**Karen Dobres, previous Lewes FC Elected Director, chats to Bo and Caitlin about her own learning curve, the power of women’s football and the rising tide of equality.**

**Karen –**

I always say sexism is the wallpaper of football. So, you’ve got this wallpaper around that no one questions, mainly because they’re largely men and they’re not really thinking about it. I think we’re a long way off equality, but I think that is simply down to decisions in boardrooms. So, it’s not like there is a lot to overcome really.

**Bo –**

Is it Girl Power or Goal Power? Hello everybody and welcome to Goal Power!

**Karen –**

My name is Karen Dobres and I’m an elected Director at Lewes Football Club where I sit on the Board, and I lead on our impact on the world and I’m involved with our fan and community engagement and also with our financial sustainability.

**Caitlin –**

How old were you when you got into football?

**Karen –**

I was 49 when I got into football.

**Caitlin –**

So, you haven’t always liked football?

**Karen –**

No. Actually I would say I hated football.

**Caitlin –**

Really?

**Karen –**

Yeah. I never liked it.

**Bo –**

What made you want to suddenly like football?

**Karen –**

I was an owner of Lewes Football Club, way, way long ago when it first came into community ownership in 2010. So, anyone could become an owner for just £30 a year. And this community ownership means that it’s sustainable financially and I liked that idea, and I liked that model. But I never thought I would go to a football match. I just thought, I like what they’re doing at our football club, I’d become an owner, along with 2000 people. Then in 2017 they announced that they were paying their women’s team the same as the men’s. And I thought, you mean women play football? And you mean, when they play, they don’t get paid the same as the men? What’s going on? I was really, really green about the situation in football. And I thought, I must get myself down to the Dripping Pan and watch a women’s football match and see why Lewes FC are making international headlines around the world for becoming the first club in the world to split their playing budgets equally. So, I did, I went down to the Dripping Pan and I saw all these women on the pitch. It was like they put their life on the line for a football and they didn’t care so much about they looked like or how they presented themselves. They cared about winning and they cared about the football. And I thought, you know what, I feel better as a woman as a result of watching this football match, however strange that might sound. Because I was so fed up with messages that we get from social media, or from you know, advertising, that just as women, we’re supposed to look a certain way and we’re supposed to be pretty passive. And I thought, this women’s football lark, this is the antidote to all of that.

So, the next part is, well, the people were saying, we didn’t pay the women the same as the men because they don’t get the same crowds. And that is true, because when I went to that football match there were only about 100 people there and the men would get 4 or 500. So, they didn’t deserve to be paid the same. So, I volunteered to go and tell other women, like myself, that didn’t like football, to come and watch Lewes FC Women so we could make the gate figure go up. As part of a marketing strategy, we quadrupled the gate in two seasons and the women got promoted and the men got promoted. So, we say, equality is a rising tide that lifts all our boats. Because it’s true.

**Bo –**

How long do you think it will take for there to be full equality?

**Karen –**

That’s a very good question.

**Caitlin –**

Lewes, there pretty much already is isn’t there?

**Karen –**

Yes, at Lewes there is full equality. But if you mean generally speaking, I think it will take a while, because if you look at the rest of the footballing world, they’re what I call pre-equality. But they don’t think about it enough. You know, they don’t think about it. I always say sexism is the wallpaper of football. This wallpaper around that no one questions, mainly because they’re largely men and they’re not really thinking about it. So, I think we’re a long way off equality, but I think that is simply down to decisions in boardrooms. So, it’s not like there’s a lot to overcome really. Because we had a lot to overcome when we introduced equality, but everyone seems to have come round to it ok now the sponsors are on board, right! And our men’s team have definitely not suffered, they’ve also been promoted. It’s an important thing to say. It’s hard to say, there are so many influences on this. But let’s say. Shall we say, shall we put a figure on it, let’s say 15 years. Could be. Let’s aim for that.

How old will you be in 15 years?

**Bo –**

Erm, I can’t do the maths…

**Karen –**

Don’t worry, maybe twenty something, late twenties? Yeah, so hopefully by the time you are late twenties, there will be an equal FA Cup prize fund. All the cups will have equal funds. Women will be playing on the same pitches as men. You’ll all be getting jacuzzies and BMWs and you know, we all have the same dreams, right.

**Caitlin –**

Do you have a piece of advice you’d give a young woman wanting to get involved in football?

**Karen –**

The piece of advice I’d give to a young woman wanting to get involved in football is stay strong and resilient, and then the piece of advice I would give to someone wanting to stay in football, because quite often girls will stop playing football round about 14, 15 or so, because really, it’s hard, you know, there’s a lot of pressure to stop. You need to get to training, you need the right teams to train with, you’ve got social pressure around you, is it weird to play football? When other girls are going out, you’ve got to go to training, so the other piece of advice is to stick with it. Because it’s not just football itself, there are loads of jobs in and around football and we need women in these roles, otherwise decisions are made by men, and they don’t understand what girls and women face. I would like those girls, and I would give them the advice, to stay in football because there is so much opportunity to change the game for the next generation.

**Bo –**

If you could change one thing to help women’s football, what would it be?

**Karen –**

It would have a great big £ sign in front of it. So, it would be money and resources. It would be the money for women to have amazing stadia to play in, it would be the money to offer training sessions for girls, to offer female coaching sessions, it would be the money to put lots of marketing behind the girls and women, tell their stories, get the public to engage with them. It would be really resources. Two things that clubs could do now without money, to help girls and women’s football, one would be, let the girls and women play at the men’s stadia. Because very often this doesn’t happen, and I know at Lewes both first teams play at the Dripping Pan, but I go to away matches to women’s teams and quite often they are inferior pitches, way away from the town where the townsfolk would want to come and support, they can’t get there.

The other thing is with social media actually. We have separate handles for our men’s and women’s teams and that’s because a lot of clubs will include their women’s team in the main club account, and they’ll get lost. Or on the website, they’ll say, First Team and Women’s Team, rather than Men’s Team and Women’s Team. So, there are lots of little things that you can do without money and that’s to do with attitude and the value you give your women’s team but the main thing you need is money.

**Caitlin –**

How would you persuade someone to come to a Lewes Women’s match?

**Karen –**

Well now that is easy, peasy, cheesy, lemon squeezy, that one. I would say, well, I guess, it would depend on the person. I’d say, often we have a band there that will do some music and we can chant to that. You know what, I will stay with you the whole time and I will explain what’s going on on the pitch. And we’ll have fun, we’ll do a bit of chanting, get prosecco on tap, which you can get at Lewes. We’ll have a vegan pie, or we’ll have a chicken pie, whatever you like. We’ll get some fries. I’ll take you round, I’ll show you our community garden, Brad’s Pit, it’s called by the way, our community garden... I’ll show you our club house, the Rook Inn and I’ll show you where the toilets are. You know, the thing is, I think the way to persuade people is to explain to them that they might not know much about football, but it is a whole entertainment afternoon in public. Also, fresh air, no chance of Covid there right. You’re outside. There are so many reasons why you would want to go to a football match, especially at Lewes FC at the Dripping Pan because there is magic in the air there. It’s the only place in the world where there is equality. So, I would say to them, basically, I will be your friend.

**Bo and Caitlin –**

Thank you for answering our questions.

**Karen –**

Thank you so much. What great questions and I felt really at ease and engaged with you both. Thank you for that.