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Transcript of an interview with  
Sandra Brentnall

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## SANDRA BRETNALL 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 Sandra Brentnall, an early champion of women's soccer in the late '70s and '80s and a former Matildas player. She represented Australia in our first international game of women's soccer in 1979 and even kicked the first goal for the Matildas. Enjoy.*

**KRIS:** So, let's start with growing up in England; what was that time like for you through your childhood? What was it like growing up?

**SANDRA:** Well, we were quite poor. Mum and dad both worked six days a week. And never actually came to any of the games really because they worked and we played on a Saturday. So I just caught a couple of buses, even from young. And when I was too young, my granddad would take me to go and play. But there were no girls' teams or anything like that back then, so you had to play with the boys. And I was used to playing with the boys anyway because we'd play on the streets. After school every night. So that was really good.

Well, I was just one of the boys. I don't even think they thought of me as a girl playing with them. So, and I was eight and I was captain in the team and you know, you played with the really old scabby ball sort of thing and you know, boots or shoes if you could afford them. Until one of the parents complained, realised that I was a girl because nobody knew because I didn't look like a girl. So they didn't really know. But once they found out that I was a girl then they put in a complaint and then I got told I couldn't play anymore, which was devastating.

I remember crying and crying and crying to mum and she said, oh well that's just what it is. So, then my dad was adamant that I would keep playing 'cause my dad used to play semi-professional as well, so that's all he knew. So at the school we started to, the teachers asked other schools if they had any girls that wanted to play because we had six girls that were playing. And then we, there was four, so there's four schools that was playing and we had just six-a-side games, which was something at least to look forward to, apart from playing on the street every night with the lads. But my dad always knew that I was, had something obviously, because he said we've got to come to another country and for whatever reason they decided on Australia. 'Cause I had two brothers as well, which, and neither of them were sporty. And so, they worked to get us to Australia.

**KRIS:** So coming to Perth, was that a big decision in terms of making sure you had the opportunity to reach...?

**SANDRA:** I think it must have been huge for mum and dad to do that, to uproot and take our three kids across the other side of the world really. Leave their entire family behind. It was a massive decision and one that I'm forever grateful for. I mean that was, that's really looking after your daughter, isn't it, really? Knowing that she's got some potential and obviously taken into consideration the boys as well. But it took a long time to get here because there were planes that couldn't fly and the ship decided that it couldn't go out. So it took 10 days from leaving England to get to Australia. So it was a long trip. By the time we got here, it was November of '74, really hot. And after a week mum wanted to go back home. But my dad said, no, it will be fine because we arrived on the Sunday. My dad had a job on the Monday and started work straight away. So yeah.

**KRIS:** So how old were you at that time? 12.

**SANDRA:** 12.

**KRIS:** 12 on the other side of the world. Did you pick up the soccer ball right away? And how did you get integrated?

**SANDRA:** That was pretty tough really. Heartbreaking in a sense, because my dad went to numerous clubs and when they saw me they said, no, you're too small. Because there was no juniors, it was just all women's soccer, so it wasn't rated or anything. So he couldn't find any clubs to take me on. So, 12 months later, we were in Australia purely to do what my dad wanted me to do, and I can't do it. So I'm kicking a ball on my own on the street sort of thing. Quite miserable. And 12 months later there was a knock at the door. We lived in Subiaco and this man called George Crow, I'll never forget. He said, would you like to come down to training? Oh my God. Unbelievable. The best moment ever. And I went down to Inglewood Kiev [Club]. There was just women's soccer back then. No girls' teams or anything like that. So, you just joined the women's team. As soon as George Crow gave me the opportunity, then the door started opening from day one sort of thing. I mean I played in the first 11 for Inglewood Kiev every game. Then got the chance to go down to state training. And state training was really official back then, if you missed a training session, you had to have a doctor's written letter, and if you didn't then that's it. You weren't in, you were gone straight away. Because you were either in it or not and there was plenty of other girls knocking on the door that could take you place if you weren't prepared to put in the effort.

