



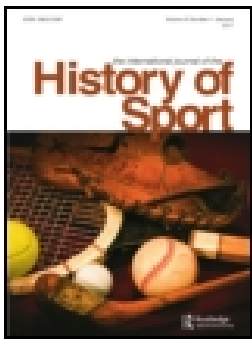
## **Equalize it!: Sportification and Transforming of Gender Boundaries in Emerging Swedish Women's Football, 1966-1999**

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## Equalize It!: ‘Sportification’ and the Transformation of Gender Boundaries in Emerging Swedish Women’s Football, 1966–1999

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the emergence of Swedish women’s football through the case of pioneering team Öxabäcks IF, from a rural village of about 900 inhabitants. From the start in 1966 until the dissolving of the team due to financial problems in 1999, Öxabäck was one of the top Swedish football clubs. They won seven Swedish Championships and six Swedish Cups, and played an important role in advancing national and international women’s football through exhibition matches and tours. How was this possible in a small rural village?

We will analyze the strategies used by the Öxabäck players to convince the Swedish Football Association, the press, and the public that their ambition to play football was serious and should be supported. What aspects of sportification did they try to achieve, as Swedish women’s football went through a rapid sportification process in the late 1960s and early 1970s? We argue that concepts related to sportification, such as rational training and organization, were used to further the cause of women’s football. The experiences from the Öxabäck case are important to shed light on similar processes in currently emerging sports today.

### KEYWORDS

Football; Sweden; gender boundaries; sportification; gender equality

The emergence of Swedish women’s football through the case of pioneering team Öxabäcks IF, from a rural village of about 900 inhabitants, is a compelling story. From the start in 1966 until the dissolving of the team due to financial problems in 1999, Öxabäck was one of the top Swedish football clubs. They won seven Swedish Championships and six Swedish Cups, and played an important role in advancing national and international women’s football through exhibition matches and tours.<sup>1</sup> How was this possible in a small rural village? In what way did the players themselves think about gender boundaries and the right to play?

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Various strategies were used by the Öxabäck players to convince the Swedish Football Association, the press, and the public that their ambition to play football was serious and should be supported, but how were they able to succeed where others had previously failed?

Prior to 1966, there had been loosely organized efforts to promote women's football in many European nations, with varying degrees of success and longevity. In the UK, the first recorded women's football match was held in 1888 in Inverness, Scotland.<sup>2</sup> For the first decades of the twentieth century, women's football in Britain was growing fast and drew crowds over 10,000, but in 1921 the English FA declared the game 'unsuitable' for women, which effectively halted its rise.<sup>3</sup> An independent women's football association was formed and teams like the famous Dick Kerr's Ladies continued to play, but the rapid growth of women's football would not be resumed until the 1970s when the FA ban was lifted.<sup>4</sup> In Sweden, women played football as early as 1902 and with more serious approach in 1917.<sup>5</sup> For example, a team was formed in Borås (in the same region as Öxabäck) in the 1930s, but this team was an isolated phenomenon and did not manage to muster support for a women's league.<sup>6</sup> Women's football in France was supported by the feminist movement in the 1920s but only for a brief period; in the 1930s, organized women's football was disbanded.<sup>7</sup> In Germany, a team was formed in 1930 but dissolved after only a year due to heavy criticism from the public and the media,<sup>8</sup> while in Denmark, women played football within the school system and were led by BK Femina, a pioneering team that began playing in 1959.<sup>9</sup> The early progress of many women's football clubs was uncertain, and while they began a process of shifting and challenging the idea about football as a male-only endeavour, they did not manage to transform it.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, this began to change. In a sociopolitical context in many European countries that experienced strong women's movements, the right to play football was again – much like it had been in the 1920s – part of a broader movement for gender equality. Also, in the Soviet Union and China, football was re-interpreted and opened up for women.<sup>10</sup> Due to the persistent efforts of advocates for women's football internationally, governing organizations were forced to act. In 1971, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) urged its member organizations to take control of women's football. Several national associations did so in the early 1970s, including the Swedish FA and the Danish FA.<sup>11</sup>

The international breakthrough of women's football in the 1970s was a broad and sweeping development, but each and every club has its own story that can add further detail and nuance to our overall understanding of how the sport was opened up for female participation. Öxabäck's story commenced in 1966, and they played an important role in securing administrative and financial support for women's football in Sweden, first at local and regional level and later also at the national and international scene.

