

Mary! Where's my Woodbines? And have you got a light, love?

I'm gasping here. Don't look at me like that, I'm leaving a good five minutes between cigs these days. What's she done with them? It's better than chain-smoking, isn't it? The doctor doesn't need to know. I'll be dead soon anyway so what's the difference! Cancer; not sure what sort it is but it can't be breast, can it? It took 62 years to grow my breasts and they had them off me in a blink. Eleven years ago. I told them – so long as they didn't take off my left foot, they could have as many of my baps as they liked. My left foot was a legend, you know.

Here they are - Woodbines, how I love you. Not as much as I love football, or my darling Mary of course, but it's a close-run thing. Females, fags and football and not necessarily in that order!

Mary? Bring me up the ball, love! Please?

I sat in the chair yesterday and played sit down 'keepy-uppy' for over two hours so she took it away. Once a nurse always a - ...

My brother taught me football (and rugby) in the street out there. I was the fourth of seven children so we practically had a team!

I couldn't wait to join St Helen's Ladies and when I did I was spotted, second game, by Mr Frankland from Dick, Kerr & Company, an Engineering firm in Preston. He managed their Ladies team and they paid ten bob a match as compensation for lost wages! I had to move to Preston and work in the factory. With the men away fighting, all the factories had Ladies' teams back then. We had thousands in the stands: Boxing Day, 1920 we had 53,000 at Goodison Park, with 14,000 left disappointed outside – and we were bloody good, though I tell it myself. We played all our matches for charity; raised thousands for ex-servicemen, hospitals, unemployed and the like.

At 14, I was definitely the tallest, the strongest and the youngest; my first match for Dick, Kerr. I couldn't believe it, there were elastic stockings going on knees and strapping up of ankles, bandages here there and everywhere. I stood looking at them

all and I said, 'Well, I don't know about Dick, Kerr Ladies' football team, it looks like a bloody trip to Lourdes to me.'

But blimey, could they move fast! When Mr Frankland toured us to America in 1922, four of us met the American Women's Olympic team in a relay race - we only bloody won!

That was right after the Football Association banned us. The factory wouldn't support us to play anymore, so most of the team went to train for nursing at Whittingham hospital - that's where I met Mary. We'd been raising money for them for a long time, but when we helped out the families of miners on strike over pay cuts, the FA said they didn't like 'women's involvement in national politics'; implied Mr Frankland was pocketing the ticket money and said 'football isn't a suitable game for ladies to play.'

I were boiling – we all were! Mary thought it was all due to the fuss caused by the two captains kissing so passionately at the end of our international with France. But I don't think it was that – they didn't care if girls were kissing so long as girls kept off their pitch and out of their politics.

America let us play though, and we did really well; Florrie Redford came out top scorer but it was me, Lily Parr, the newspapers called 'the most brilliant female player in the world'. The FA didn't lift the ban until 1970 – too late for me. It's 27 years since my last game. 12th August 1950. I was 45 and scored my 968th goal!

'A kick like a mule,' they said. I broke a goalie's arm with a penalty once – he was a sport about it; even complimented me on the power of my shot! Those heavy, leather balls - blimey! Florrie needed stitches after heading in one of my bullets from the corner. She had the lace marks on her forehead as a souvenir too!

God, I miss it! Matching a player breath for breath and stride for stride to keep her checked and unavailable, then a charge of extra speed to lose her and take the ball. Running the wing with a pass in the offing and sensing a move to the goal from Florrie in the corner of your eye, swinging the perfect arc across and it's there! Time doesn't exist and you're in total tune with your body and the whole world lets you fly. It was magic! It was life!

Oh, come on Mary, bring me up the ball! Just for a few minutes! ... I'll die happy if the ball's on my foot, won't I? I'll stop smoking ...

Go on, Mary – pass us the ball ...

Lily Parr

Alexandra Mathie