



# Jess Carter is changing the game

ELLA GAUCI talks to the Lioness about that Euros win, the power of LGBTQIA+ visibility, and tackling racism in football

Gold confetti is completely covering the pitch. England fans are in floods of tears in the stadium, their face paint streaking and their voices cracking as they sing Sweet Caroline. The roar from cheering in pubs and front rooms back at home can probably be heard in Basel. Scarves are swung in the air and teammates are rolling on the pitch in disbelief, as young girls across the continent watch spellbound. It's come home once again. And right in the middle of this euphoric scene is centre-back Jess Carter.

Photo Bryan Berlitz/Creative Commons

"If people are inspired by what I'm doing on and off the pitch, that's a beautiful feeling"

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## "I don't think people realise how different racial abuse is to 'normal' abuse"

» A month after the Lionesses' second Euros win, I'm sitting in slight disbelief as Jess joins our call from across the pond. She's not had much time to process this incredible achievement, already back in the US to continue playing for Gotham FC. She smiles bashfully when I give her what I can only imagine is her millionth congratulations since the win.

Jess is nothing short of a national treasure. Starting her career at just 16 when she joined Birmingham City, she's since played for Chelsea and now Gotham FC in the US. In 2023, she was named the second-best player for England by BBC Sport after her performance at the Women's World Cup. And now she's been hailed an "England hero" after her pivotal role in bringing the Euros trophy back for the second time.

The 2025 UEFA Women's Euro was the event of the summer. The final alone was watched by 12.2 million people, making it the most-watched television moment of the year. After a tense tournament full of twists and turns, Jess tells me that the first thing she saw when England won was her teammate and young player of the tournament, Michelle Agyemang, praying on the pitch. Surrounded by chaos, this moment stuck with Jess, and she took a second to hold that euphoria with the rising star before running over to her family. While the win was full of joy, Jess admits that she was exhausted afterwards. Instead of partying hard, she went

to bed, ready to head straight back to the US to continue playing for her new team.

This exhaustion was not just physical. Alongside a number of nail-bitingly stressful games, Jess was navigating something much bigger than just football. During the tournament, the centre-back had been inundated with racist abuse online. Although Jess admits she had experienced subtle racism before, this was the first time she had ever seen it so blatantly shared on social media. She was at a loss about how to report these comments, let alone deal with the negativity. While she was usually able to brush off hate comments online, this felt too big to deal with alone.

"It was actually my sister who encouraged me to say something," Jess shares. "She asked me how I would feel if it was happening to Lauren [James], Khiara [Keating], Michelle [Agyemang] or even my nieces and nephews, who are all mixed-race."

After speaking with captain Leah Williamson and manager Sarina Wiegman, the leadership team called a meeting with Jess, Lauren, Khiara and Michelle about how to tackle this abuse head-on. It was in this meeting that the team decided that they would no longer take the knee before games – a previously symbolic gesture against racism – because it had lost its significance. Jess also posted a statement on Instagram, explaining that she was stepping away from social

media, following the racism online.

In writing that statement, Jess wasn't expecting the racist abuse online to completely stop. But she hoped that it would start a dialogue. "If it just makes one person hesitate to say some of those words, then that's a great thing," Jess adds. "I don't think people realise how different racial abuse is to 'normal' abuse. Calling me an asshole isn't going to upset me. You could just say I'm crap at football – it's got nothing to do with my skin tone."

Racism in football is sadly all too common. Only a few days before our interview, Bournemouth forward Antoine Semenyo was subjected to racial abuse during the opening match of the Premier League. Time and time again, Black players have been torn down for missing a penalty, and Jess admits that the threat of this scrutiny 100% comes into her mind during a game. "When a [Black] player goes up to take a penalty, there should be no doubt in a player's mind that they're going to get racial abuse after."