### **Football as a Gendered Activity**

Like many other activities in society, sports and sport identities are gendered.<sup>12</sup> This has been found in a number of sports, and football certainly has a history of being gendered as male.<sup>13</sup>

While many sports, for example ice hockey, have gone through profound changes in how female athletes are represented and regulated,<sup>14</sup> others, such as ski jumping, have barred female participants in Olympic competitions until only a few years ago.<sup>15</sup> Women's football was established internationally in the 1970s, but this was preceded by many local, regional, and national struggles for recognition of women's right to play.

The theory of 'gender boundaries', which can be shifted, crossed, and transformed, is useful for analysing the rise of Öxabäck as the first established women's football team in Sweden.<sup>16</sup> The women of Öxabäck managed to challenge established ideas about football and femininity through conscious and time-consuming work to persuade the Swedish Football Association to support the new women's football league. In the process of establishing women's football, it was important to legitimize this novelty through aspects of 'sportification'. Through a Weberian lens, Allen Guttmann used this term to consider how sports develop, following a similar pattern from unstructured, leisure-like games and play towards increasing organization, equalization, rationalization, regimentation, specialization, quantification, and standardization.<sup>17</sup> Historically, such processes are evident in many sports, and today we see younger sports like e-sports going through similar developments.<sup>18</sup> Combining the ideas of sportification and gender boundaries, the success of Öxabäck can be attributed to their ability to work with aspects of sportification, such as organization, and make their football part of the regional and later also national football system. Where other clubs had crossed the gender boundary that excluded women from football, they had rarely succeeded in transforming it permanently.

The gender boundaries in football were constructed through classic ideas and strategies about gender differences. Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman outlined three different ways of constructing gender difference: the idea that what is male is not female, the idea that men and women are qualitatively and essentially different, and the idea that women are quantitatively different and somehow inferior to men.<sup>19</sup> These ideas have also been used to analyse gender constructions in sports and sport physiology.<sup>20</sup> All three of these constructions are found in the material about Öxabäck, and consequently, the players have had to face numerous sexist, misogynist, and reductive reactions and representations from sport media and sport organizations.

Alongside an analysis of papers from Swedish newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s – drawn from various newspaper archives and the exhibition of press clippings at the Women's Football Museum in Öxabäck – interviews were conducted with former Öxabäck players, ranging from the team's early co-founders to those active in the late 1990s when the team was dissolved.

### **The 1966 Revolution in Öxabäck: Crossing the Gender Boundary**

As many new ideas, this one was born on a night out. Some friends from the textile factory Gefa AB in Öxabäck were out dancing on a spring night in 1966. A few of them had played football for fun at the factory, and by the end of the night they had agreed to start playing football in a more organized and serious way. They asked the

local football club Öxabäcks IF, which until then had only organized a men's team, if they could start their own team as part of the club. The board agreed, with the condition that the women had to do everything on their own, including handling the economy and recruiting new players. They were also not allowed to train on the grass pitch at the home arena Hagavallen, but had to make do with a nearby gravel pitch.<sup>21</sup> To finance the team, these pioneering women sold lottery tickets at the textile factory and made their own football jerseys.

These pioneering efforts were, as described in the opening section of this paper, part of an ongoing rise of women's football across Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Sweden, teams from Gothenburg (Jitex), Umeå (Sandåkern), and Malmö (IFK Malmö) were started in the late 1960s and some of these were directly inspired by Öxabäck.<sup>22</sup> In West Sweden, teams were started in many small villages and some of them took part in the first women's football league organized by Öxabäck. However, Öxabäck received more attention in the press than any of the other teams and were the most influential team in this vital period for women's football in Sweden.

Apart from the fact that Öxabäck were the best team at the time and won most matches comfortably, another explanation for the attention given to Öxabäck could be that this peripheral place was a highly unlikely arena for elite sports. A small village of about 900 inhabitants, located in a forested area 70 km south-east of Gothenburg in West Sweden, Öxabäck had none of the competitive edges (e.g. facilities, sponsors, large population, strong finances) associated with modern elite sports. What they did have, however, was a strong local community that would prove to be highly supportive of women's football.<sup>23</sup> The rural setting and the fact that some of the players were farmers caught the attention of the press, and Öxabäck used their peripheral status to their advantage.<sup>24</sup>

One of the leading players was Kerstin Johnson. She was the youngest of ten siblings, among them six brothers who all played football. She grew up at a farm in Öxabäck and always played football at home with her brothers when she was young. Another important player during the first years was Ebba Andersson, a farmer who was 31 years old at the time and was sister-in-law to Kerstin Johnson. Ebba Andersson would soon be one of the most famous female footballers in Sweden. Many of the others had similar backgrounds – they were from the area, grew up at small farms, and lived and worked in Öxabäck.

