

Sport Soccer [A-League Women](#)

‘They all want to play for the Matildas’: Inside soccer’s grassroots boom



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Within 12 months, 17-year-old Daniela Galic went from watching the Matildas in the stands of Sydney’s Stadium Australia during the Women’s World Cup to training alongside them in Dubai.

The Melbourne City midfielder got the call-up from coach Tony Gustavsson in February to join the national side as a train-on player for the Matildas’ camp before [Australia’s Olympic qualifier against Uzbekistan](#). A month later, she won a bronze medal with the Junior Matildas at the AFC under-20 Women’s Asian Cup in Uzbekistan in March.



Melbourne City's Daniela Galic and Sydney FC's Indiana Dos Santos will do battle in the 2024 A-League Women grand final. PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES. ARTWORK: BETHANY RAE

Alongside her on the podium in Uzbekistan was Sydney FC's teenage star, Indiana Dos Santos, who last year became the youngest player to feature in an A-League Women grand final when she came on for Sydney against Western United at 16.

This Saturday, the pair will go toe-to-toe in the A-League Women's grand final at AAMI Park in Melbourne. They, along with Galic's City teammate and Junior Matildas captain Shelby McMahon, who isn't playing due to injury, are touted as the future of women's soccer in Australia.

"There's a big future for women's football, it's exciting to be part of," Galic told this masthead before the decider.

"Actual facts have been proven that this season was the biggest crowd for any A-League season. So, there's definitely [been] a difference from last season.



Melbourne City's teenage gun Daniela Galic. MELBOURNE CITY

“There were a lot more crowds showing up and just people even turning out to training for us.”

The teenage stars have been at the centre of the boom of women's soccer in Australia and Galic is right about more fans in the stands.

Crowd numbers spike in A-League Women on back of Matildas

The 2023-24 A-League Women's attracted 284,551 fans over 22 rounds, the competition's first full home-and-away season, with an average attendance of 2200 per match. This is a 108 per cent increase on the previous season.

During finals, the season became the most attended season of any women's sport in Australia with more than 300,000 fans, surpassing netball's previous cumulative attendance total.

In figures provided by the A-Leagues, broadcast viewership hours are up more than 133 per cent compared to last season and club memberships increased by 611 per cent year-on-year.

However, despite this significant uptick, there is still an interest gap between the national and domestic teams and a point of consistency to reach.

More than 11,000 fans attended Sydney FC's opening match against the Western Sydney Wanderers in a “homecoming” match for Cortnee Vine after [her heroics in the penalty shootout against France in the Women's World Cup](#). Yet just over 2000 fans went to the Melbourne City and Newcastle Jets semi-final at AAMI Park last Sunday night.

City coach Dario Vidosic suggested letting the finals be free to the public to create a crowd boost. “If it was up to me, I'd let everyone in for free. Just fill the stadium and you know, and let

them catch that, sort of, fever,” said Vidosic.

The other three ALW semi-finals averaged close to 6000 fans a match.

That fever, however, is catching on in an area that Football Australia desperately wanted during and following the Women’s World Cup: at grassroots level.

Grassroots the beneficiary of the World Cup boom

Mark O’Shea, president of Diamond Valley United Soccer Club in Melbourne’s north-east, said when his two daughters Charlise, 17, and Makayla, 15, first joined the club seven years ago, there were just two girls who played in the boys’ teams.



The number of girls taking up soccer is soaring, including at Diamond Valley United Soccer Club. From left: Suné Du Plessis, Makayla O’Shea, Olive Mary Wilson, Laura Bertazzon, Lydia Maye Natoli, Charlise O’Shea, Elise Whitney, Jasmine Peters, Macey Davies and Lucy Buckley. SIMON SCHLUTER

They now have four girls teams, and two of those were picked up during last year’s captivating Women’s World Cup.

“Our girls in particular, they all want to play for the Matildas, like pretty much every second child ... So, having that ambition and drive is really helping the sport because obviously, in the past, they didn’t have that to look at and wasn’t as highlighted as it is today,” said O’Shea.

“So, it’s quite exciting that the girls can actually watch how it all unfolded and the popularity of the Matildas, and it gives them ambitions and dreams.”

Diamond Valley United, among other clubs, will be part of a pre-game march around the field at Saturday’s grand final to celebrate grassroots soccer.

[East Bentleigh Soccer Club](#) president Anthony Galante said that before the Women’s World Cup it was unusual for them to be able to field more than one team of any age group. However, during the tournament “the phone was literally ringing every day with people wanting to join their daughter, who was wanting to play soccer”.

That resulted in 90 girls joining the club, which now fields two under-eight and under-nine, three under-10s, two under-11s, two under-12s, two under-13s and an under-15s and 18s girls teams.

Player registrations for the 2024 traditional winter season have increased by 20 per cent from 2023, which is still a few weeks away from closing. This follows the 8 per cent (42,710 people) increase in total participation of outdoor soccer registrations between 2022 and 2023.

In Victoria, 85,000 players have registered so far this season, an overall increase of 18 per cent on this time last year, with an almost 30 per cent uptick in junior girls ranks.



Sydney FC’s star teen Indiana Dos Santos keeps her feet against the Mariners’ Annabel Martin. GETTY IMAGES

In NSW, there has been a 10 per cent increase as of early April, with a 23 per cent year-on-year increase in junior females signings.

Maddie Thynne, 21, a senior women’s player at East Bentleigh and coach of one of the under-13 teams, said while she has played soccer since she was 11, she never watched it regularly before the Women’s World Cup and the subsequent A-League Women’s season, which was put more front and centre in the aftermath of the Matildas’ semi-final run in the cup.

“I think that’s the same for a lot of people in my team,” said Thynne. “So, the influence that the big game has had on us [is] we’ve had a lot of more motivation and drive to continue to play. Because one of the big things about women in sport is that a lot of girls drop out as they get older.”

Now, Thynne says, girls can see a clear pathway from grassroots to professional opportunities, which acts as motivation to be like their heroes.

Spreading the word

Sydney FC's Dos Santos said [the Women's World Cup](#) had a massive change on how people talk about women's soccer, including her peers at school.

"You can see how much it's grown from the people that are constantly talking about the Matildas and everyone knows what the Matildas are now," said 16-year-old Dos Santos.

She added that while they are yet to see the interest for the A-Leagues that the national squads garner, it's growing.

"They [school peers] always say, 'Oh, you play with [Cortnee \[Vine\]](#), that's so cool' and I'm like 'yeah'."

Melbourne City will host Sydney FC at AAMI Park at 4.15pm on Saturday, May 4.

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