

LIVING ARCHIVE MK
WOMEN'S EUROS PROJECT
LEAH CALEB

Interviewed by: Vicky Holton

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Can you tell us about your family, your parent's jobs and siblings?

My parents were May and Dermot. They both made waterproof coats in Dublin, so in Ireland. We came to Luton in 1961. I have an older brother and older sister ... Derry and Mary. Mum and dad both ... dad continued making his waterproof coats in Luton, until the factory closed, and mum was a seamstress. After that dad worked in Vauxhall.

So, can you tell us about your earliest interest in football?

So, for me, football started when I was in the playground of my infant school in Luton ... Hitchin Road ... and the boys would play football and the girls would usually be standing around and you'd get hit by the ball. So, in the end, two or three of the girls joined in ... of which I was one. I found I just thoroughly enjoyed it and took to it. So, I carried on playing football at break-times and from thereon in football just became a passion of mine. I just naturally took to playing football.

What was your sort of first involvement in actual football teams ... out of school?

Out of school, it wasn't ... I continued to play with the boys in the park, so out of school that's how I continued. And my first team was at the age of eleven, which was the Chiltern Valley, which is June and Harry Batt's team. My mother had met someone, and they told her there was a ladies team in the town and she allowed me to go along and so I started, at the age of eleven, playing for a women's team.

That's fantastic. So that was that team. So, knowing you played ... what was your kit like?

So, the kit for Chiltern Valley actually was ... best way to describe it for people of that era, it was a Celtic kit. So, it was green and white hoops. I've since found out that Harry actually liked green. So, obviously, there was a nod to the green and white hoops there ... white shorts, white socks.
Tell us what position you played and how the team went.

I played ... I was number 8. I played inside-right. Again, that's the terms used in those days. So, I was number 8, inside-right, which was a forward. And the team ...

What's the team's record? Were they winners?

They were winners. In '70/'71, they actually won the league. They did very well in the cup at the time, which would have been the Mitre Cup or the Pony Cup at the time, as it would have been known. I think ... I recorded from some records that Harry had kept ... a 142 goals scored and 6 against in that season. So, Chiltern Valley was a successful team at that time.

Fantastic. What other teams did you progress to or did you stay with that team?

No, well ... Chiltern Valley ...

I was going to ask you how you came to be picked for Harry Batt's team ... international team I should say.

I would say ... I played for the Chiltern Valley, which was Harry's team. Harry knew the kind of footballer I was, and I was just very fortunate at the time that he asked my parents could I go. I mean, I was the youngest player in the squad. I was only thirteen at the time. So, I was very young to play in Sicily and Mexico.

It's a good time for you to tell us about your memories of Harry. I know that you ... of the team, you've got a lot more to tell us.

Yes. Harry himself ... he was very passionate ... you could always see Harry, himself, as very passionate about women's football. He was an intelligent man and he had a natural vision about the women's game, which we probably reflected on more now, with the fifty years passing. Harry could speak five languages. He believed that women's football had a place and it could progress. He just had that self-belief and he did give it to the team. Looking back, just an amazing character. Obviously, him and June both had the same passion about football.

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Can you tell us about his character, his appearance?

He would generally be very smart actually. He'd have his blazer on, a shirt and tie. He did smoke. Smoked quite a lot actually, thinking about it. You know sometimes, like any football manager, coach ... could get frustrated when things weren't going the right way. And he had a definite vision and the vision, therefore, meant that he saw how he wanted things to happen going forward in the Women's Football Association as well.

So how much preparation ... once the team was put together, how much

preparation did you need before you ...

We went in June '71 ... we went to Sicily. So, we were preparing ... they were the qualifying rounds, which I don't think as players we realised at the time. That was part of the preparation for Mexico. As a team at the time, we all trained once a week. We did extra training at the RAF, Henlow base, because our captain was actually a PTI in the RAF. So, we were a pretty fit team. In that respect it stood us in good stead for going to both Sicily and Mexico.

