that playing side is still there, I still want to do that as much as, as much as I can and until I can physically no more, do it again. So, that's something I just want to carry on doing. And I'm sure coaching is something I can do on the side as well, which I'll be looking into. But its just having as much interface and involvement in the sport as much as possible, in between obviously my job, which is quite demanding as well so. Yeah, just having that balance.

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And any questions that you would like to add now?

I think just to ask about what you're looking forward to with the Women's Euro's games coming? Are you going to watch them? Talk to us about that.

Yeah, sure, sure. Yes, so recently, I went to the Women's FA Cup Final. Absolutely shocking, and unbelievable to see the attendance there, you know, it was one of the biggest, largest attendance they've had, I believe they've had in any sort of women's game. Just over forty-nine thousand. So just to see that you can see development, you can see it, you know being promoted. People are, more people are getting into it. You know, even little, I've seen youngsters, you know I can see the little girls, you know our players children are even playing in the teams, like MK United. So, it's unbelievable, just to see that.

And with the Euros happening, we were at the roadshow, I think it was last week at Willen Lake, the Women's Euros Roadshow. So, being involved in that, I'm actually going to be applying for the ambassador role, for the Women's Euro's as well, as we speak. So, just having as much involvement, and to see women actually now getting into the sport more so than before. Yes, we do have a long way to go still if you're coming it to the men's. But, I do think its slowly picking up. And I do believe it's going to move forwards quite fast. And I think it's just inspiring those other women to get involved in the games.

I am actually myself, I will be going to the Euro's matches, I will be going, I've got the tickets already. When they came out I literally came out to the ballot thing, and I applied straightaway. So, I'm really looking forward to those matches. I do believe I think a lot of them are sell outs as well. So, to have families there, you know, children, everyone getting involved and enjoying the match, enjoying the game so much and be passionate about it is great to see, with everyone nowadays with everyone, so. It's lovely to see. Hopefully get my parents and everything there as well! [Laughs].

00:19:35

Great, fantastic. Is there anything you'd like to tell us that we've missed of?

No...like I said, I don't know, I mean, I think the main thing, like I said, for me, is I've seen, even a Muslim's Women's Group that's been developed in Milton Keynes area, and they have training on a Thursday. And that coming from the background I've come from; I think that is a massive milestone to have. You know, it's something I was thinking of getting involved with on the side as well. But like I said, it's how much I could commit to, on a weekly sort of basis. But at the moment, I think going forward with the Euros, we have actually signed up for the Women's Euros Legacy. It's a training recreational League that they're starting every Wednesday. So, Tuesday, Wednesdays, Fridays, for me is going to be football, as well as that, I also do the social events, and anything to do with football at work as well.

So, I've got matches starting with the work, guys at work, as well and that's a combination of female and male, as well, which is really good to see as well. Because I do love getting females involved as much as possible. Yes, it will always be a male dominant sport, but I think it's only us women that can change that, going forward and getting as much women involved as possible, so yeah. That's what I love to do.

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So, if you'd like to tell us about sort of other parts of football and what it does for you?

Yeah, so I think, for me, personally, I've said in terms of my job, it can be quite challenging and frustrating, you know, demanding. And there are times when you are just trying to switch-off from work, but you're trying to do something whereby it has to be something that, you know, you enjoy.

So, me joining football, actually, there's has been times where I've suffered such a stressful at work and I'm thinking 'oh, I don't know if I feel like going today'. But now, I've got something to look

forward to. You know, it's massively helped me in terms of mental health, and without fail each and every week, you know, no matter how bad a day I've had at work or whatever, it's something I always look forward to. And that's helped me massively. And it's almost given me a reason to almost, almost carry on with life, because I've got some, sounds quite sad, in life, but it's just my part of happiness, you know. That's my time to myself and my team. With something I've got a huge passion for, in terms of being involved with that, I suppose it's really, really helped me.

And I want other people to realise that was what, no matter what you're going through in life, always look for something that makes you happy, you know. That makes you feel as though, that is your one moment in your time, in your life, that you do enjoy doing because, if you do something that you enjoy doing, it really, really helps with your mental health, massively. And I know for a fact, we've got people in the team in exactly the same place, that have shared that with me as well. And it's just nice to see that people are sort of on that same wavelength, as well. Definitely.

Lovely.

Thank you.