A common ingredient was the 'feminist perspective' in these families, where the girls had always been allowed to pursue whatever interest they saw fit, including football.<sup>25</sup> There were generally few problems for the players to have time for training and matches – their husbands stayed at home with the children and many of them were also active in the fan club that was soon initiated to support the successful women's team in Öxabäck.<sup>26</sup>

The first year, 1966, they played only a few matches against local non-club opponents. In 1967, a special women's section was started within the club and they played 24 exhibition matches, 16 of these against other women's teams.<sup>27</sup> After a long struggle, not least by the player Kerstin Larsson, Öxabäck managed to convince the regional football association, Västergötlands fotbollförbund, to support an unofficial

women's football league in 1968. This was a crucial win in the sportification process and quite unique as other regional FAs (e.g. in Gothenburg) refused to have anything to do with the organization of women's football.<sup>28</sup> Six teams participated, and a few of the games were partly covered by national television and newspapers. Öxabäck won 10 games out of 10, with 67 goals scored and only two conceded. A local journalist raised the issue if the women should not be allowed to take part in a goal-scoring competition organized by a Swedish journal. Kerstin Johnson, the team's top scorer, argued that she should be considered for the prize but she was dismissed by the editor of the journal in question, who stated that only 'real' (i.e. male) teams would be included.<sup>29</sup>

Until 1971, the unofficial, regional football league was organized and administered by the teams themselves, with Öxabäck as the leading club. In 1971, the league was made official and Västergötlands fotbollförbund took over the administration. Now things moved quickly. In 1972, the Swedish Football Association decided to include women's football at all levels, and the following year the first official Swedish championship was played.<sup>30</sup> Öxabäck beat Rättvik 3-0 in the final in front of 1,859 spectators.

So far, Öxabäck had mainly impacted the national scene, but in 1973 three of their players (May Gunnarsson, Ebba Andersson, and Inger Arnesson) played in the first official international fixture, against Finland. Öxabäck also went to England for training fixtures against leading British teams, including Birmingham City Ladies FC and Amorpham Angels. Öxabäck goalkeeper Majvor Turesson was newly-wed and brought her husband Jan on a combined football trip/honeymoon.<sup>31</sup>

The broad media coverage attracted both sponsors and spectators. In 1975, Öxabäck again won the Swedish championships. In the first leg of the final, 1,358 supporters had found their way to Hagavallen in Öxabäck, an arena without stands situated in the forest. The high-attendance numbers proved to be an effective argument for women's football in Öxabäck, as this small rural club could use it to strengthen their economy. After a 2-2 draw in the first leg, the second leg of the final was dramatic. A late equalizer for Öxabäck took the game to penalties, where 13-year-old Mary Andersson missed from the spot. Her mother, 40-year-old Ebba Andersson, stepped up to take the final penalty of the game and the first penalty of her life. A well-placed effort secured the victory for Öxabäck.

The success continued. A new record attendance was reached in 1978, when the Swedish championship final was played at Hagavallen. Öxabäck beat off Hammarby 2-1 in front of 2,800 people and secured the club's third Swedish championship. The unlikely story of the small club from the tiny village just kept going, and Öxabäck won again in 1983, 1987, and 1988. Still, time was about to catch up. Women's football had rapid development, from a small-scale hobby to a full-fledged national concern. The 1988 reform of the league, which meant a national league instead of regional leagues with national finals, raised the status even more but also meant longer travels as new teams from other parts of the country were included in the league. In 1991, Öxabäck managed to get sponsorship from the municipality for 30,000 Swedish crowns (approximately 3,000 euro) each year.<sup>32</sup> This deal could not stop the tendency which was now clear – rural teams had a hard time attracting

players and sponsors and teams from bigger cities such as Malmö, Göteborg, and Stockholm were more and more successful. The attendance levels were not rising, and it was not until the end of the 1990s that the average attendance started to grow significantly, from around 200 to more than 1000 in 2004.<sup>33</sup> By then it was teams from major cities (Stockholm) and university towns (Umeå) who were leading the development and it came in the wake of international success for the Swedish national team and broader media coverage of the national team and the national league.

