

Sporting collaboration boost for women's football



A collaboration of South Yorkshire sporting expertise has been formed to provide Doncaster Belles with a pathway to top-flight women's football.

The Belles are bidding to win a professional franchise in the new FA women's Super League and have gained support from Sheffield United's community scheme, their girls centre of excellence, Sheffield Hallam University and Sheffield Hallam Students Union.

To help secure their place in the new Super League, which is set to kick-off in March 2011, the club needs to show the FA that their structure for player development is sufficient for a leading professional team.

The new partnership means that girls in South Yorkshire who show potential as top footballers, have a clear path to boost their skills.

At the moment many up to the age of 16 play for very successful local clubs, or if selected, attend the girls' centre for excellence at Sheffield United's Shirecliffe Academy, where they are given top-class coaching from the club's professional staff.

From there the Belles have developed a partnership with Balby Academy of Sport in Doncaster which offers 16-19-year-olds the opportunity to continue their full-time education, while gaining six hours of coaching each week.

Under the new partnership, the best players will then be able to go on to study at Sheffield Hallam University and play with their women's squad. This enables players to enjoy further and higher education alongside their football development, whilst benefiting from the sport science support available at the University.

The end result will see the top players being given the chance to be selected for the Belles squad, potentially in the new professional Super League, where many of the games will be televised. The partnership was announced at Bramall Lane during United's Championship clash with Crystal Palace.

The FA is looking for eight teams to make up the Super League and entries need to be submitted by December 18. If their bid is successful, the Belles are aiming to play their home matches at the Keepmoat stadium in Doncaster, which recently staged an England women's international match.

The Belles are one of the oldest female clubs in the country and have played in the women's national Premier League for more than 15 years. Football is currently the country's fastest growing team sport for women, with more than 160 junior teams in the Sheffield and Hallamshire FA region alone.

John James, chairman of Doncaster Belles, said: "This is a win win scenario for all concerned and is the final piece in the jigsaw for the Belles in helping to bring new players through the ranks.

"We already have a good base of junior clubs in South Yorkshire and, with the support of the Sheffield United's centre of excellence and Sheffield Hallam University, we can bring together the community with education to boost women's football over the long-term."

The Sheffield United girls' centre of excellence has developed a strong reputation for finding excellent young players from across South Yorkshire.

Also, the club's community division The United Initiative is working hard to increase the amount of football activities available for girls, through coaching sessions and creating links with local schools.

Professor Ian Maynard from Sheffield Hallam University added: "This is a fantastic development for South Yorkshire. Seldom do you see such a good example of joined-up thinking in elite sport.

"It is hoped that this partnership will help support the Belles in their application for FA Women's Super League status by providing a higher education pathway for the players as well as sport science support to the team.

"Likewise, the agreement should help improve the standard of women's football at Sheffield Hallam University, so it is obviously mutually beneficial to all parties, as well as being a big plus for the region."