**KRIS:** So you were 13 playing with the women's team?

**SANDRA:** Yeah. It just come natural to me. And I just fitted in really well. I went up front and started playing as their striker and they were really happy to have me, and training was really good. George did the training and my dad started helping out as well. And the drills were good. I don't know, it was just really, like a family almost. You didn't feel inferior. Everybody treated everybody the same. There was a lot of laughter and a lot of encouragement. Really good. It was hard work because to be able to play on a Sunday, you had to do a lot of things leading up to that. You had to run the canteen on a Saturday for the men. You had to put their nets up and help mark the pitch for them. And where we trained it was next to the main pitch with no flood light. So, it was just like a bit of land. We had to train early before it got dark and then we'd all be moaning and groaning because it got dark early, and we still wanted to play, and we'd play until we couldn't see at all. And then of course we had to go mark our own pitches, which was another pitch, not on the main pitch where the men were. And put the goals up, because you literally put the goals up back then, you took the goal posts out of the ground and put them up and then put your nets up and then marked the pitch. So, there was a lot to do, just to be able to play the game.

**KRIS:** How many years were you at Inglewood before you joined other clubs and, and at what point did the opportunity to play for the Matildas come about?

**SANDRA:** Well, I played for Inglewood Kiev for three or four years and then I went to Olympic Kingsway, which was a great club. And I played for quite a few years with them. And state training came about straight away really. I mean, I went down to training with Kiev, because back then you got a letter in the mail inviting you to go to state training. Which was really official and really nice. Peter Dimopoulos would go around the clubs and check out the teams, a bit like the men's really, you get, you know, people going around, seeing who's coming along. So anyway, the letter came in the mail and I went down to state training, which was at Nedlands. I trained all along and got selected but didn't get taken away because Peter said I was too small. So he said we'd come back next year, which was hard, but understandable. I was only small, and it was just women, even though I could hold my own and was, you know... So the next year came along and I didn't grow, I was just the same size, still really small. And he said, well, it doesn't look like you're going to grow so you're coming along! So we went to Melbourne, that was my first tour.

I don't know whether they had the mindset, if you had to be tall and burly and strong to play the game, whereas I was spindly and not that tall, really. But I learned very early on how to miss the tackles and read the game and you know, because I played with the boys all the time and the boys get a bit shirty if you're beating them when you're a girl. So, you learned the hard way.

Peter Dimopoulos, he would run from Fremantle to Nedlands, to training. He was a fitness fanatic and he would have us running and running and running at training, running with medicine balls, throwing medicine balls, doing all sorts, crawling in the mud.

Both of those guys, without those two I don't think I would've gone as far as what I did. And Barbara Gibson as well, she was the manageress with the state teams. And they sort of took care of me as well when I was away with the state and buddied me up with Sharon Mateljan, or Sharon Loveless at the time. She was a couple of years older than me. I mean, looking back now, we were all young, you know, to fly away from your parents was pretty daunting. So yeah. I buddied up with Sharon and she was really good and looked after me, sort of thing, which I'm forever grateful as well. And Sharon did play with the Matildas with me. Because we had six from WA one year in the Matildas, which was very good because

the numbers over east were in the thousands of women that were playing, compared to what we had in Perth, so it was very hard for us to knock on the door to get in with the Matildas. But we had some really good players as well back then.

