

***The Fan Gap: The girls
missing from sport fandom***

and how to reach them

Introducing

Hark Sport

At Hark, we help brands build meaningful relationships with young people, and sport is one of the most powerful ways to do it.

Sport shapes confidence. It shapes identity. It shapes the moments young people remember.

That's why we created **Hark Sport**, a dedicated sub-brand for clients who want to use sport to inspire, include and elevate the next generation.

We work where young people already learn, grow and form their interests, in **schools, families** and **communities**.

Here, we help clients build relevance and reputation, while making a real difference to young people's lives.

By blending **insight, storytelling** and **education**, we create programmes that connect young people to sport in ways that build confidence, open opportunity and ignite lifelong fandom.



Introduction



**Girls aren't short on passion.
They're short on pathways.**

Girls **want** to follow sport.
They **want** stories.
They **want** role models.
They **want** to feel included.

But the world around them doesn't always give them everything they need to become and remain fans.

We wanted to find out more.

So we spoke to them. We asked girls what they need and want from fandom.

We asked them what's working and what the sports sector can do to create even more fans, and to keep them connected as they grow.

Their views are relevant to every level of sport — guiding teams, events, brands and rights holders as they build the future of fandom.

Who we **heard from**

A nationwide look at girls' fandom today.

- **1504** youth voices, aged 11-17 years
- **UK wide**
- Breadth of ***lived experience, demographic groups, exposure*** to and interest in sport

Half of our sample were boys, both for comparison and to ensure their voices and perspectives are heard.

This was supplemented by the ***voices of teachers from our Hark Teachers Panel***: bringing to life what they hear in classrooms, playgrounds and playing fields across the UK.

These are the voices shaping the future of UK sport.



