

'I'm changing the world with a hijab on my head and a ball at my feet'

Lipa Nessa is a former semi-professional footballer-turned-grassroots coach and sports activist. Here, the trailblazer talks about using her voice to break down some of the barriers preventing women and girls from enjoying exercise, plus her collaboration with the Sweaty Betty Foundation to develop a new sports hijab

Words: Joanna Ebsworth

'I've always been super active, and started running as soon as I could walk! Growing up in Bedford, I had the desire and curiosity to try every activity available to me and was privileged enough to have access to amazing sports facilities and inspiring sports teachers to support me on my journey. I was a part of every single sports club at school, and the only issue I had back then was that the teachers would fight over me to play for them when tournaments clashed - which was a delightful problem to have!

'My sportiness was also inspired by the TV shows I watched. I thought Josie Jump from *Balamory* was so cool, and I wanted to hold a football all the time like Milo from *The Tweenies*. But Sportacus from *LazyTown* was my favourite. He

changed LazyTown into an active town, which I thought was amazing. I think all these things combined to influence me to pursue the field I'm in now.

'I think I was a sports activist from a young age without even knowing. I remember, at around the age of 10, the boys I played football with asked me to grab a football from one of the dinner ladies. She told me "no" and said I should go play with a skipping rope or make a daisy chain instead - so you best believe I brought my own football the next day so it couldn't be taken away from me! That's when I realised that if people were going to put obstacles in my way, I was going to break them down. Not just for me, but to make sure that doors stayed open for everyone.

'I only really began to wear a headscarf, or hijab, after I left school, which coincided with me starting to play semi-professional football for a local club. That's when I started to face real challenges, and when I also realised that I'd been bubble-wrapped my entire life. Going into my first match, I thought I was living the dream of being the first Bangladeshi girl on the team. And everything - from getting off the coach to getting ready in the changing room - was normal... until it suddenly wasn't.

'When I realised the parents of the opposing team were booing me every time I touched the ball, I figured they probably thought I was too good as a kid at getting past the opposition. But then they started making aeroplane noises,





Profits from Sweaty Betty's hijab are used to support the community

and when I turned around and looked, I realised I was the only person of colour on the whole pitch, as well as the only visible Muslim person. That's when it sunk in what was really happening.

'My parents had told me horror stories growing up, but I'd never thought it could happen to me. And when it did, I had no one there to support me. When the half-time whistle went and it was one-nil to the opposition, no one asked me how I was in the changing room, even though I was the baby of the team. But I don't think anyone knew how to react. When it was time to return to the pitch, I decided to play



for myself and let my actions speak louder than their noises. I assisted a goal to level the score, and when we went to extra time, I scored a goal in the 94th minute.

'Scoring felt great, but not because I'd scored my first ever professional goal. Instead, it felt good because I'd made people quiet and proved a point, and that should never have been the case. What I remember about that moment is negative instead of positive, which is horrible.

Football went from being a best friend to feeling foreign, and I started to really hate it.

'I also remember practising a set piece in training where I had to head a ball into the goal. Unfortunately, it caused my makeshift sports hijab to slip back, and the goalkeeper coach - who'd been a best friend before I started looking like a Muslim - told me I shouldn't be wearing the "stupid

thing" on my head in the first place. That made me feel so unhappy and alone, and I realised I was being really affected by everything going on. I asked the club if I could play on a dual contract, where I'd only play for them if they really needed me. They agreed, and I went to play for a different club two leagues lower down but super diverse and inclusive.

'I started enjoying football again, but when I got called back to play for my old club, I didn't go because I didn't feel comfortable going. My contract was terminated and I haven't played competitive football since. But my experiences have really pushed me to become the sports activist I am today because I decided I wasn't going to let my experience happen to another child ever again.

'I studied at the University Campus of Football Business (UCFB) Wembley, based in Wembley Stadium, and I was the first-ever hijab-wearing Muslim to graduate from the institution. It was during that time that I came up with my mantra, while looking up at the famous Wembley Arch and thinking about the fact that everyone who had walked into that stadium had something unique about them. I was wondering what my USP was when I realised that people remembered me for wearing a headscarf and really liking football. That's when I created my quote, "I'm going to change the world with a hijab on my head and a ball at my feet". I've been saying that since 2017, and it's given me the purpose I needed to become a driving force for change by opening my mouth - right or wrong - and make my sports hijab journey with Sweaty Betty possible.

'I was the Chair of the Youth Board at the Youth Sport Trust when I met the head of the Sweaty Betty Foundation (sweatybettyfoundation.org), at a dinner in December 2022. I mentioned to her that I'd been involved in a focus group for the activation of Sweaty Betty's first sports hijab, and later, on the mini bus home, we got talking a bit more. When she asked me what I thought of their hijab and showed me a picture of it, I basically said, "Oh, that's just like every other sports hijab out there - making me look like a medieval knight or an egg". She looked at me, and I was like, "Did I open my mouth too much?" But that's what makes me a sports activist. You'll always get honesty from me.

'I went on to explain that the hijab didn't flatter me or empower me. Don't get me wrong, it might have been alright for athletes, but I didn't think it was the right product for the everyday girl or woman we were trying to engage in more physical activity (research carried out by Sport England in 2019 found that Muslim women are more likely to be inactive - doing less than 30 minutes of moderate activity per week - than other women).

'That got her thinking, and a month later, I got an email from her asking me to collaborate on a new sports hijab. Since then, there have been focus groups, planning and production meetings, presentations, lots of testing and tweaking of prototypes, and photoshoots to turn my vision into a reality. Even better, Sweaty Betty has turned the sports hijab launch into a major campaign for the activewear brand, rather than just a small thing for the Sweaty Betty Foundation, which is an

Photography: Sweaty Betty

independent registered charity working across the UK to empower women and girls from every background to get active, and stay active, for life.

'The new Sweaty Betty Foundation Hijab (£30, sweatybetty.com) is made from an all-day fabric used in some of the leggings Sweaty Betty is so famous for. The fabric sits well on your hair, doesn't slip and it's sweat-wicking, breathable and quick-drying

'I've gone from experiencing hate in my hijab to making a hijab with Sweaty Betty... I'm so proud of that.'

to prevent sweat running down your face. It's hygienic and easy to wash, so you can wear it all day, whether you're a schoolgirl wearing it as part of your uniform and for P.E., or like me, going from a meeting to a coaching session, to doing the grocery shopping.

'Very importantly, it's made of layers of fabric - rather than a jumper you just pull over your head - and it's fully adjustable

with multiple fastenings so you can wear it in different ways and find a flattering fit that works with the contours of your face. This gives customers different styling options and freedom to be creative with it, which I love, and there's also a band you can hook behind onto your bun to stop it moving around.

'It's been 10 years since that incident where I was booed by parents while playing football, so I've gone from experiencing hate in my hijab to making a hijab with Sweaty Betty, and that's something I'm so proud of. The feedback so far has been amazing, and I feel so privileged and lucky to be able to help create a product I feel so passionately about. As well as helping women to feel empowered and free whilst keeping active, the profits from sales of the hijab go back into the community, which is another thing I'm passionate about. The 15-year-old me would never have believed the possibilities that could come from me just opening my big mouth!' 🗨️

The hijab has multiple fastenings for different styling options