When Öxabäck won their last Swedish cup title in 1991, most of the competitive edges that had helped them in the past were now obsolete. In the 1970s, almost all players came from Öxabäck or lived and worked in the surrounding area. In the 1990s, this was no longer the case.<sup>34</sup> The team had initially built on the pre-existing female community at the textile factory, which was now closed. Pre-existing social communities, at factories and other workplaces, in the military or among students have been an important factor when new sport teams are started, and Öxabäck was no exception.<sup>35</sup> However, by the 1990s elite-level clubs depended less on such pre-existing communities and more on strong finances and the ability to attract players from the outside by offering jobs and apartments. In 1998, Öxabäck was relegated from the first division, Damallsvenskan. Most of the established players, who had no ties to Öxabäck, left for other clubs. During their first and only year in the second division, Öxabäck fielded a young team and took only three points. With 400,000 Swedish crowns (approximately 40,000 euro) in debt and facing a second consecutive relegation, the team was disbanded in 1999. For more than thirty years, Öxabäck was one of the major clubs in Swedish women's football, and they are still top five in the all-time marathon table (i.e. the historical ranking of the teams in the first division). Today the club has a men's team in the eight division, and several youth teams.

### **Shifting the Symbolic Gender Boundary through Sports Media?**

Swedish sports media represented female footballers in stereotypical ways and complained about the quality of the game already in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> In the first women's game that was (partly) broadcasted on national television, between Öxabäck and Hyssna in 1968, the commentator remarked that 'at least it sounds a bit like real football sometimes does' when one of the players made a poor pass. He also made remarks about the looks of the players.<sup>37</sup> It was common practice that women footballers were dubbed 'football amazons' or 'Valkyries' during the 1960s.<sup>38</sup> When Öxabäck started to gain media attention, such attitudes were still dominant.

The ideas about football as a male sport constituted a symbolic boundary, a way to categorize male and female athletes according to established gender dichotomies.<sup>39</sup> Internationally, it was seen as unsuitable for women to play football, for many reasons. Partly from a paternalistic perspective, women should be protected from the dangers of the physical game. They could also, it was argued, lose their femininity and become more masculine. Such fears were raised in many countries in Europe and North America.<sup>40</sup> It was also argued that there was something essentially



masculine about football and about kicking, an argument that relates to essentialist constructions of gender.<sup>41</sup> Even when being appreciated for their skill, female footballers were compared to men. In the paper from 1971, Öxabäck star player and top goal scorer Ann-Kristin Lindqvist was described as able to treat the ball ‘like a real man’.<sup>42</sup>

Even in countries such as New Zealand, where women’s football was initiated in the early 1920s, it did not result in any dissolution of the gender boundaries but rather a confirmation of the masculine gendering of football. The ‘girl footballer’ crossed the gender boundary but could not shift or transform it until much later.<sup>43</sup> Another common theme was the sexualization of the players. Stereotypical representations of athletes were common in the Swedish press throughout the twentieth century, not least regarding female athletes in sports that had a strong male gender coding. Women were seen as playful and spontaneous, while male athletes were described as rational, serious, and goal-oriented.<sup>44</sup> Öxabäck was no exception. It was insinuated that the spectators did not primarily come to watch the game but rather the bodies of the players. In 1968, the local priest in Öxabäck was interviewed and he explained: ‘we are not pleased about women’s football. No one should think that the spectators come to watch football. They come to watch the girls. Football is too tough for girls’.<sup>45</sup> The quote relates to two of the most common discursive strategies to reduce female athletes: sexualizing and paternalistic protection from sports that are too physically demanding.

