

Women's World Cup: Mexico 1971



Aim

To celebrate a major sporting occasion and/or the achievements of the England women's football team - the 'Lionesses'; to learn about the 'Lost Lionesses' and consider prejudice.

Context

It may be the biggest sporting contest you've never heard of. In 1971 six national football teams - including England - competed in Mexico for the Women's World Cup. The tournament was a huge success, with the final played in the famous Azteca Stadium in front of an estimated crowd of 110,000 - a record for women's sport that stands to this day.

Denmark won the final and were crowned world champions. But *unofficial* champions, because Copa '71 wasn't sanctioned by football's governing bodies - including the FA (Football Association) in this country.

The England team might have expected to return to a hero's welcome, but the reality was very different. The players all received bans from the FA and the manager - Harry Batt - was banned for life. The tournament was largely ignored by the press and in the years that followed the team drifted apart and the players never met up to reminisce about the occasion.

To understand how this could happen you need to consider the history of women's football in the UK. In the early 20th century the women's game was every bit as popular as the men's - for example, on Boxing Day 1920 a women's match attracted a crowd of over 50,000 in Liverpool. But shortly after, in 1921, the FA chose to ban the women's game in England. Clubs were told they could not allow women's matches to take place on their grounds and the FA even

stated that '*the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.*' The ban was finally lifted in 1970, but it meant that the team assembled for Copa '71 was an unofficial one, not recognised by the FA.

Since 1970 the women's game has gone from strength to strength. And the England women's team - now official and dubbed the 'Lionesses' - won the European Championship in 2022 and finished runners-up in the World Cup of 2023.

Possible discussion points before watching the video

- If showing the film in the run-up to a big football or other sporting tournament you could ask who is aware of a big sporting occasion about to happen. [*The UEFA Women's European Championship will be held in summer 2025*].
- Who has heard of the 'Lionesses'? Who are they? [*Invite responses and establish that 'Lionesses' is the nick-name of the England women's football team*].
- Does anyone know what success the Lionesses have had? [*Winners of the European Championship in 2022; runners-up in the World Championship 2023*].
- If the 'Lionesses' are the women's football team, who might the 'Lost Lionesses' be? [*Invite responses. Establish that the assembly will discover who the 'Lost Lionesses' are in the video they are about to watch*].

The video

The video features the memories of Leah Caleb, Gill Sayell and Paula Rayner - three of England's players at Copa '71. Their words are initially spoken by Jasmine, Gus and Maisie - three of today's aspiring young footballers.

In the film Leah, Gill and Paula describe arriving in Mexico in 1971 for the tournament and their excitement at taking part in front of such large crowds. They share their sense of disappointment

on returning to the UK to discover that the tournament has gone largely unnoticed. They go on to describe the pain of being banned from playing and the team being disbanded. As Paula Rayner says: *'You get memories from talking; but we never talked about what happened.'*

The video then adopts a more optimistic tone as it considers the achievements of the Lionesses. Leah, Gill and Paula are delighted by the success of the current team, but - more importantly - are delighted that the team are an inspiration to young girls (and boys) across the UK who are able to put on their kit and play football where and when they like.

The video ends with Jasmine, Gus and Maisie speaking their own words and reflecting on the inspirational story of the 'Lost Lionesses' and their own love for the sport.

Possible discussion points after watching the video

- You may wish to reiterate that the England players were banned on their return from Copa '71 because it was an unofficial team, not sanctioned by the FA, and that the FA had only very recently lifted a 50 year ban on women playing football.
- Why do students think Copa '71 attracted so little interest in the UK?
- Jasmine (speaking the words of Leah Caleb) says: 'It was all about the politics of the Association at the time and their attitudes...' Why do students think the FA handed out bans to the England players?
- Jasmine (speaking as herself) says: 'The power of football is so underrated - the teams that you can build, the friendships you can make, and everyone should be able to experience that.' Do pupils share that feeling? What are their views on sport - both positive and otherwise?
- Why do students think the video was filmed with the young footballers speaking the words of the England players? What effect does it have?

- Women are often paid less than men when playing sport professionally. Why do pupils think that happens? Do they think it happens outside of sport? Are they aware of any cases?
- Clearly sexism plays some part in the story of the 'Lost Lionesses'. Do students think sexism is an issue today? In sport? In society more generally? If so, how should it be challenged?

Bringing the assembly to a close

Some reflections on the story of the 'Lost Lionesses':

- Today it seems extraordinary that the women's game was once banned in England, and within living memory. The ban happened for many reasons, but clearly prejudice was one of them.
- Society has changed greatly since the time of the 'Lost Lionesses', but there is still more to do. Their story reminds us to strive for equality and inclusivity...and to reject prejudice.
- As we heard in the video, sport gives us an opportunity to build teamwork and friendships. It also gives opportunities to improve fitness...set challenges...push ourselves to be the best we can. Sport isn't for everyone - but teamwork, friendship, and a growth mindset are all valuable nonetheless.
- As we look forward to the next major sporting occasion, let's also remember those who have gone before, and who have helped to make possible what we enjoy today.

Links

- [Storyville: Copa '71 - BBC documentary](#)
- [BBC Sport article about the 'Lost Lionesses'](#)
- [BBC Newsround: Women and girls need more support in sport, say MPs](#)

Possible assembly framework

1. Entry

Play your chosen music. *[Display Slide 1].*

2. Introduction

[If using the assembly in the days prior to a major sporting event]
Who can tell me about an important sporting event about to happen? *[Gather responses. Establish which occasion is about to happen].*

Has anyone heard of the 'Lionesses'? Who can tell me who they are? *[Gather responses. Establish that the 'Lionesses' is the nick-name for the England women's football team].*

Who can tell me about some of the achievements of the Lionesses? *[Establish that the team won the European Championship in 2022 and finished runners-up in the World Cup of 2023].*

If the 'Lionesses' are the England women's football team, who might the 'Lost Lionesses' be? Does anyone have any suggestions? *[Gather responses].*

Today we're going to find out about the 'Lost Lionesses' in a short video. And as you watch you'll come to understand how they've gained that name...

3. Play the video

The last words are: '...where we are today.'
Duration: 5min 34sec

4. After the video - time to talk

An opportunity to discuss pupils' responses to the film. See above.

5. Bringing the assembly to a close *[Display Slide 2, then Slide 3].*
Today it seems extraordinary that women's football was once banned in England - and within living memory. The ban happened for several reasons, but prejudice was surely one of them... *[You could refer to Slide 2].* Just consider the words on screen...

Society has changed greatly since the time of the 'Lost Lionesses', but there is still more to do. Their story reminds us to strive for equality, fairness and inclusivity...and to reject prejudice.

As we look forward to *[identify the sporting occasion]* let's also remember the achievements of those who have gone before, and who have helped to make possible what we enjoy today.