1504
youth voices



The state of girls' fandom

Why **being a fan matters** to girls

Happiness



say being a fan makes them happier

Connection



say it helps them make new friends

Confidence



say it boosts confidence

Physical health



think being a fan makes them better at playing sport



want to try more sports

**Above figures represent girl fans aged 11-17.*

Why girls' fandom **matters to your sport**

They are committed viewers



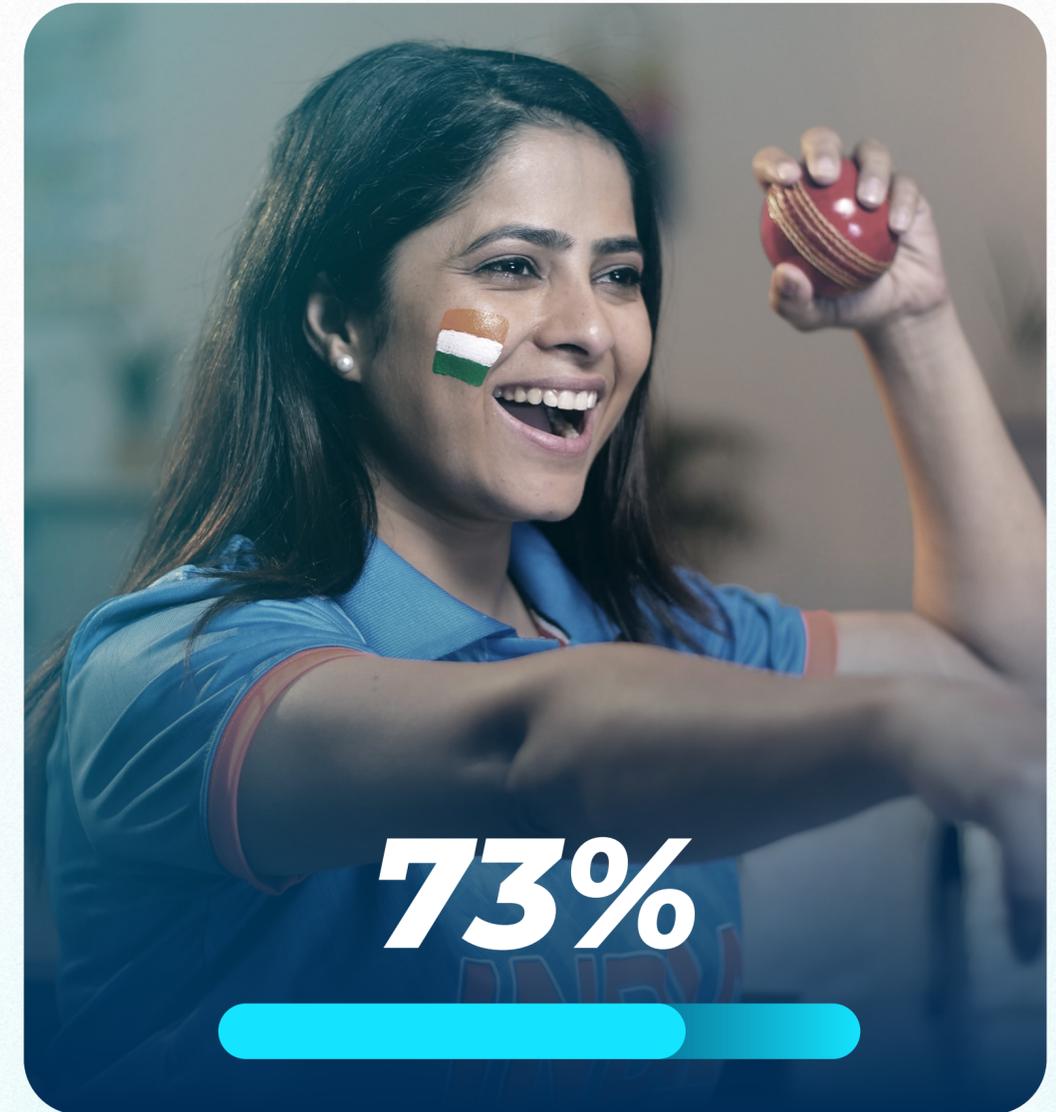
watch full matches

Powerful advocates



talk about sport with their family

And proud to belong



own branded sports merchandise



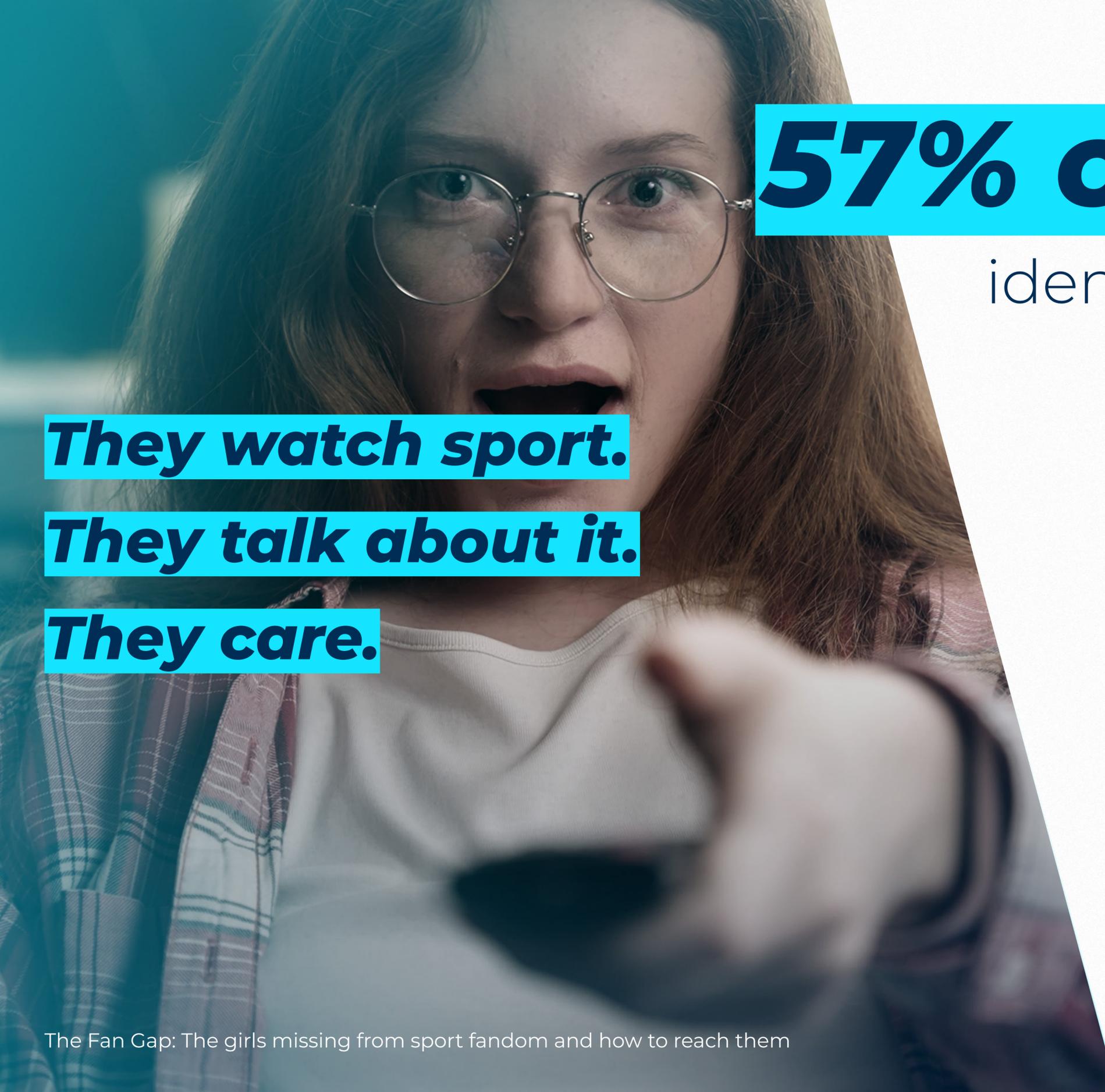
watch short-form content



talk about it with friends

**Above figures represent girl fans aged 11-17.*

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57% of girls

identify as sports fans

They watch sport.

They talk about it.

They care.

“I would be bored if I couldn’t be a fan. I wouldn’t have as many friends as I do.”