And how old were you at the time?

I was thirteen, in 1971. I was very young.

Were you the youngest member of the team?

I was. I was the youngest.

Can you tell us why were you called the 'British Independent Ladies Football Team'?

Why were we called the British Independents? It's a good question. I think it's because there was no recognised affiliated England team at the time. So, Harry's teams actually were known as the British Independents, which is because there wasn't a recognised England team at the time. However, the tournaments that he took teams to ... so from 1969 to, actually, 1972, he took teams abroad but I know we're focusing on '71 ... and, of course, if you entered a tournament, be it European or be it a World Cup, they were naturally then known as the England team because that's where the team came from.

Makes sense. Tell us about your parent's attitude to you, as such a young age, going to Mexico.

I think they ... they just had an incredible belief and trust that it would be okay. I mean, June and Harry came to see my parents, obviously, and asked their permission and could I go to both Sicily and Mexico. They obviously realised it was a great opportunity and they just had that you can do anything approach to life and saw the good side of everything and were very trusting, both in Harry and June taking us and, obviously in me, as a thirteen-year-old going on an aeroplane for the first time across the other side of the world. I've said it, and it will be recorded forever, that I'm just eternally grateful that they allowed me to go at such a young age.

Did anyone from your family or friends go at all to watch?

No. I think, again, it was such a period where there were no direct lines of communicating. Yes, there were telephones but not every house had a telephone, although we did actually have a telephone. But the communication line was writing letters home, which I did, and I wrote two or three letters home, which my mother kept, and I still have. So that's just a lovely thing to

have and a great memory of the time.

But there was no mobile phones. There just wasn't the lines of communication that people have become aware of nowadays. There wasn't a computer. You know, there wasn't laptops so it's a hugely different time. It's quite incredible looking back and realising that it was just pure trust, taking off and going for it really.

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Right, so this is the exciting bit. So you got on the flight ... how was the flight and how was the arrival in Mexico?

The flight ... first time on an aeroplane. I was okay with that. We stopped at New York. We were in New York for a few hours. People talking to us because we had walking-out suits. There was one lady in New York was talking to us and for some reason thought we might be a choir, which was a lovely thought but I think if she'd had heard us sing it might not have quite worked. We talked to quite a few people in New York.

Then we caught the flight out to Mexico City. We arrived quite late in the evening. I must say it was quite tiring ... the whole day. You'll hear this on Chris's interview, in particular, that we came down the steps and, from the moment we actually walked out of the aeroplane and walked into the terminal and through passports, then our lives changed completely to being treated as celebrities and photographers were everywhere. Journalists were everywhere. We had our own interpreter. We were on TV. So it literally started from that moment.

So when the aeroplane doors opened and you came down the ramp, were there people there waiting for you or not till you came through ...?

I think at the bottom ... I think ... we have photographs of us actually walking down the steps so there was definitely photographers as we came down.

Once you were there what preparations did you then make for your first match?

We had two weeks preparation. We arrived, I think it was 6th August and we didn't play till 20th/21st. So we had two weeks prep, which you needed to ... for altitude. And the heat, of course, in Mexico City ... we played all our games in Mexico City in the Azteca Stadium. We would train every morning at 7:30. It was ... you know, I look back and I really loved those mornings of getting up early and going training. It, again, put us in good preparation.

Tell us about the first of your matches? Was that the one against Mexico?

The first match was against Argentina. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and driving into the Azteca Stadium ... we had visited the stadium prior to the matches and, of course, it is one of the biggest stadiums in the world and, at the time, I think it held 114,000 people. So walking into even an empty

stadium ... Azteca Stadium ... was incredible. Actually going to the game, we would be on our coach but to get to the game we would have a police escort. And the police escort, of course, got us through the crowds because there would be crowds going to the stadium for the game.

