EX-THREE LIONS BOSS TELLS FOOTIE CHIEFS:

'We must give our girl coaches hope'

FIGHTER: Right, Hope in action in the late 1980s

THE MIKE WARD INTERVIEW

HOPE POWELL
EX-ENGLAND BOSS

SUNDAY June 9 will be quite an emotional day for Phil Neville, manager of the England women's football team. Chances are he'll be welling up.

But it might be rather bittersweet for ex-England boss Hope Powell.

As Neville's Lionesses kick off their World Cup campaign at France's Stade de Nice, facing Shelley Kerr's Scotland, Hope could be forgiven for thinking: "What if…?"

What if she were still in charge of this England side, that is, as she was for a remarkable decade and a half?

It's nearly six years now since the FA showed her the door – Euro 2013 had not gone well – but the nature of her sacking clearly still rankles.

"I'll be forever disappointed," she tells me. "I don't think I was treated well."

When Hope's immediate successor, Mark Sampson, was fired in September 2017 – in controversial circumstances of a very different kind – it was ex-Manchester United and Everton star Neville that FA chiefs chose to turn to.

It's not that she doubts Neville's credentials. "Phil is good at what he does," she says.

"He brings a lot of experience from the playing perspective. He probably learnt a lot from Sir Alex Ferguson at Man Utd."

Nor is she questioning what he's done with this England side, currently third in the Fifa rankings, since he took charge early last year.

"They've got a really good opportunity of winning the World Cup," she says, with genuine pride. "Really good."

It's just that it meant the FA had handed the top women's job to a bloke again, and she'd rather they hadn't.

"I mean, it's great for Phil," she acknowledges. "But from the other perspective, it would have been great if it had been a female. They missed that opportunity."

The problem, she feels, particularly at international level, is the growing pressure to deliver results. Hope was given years to lay foundations ("I think what we did was fantastic…"), but now that the top women players are professionals, earning decent if not crazy money, it's success people want.

"I can't envisage anyone ever having that job as long as I did. It's changed now. There's more investment, so the expectation becomes bigger."

On a happier note, the rise of women pundits on TV, now regularly sat alongside the Graham Sounesses and Alan Shearers of this world, is something Hope is chuffed to bits about. And she's very keen to stress they're there on merit.

"These are not silly girls. They played at the highest level. They're used to analysis. It's what they used to help them improve."

Hope's job now is at Brighton And Hove Albion, where she's managed the Women's Super League side since late 2017. For a while, after the FA had sacked her, she wasn't sure she could face management again and took on roles instead with FIFA and UEFA.

But eventually came an opportunity that felt right. "I knew Brighton was a progressive, ambitious club. They understand where they are and where they want to be, but within reason. That appealed to me."

But while Hope has had to learn to be more patient with players at club level, she's still not a coach to take liberties with. Not if you want to stay on her good side. In fact, she once likened herself to a Sergeant Major. Would she still?

"Probably. I like things done a certain way, I don't mind having a good time, but remember, this is your job. There are rules. Stick to them. Otherwise what's the point?"

Despite her quibbles over decisions, Hope thinks the future of women's football is brighter than ever. And whatever happens at the World Cup, she's convinced we're at a pivotal moment in women's sport.

"It feels to me like it's women's time, it really does."

● ***The FIFA Women's World Cup, France 2019, runs from Friday June 7 to Sunday July 7.***

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