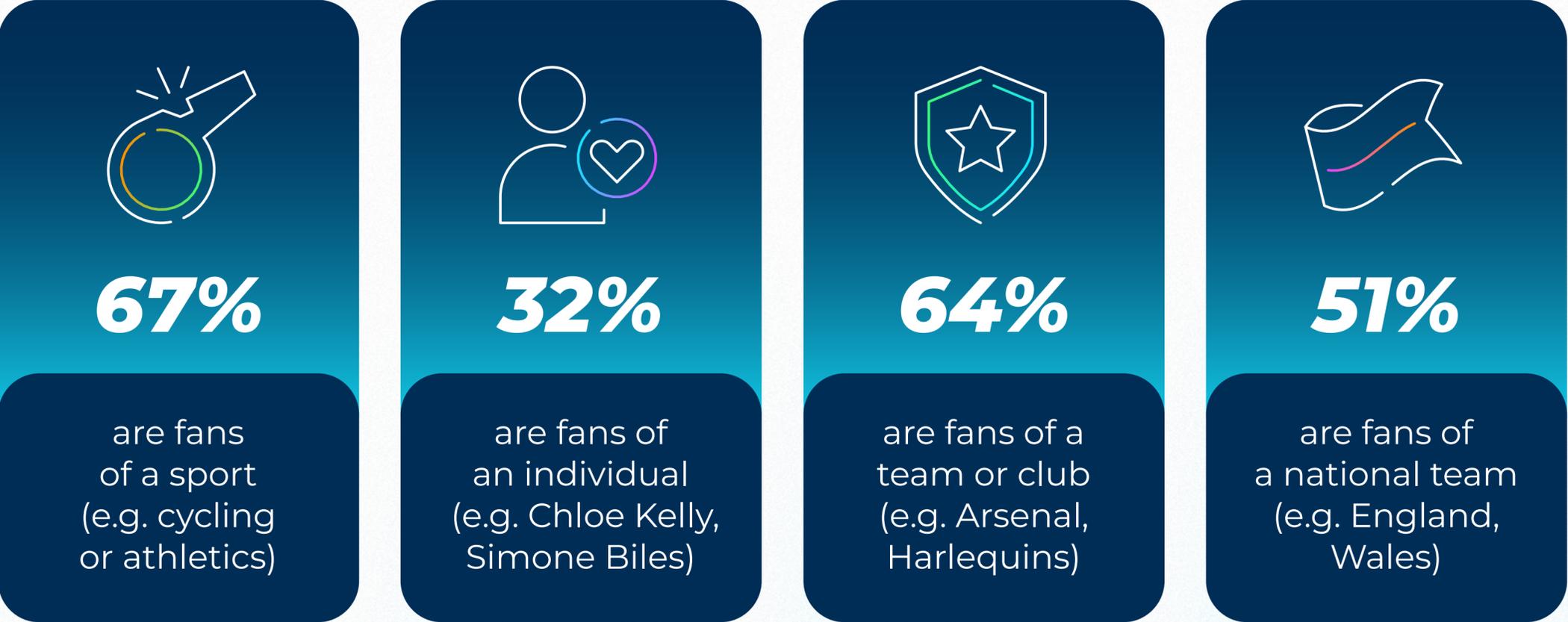
Girl, 12

“Sometimes boys are shocked by how much I know.”

