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Transcript of an interview with
Marilyn Learmont

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MARILYN LEARMONT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT – GAME CHANGERS COLLECTION

INTRO [LUISA]: *Welcome to GAME CHANGERS, a podcast about trailblazing West Australian women and their contribution to the wonderful game of soccer. This collection was produced and developed by the Centre for Stories and the State Library of Western Australia. Together, we are sharing stories that reflect our state's rich heritage, diversity and history.*

The interviews you're about to hear were recorded on Whadjuk Noongar boodjar, and we pay our respects to their elders, traditional custodians, and knowledge-keepers, who are the first storytellers of this place.

In the lead up to Perth hosting some of the games for one of the world's largest sporting tournaments, the FIFA Women's World Cup Australia & New Zealand 2023, we hear stories from local women who rose up against inequality and stereotypes to champion the game of soccer as far back as the 1970s.

We hear from elite athletes past and present considered to be the best in the game, both locally and globally; and we hear from community role models who are courageously making soccer more accessible and equitable for future generations of women, young girls and newcomers of all genders to the game.

Sports media journalist Kris Marano sat down and heard why self-belief, sacrifice and strength is what it takes to become champions of soccer. In today's episode, Kris talks to Marilyn Learmont, the first female referee from WA to run the line in the men's national soccer league. Enjoy.

KRIS: Women should just be able to step on the pitch as well and be trusted that –

MARILYN: That they can do the job. But a woman has to prove themselves that they can do it, I think a little bit more. 'Cause it's just part of the game. It's a man's game, isn't it? And there wasn't a lot of women sides around when I was refereeing, so that's sort of come later.

KRISTEN: So, you were the first female referee in Western Australia. Do you wanna walk us through a couple of the other firsts that you achieved in that time?

MARILYN: I think I was the first female or male to be appointed to the National Linesman's panel. I went over to Adelaide for that game. The first woman in the world, I believe, to do a B-class International, which was Australia-Brazil, under-nineteens. I did a WA versus an Irish team at the WACA. I did WA versus Marconi game, and I did a West Adelaide versus Brisbane game. No other female had done that at that stage. I mean, I don't know now what, I don't follow it that much. I have seen women a few years ago, but they don't seem to last. It's not easy to be there. Physically it's quite demanding, I think. I was Australia's first choice for the FIFA World Cup in China. Unfortunately, Australia didn't qualify that year, so I didn't get to go to that. But I did try hard, I trained, I got, I did the FIFA test. I passed everything that I had to do to go, but I was relying on the Australian team to go with them, but it doesn't matter. At least I got the nomination. The Women's World Cup was 1991. The WA-Shelbourne game was 1992. Australia-Brazil was 1992. Marconi game was 1993. And the West Adelaide-Brisbane was 1993.

I think today there's too much abuse from the sidelines at people. Let people just get on with the game and do it, you know? I mean, when I first started, I was told to go home and do my dishes, go and do my knitting. That's where I belong, behind the sink. And I'm thinking, oh, hello. I took the time to go and learn the laws. I'm now trying to put them across. And yeah, and not having played the game, I had to referee to the laws.

It didn't last very long. Once they realised, hang on, this woman knows what she's doing, it sort of ceased. And then I'd get asked to do the games and when I did Country Week, they'd all come out from Kalgoorlie and Albany: 'Oh, can we have the lady referee?' So, it was a novelty, I think, for them to have a female. And I'd probably cheated a little bit because I'd make 'em take the throw ins again if they did it wrong. And I'd tell 'em what they would do. And the coaches would come up and say, thank you for doing that.

KRISTEN: So, it sounds like because people weren't seeing a lot of women refereeing at that time, they had to see it to believe it. And once they saw your expertise and you being on the pitch, the comments stopped.

MARILYN: The comments stopped because they knew that I was doing the job, I suppose.

KRISTEN: Can you tell us about the moment that motivated you to referee? Because it's a great story.