The players themselves were sometimes annoyed by the sexualized representations in the media, but some had a more pragmatic approach and saw even sexist media coverage as a good advertisement for the sport.<sup>46</sup> Players from the Danish pioneers BK Femina have expressed similar ideas in relation to sexualized media coverage in the 1970s.<sup>47</sup> The players of Öxabäck opted for a strategy of sameness rather than difference, demanding equal rights, rules, and equipment as the male players.<sup>48</sup> This strategy obviously lies much closer to equality feminism than difference feminism.<sup>49</sup> Equality feminism had gradually during the 1960s broken through in the highest political circles in Sweden and had become the leading strand of feminism in the expanding women’s movement, paving way for reforms aimed at gender equality.<sup>50</sup> Given this context, it could be argued that the sameness strategy of Öxabäck was part of a larger movement even if the players themselves did not explicitly relate to it at the time, nor in retrospect.

In the paper from *Expressen* in the summer of 1971, May Lindgren was dubbed ‘the most beautiful footballer in the country’.<sup>51</sup> Being rated not as a player but rather for her looks, Lindgren was undermined as a serious athlete in line with how the Swedish media represented female athletes.<sup>52</sup>

The female players were often discussed in relation to men, such that their accomplishments were often positioned as less important. A concern raised was how the husbands of the female footballers would manage to take care of home and children. In one paper from 1968, player Margareta Johansson’s husband Hugo was portrayed staying at home with their two kids while Margareta was out playing football.<sup>53</sup> In another paper, Kerstin Johnson was described as a mum with the headline: ‘Mum a star in the team – Dad fixes diaper change’. The article made a big

number of how her husband, Thor Johnson, stayed at home with their daughter when Kerstin played football.<sup>54</sup> These were examples of how the men in Öxabäck in various ways supported their wives sporting endeavours, but also of how such support was uncommon enough for the media to take notice of. The impact on men was apparently an interesting thing to focus on, even in a relatively progressive country like Sweden which along with fellow Scandinavian countries Denmark and Norway had introduced a number of reforms to further gender equality in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including individual taxation of spouses, abortion rights, and equal pay for equal work.<sup>55</sup> And, of course, such concerns were not raised in relation to male footballers.

While the early media coverage focused on the players as women, mothers, and sex objects, this gradually changed and several newspapers (e.g. *Expressen*, *Arbetet*, *Göteborgs-tidningen*) had reporters who specialized in covering women's football. Many of these reporters wrote straightforward, serious, and non-condescending texts about Öxabäck and other teams where they focused on the actual game or defended women's football against condescending remarks from the Swedish FA.<sup>56</sup> In the paper from 1968, the new women's football league was celebrated as a success, despite the hesitant attitude from the Swedish FA.<sup>57</sup>

The success of Öxabäck helped shift the symbolic gender boundaries of Swedish football. Such shifts have been framed as a sign of a 'boundary losing its strength or salience'.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, the idea of female athletes became more accepted and thus crossing and transforming gender boundaries was eventually possible. There are many examples of this from different sports, including the transformation of equestrianism from an activity gender-coded as male to something more diverse and with a stronger emphasis on femininity.<sup>59</sup> Another example is cross-country skiing, where sportification in terms of specialized, scientific training methods shifted the identity of a skier from a male forestry worker with experiential knowledge to something more based on rational, theoretical knowledge.<sup>60</sup> This shifted the gender boundary of skiing and opened the sport for women.

Symbolic gender boundaries in sport have throughout the twentieth century built on a large body of work from medicine, physiology, and other theoretical approaches that have constructed the female body as inferior to and/or essentially different than the male body.<sup>61</sup> By consciously demanding equal rights to play (with the same rules, equipment etcetera), the pioneers of women's football attacked those ideas of essential differences between men and women in sport.<sup>62</sup> Such ideas of essential differences between men and women, and thereby between men's football and women's football, were widespread within the media and the male audience during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>63</sup>

### **Transforming Social Gender Boundaries through Sportification**

Having shifted, crossed, and transformed the symbolic boundaries of football through playing the game and talking in public about football and gender equality, there were still social boundaries to overcome. These boundaries are more fixed and concrete manifestations of ideas and perceptions.<sup>64</sup> In the case of women's football, an

important social boundary was the unwillingness of the Swedish Football Association to organize and administrate a women's football league at national or even regional and local level.