Girl, 17

Being a fan **means different things** to different girls

**Girls' fandom spans sports, teams and individuals.
Of those who define themselves as fans:**



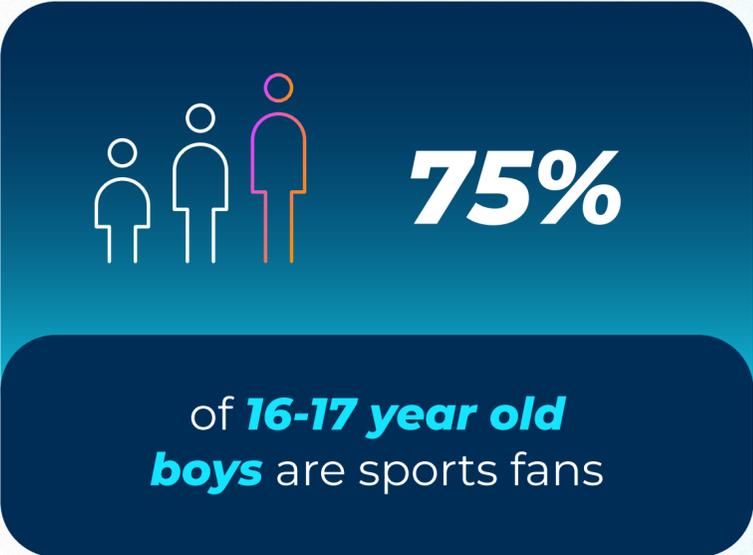
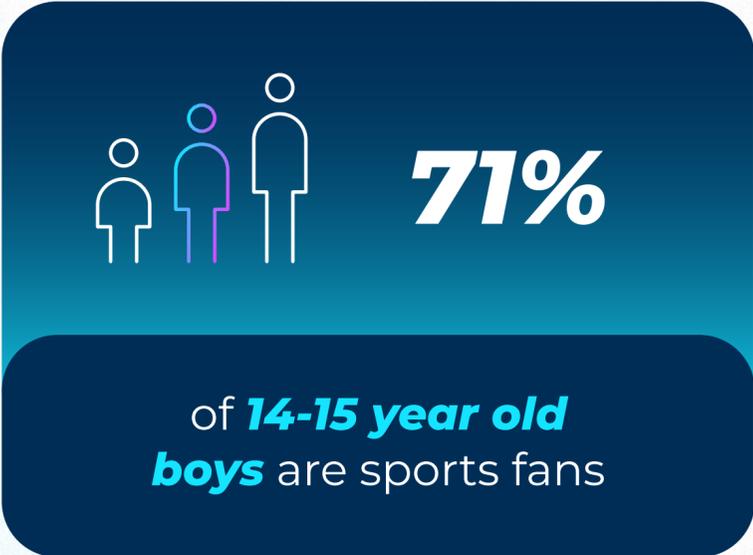
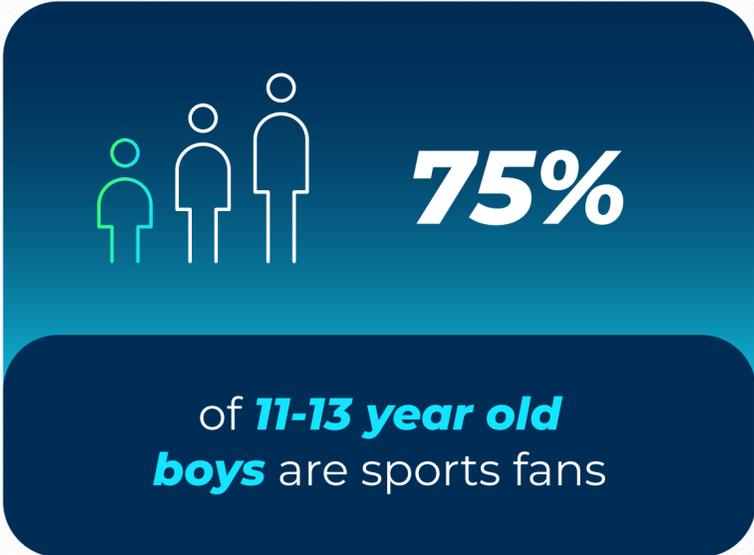
“When the bigger competitions come around, like the Six Nations, I’ll tune in when England plays.”

Girl, 17

Girls' fandom **decreases** with age

As girls move through adolescence, the number who define themselves as fans starts to decrease.

We don't see the same decrease with boys.





“You don’t hear as many women’s stories as you do men’s.”

Girl, 14

We need to do more to **keep girls as lifelong fans**

The sport sector needs to pay attention to and address this downward trend. The teenage years are a time when you can create fans for life.

What causes the decrease during these years?

Not enough stories.

Not enough coverage.

Not enough visibility.

Not enough support.

Meet **Leyla**

Leyla is 17 and has been a sports fan since the FIFA World Cup 2018™. She follows two Premier League teams but will watch other matches and leagues too. She supports England in the Six Nations. She also plays badminton but wouldn't describe herself as a fan of it as there is little coverage for her to engage with on TV.

Leyla loves being a fan. She loves learning about players and the history of sports, listening to the commentators, wearing the shirts and sharing that sense of identity.

“If there's a big game, I'll put my shirt on and watch it on TV – it feels like I'm there.”

Leyla feels that following sport is now one of the only things that brings people together. She loves watching matches with her dad and chatting to her grandad about sports news and gossip.

However, Leyla feels irritated that girls don't get the same exposure to sport as boys. She feels it starts early and notes how sports-themed toys and merchandise are marketed at boys, and that football magazines are stocked in the boys' section. She also thinks other dads make more effort engaging their sons with sport than their daughters.

Leyla is really frustrated by the extra scrutiny and criticism that women's sport faces. She wishes more people would focus on how good women's sport is rather than sharing 'hate' online by 'taking clips of silly things'. She wants more people to experience what women's sport is really like – via stories, news and more coverage.

Her story reflects a common theme: **girl sport fans aren't short on interest and passion; but they don't always feel welcomed, included and valued.**





What's holding girls back?

01. The awareness gap

40% of young people can't name a single sportswoman*.

We've had an incredible few years of women's sport, with huge successes in rugby union, football, tennis, Olympic and Paralympic sport and beyond.

Yet two in five of today's generation of young people are unable to name any of the stars at the heart of that success.

And if they can't name them, that's significantly impacting their ability to be inspired by them.

**Above figure representative of 35% girls, 45% boys.*

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"I play badminton twice a week, but I can't name a player."

Girl, 17

"It's easier to name male sportspeople because they get shown a lot more on TV."

Girl, 14





However, the picture ***isn't all bleak.***

The 60% of young people who can name a sportswoman are inspired by an incredibly broad and diverse range of sports stars.

