

THEN AND NOW: Matildas players in the '80s (below); Brisbane City Ladies Football Club in 1922 (bottom); and Brisbane Roar captain Clare Polkinghorne (right).



Delving into our history feet first

The hunt is on to track down pictures of the state's pioneering female soccer players, writes **Talisa Eley**

“A lot of men, saw it as a bit of a gimmick, a bit of a novelty”

RAE DOWER

PHOTOS from nearly a century ago have launched a search to discover more about Queensland's first female soccer players. The pictures from the 1920s, showing players in baggy jerseys, long shorts and knee-high socks, are a far cry from the images of today's elite athletes, with Australia's women's soccer team, the Matildas, now scoring national respect and international success.

“The Matildas Effect” has been credited with driving a dramatic increase in the number of females taking up the sport since 2010.

Soccer is growing in popularity among female players, with 250,000 women and girls competing last year, including nearly 16,000 Queenslanders on the field and another 700 on the sidelines as coaches and referees.

Brisbane's home-grown talent is also inspirational, with Brisbane Roar led by captain Clare Polkinghorne, finishing on top of the leaderboard in last season's W-League for the third

time and Queensland's statewide competition boasting 14 teams as it reaches the grand finals this weekend.

“Brisbane has been at the forefront of women's football for over a hundred years,” Queensland University of Technology researcher Lee McGowan said.

The university is leading a project, With the Ball at Her Feet, to unlock the hidden history of women's football, calling for help from the public to dig through the family archives and add to the story, starting with Australia's first public women's game on September 24, 1921.

“There was a really famous game at the Gabba in 1921, 10,000 people were in attendance,” Dr McGowan said. “It looks like there were four or five teams playing in a regular competition in that period and it seems that game at the Gabba featured Australia's first representative teams, drawn from those local clubs.”

Brisbane's inner northern suburb of Paddington had formed the first

women's soccer club in the country just two months earlier, called the Latrobe Ladies, sparking a flurry of interest from nearly 100 others eager to make an association.

The city's infamous north versus south rivalry led to teams being formed on both sides of the river, along with two in Toowoomba, just days after the first team was announced. But it wasn't all smooth sailing for the pioneering women.

“There's been all sorts of obstacles put in their way,” Dr McGowan said. “Women had to play in the boys' junior league because people weren't that supportive of the competition, there were protests when the teams looked to form. (It) became about doing it yourself because no one was going to help you.”

In the 1920s, following bans in England and France, the Queensland Football Association tried but failed to ban women from playing.

Newspaper reports from 1922 described games as an “unusual spectacle” but by the early 1930s they were used as curtain-raisers for men's intercity matches as more teams popped up in Booval and Ipswich.

Enthusiasm waned during World War II but a revival in the 1950s saw *The Sunday Mail* report that “wives, sisters and fiancées of well-known Ipswich soccer men” had been in “strict” training for a month for a big game under the watchful eye of Blackstone captain Ron Hughes.

By 1977 when former Australian Matilda and current Australian junior coach Rae Dower started playing,

female coaches were still a foreign concept and women weren't completely accepted as serious players

“There were a lot of people, dare I say a lot of men, who saw it as a bit of a gimmick, a bit of a novelty, but once they saw the women play the game, they could see that they could actually play football,” she said.

The formation of the Southeast Queensland Women's Soccer Association two years earlier offered more opportunities for girls.

Dower joined the Under 14s as a seven-year-old, filling in occasionally for the women's side and first representing Queensland at a state level at age 10.

“When we represented Australia we were given our badge at the airport and had to sew it on to our jerseys ourselves,” she said. “Now the professionalism is obviously a lot higher, the resources are a lot greater so the players now can have real aspirations about being professional players, earning a living and being in the sport long-term.”

Dower and her mother Fay, a life member and stalwart of Brisbane football administration, have been a part of Brisbane's football history for more than 40 years.

“I recall getting an Under 15s team together to represent Queensland,” Fay said. “We were just about dragging people off the street ... it's changed now, it's just wonderful.”

Families can contribute stories or memorabilia to the With the Ball at Her Feet project through withtheballattherfeet.com.au/