MARILYN: My husband was studying 'cause he'd failed his class 3 the first time. So I was helping him study so he could pass it. And I said, this is easy. So he said to me, if it's so easy, you go and do it. So I thought, right. So, I got the book out and I went the next time the exams were there and I went and I passed it the first time. Well, my husband's a referee and the boys would eventually start playing the soccer. I thought it's nice to know the laws and what I'm watching, not intending to actually go out and do it. And then I got approached by one of the, was it Peter Woods, I think? To say, why don't you go and do a school match and see how you go? And I loved it, except I started off with 12 on one and 11 on the other. But that was nothing. You learn by your mistakes. Now before every game you count how many players, you know? Then they said, oh, now you can do a line here and you can... and it just kept snowballing.

KRISTEN: Yeah. Because you hadn't even played soccer, you said?

MARILYN: No, I did every other sport, but I've never played soccer. Growing up I played a-grade netball, hockey, squash. And I was also in the ice-skating club as well. So, I did a quite fair bit of sport. I grew up in Perth, yes. Having a husband referee and I was going to watch him do the games.

KRISTEN: So, it was a 20-year career refereeing?

MARILYN: Yes, it was. Yeah.

KRIS: Yeah. Quite amazing. I know, especially through that time.

MARILYN: I just did it as a joke, really. Oh yeah. I can do that. And they said, oh no, you can do it. Get out there and do it. So, I did. Right, if they think I can do it, then, you know, it's a confidence thing, isn't it, really? You've got to believe in yourself.

I used to say to myself, if I heard something from the sidelines, well, I'm getting paid to come and do this, you have to pay to come in to abuse me, you know. And that's how it got me through. I only ever had one person ejected from the game, he was at the fence and he was running up and down. He was really giving me a lot of... So, I just asked, could you have him removed. So that's the only time I've ever had to do that. And after that I got respect from coaches, I got respect from players. Even today I meet up with – “oh, hi ref.” You know, so they still think you are a good referee. I go watch our sons play in the Masters and they want me to referee the games, but I can't run anymore, so!

KRISTEN: I think the comment in one of the newspaper clippings we were just looking through said, you know, Marilyn is just one of the boys, or, is part of the group.

MARILYN: We used to train at Morley. I'd finished training first and I'd run in and grab a shower or something. And at games there was no showers or change rooms for women. Most times I'd try and leave home in my thing, with a kit, with a tracksuit or something. But if it was really wet and that, you'd have to change after, you just gotta go into a local toilet, block it, game and change, you didn't have a choice. Which is unfortunate. Macedonia, when they built their new club rooms, they did build a separate room. So that females can use that as well. Which was really good when they upgraded some of the change rooms.

KRISTEN: Some of the change rooms at the clubs, they're being upgraded now for the Women's World Cup. But when they were built, they were built for men. So, you know, a lot of the women and girls are changing where there's urinals or one shower, one toilet.

MARILYN: And you're trying to sit on a toilet and put your boots on 'cause there's nowhere to else to do it. So it's just life, isn't it? So just get on with it.

KRISTEN: Yeah. What about some of the games that you were refereeing? Because you told me about one where yourself and another man showed up and he was meant to be the lines person and you were meant to be the referee, but he believed, or he wanted to be, the referee...?

MARILYN: We got told which games we had to do. When I turned up to the game, he said to me, oh no, he'd been told that he had to do the middle and I had to run the line to him. But I then found out when the assessor came to assess me, that that was wrong. But I just left it because I thought, there's no point making a scene on the day. I let him do the middle and I did the line. And I just, yeah, it never happened again. So yeah, it's just one of those things. I suppose he obviously didn't want to run a line to a female. That's all I could put it down to. I really don't. It's not that I couldn't do the game. I think he just was a bit chauvinistic about it.

KRISTEN: And what about the Italian match? The two Italian sides, this is a great story.

MARILYN: That was quite funny. I do know a little, a few words. And these, they were swearing at each other. So I just called stop the game, called the two captains aside. And I just said to them, I don't know

if you realize, but I'm from Italian background and I know exactly what you are saying, so would you please tell your players to cut it out and let's get on with the game. And nobody said another word. I wasn't telling a lie, but it was just a little bit of untruth really. I didn't know what they were saying. But I gathered it was in swear words, the way it was coming across that I knew they were swearing. That's another thing I think comes over with confidence or bluffing people. I don't know what it is.

KRISTEN: Do you think that confidence was already within you or did someone guide you in your life to build that confidence? Like, to be able to do that on the pitch? You know, people could easily be overwhelmed with emotion or...?