We asked participants to name their favourite sportswoman. In our 700 answers, we were delighted to see:

- ***177 different names***
- ***33 nationalities***
- ***34 sports***
- ***new stars, as well as icons and retired legends of their sports.***

There was a particularly positive picture for football: **51%** of those who named a sportswoman named a footballer. **61 footballers** were named, reflecting **16 nationalities**. This included **31 England players** (with 20 having played in or since the win at UEFA Women's Euro 2022) and **8 other home nation stars**.

A snapshot of the list, showing the **range and diversity of the sportswomen** who inspire today's young people.

These 50 names have been drawn from the full list at random so this is not in popularity order.

Sophie Ecclestone: Cricket

Bianca Bustamante: Racing driver

Alessia Russo: Football

Florence Griffith-Joyner: Athletics

Eni Aluko: Football

Emily King: Equestrian

Charlotte Cooper: Tennis

Beth Munro: Para-taekwondo

Penny Healey: Archery

Beau Greaves: Darts

Shericka Jackson: Athletics

Lauren James: Football

Alex Callender: Rugby Union

Alex Bell: Athletics

Becky Lynch: Professional Wrestling

Ellie Simmonds: Para Swimming

Emma Raducanu: Tennis

Molly Carlson: High Diving

Jackie Joyner-Kersey: Athletics

Deng Yaping: Table Tennis

Rayssa Leal: Skateboarding

Ella Lloyd: Racing driver

Susie Wolff: Motorsport

Lauren Hemp: Football

Emily Campbell: Weightlifting

Liz McColgan: Athletics

Sarah Bern: Rugby Union

Fran Kirby: Football

Aggie Beever-Jones: Football

Claressa Shields: Boxing

Steffi Graf: Tennis

Jean Andersen: Tennis

Angela Addison: Football

Clare Balding: Equestrian / Broadcaster

Sky Brown: Skateboarding

Janja Garnbret: Sport Climbing

Tai-Tzu Ying: Badminton

Pippa Funnell: Equestrian