While the rise in popularity for the women's game has been a force for good, it has also meant that the evils of the men's game, like racism, have found a way to infiltrate this safe space. What's next in confronting this issue? "I think it's about recognising when players report abuse. We're not saying it to get attention. I don't want to say to people, 'I'm getting racially abused'," Jess explains. "I think there should be more effort being put into >>

## "There are so many LGBTQIA+ players, it helps others feel seen"

» finding the people who are saying these things and being prosecuted appropriately. There needs to be something to deter people from wanting to say those things again. Women's football has always been such a safe family space, and we want that to include everyone."

For a number of LGBTQIA+ people, women's football has been a sanctuary both at professional and grassroots levels. Due to the visibility of out players like Jess, more and more queer fans are finding a home on the pitch. Jess understands the power of visibility. "Because there are so many LGBTQIA+ players, it helps others feel seen."

In particular, many fans have found representation in Jess' relationship with fellow Gotham teammate and German professional footballer Ann-Katrin Berger. The pair met in 2016 when they were both playing for Birmingham, and at first were just friends. In fact, they even moved in together before realising that there was a deeper connection between them. It wasn't until the pair shared a kiss gingerly in 2017 that they understood that their bond was a lot more than platonic. Now, the pair have openly shared their beautiful relationship online, even announcing their engagement last year.

Jess grins when I mention that I had actually gone to see Ann-Katrin play in Basel during the quarter-finals. It's not the first time that England and Germany have been up against each other at a tournament like this – who can forget the 2022 Euros? – but it is the first time there was a real chance of the pair coming

head-to-head with each other. As the couple are used to playing for the same team, I ask whether it was weird to be at the same tournament on opposing teams.

"We've never really been bothered by it. I think this tournament was different because there was a strong chance we could be playing each other. Ann has become a very, very passionate German player! I think if we had played each other and one lost, we'd have needed a couple of days for space."

In the end, Germany was knocked out of the tournament before they had the chance to take on the Lionesses. Jess shares that Ann-Katrin took a few days away from the tournament after Germany lost to Spain in the semi-finals before coming back to cheer Jess on in the finals. Although Jess says she finds it easier to move on from such situations, the duo are learning how to navigate work and their relationship.

The couple are back in the US now, playing for the same team as they have done for most of their relationship. While they spend all day at training together, Jess says they don't actually see that much of each other during sessions. And talking football is firmly off the cards when they get home.

Throughout their relationship, the pair have openly shared adorable couple content – including their dreamy proposal pics last year. Jess laughs when I ask how they decide how much of their life to share online. "If it were down to Ann, we would share nothing! I'm obviously the talker, and I probably share too

much. The only thing she's told me not to share is details about our wedding – not that we've got very far with that. There isn't much of a line when it comes to how much we share. I'd say I'm open and she's not against it."

In this openness, Jess has inspired a whole new generation of young girls to take up football. It's at this point of the interview that I have to admit a cardinal sin – I support Arsenal. We chat about the incredible game between Chelsea and Arsenal last year at the Emirates Stadium, which was packed to the brim with over 60,000 adoring fans. "It's incredible seeing the growth in the women's game," Jess says. "When you see the fans come together, cheering and singing, it's a real goosebump moment. I don't think I've ever gotten used to seeing little girls with my name on their tops. It makes you feel like you're doing something right."

Jess tells me that when she joined Birmingham aged 16, she didn't realise that football could become your job. She laughs, talking about her debut in the Champions League, and feeling like it was like having a kick around the park. "I didn't realise the magnitude of what I was playing in."

Now, young and old fans alike are repping Carter's number 16 shirt. It's more than a sport – it's a place to dream big and believe in yourself. While Jess doesn't like to see herself as a role model, she admits that it's pretty surreal to see the reaction from the fans. "I'm just playing football and doing what I like to do. If there are people who are inspired by what I'm doing on and off the pitch, that's a really beautiful feeling." **D**

### 4 quickfire questions

What is your go-to hype song before a match?  
**Show Me Love**  
by Robin S.

Who is the loudest in the locker room?  
**Khiara is always entertaining to watch.**

What is your favourite football chant?  
**The Sarina one was quite catchy.**

Is there a British snack you're missing in the US?  
**Chocolate from the UK! I don't like American chocolate.**

Photo: The FA/Getty Images

