

The beautiful game has never looked so good

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THE FA has hailed Euro 2005 as a huge step forward for women's football, despite England's early exit.

It was the Germans who won the title for the fourth time in a row, beating Norway 3-1 on Sunday in front of a 25,000-strong crowd at Blackburn Rovers' ground, Ewood Park.

Women's football is the fastest growing sport in the country and Tony Lee, chairman of Cheshire Girls' Football League, who also runs Winsford Ladies Team, says there is a similar pattern emerging across mid Cheshire.

He said: "We will have 900 registered players for this season. We have teams travelling from all over to compete.

"The growing impact of it in this area is due to the successful ladies' team. It has increased our profile as well.

"Obviously having Euro 2005 in the north west has given the sport a big boost, a lot of our parents and girls have been watching it."

Tony started off with girls' teams in 1999 but as the girls grew older he realised the need for a woman's football team.

He said: "We started off Winsford Girls' Club with just 12 members playing in the Lancashire League.

"We kept growing and now have 80 members aged between six and 16." His women's team is mainly made up of women from the Northwich and Winsford area and has only been going for a year.

And it has been an incredible start for the team, which won the Cheshire and Manchester Women's Football League and reached the cup final.

Tony said: "It has been a great achievement as the team's average age is only 17.

"In the past girls playing football was scoffed at and people used to make fun of them.

"But people watched them in Euro 2005 and saw the quality of football being played and there is now an acceptance that girls really can play football.

"To see 25,000 fans twice and also read about television audiences reaching three million is fantastic.

"We are starting to remove some of the old prejudices."

Emma Johnson, 17, of Beswicks Road, Winnington, is captain of Winsford Ladies Football Team and plays at centre half.

She first became interested in football at Winnington Park Primary School when she played it in the playground.

Emma said: "I also played for the boys' team. It was great but the boys didn't give me much of a chance."

It was when she went to Hartford High School that her interest really developed.

Emma said: "Our PE teacher encouraged us to go the Cheshire Youth Games.

"Tony Lee was there and asked everyone if they were interested in becoming involved with football.

"I love being part of a team. I really enjoy it."

Emma, who is studying PE, human biology, business studies and psychology at South Cheshire College, added: "I would like to take football further.

"There are scholarships in America and I have talked about doing it but it all depends on the cost.

"I went to see England's first game and also the final of Euro 2005.
"It's really good. There is a lot more interest in the game now."

So does she watch and enjoy men's football?

"I support Manchester United, although I have only been to see one game," she said.

Despite England being eliminated in the group stages the Football Association said Euro 2005 was part of a long term plan to develop the sport.

A spokesman said: "The crowds and media coverage have been phenomenal.
"No one made rash predictions - nobody said England needed to win for the tournament to be classed a success."

Defeats against Sweden and Denmark cost England dear after an opening game win over Finland had raised hopes.

But combined attendances of almost 70,000 for England's three games and encouraging television audiences have left the FA optimistic about the game's future.

The FA spokesman added: "The quality of the football the team played was obviously instrumental in these figures.

"Hopefully a fair number of those people will come back and watch when the team kick off their World Cup qualifiers in September.

"When we bid for the tournament three years ago we did see this as part of a long term plan to assist the development of the women's game here.

"I don't think anybody can take anything away from what the coaches have achieved."