Keely Hodgkinson: Athletics

Beth Mead: Football

Kadeena Cox: Para-athletics & Para-cycling

Jill Scott: Football

Femke Bol: Athletics

Alexia Putellas: Football

Madi Gittins: Boxing

Caitlin Clark: Basketball

Katie Taylor: Boxing

Asisat Oshoala: Football

Gabi Butler: Cheerleading

Karen Carney: Football

Football and tennis **dominated** the top answers

Girls' top 5

1

Serena Williams

2

Chloe Kelly

3

Emma Raducanu

4

Jill Scott

5

Simone Biles

Boys' top 5

1

Serena Williams

2

Chloe Kelly

3

Jill Scott

4

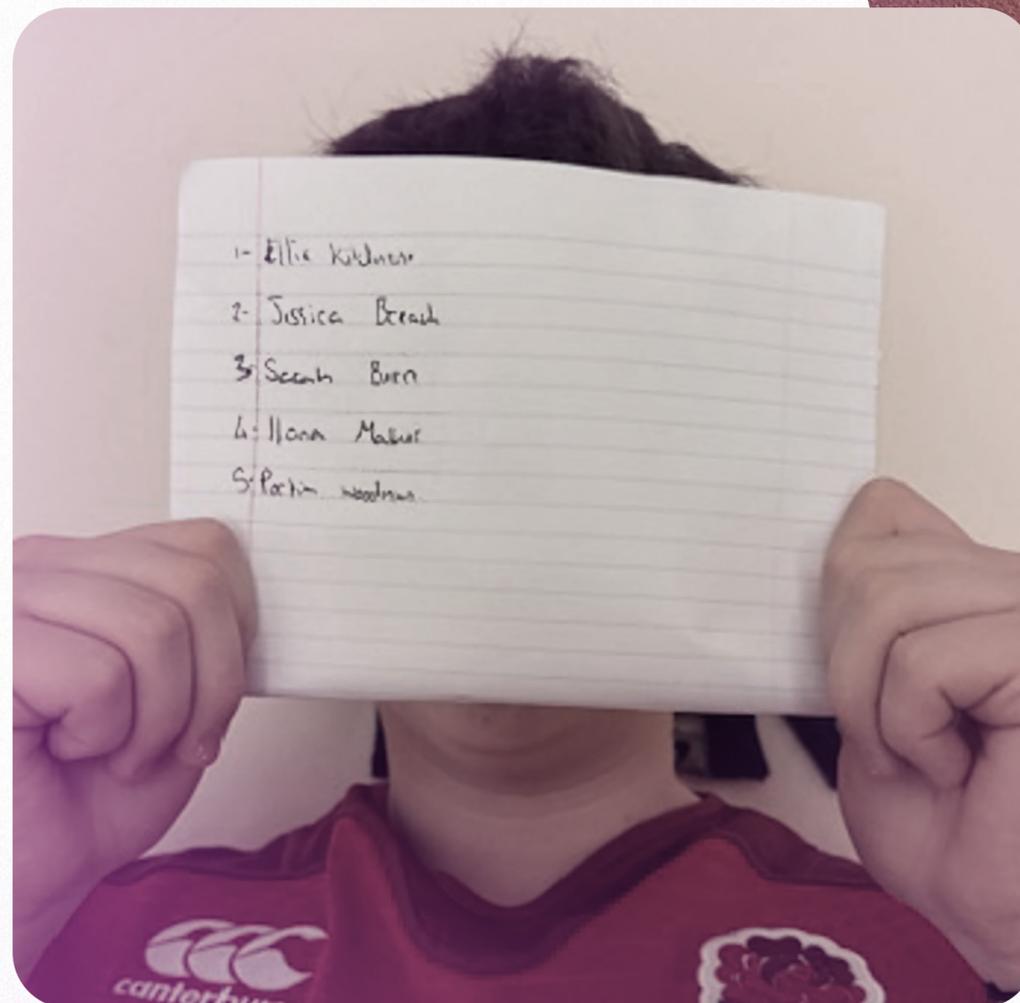
Emma Raducanu

5

Mary Earps



1. **Ella Toone**
2. **Chloe Kelly**
3. **Leah Williamson**
4. **Mary Earps**
5. **Georgia Stanway**



1. **Ellie Kildunne**
2. **Jessica Breach**
3. **Sarah Bern**
4. **Ilona Maher**
5. **Portia Woodman**



“Mary Peters who won gold at the Olympics and I’ve met her. She’s lovely and very encouraging to teenagers.”

“Flo-Jo – she’s from the past but bad ass.”

Meet **Reeann**

Reeann is 12 and loves netball, basketball, football and hockey. Sport is a big part of her identity and it helps her feel 'included'. She loves talking about it with her mum and her aunt.

When asked about role models, Reeann mentioned her mum who she described as '**strong, brave and kind**'.

Her sporting role model is footballer **Lucy Bronze** because **"she never quits... even if she's injured during the Euros, she always tries her hardest to win"**. For her, role models matter because they show what's possible. They help her to believe that if she is resilient and keeps going, she can achieve her goals too. **"If you have somebody that's kind of like you to look up to... you can believe you can be like them."**

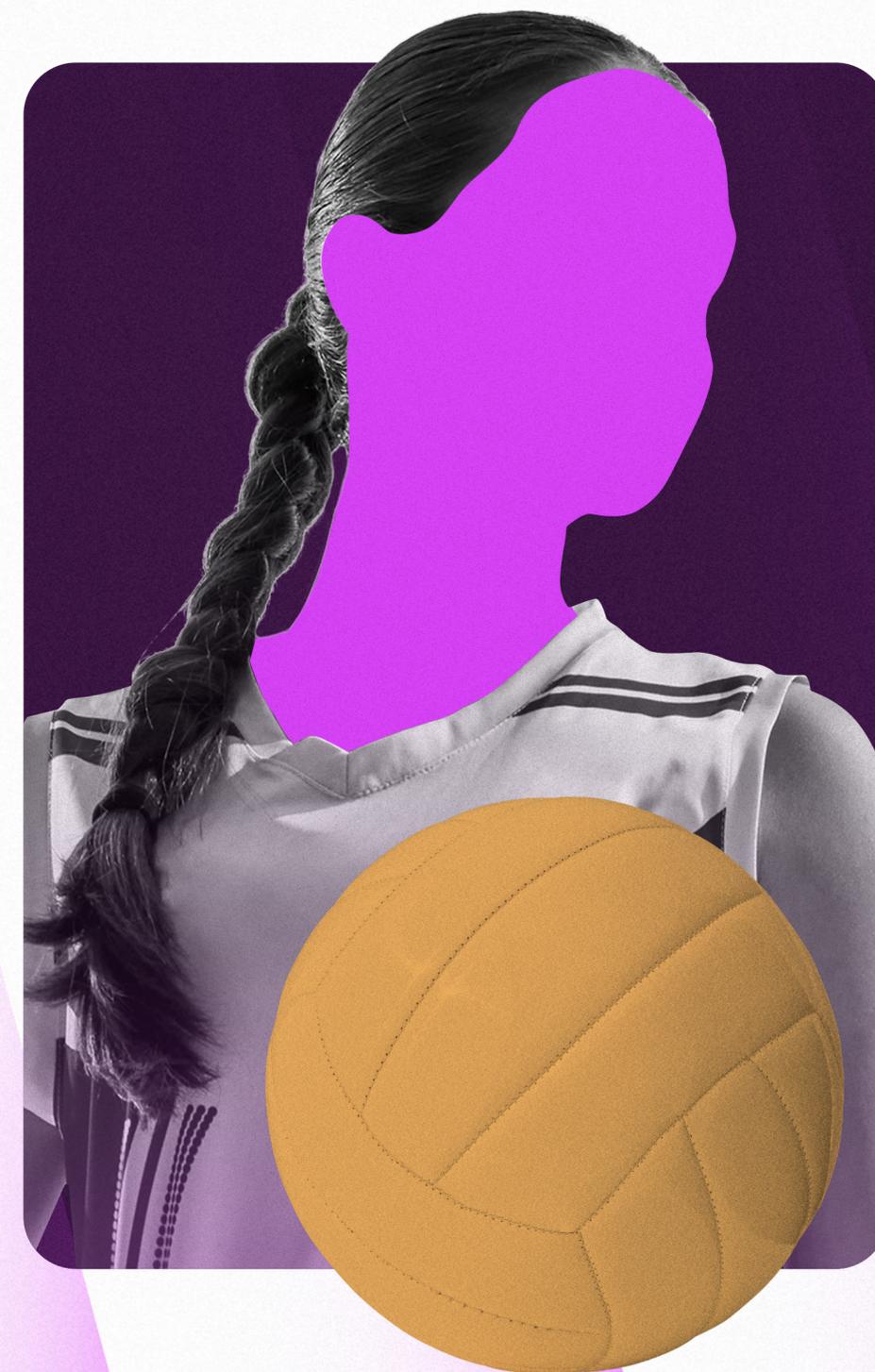
Reeann prefers watching women's sport to men's. She would love to learn even more