Then you went through, down the long tunnel and I do remember that and getting off the coach and then you went into the changing room, which was hot and you could hear the noise of the crowds in both games. It's quite difficult to recollect a lot of the games and I'm sure that's just a surreal protection because it was ... the magnitude of what we were about to do ... we just didn't realise.

How were the other teams? How did they play against you, what was their style?

Argentina ... you know, there were Latin American teams. We played Argentina, then Mexico and their style was very different and it was very similar to the men's. So anybody that's watched ... 1970 World Cup, would get a feel for the different styles of European teams against Latin American teams. It was extremely physical. We were probably not ready for ... it's quite difficult to put words to it but it was just different and not what we were used to but definitely extremely physical.

So the Mexico game ... any injuries?

I think, obviously, playing within 24 hours ... so we played the next day at 12 o'clock. So it was the searing heat of midday and we're playing against Mexico as well. The crowd was huge. I think it was recorded at around 85,000 people watching that match. The whole ambience of everything was just, you know, heightened.

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It was a tough game and, again, we were probably carrying injuries we probably didn't even know we had from Argentina. So, naturally they would now flow into the Mexico game and yes ... we had players after that game taken to hospital and one with a fractured foot and one with a fractured leg. Other players also went to be checked. I think there was six or eight ... it's well documented in another article actually. So, yeah, it wasn't ideal and not what you expected.

How long were you away for roughly?

We were away for four weeks in all. After the games against Mexico and Argentina and, sadly, because we lost it meant that we didn't progress into the semi-finals so they actually allowed us to stay on for another week. So we were very fortunate that we stayed and we saw the final and semi-finals. Yeah, very fortunate that they seemed to like having us around really so it was good.

Tell us about TV appearance ...

I think we were probably on the TV, I don't know, four or five times. They had all the teams on the first TV appearance, where someone jumped out of a big cake. You know, the type of thing and that was introducing all the countries to the tournament. I went on to one TV appearance on my own, with June, because I was the youngest player and the mascot for the tournament was called 'Xochitl', which means flower. I had black, long hair and they would call me Xochitl because I had the dark hair and I could have had my hair in bunches but it was usually in a ponytail.

I was asked to go on TV with June and they asked a couple of questions. Questions you probably wouldn't ask now and they asked me to answer in Spanish. It was pretty much yes and no but it was 'Do you like our Mexican boys?' And it would be 'Si.' You look back now and you think, 'Well, perhaps that wasn't appropriate.' At the time nothing ever felt inappropriate I have to say. Four weeks away as a thirteen-year-old, at no time did I ever feel uncomfortable with anybody. That was an interesting experience on my own. So, yeah ...

So you stayed together in the hotel ...

We did.

And what was that experience like?

We stayed at the Hotel Royal Plaza, in Mexico City, and we were told that it was actually the same hotel as the 1970 men's squad had stayed in. It was lovely. We had our own ... obviously, bedroom but you also had a small suite, sitting room, as you walked into your room. The hotel staff were just absolutely fantastic and really looked after us and very kind. Everything was laid on for us and we ... you know, you'd turn up for breakfast and, you know like any hotel, but they were very special. They took us into the kitchens. We've got photographs of us in the kitchen with some of the staff. After we actually lost to Mexico they had a banner that they put up for us. It was ... that in itself was very special.

So I've just got interested ... if you were only thirteen ... have you grown in height? Were you tall then and were you a little girl?

I was ... I wouldn't say I'm much taller but I was slightly built. I was very slim. I was probably quite wiry and I was a natural footballer. You know, I would kick with both feet. My idol was George Best. So I spent hours and hours keeping the ball up in the garden and football really became an inner part of me and it was a real ... you know, remains a passion and certainly was all the time I played.

How did you cope with the ... as you said, their sort of style of play against your style of play? Were you able to show off your skills or ...?