**KRIS:** You have a story, it was from Peter Dimopoulos. It involves a \$10 note In Malaysia...?

**SANDRA:** Like I say, we didn't have a lot of money. I mean the boots I had were from Target, always two sizes too big, because then I could grow into them because that's all mum and dad could afford. And for me, I didn't care. It didn't make any difference. I mean, I played for the Matildas in Target boots two-sizes too big anyway, made no difference. So yeah, we went away, and mum and dad gave me a bit of money and that had to sort of last. And two days before or a few days before, I'd run out of money, and I needed money for something. Peter came up to me, the Peter Dimopoulos, and gave me a \$10 note and said, here, take this. This will get you by until you get home. And I remember that as probably one of the nicest, kindest things anybody's ever done, really? Because he didn't need to. I don't know how he knew that I didn't have any money left. I thanked him and I said I'll give it back, pay you back. And the first thing I did when I got home was said to my mum, I need \$10. I have to give it to Peter, he gave me \$10. She said, okay then. She gave me the \$10 and I gave it to him back. Obviously he didn't want that to be bothering me instead of being, you know, concentrating on playing. And two, I would've been a bit stressed, which I was. And when I had my 50th birthday, I brought that story up again and he was there, thankfully, he hadn't passed away then. And it brought a tear to his eye. So, it was important to him as well. But, yes, it's about trust, it's about being aware of other people's circumstances and just a kind gesture, which will always stick with me.

**KRIS:** How has that moment, or how has the legacy of that kindness from Peter lived on throughout your career...?

**SANDRA:** I've always had time for people no matter what situation they're in, or whatever. I've helped a lot of people and I think just a little bit of kindness or a bit of time out of your day goes a long way, and it doesn't take a lot to do that. I never let any of the girls say, I can't do this, because you can. It might take you four weeks and it might take somebody else only a week, but you will get there, you just have to believe in yourself. Say that it's a defender and they're really unsure because they know they're coming up, you know, across a strong attacker. I just say to 'em, you just have to work them out from the beginning. You decide, don't let them decide. You dictate. Either you're going to do close marking or you're gonna give 'em space. You just decide within the first five minutes, you'll know. But your first tackle is the most important one. You have to make your first tackle count. Let them know you are the boss. So, if you just give them little tips like that along the way... and also, I didn't put you there, if I knew you couldn't do it, you wouldn't be there. So straight away they go, okay, I can do this. So, there's lots of things you can say.

**KRIS:** What was the team environment or culture like at that time?

**SANDRA:** We had some really good manageresses and support with us because they knew that we were still quite young. You felt good in yourself because everywhere we went, we wore the tracksuit jackets. It was all very official. You felt professional. The passion of the game is, you've got to be in it to feel it. It's just a feeling you'll never have unless you've played a team sport. Team sport is incredible.

The first year that I went away with State, I was chosen in the All Stars for the Matildas, which is the, not the Matildas... he chose about 26 players, I was in the All Stars, which was the up-and-coming Matildas to go away. And then the next year I was selected to go into the Matildas. And then it was just from there. And you just had Jim Selby, who was at the final presentation of the state championships, and he called out all the names there and then.

**KRIS:** How did that feel?

**SANDRA:** Unbelievable, to play for the country. That's just something you don't even, doesn't enter your head sort of thing, let alone traveling with them and going away and going to camps with them. And he didn't say you're too small or anything like that, Jim Selby, because I still hadn't grown! I don't think I ever grew.

**KRIS:** Probably made you great as a striker though.

**SANDRA:** Well, back then they played with wingers. And I was the only one that could use my left and right foot quite well back then. So he said to me, you're on the left wing. And my first thought was, I don't care where I'm playing, if you are gonna put me on the park, I'll play anywhere. So yeah, I played left wing. It was pretty daunting when you got out there because then you were on the maximum size pitches when you played for the Matildas and the pitches looked huge then. But the step up from club to state was quite high. But then the step up from state to national... I was in my element. I loved it. I loved playing with the better players. I loved the drills and, I don't know, that was me. I really loved it. That was where I should have been when I look back now, I can still feel myself back then, just so enjoying playing with better players.

**KRIS:** Where like, are your parents at this time? Like, what's your dad thinking with you joining the Matildas? It must have like, he must have been so proud of you.