about women's sport, and players' journeys to becoming famous, but she doesn't know where to find the information.

Reeann finds it frustrating that 'a lot of people think that most sports are for boys and not girls, and feels that she, and other girls, are treated differently as fans purely because of their gender. She also feels that **girls don't get the same encouragement or visibility**, whether through media coverage, conversations or what sports stars get talked about in school.

Like so many girls, Reeann wants to feel connected – she wants stories that reflect her world and representation that helps her picture herself in sport.

Reeann's experience shows us something crucial: **girls want to see themselves reflected in sport and to be inspired by those they can relate to.**



02. The knowledge gap

80% of girl sport fans want to know more about famous sportswomen.

67% wish they could name more sportswomen.

And **76%** want to know more about sportspeople who “look and sound like me”.

Girl sport fans **want more information, more inspirational stories and more relatable role models.**



“If more people talked about it, I’d want to learn more.”

Girl, 14

“You can look up to them. If they do a move, you can copy them. They’ll inspire you to do different things.”

Girl, 14

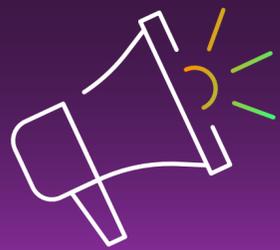
Learning about sportswomen has a ***hugely positive impact*** on young people

Teachers strongly believe that sportswomen are good role models for young people and that both girls and boys benefit from learning about them.

Teachers think stories about sportswomen can:

“Having a diverse role model pool helps people to identify with them but also to value diversity and promote respect.”

“It provides girls with relatable role models, boosting their confidence and participation rates.”



Help challenge gender stereotypes in sport and beyond



Build confidence and self-esteem in young people



Encourage girls to participate in physical activity and sport



Show different pathways to success

03. The access gap

Girls want to watch women's sport. They just don't know where to find it.

1 in 3 girl sport fans don't know when or where to watch women's sport.

40% struggle to find highlights or clips from women's sporting events.

Teachers say they talk about men's sport much more regularly than women's sport in their classrooms.

“More coverage. More stories. Just a snippet of what is going on in the women's world would be really helpful.”

Girl, 17



Girls want more

touchpoints with sport

Girl sport fans want:

- ***to meet a sportsperson (77%)***
- ***more women's sport on TV and social media (75%)***
- ***to go to watch live women's sport (81%).***

And every teacher we spoke to wants more information to help them to talk about women's sport in schools with their students.

They're not disengaged – they just want more.

04. The societal gap

Girl sport fans still encounter judgement and discrimination. While some acknowledge it's improving, girls still don't feel accepted or included in many settings, or that their opinion is as valued as boys.

Teachers think social expectations, prejudice and stereotyping are major reasons why there are more boy fans than girl fans of sport in their schools.

“We’re evolving as a society... but I think that some fans are still not willing to accept women into the game, and into the crowds”

Girl, 17

“Some people think girls shouldn't support the boys' teams.”

Girl, 12

How others **shape girls' fandom**

Girls' experiences of sport fandom are influenced by the people around them – classmates, teachers, friends and family.

Role of schools: Teachers want to challenge stereotypes and schools are key spaces to do so.

Role of boys: While many boys have limited exposure to women's sport, some want to engage more – and when they do, it helps normalise men and women supporting women's sport together.

- **Over a third of boy sport fans** want to go to a women's sports game.
- **A third of boy sports fans** want more women's sport on TV and social media.

Role of families: Families are engaging in women's sport too, and they play a big role in shaping early fan identity.

- **2 in 5** boy sport fans say that the men in their family watch women's sport and **90%** of them talk to people in their family about sport.
- **56%** of girl fans say the men in their family watch women's sport.
- **59%** say the women in their family do.

These everyday influences shape whether girls feel encouraged, confident and supported as fans.

"I feel like boy football fans get treated like more of a football fan. I've seen a girl fan talking about football before, and I've heard a boy fan going, 'Oh, you don't know a lot about it.' Well, that is unfair."

Boy, 14

"Sport is one of the things that my dad and I both enjoy sitting down and watching. In terms of other TV shows, we don't really like the same things"

Girl, 17

Meet **Luca**

Luca is 14 and a huge rugby fan. He follows the men's game closely – England, Premiership clubs, and players like Ellis Genge who influence how he plays. But Luca is also part of a growing group of boys who are curious about the women's game and frustrated by the lack of visibility.