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If I'm honest it's quite difficult to say how I performed. I did play in both games, at different times, but I certainly came on as substitute in one. But the only thing I can recollect, and that's actually from seeing a newspaper report since we've been looking back at the tournament, but I did actually shoot and made the goalkeeper ... the Argentinian goalkeeper ... make a save and then Paula scored the goal. So that's lovely. I actually can look at that and think, 'Yes, I did actually participate in that game.' Because I think there was a protection mechanism about the actual matches because I was so young.

Do you remember ... I mean, I've read that they had pink hoops around the football goals and people wore pink.

They didn't ... so the interpreter's dress ... we all had an interpreter with each team. Nellie was our interpreter, who was actually lovely. They all wore pink dresses and they'd have a scarf on, a black and white silk scarf. So that was their uniform. The goal posts actually were ... now whether they were pink or they're red, I think that's for debate depending on the photograph you see but they were red and white or pink and white.

They had some exhibition games before we went to Mexico, which were actresses and singers and they weren't footballers and I think that's been shown in some of the articles. So it mixes up the actual tournament slightly, when this was a serious World Cup tournament.

Yes ... misattributed.

Yes, that's probably a good way of saying it.

So the modern day Lionesses owe a lot to you, don't they really, because it made you believe that you could do it?

I think ... I think all the women that played at that time ... of course, being as lucky as we were to play in a World Cup is exceptional but I think the Lionesses ... the current Lionesses are ... I think they're very aware of the history and for them it's not easy. They've got a completely different set of circumstances to deal with and they're truly athletes, you know. I'm just thrilled for them, the way they look like they're progressing into the Euros.

I mean, Serena Wiegman is just ... only been there since September but you can see how they're developing as a squad, as a team and some of us were lucky to meet them for a very short period and they're just a delightful squad. You can only see good things for them, however the Euros turn out. Tournaments are tournaments. But I think they appreciate where the game's come from and that's for all the players that played for England that the FA recognised, whereas we weren't recognised. So, yeah, it's good times. Good times for the girls now and that's how it should be.

Going back now to when you said you weren't recognised, should we do your arrival back in England and what that was like?

So coming home from Mexico ... of course, in the airport it was very different. I think there was one newspaper reporter took a photo of the girls, with plasters on their leg ... Yvonne and Carol. Yvonne actually was my roommate, who had a plaster on. We hadn't realised the way the Football Association here ... as in the Women's Football Association ... hadn't realised I don't think as players, how they felt about it.

When we came back we were informed that we would be banned from playing and that depended on age, whether ... the way I look back now, it looks like if you were sixteen and under it was three months and sixteen and over it was six months. That was a bit of a shock and it was very much nobody wanted to know about Mexico or any of the tournaments that Harry had been to.

So you just shelved it. You actually shelved talking about it. I'm very lucky, I did do a scrapbook and I have some lovely memorabilia but we really didn't talk about it. And, at some point, we were also certainly ... Chris and I were advised that to carry on playing we should move to another club, which we eventually did and we played for Daytells but Chiltern Valley actually disbanded and I think that was at the end of '72.

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Harry himself was banned from having a women's football team. Now, that for me ... now, again I was very young, still carrying on playing football, wasn't aware of the issues around Harry and carried on and I played for a total of 22 years but going to Mexico was in my first three years of kicking a ball. So I wasn't aware of what happened to Harry and June until we started looking for the squad and that's 2018.

My frustration is I was so young at the time that I didn't know what happened to June and Harry until recently, until we started looking for the whole squad and that's with great sadness and disappointment because I didn't really see them after I finished playing for Chiltern Valley. It's a massive regret to have not had the opportunity to have talked to them, supported them, understand why the WFA made the decisions they did because Harry really believed that women's football could be as it is today and that's 50 years ago plus. And it was stifled, it was just stifled.