Öxabäck faced the same resistance from the public, media, and sport organizations as did their fellow footballers in many parts of the world. Despite this, and unlike many of the early attempts to initiate women's football competitions around the world in the 1910s and 1920s, Öxabäck eventually secured local and regional support and got the regional football association, Västergötlands Fotbollförbund, to help with some of the administration. It was the player Kerstin Larsson, who after a long persuasion got their support in 1969. Before that, she had done most of the administration of the local football league herself.<sup>65</sup> This was perhaps not as visible to the broader public as the matches and the media debates, but securing a place for women's football within the existing administration was an important part of the sportification process and thus vital to transform the social boundaries of football.

This can be understood as an aspect of an ideology of equality as laid out by Swedish historian Eva Olofsson, i.e. demanding equal rights and opportunities as the male football players.<sup>66</sup> Instead of pointing at differences between men and women in relation to football, and opting for a special type of women's football, the Öxabäck players demanded that the Swedish FA should organize women's football on equal terms, using the same equipment, rules, and regulations. Similar strategies were used in other countries, such as the UK, where female footballers also argued for equal participation.<sup>67</sup> This strategy may be risky, as it opens up female athletes' performances for comparison with male athletes.<sup>68</sup> Women's football has had to endure such comparisons throughout the history of the sport. Nonetheless, the ideology of equality meant that women's football could be incorporated within the existing organizational structure and undergoes a fast sportification process.<sup>69</sup> The case for women's football gained momentum, and the number of licensed players rose quickly from 728 in 1970 to more than 9,000 two years later.<sup>70</sup> It had started at regional level, and Öxabäck were the pioneers in Sweden. This process was a transformation of gender boundaries, as the outcome of shifting and crossing boundaries was institutionalized through the established governing organizations of football.

How did Öxabäck representatives manage to transform these social boundaries? We argue that it was done through a process of sportification, to legitimize women's football as a serious sport. One of the criteria for sportification is organization. Öxabäck worked tirelessly to convince the regional football association to support them. Once they had secured this support, their football league was unofficially part of the organizational structure and regimentation of Swedish football. The team worked simultaneously in many levels to increase their influence. In 1976, the player and would-be coach Britt-Inger Kjellman was elected as the representative of the women's section in the board of Öxabäcks IF. And in 1978, she was elected for service in a committee within the regional football association.<sup>71</sup> By representation at many levels in Swedish football administration, Öxabäck gained influence and could further the cause of women's football.

Other aspects of sportification are specialization and rationalization, and training is one area where such developments have historically been of great importance.<sup>72</sup>

Öxabäck were very serious about their training from the start, and this was noted by the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* who in 1968 wrote that Öxabäck had been training ‘rationally’ for years.<sup>73</sup> With five training sessions a week, quite much for a team where all players had jobs on the side, Öxabäck set a high standard. Ebba Andersson recalls that this was a conscious effort to be the best-trained team in the league, and this meant heavy training sessions where the players for example ran intervals carrying each other on the back.<sup>74</sup> Being systematic and rational are values historically attributed to male athletes, while female athletes have been portrayed as playful, natural, and spontaneous.<sup>75</sup> By displaying such traits, Öxabäck challenged the symbolic gender boundary of serious, competitive sport.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, Öxabäck used quantification and records in establishing women’s football. By being very thorough about statistics on goal scorers and results even before the league was administered by the Swedish Football Association, sports media had access to numbers which could be used to advocate gender equality in sports by pointing at the impressive scoring records of players like Kerstin Johnson and Ann-Kristin Lindqvist, who scored 580 goals in 579 matches for Öxabäck. While subjective judgements reducing the performance and skill of female footballers have been common also in the twenty-first century,<sup>77</sup> sheer numbers are harder to argue with. It should also be noted that these numbers, and other forms of football memorabilia, are displayed at the Women’s Football Museum in Öxabäck. The museum, managed by former player Kerstin Johnson, is an example of how local history can be presented as cultural heritage.<sup>78</sup>

### The Öxabäck Case and Women’s Football in Sweden

An important aspect in the success of Öxabäck was their ability to further the sportification process and make their football part of the regional and later also national football system. Where many had crossed the gender boundary that excluded women from football, none had succeeded in transforming it permanently. Öxabäck did precisely that, and it eventually resulted in the recognition of rights, such as access to playing fields, administrative, organizational, and financial support and not least international exchange and competitions.<sup>79</sup> The Öxabäck case suggests that a conscious effort to further sportification may result in a legitimization of a sport, or in this case, of a new group of participants within an established sport like football. Öxabäck, as well as other pioneers of women’s football, used a strategy of sameness and demanded the same rights as the male players.<sup>80</sup> This was not a case of establishing a new sport, but rather to open up a traditionally male activity for women. Additional research about how sportification has been used for such transformative work would be most interesting.