Luca feels women's rugby still doesn't get the coverage it deserves. He knows and is inspired by several women's players: Ellie Kildunne; Jess Breach; Sarah Bern who he admires for **“having fun in the stadium with the fans”**; and Portia Woodman, who he says, **“really shines.”**

Luca believes strongly in equality in sport. **“It's sad that people are treated differently because it's the same sport at the end of the day.”** He loves the rise of the Red Roses and is enthusiastic about the upcoming British and Irish Lions Women's Series. He knows more visibility will only build momentum. As he puts it:

“I think it would just give people a bit more happiness, being able to watch more rugby.”

What Luca shows us is powerful: **boys are not the challenge – access and visibility are.** And when boys are given access to women's sport, they can become allies, advocates and engaged fans.





The opportunity

Five actions you can take today to build the next generation of fans

Now is the

time to act

If you're a brand, sponsor or rights holder

Young women and girls are your future fans – and your future growth. They're tomorrow's athletes, consumers, creators, workforce and leaders.

If you're new to this market, investing in young fans will have long-term societal and commercial benefits for you.

And if you're already supporting young audiences, what more can you do to help them to become and remain lifelong fans?





01. Talk to young people

Talk to young people, particularly girls, about their experiences of sport fandom, and let their voices shape what you create.

- Understand girls' motivations, needs and pain points – especially the moments where their fan journey slips.
- Don't just talk to your fans: engage with those who feel excluded from or have dropped out of fandom.
- Co-create campaigns and programmes with young people. Shape a concept together to reflect their ideas and ensure buy-in.
- Consult them early, often and meaningfully.

Close the fan gap by listening to the girls at the heart of it.

02. Act when young people need it most

Our research shows that you need to act early if you're to keep girls and young women as fans of sport:

Choose your target market.

- **Primary school (4 – 11 years) is where fandom begins.** Influence attitudes by starting early with role models and stories.
- **Early secondary school (11 – 14 years) is where impact is highest.** Focus attention here to address that drop-out.
- Girls' fandom declines steadily across secondary school, but boys' fandom doesn't. **If you wait until 16, you've already lost them.**

Act before the dropout begins – not after.

03. Give girls what they need

Girls want real stories, real role models and real relevance.

They want to learn about:

- how athletes started out
- what helped athletes reach the top
- staying healthy
- teamwork
- mental health.

Sportspeople's time is limited and precious. Young people don't need time-consuming face-to-face interactions. They value:

- a ***broad and diverse range of inspirational role models***
- ***real-life stories*** that inspire confidence, ambition and the will to succeed
- ***relatable content*** that speaks to their lives, not just the sport
- ***more news, more coverage, more exposure.***



If you change the stories they see, you change the fans they become.



“I’d happily learn about women’s sport. I’d definitely want to watch it more if I was told more information about it.”

Boy, 16

04. Bring boys with you

Make boys part of the solution.

45% of boys can’t name a single sportswoman, but many of them want to know more about women’s sport and to create a more supportive environment for girl sport fans.

Teachers tell us boys benefit just as much from the stories of inspirational sportswomen.

So consider how you can:

- involve boys in the conversation about women’s sport
- strengthen their role as allies: as friends, siblings, teammates and classmates who support girls’ fandom
- make women’s sport easier for boys to access too – on TV, social, in schools and at live events.

05. Create sports fans via the classroom

Schools are the most powerful, cost-effective way to shift fan culture and shape the future of girl sport fans.

- Schools give you scale, credibility, guaranteed reach and measurable impact.
- They also provide a captive audience: students want to learn more about women's sport and teachers want to teach it.
- Teachers see the power in using women's sport and sportswomen to deliver key life skills, including teamwork, confidence, mental health and focus.
- Schools give you the opportunity to build and nurture young fans, while having a positive impact on young people's futures.

“If I learn more, then I’ll get more interested in it and I’ll want to watch it more.”

Girl, 14



Invest early.

Show up meaningfully.

That's how you grow fans for life.

In summary

The last few years have been incredible for women's sport. We've seen huge growth, investment and support.

As a result, many of today's girls love sport, and they love the difference that being a fan makes to their lives.

Yet we can do even more to ensure the benefits of being a fan aren't lost as girls progress through school and into adulthood.

Take action by:

1

Working with and listening to our young audiences

2

Targeting campaigns and interventions when they need it most

3

Inspiring through real-life relatable stories and people

4

Including and involving boys

5

Using schools as a powerful route to market





Want to help create and shape the **next generation of lifelong girl sport fans?**

- **Learn more.** We have more insights to share, covering what girls know, want and experience.
- Access our follow-up '**Future Fans Playbook**', to find out more about how to turn these insights into powerful action in schools. Simply email megan.smith@harklondon.com to gain access.
- **Get in touch.** Whether you're a brand, a rights holder or a sponsor, the Hark team can help you to create impactful programmes that make a difference in schools, communities and homes.

Let's build the next generation of fans – together.

HarkSport

harklondon.com