The important thing with Harry and June is Harry set a platform for women's football. Harry actually said in an interview, as the journalists were laughing at some of his comments about women's football ... he actually said, 'You may be laughing now but one day there may be an Arsenal football team.' And that's the irony of the whole thing ... is that there's absolutely no reason why girls, women can't play football. Absolutely no reason whatsoever.

So the nonsense of what was thrown at Harry and he was such a visionary man and he had such a get up and go. He was worldly, he had a worldly persona. He knew how to communicate with people. He went to Italy, he spoke to the people ... Martini Rossi ... who sponsored everything. So to have all of that stifled when he came back, I can't even imagine how he felt. Just

awful. It's very bittersweet actually that the experience now because we weren't really there to support him and say, you know, this is wrong.

Is there anything else about Harry that you'd like to add?

No. I think all the girls feel the same, that played for him, with him ... for Harry and June ... they would like to have seen more fairness. He was a character, he obviously knew what he wanted to do so there was, obviously, very difficult conversations amongst the WFA at the time. I think they just couldn't see past his get up and go and how he saw and wanted to do things. He was before his time, to be perfectly honest. I mean, he really was before his time.

No question by the sound of it, isn't it? Anyway, let's talk about after that. So you continued to play football and when did you stop?

I carried on playing football at Daytells and then after Daytells ... I was there for six years. I then played at Aylesbury United and played there for six years. Then I finished my career at Biggleswade. In total I played for 22 years. So I had a great football career. All teams were successful in their own right and, again, in revisiting all of this with Mexico, I found all my trophies that I had put away. I've won at least fifty-plus trophies over those 22 years ... cups, tournaments, leagues and played in some fun, very competitive situations. I think, probably, Mexico, without me knowing it set the stall of 'you're never gonna be frightened playing anywhere after you've been in the Azteca Stadium', even if I wasn't aware of that.

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My most ... the games I would enjoy the most were the most competitive, throughout my football career. So I was very lucky and I've got lifelong friends through football and it just transcends all avenues of life, all people, all diversity, all cultures and that's something ... it definitely gives to girls ... and it gives you a confidence that you can do things because there was a stigma to playing football, you know.

It wasn't always easy. There were comments made on the side of the pitch and different things but, actually, it was your passion so it really didn't matter. You could just think, 'Really?' And carry on. So I'm blessed as far as I'm concerned that I've had all the opportunities I've had with football and great friends that I've still got.

Ross, is there anything you'd like to ask?

The only thing I was thinking was you said you were not afraid of playing anywhere after playing in the Azteca Stadium ... is there anything else you think that experience gave you at such a young age that inspired you to carry on with football? What was it about that trip that contributed to the rest of your career?

I think just having, at the time, going to Sicily, going to Mexico, meeting people. Having the experiences, the TV experiences, the journalists ... the warmth. The other part of Mexico was the people were incredibly kind and warm and they really did take us to their hearts and, you know, we lost our games there but, for some reason, there seemed to be a connection with everybody and that was lovely.

I think it carried on through, that sport just adds another layer to life and, for me it definitely gave me this inner confidence when I played sport and I played both football and hockey alongside each other ... to just enjoy it and be ... I can only think that may have been a contributory factor to my confidence because I do think sport gives girls confidence and football certainly does.

Talking of TV, do you want to tell us about when you went on 'The One Show'?

Well, that was a huge surprise. The One Show ... more recently as we found the squad and we are very lucky because not all the teams that participated in Mexico have all their squads still alive. So we're very lucky. The fourteen players that went are still alive and we found them all. The last two to be found was actually ... we were assisted with The One Show ... The BBC One Show helped us find the last two players and that was Paula and Jean.

It was quite incredible, just the whole experience of a) them filming us to help and they came in and surprised us as we were filming and then actually being asked to go onto The One Show to talk about Mexico and football. Everybody's been very interested in the story and I think quite a lot of it is not just about the football but it is about what happened when we came back. It is a story that really should have been told. It's part of the history of women's football. It sits in its own era. Harry Batt sits in his own era with his wife, June. And over a period ... '69 to '72 ... did amazing things for women's football. So, yeah, The One Show was a great experience and it gave us a platform for the story to be heard.