The experiences from the Öxabäck case are also important to shed light on similar processes of gender coding and boundary work in currently emerging sports such as e-sports and MMA. Precisely because of the strong historical connection between sport and masculinity, female athletes and their actions have a critical potential that can contribute to a more detailed examination of the ideas of gender and sport.<sup>81</sup>

There are different ways to characterize struggles for gender equality in sports. Swedish historians Hjelm and Olofsson suggest that in the case of women's football in Sweden, the players were generally not identifying themselves as feminists even though they were norm-breakers.<sup>82</sup> Similar conclusions have been drawn regarding women's football in countries such as England and Canada, who also seem to have rejected the feminist label.<sup>83</sup> Suggesting a more nuanced description, players in Öxabäck stated that they saw their struggle for the right to play as a part of a broader movement for gender equality.<sup>84</sup> Even if many of the players were not explicitly feminists, they were part of a team that transformed the gender boundaries of Sweden's national sport and thus secured a recognition of rights beyond their individual right to play football.<sup>85</sup>

Women's football in Scandinavia has also been framed as a result of the strong women's movement in these countries from the 1960s onwards.<sup>86</sup> Though never primarily focused on sports, it has been shown how parts of the women's movement in Sweden saw the strengthening of the female body (through sports) as an ingredient for emancipation in practice.<sup>87</sup> Swedish football historian Torbjörn Andersson has argued that such emancipation and subversive challenging of heteronormativity through sport was one of the most important aspects of women's football.<sup>88</sup> Öxabäck thus arose in a national context of progressive political reforms for gender equality and a strong women's movement with some members that saw sports as one of many tools for liberation of the female body.

Although Öxabäck's legacy is impressive in terms of victories on the pitch, their most profound contribution was the part they played in transforming the gender boundaries of football. Both accomplishments are even more impressive given the fact that this team came from a sparsely populated rural area. Challenging and transforming the gender boundaries of football in Sweden was hard work. Like in other, similar struggles, the success rate is largely determined by how much support the norm breakers can muster for their cause.<sup>89</sup> Öxabäck managed to get support from both the local community and their regional FA. It has been suggested that rural areas have been more favourable for women's sport, where masculine ideals and social restrictions are less important.<sup>90</sup> In the US, it was mainly rural schools that maintained competitive women's sports when such competitions were abandoned in most urban areas.<sup>91</sup> Öxabäck is yet another example that strengthens this argument. Certain forms of norm breaking seem to be easier in a smaller context.

While Swedish football has its roots as a popular movement and amateur vocation, this changed during the 1970s when elite football for men was increasingly professionalized.<sup>92</sup> For women's football, these aspects of sportification did not have any major impact until the late 1990s, which also meant that Öxabäck could no longer compete at the highest level. By the 1990s, very few of the players actually came from the area and most were recruited from larger cities.<sup>93</sup> Until then, the conscious sportification of their football through organization, specialization, and quantification had been more than enough to compete.

Another aspect that could be added to the sportification model is the increasing role of the media in promoting the game. Öxabäck became the darlings of the Swedish sport media and received more attention than any other women's football

club. Öxabäcks Fan Club was even initiated and led by a senior editor at one of Sweden's largest newspapers, *Expressen*.<sup>94</sup> The urban sport media were clearly fascinated by the rural aspects of women's football, and players like Ebba Andersson were often portrayed as farmers.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, Swedish media were directly involved in the promotion and even organization of early women's football, and sponsored local initiatives.<sup>96</sup> It is likely that the professionalization in Swedish men's football in the 1970s also added to the interest in women's football, which was romanticized and seen as something more genuine and small scale than the increasingly professionalized men's football.

To conclude, Öxabäck managed to secure organizational support for their football, at a time when such support was rare. They convinced Västergötlands Fotbollförbund to take the lead in the organization of women's football. They also used their local community, the press, and the existing social networks, such as in the local textile factory, to attract both players and spectators. Even if many teams in Sweden started around the same time, it was the Öxabäck players who became the poster girls. Women's football is now, just like men's football, a predominantly urban affair but in the quest for early football equality, the avant-garde was rural.

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