

During the rapidly changing 1990s women were drawn further into the fold of English football. In 1991 a new National Premier Division was formed featuring the country's top eight teams, and Doncaster Belles were the best of the lot. They were in the middle of an astonishing run after featuring in eight FA Cup finals in the previous ten years, winning four, and boasted a star-studded squad. However, at the start of the season, the Belles did not have the trophy having lost to Millwall Lionesses in the 1991 final.

The defeat was unexpected. While both sides featured some of the most talented English players of their generation, the Belles were expected to come out on top. Indeed, there was talk of a double-digit thrashing before the teams took to the pitch at Prenton Park. However, it wasn't to be and Yvonne Baldeo netted the only goal of the tie in the 65th minute to inflict the Belles' first defeat in two years. "It was tough," says Karen Walker, striker for the Belles and former England captain. "There was an expectation we were going to win because we were Doncaster Belles and we certainly felt it. But losing gives you that kick up the backside that sometimes you need." The loss was to prove decisive in the history of the club.

Following the FA Cup final the Lionesses splintered dramatically, with their players spreading out across the other London

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clubs. The demise of such a strong team meant that, of the teams which made up the first year of the National Premier, the Belles looked by far the best on paper. Their team sheet included all-time greats such as Walker's strike partner Gail Borman and midfielder Gillian Coulter.

In what was supposed to be the most competitive and highly skilled league English women players had ever had, Walker made it look incomprehensibly easy. Despite their obvious superiority in staff, what the Belles and in particular Walker went on to achieve that year has not been repeated by a team or player since. Walker scored 36 goals in just 14 games as the Belles racked up a plus-85 goal difference. They became champions having conceded just four goals.

The next mission for the Belles came on April 25, 1992 when they made their bid to

regain the FA Cup and complete the first League and Cup double. After powering through the rounds, the team returned to Prenton Park to play Red Star Southampton. Not only were they on the brink of collective history, but Walker was close to having her name in the record books. She had scored a hat-trick in every round of the FA Cup that season and was hoping to seal the record in the final. "The team wanted me to do it, my family wanted me to do it, I wanted to do it," says Walker. "You can't get to a final where you've scored in every round and not think about it. I was the most nervous player in the team, so there was pressure, but I didn't mind."

The match was more comfortable than the previous year with Coulter putting the Belles one up in the 38th minute. All eyes then turned to Walker. She claimed her first in the 47th and got another in the 65th. With 15 minutes left, her trademark header secured the record. The Belles became the first side to do the national Double. "I think once I scored the first one, I knew it was coming," Walker says. "Everyone went nuts when it happened."

The Belles team who took the competition by storm in the early 1990s were one of the most dominant of their era, winning a second Double in 1993-94, but the appearance of Arsenal – who won their own Double in 1992-93 – was a sign that change was coming. After the FA took over the women's game in 1993, the Belles could not compete with the funding that was injected into other sides with parallel professional male teams. After a short-lived merger with Doncaster Rovers and controversially being demoted during the 2013 restructuring of the WSL, they are now in the third tier. Nevertheless, the Belles' 1991-92 season tells a story of an outstanding team which occupies a crucial space in the rise of the women's game.



JAMES MALONE (2)

Belles toll

Before well-funded professional teams became involved, one independent South Yorkshire club ruled the country

By KATYA WITNEY

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ALAMY

Above Goal-machine Karen Walker holds the 1992 FA Cup after scoring a hat-trick in the final
Left The Belles squad celebrate together
Below Midfielder Gillian Coulter (right) in action