MARILYN: I think being involved in different kinds of sport all my life and having to sort of fend for myself I suppose. And in my day, growing up, it wasn't easy. You had to get out and do things for yourself. Nothing was given to you. I just feel like I'm a confident... I think anybody can do what they want if they put their mind to it. And once you walked out there with that whistle, you knew you had to control 22 men. I mean, you can make mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes. But you just have to think, no, I can do this. I mean, one game, I gave a penalty, the guy missed it and he run up and he blamed me. Alright. So, I called him back and I said, no, just wait a minute. I gave you the penalty, you missed it. Now let's all get on with the game. And he never said nothing after that.

KRIS: And what about the international matches that you traveled for?

MARILYN: Brazil, that was at Fremantle Oval. Actually, I wasn't that nervous funnily enough. I got to the game because it was all local referees. We just went out and we did the game and got congratulated after, and I think I got nine out of 10 for the game. So, I was quite happy. You're up with play, you'd make the right decisions.

Because there was no women involved and there was no actual time set for women then. Every year to get your stay in that panel, you got paneled, you had to pass the fitness test at the beginning of the year. If you didn't pass that, then you didn't go into that next panel. So, I had to do the men's times. I didn't have a choice, did I really? There were 200-meter runs. There was the men's fitness test and then at the end of it you have to run two and a half kilometers in 12 minutes. After doing so many 10-meter sprints, a 100-metre-sprints, 200-metre-sprints. So it was pretty hard going.

KRISTEN: How did you prepare for the fitness test?

MARILYN: Well I had a two and half kilometer run from our house around the street. So, once I got the children over from school, the boys were settled, I put on the joggers and I did that every day. Just to keep fit. Yeah. You had to do so many sprints in a certain time. But I managed to get through. Wear and tear on the knees, but I did it. You have to be strong I think.

KRISTEN: At the time, how old were your kids?

MARILYN: Well, they were only like two or four. I think being a mother, you have to be strong for your children, don't you? Because that's who they look up to. I'm in my late 40s now, nearly 50, and they'll still ring me for advice or ask me things. So, you're there for your children right from day one and you

got, you've gotta have that confidence that goes across to them. I think that's why I think being a mother does help you.

And I put a blanket next to the fence where I was refereeing with a little case with food and they'd just sit there and they were as good as gold. We had to tell some clubs they would spoil them because they'd bring them down lollies and drinks.

KRISTEN: So they were there with you at the games?

MARILYN: They were there. Yeah, yeah. Sometimes they'd be climbing up the fence shouting out mum, you know... If we go somewhere they'll say, oh my mum did this and my mum... 'Cause I don't think people believe you? Recently we were up in Bali with the whole family and we met some people from the east coast and my oldest son said, 'oh, my mum used to referee,' and they were sort of looking a bit sheepish. He said, 'oh yeah.' And my son was telling them everything I did and I think these, I don't think these people believed him. And I said, yeah, he's telling you the truth.

KRISTEN: I guess even like today, the fact that there aren't many female referees or coaches, it's still, like to hear your story, I think people are quite in awe of it.

MARILYN: Well, the women's were still coming through. It's more now, isn't there? Our eldest granddaughter played, our grandson, but they're finished. But I've still got two granddaughters playing now in the women's, so, yeah. So, it was just a family thing, I think.

It's sad that people get abused... I mean, I don't have a lot to do with female referees and that now, I've seen 'em occasionally out in the pitch and I feel like I should go up and say well done, you know, but I don't, I sit back and watch them, and you could help a lot I think by telling them things.

I used to do the lectures at John Curtin and Lynwood High when they did their referees academy for referees exams. At the soccer academies at the schools, which they still have, they have to pass the referees exam as well. So yeah, I was just going to the schools and doing that. I mean I did get asked when I first gave up refereeing, if I would help coach female referees. But unfortunately, then I was working full-time. So, it was just too much.

KRISTEN: Yeah. What about your husband? Because at the time that you went through the course and the certification to become a referee, he was doing the same thing, and you became known as a sort of power referee couple?