How do you feel about the FA now and the way they behaved ... or the WFA?

I think it's a shame what happened. I think it's personalities. You've got to look at the historical time ... fifty years ago ... the attitude to football. I don't look at it with regret or any bitterness or anything ... you know, people have to live by what they do themselves and I would have thought anybody looking back objectively would have understood that there were some wrong decisions made where Harry was concerned. And it's taken far too long for girls and women to be recognised as footballers. It shouldn't have taken fifty years for a story to come out like this and there's been incredible women's teams before ... the Corinthians, an incredible ladies team that went abroad.

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So I just think, as time goes on, it'll just become part of the history as it should do. As all the women's teams should do and any that travelled abroad and all

the teams that played at home in the tournaments. So it's lessons learnt. People must learn from lessons and be objective about situations and, certainly, it's the time it was. The seventies were quite a volatile period in so many ways ... when you look at the seventies. Equality was a big thing, feminism was rising. There was lots of things happening so ... yeah ... no, once it ... women's football carries on in the direction it does now and it's embraced and it's not spoilt, it's all good.

Is there anything you think that we've missed in what you've ...

Your notes there ... is there anything you've failed to mention?

Sicily ... I think you asked Jan where we played in Sicily.

Could you give us the specific location in Sicily?

So I have the locations ...

Tell us about Sicily.

It was a train journey to Sicily. It was an overnight. So to qualify for Mexico, which we weren't really aware of when we went to Sicily, was a train journey not an aeroplane flight. That was a long journey to get to Sicily and when we got there we played three games and two of them were for the qualifiers, which was against Italy, who we actually lost to and Austria who we beat. We played in Palermo, Trapani and Syracuse. So we had a triangle tour of Sicily. Stayed in some lovely hotels and, again, were really well looked after by Martini Rossi, who funded that tournament as well.

Do you have any memorable incidents or things that you want to tell us about?

Well, looking back to when I first played so as we're going through from the beginning of when I played football ... my first game and recollection ... were excited and, obviously, to wear a kit, be part of a team but we played a team called Beecholme Belles. I can remember a striker ... a forward ... playing in that game and it was Mandy Osgood. Now Mandy Osgood was the sister of Peter Osgood, who was an England and Chelsea footballer at the time. From what I remember she played quite similar to her brother. So that was an interesting thing that sort of stayed with me and that's probably because I quite liked Chelsea at the time as well.

So that's one of those early memories of when I first put a kit on. It was just the whole experience of travelling to matches, meeting up. Two buses to get to training. You had to put a lot of effort into it and, again, I was very lucky. My parents ... happy for me to do that.

One incident that may be aware of ... may have been recorded ... but, sadly, we were kicking around at a game ... this is the Chiltern Valley team still, so this is the very early days and Jean Breckon, who was one of the players that

actually played for Chiltern Valley but came to Mexico ... unfortunately there was a freak accident and Jean was ... we were kicking around in the goal and Jean actually was jumping and caught her finger on the net ring and lost her finger. You know, that's a morbid thing but it happened. It's real and Jean herself was an RAF javelin champion at the time and it was that particular finger that you hold your javelin with that she lost. Freak accidents happen but, for some reason, you know that's bound to stay with you.

Great games, lovely tournaments I played in. I had the chance to play at Wembley Arena when the men's professionals used to play an indoor tournament each year. Aylesbury United I played for at the time, we won the North/South Five-a-Side tournament at Pontin's which, again, was a big tournament for women's football and we had the chance to play at Wembley Arena, which was fabulous. So I've been quite lucky, you know. Azteca Stadium, Wembley Arena ... that's not too bad.

Not too shabby!

That's a lovely ending as well. That sounds great.

There you go.

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End of Interview