**SANDRA:** Cheesy grin. Yeah. Big cheesy grin. My dad was a defender, out and out defender. Terrible. So rough. But he is very skillful, really skillful. Could take on two or three players. He used to drill me all the time. It was left and right, left and right. We used to do months and months on end, just using your left foot until mum used to [say], yeah, leave that girl alone; mum, you won't let him kick with me. Or that sort of thing. So, he'd really make me go, no, you're gonna do it. You're gonna do it and you're gonna do it. You can't be a player unless you can use two feet. So out of everything, that is the best thing my dad ever taught me, was to use my left foot, because it's just as good as me right foot that you can't tell the difference between the two, which is such a bonus when you're out there. And he also taught me never to give up, never to give up. And also, every drill you do, you do it properly, do it 100%. You never do anything half-hearted and even when you're tired, you still push through it and you know, you play for 90 minutes, and those 90 minutes are 110%, no matter what. And I think through that, he was a hard coach. He didn't give an inch with me. He'd give an inch with lots of other players, but not me. But it paid off. It paid off. And we would kick a ball every single day no matter what, no matter what. And I remember my dad coming up to me, I think I was probably 28, 29, and he said, I can't teach you anymore. And I said, oh, what do you mean dad? And he said, you know more than me now. I remember that day. It was at a game we were playing against Cannington. And we'd finished the game and he came up to me then put his arm around me and he said, that's it. I can't teach you anymore. I said, yes, you can, dad, come on. You know that. It was strange actually. It was almost like he was cutting the ties

and then you were off on your own sort of thing. Really strange, because he'd coached me my entire life alongside other coaches. And that's all we talked about at home was soccer, soccer, soccer, soccer. And you know, if you'd done this, do this, rah-rah-rah. Okay. Do all that. And then it was like, is he not gonna do it anymore? But even though he said those words, he carried on. I'd always ask his advice and things like that. People have said to me, did you realize how good you were? And it was like, I never thought along those lines. I just wanted to be in the first 11. I just wanted to score the goals. I just wanted the team to win, no matter what team we're in. And I wanted to play good football.

**KRIS:** So let's talk about scoring the first international goal for the Matildas. Can you take us into that game? What was the atmosphere? Which team were you playing?

**SANDRA:** We were playing New Zealand. I think it was in Auckland from memory. Yeah, I was just put through by Leigh Wardell. And I just side-footed the defender and scored the goal and I remember that. But what I remember more than anything was the girls all coming around me and grabbing me. Rose, the big, tall centre-back, fell on the floor, cause they're all over you, you know, really excited right around. She grabbed me by the back of the shirt and picked me up and just ran off. That was really good. Amazing to score a goal anyway, but for Australia. Yeah. That's one you never forget. Well, I was on the wing. So, it came out to the wing, back into the midfield, and then I cut inside, and the ball came through and I just side stepped and hit it into the corner of the net. I hit it in from the right. Well, just really happy that we'd scored. Not that I'd scored, just that we'd scored, you know, we're ahead, one nil ahead. I never really thought about what I'm doing or whatever. It's just the team.

**KRIS:** Yeah. What has soccer given you in your life?

**SANDRA:** Soccer was my life. It still is to some point. It's in my blood. It always will be. I had some terrible times as a kid personally and soccer was my escape. I'll be forever grateful for anyone that's helped me, guided me, especially my dad. He knew I had something and he was determined and I don't think I let him down. If anyone's ever struggling out there, I think if you get into a team sport, it can really be reassuring and supportive for yourself. It's really good.

I think being on the pitch was my safe place and whilst I was out there, I was okay out there. And it was like the ball was attached to my foot and I wanted the ball all the time. Looking back now, I can see how I helped the other girls to score goals and play better and get into the game. I realize now that I'm really encouraging when I'm out there and maybe that's probably why I've been a captain a fair few times. I don't think there's anybody out there that can't play the game. I think it's a very easy game to play, made difficult. It's very basic and anybody can play the game no matter how old you are, race, size, whatever. You can play this game.