MARILYN: We didn't do a lot of games actually together, but if we did go to the same game, we were just referees. We weren't husband and wife. If he was running the line or I was doing the middle or vice versa, we were just two referees out there doing the game. And it worked okay.

We did have an experience once; I did the reserve game and my husband was doing the main game and it was a really wet day. I came off and I had to go in and check the boots for the main team and the reserve players had come off and they were all naked in the change rooms. And I'm thinking, oh well, I'm in here now. I may as well just keep checking all the boots! And then walk out again. I mean, what could I do? I couldn't go close my eyes. I never flinched and they never flinched. I went in another game

and my husband, he was getting changed because he got so wet, and the club official came in with the match balls to present to the referee, and he's standing there starkers! I'm thinking, I didn't have time to say look, it's alright, he's my husband. So yeah, we've had some fun times as well.

KRISTEN: What did your husband think though of your achievements in this time?

MARILYN: I think he's pretty proud. Yeah. The family's proud, yeah. When I did the Australia-Brazil game, my two sisters who have got nothing to do with soccer or a lot of sport, they even came down to watch the game, you know, just because I was involved in it.

I didn't say I was a female. I was a referee. And that's how I always looked at it. I went out there as a referee to referee the game. I didn't go out there as a female and wanna be, 'Ooh, she's a female, don't...'

KRISTEN: What kind of relationship did you have with your mum and like any influence...?

MARILYN: She was very hard on me. I had to do everything for myself. Yeah. So, no, it wasn't easy, being the eldest. And then as my younger sisters come through, they seem to be allowed to do what they like, but I wasn't allowed to do anything. Yeah. I had to help around the house, I had to do everything.

KRISTEN: Yeah, because I was wondering if your mum kind of saw you through this process and what she would've thought...?

MARILYN: She didn't see all this. No. Or my father. So, then I went to England in '70, '71. And then we got married in England in '73. And then we come back here in '76. So, instead of getting souvenirs, I come back with a husband and two children.

Gone on to do other things and like I say, I was working full-time up until I retired 12 years ago. And then we've been traveling and caravanning. I don't get to a lot of games, but we try to go and watch the grandchildren playing. Sometimes we'll go and watch our sons playing.

KRIS: So, as we're coming into the Women's World Cup which is like the biggest sporting event in the world. And so momentous to have some games here in Perth as well...

MARILYN: It's great, isn't it?

KRIS: Are there any other messages that you have to pass on to the generation coming through now that has the ability to create change or just even simply to, for girls to stay in the game?

MARILYN: It'll be interesting when this Women's World Cup's held here, how many people actually go on to referee from it thinking, well I can do this. By going and watching the games, I think they might find that they can just go and do it. I'm hoping that's what's gonna happen. Then there'll be more - 'cause there's so many girls out there that could be refereeing. They could coach, referee...

My husband and I would go with our boys when they were playing and at the game, we'd do some games. We didn't want money for it. 'Cause they'd pay you to do it. No, no. Just give us a can or drink or something. Put something back into the game and the kids appreciated it because oh, we've got an official referee. I think when they see someone in a uniform, it's like a policeman or something, they think, oh hang on, I better behave myself. You know what I mean? It's just, that's the way I look at it.

You can get to travel, you can, I mean, I didn't think I'd ever get put on a plane and taken to Adelaide to do a game or, you know what I mean? It's just... probably now if I was younger there'd be a lot more opportunities. But unfortunately, you know, it came later in life for me. So, and now girls have got so much opportunity, haven't they, really? Because you look at commentators and that, there's always a woman on the panel. Where when I was growing up, that didn't happen. In a man's game, it was men only. But I think women have got more opportunity today than what I ever had. And if I could make it, I'm sure they could make it today. Let's hope we can get more women out there.

KRIS: Yeah.

OUTRO: *Thank you for listening. This podcast was produced by the Centre for Stories. It was developed in conjunction with and funded by the State Library of Western Australia. Our organisations believe in storytelling as a way to build more inclusive communities. Head to slwa.wa.gov.au to listen to the rest of this oral history collection, or to centreforstories.com to learn more about our storytelling services and mission. Special thanks to our production team, script editor and executive producer Luisa Mitchell – that's me – producer and interviewer Kris Marano, and audio engineer Mason Vellios. Thank you.*