As soon as I stepped onto the pitch, everything else was gone. It was just, that's it, I'm there. We can do this. I never ever walked onto a pitch thinking we were gonna lose. I have always walked on there thinking we are gonna win this, even down to the 99th minute or whatever it is, and we're two nil down. We can still do this. I've never given up no matter what. I think it's determination to survive. I never realized that was it, but I do now. It's not just about the team and the coach. You've got all the parents and you've got all the sacrifices and you know, the money side of it back then. There was no money. So, you know, there's all that side of things and there's all of your siblings and all that and the, the traveling, you know, carpooling and standing in the rain, watching you play and driving miles. So, there's a lot that



goes into the game and I've got a lot of respect for all of those people because without them there would be no game today. There's been a lot of hard yards gone into the women, especially the women's game. And no doubt in the men's as well, but I think the women have had to go a little bit further than the men.

**KRIS:** Survive a little bit more.

**SANDRA:** Yeah. Especially seeing as we're women and you know, it's a men's game. Well it was, but it's not anymore, is it?

**KRIS:** So how did it feel then when you decided to retire?

**SANDRA:** Very hard. Very hard. I retired and then came back because it was like, no, it was too early. But then I got a really bad groin injury and I had to have surgery for osteitis pubis. And that took me out for a year and then I came back, but I'd lost the strength in my kicking in my legs. But I played on until I was 51. And then it was when I was running for the ball and this young girl just streamed past me and I thought, whew! And you know, you gotta get the ball and it's gone. And you're thinking, okay, okay, something's not right here. I played Striker for the bulk of my years, and then I played in the center of midfield. Sort of like the general, attacking, midfield. And then the girl said, well, just drop down a few leagues. And then I said, no, I'm really sorry. I can't do that. I just couldn't, I wanted to play at the top. And then my injury it was just, not coming back, but it was just too painful to play. So it was a forced retirement in the end. And it's strange because my dad's retirement was a groin injury. Well, when the surgeon, when I came outta surgery, he said, you had so many bits of broken bone in there. And he said, what have you done? I said, I've played football all my life. He went, you've just ground down those bones.

**KRIS:** It's fully in you, your blood, in your bones.

**SANDRA:** Definitely.

**KRIS:** With a Women's World Cup coming, can you tell me a little bit more about, about that feeling as we move to this really momentous time in this tournament?

**SANDRA:** I think for an occasion like this, which we probably will never have again, because to get a World Cup is huge. Men and women in any kind of sport, to get something like this is massive. And I think the respect should come through from the associations to the girls that form the game throughout the years. And I think some kind of recognition to all those players through this World Cup. That this game has come from there and it's now to *there*, I think would be nice for a lot of the ladies. I mean, you see it in other sports, you know, especially in the men's, they recognize their past champions so to speak. You can't just say, right, we're the Matildas. Where did the Matildas come from? You know, there's a history behind every sport and it, I think it's important and important not to lose that. To know about the trials and tribulations, to get to where we are now, where you're getting multimillion dollar women playing. I mean that would never have existed without all the years prior.

And I think the women's game could, and I've always thought this, could go a lot further, if they had some of their competitions, especially cup competitions, where they have them all played at one

ground, where you have like the premiers and then you have the next league and they play at the same round. So the state league can see the premiers and see what they have to do to get to that league. And the premiers can then see what's behind them and encourage them and you know, then the women can in turn help themselves instead of it just being stand-alone. If they had competitions where you actually saw how the next level was playing and the next level saw what's coming behind them and help each other along. And the women would support the women more, better that way.

The barriers have been broken now, and for me, life's a lot easier for me as a female. And I don't take that for granted. I just embrace it and love it. And I think women in general are very strong, stronger than what they think they are. And I think the world is a better place for having us in it.

**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](http://slwa.wa.gov.au) to listen to the rest of this oral history collection, or to [centreforstories.com](http://centreforstories.com) to learn more about our storytelling services. Special thanks to our production team, script editor and executive producer Luisa Mitchell, producer and interviewer Kris Marano, and audio engineer Mason Vellios.*