

Three years in, is the AFLW kicking goals?

Written by Adam Karg, Senior research fellow, Swinburne University of Technology

The AFLW competition rightly celebrated the [record grand final crowd of 53,034](#) and television audience of more than 400,000 last month as a successful conclusion to its third season.

The Adelaide Crows vanquished Carlton by an emphatic 45-point margin to claim their second flag. But after three years, what's the overall scorecard for the AFLW as a competition, and how should its success be measured?

Read more: [*The AFLW found instant success, but challenges remain for its long-term sustainability*](#)

The AFLW has built a strong, differentiated brand, with new sponsors attracted to a league, teams and athletes perceived to offer something different in a cluttered sport market. While media fees - [reportedly worth A\\$2 million over four years](#) - are modest, the AFLW has secured a [free-to-air platform](#) that is coveted by many, but achieved by few leagues of either gender.

There's strong support for the women's game among fans and club members, with an embryonic but strong interest in club products, including foundation memberships to support women's teams.

For the public, league success also depends on key visible measures – one of which is attendance. And despite the AFLW maintaining free entry as a feature, [regular season average attendance](#) per game dropped 25% in 2019. This is not surprising. Many new leagues around the world have enjoyed hugely popular inaugural seasons, followed by a downturn as the novelty wanes.

Much like any start-up, however, judging a new league purely on commercial outcomes in its early years is unwise.

The field of play

Sporting organisations and assets should be assessed on a complex range of financial, social, institutional and organisational measures. In the AFLW's case, a key aim is to challenge the dominance of elite men's sport and boost the visibility of the women's league and its athletes as role models. This, in turn, helps to celebrate women's football, and bolster female participation in community sport.

Recent federal budget [announcements](#) recognise this development, with funding allocated to improve grassroots facilities, such as female changing rooms at community ovals, and female-specific investments in sports science and elite performance development programs.

But alongside the clear success in these areas, the AFLW has also come in for criticism of the competition's structure. The third season featured the much-maligned [conference system](#), which split the 10 clubs into two separate groups and led to

[accusations](#) of a disparity in quality between the two, crowding out some talented teams while giving others an easier path to the finals.

A marketing plan that [restricted the league's visibility](#) in year two and the decision to restrict the regular season to seven rounds has also prompted criticism that the AFLW is not ambitious enough in its expansion plans, choosing instead to confine itself to a two-month window that barely overlaps with the men's season.

Global games

Women's sport is booming around the world. So far this year, soccer clubs [Juventus](#) and [Athletic Bilbao](#) have set new Italian and European attendance records, respectively, for domestic women's matches – the latter eclipsing any crowd drawn by the men's club teams this season.

Opportunities to showcase Australian women's teams on an international stage are more limited, although nevertheless important. Australia claimed the [first ever women's rugby sevens gold medal](#) at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The Matildas soccer team, led by Samantha Kerr, will soon contest the

[2019 FIFA Women's World Cup](#)

in France. And in cricket, Australia is preparing to host next year's

[Women's T20 World Cup](#)

Yet while global platforms are exciting, domestic leagues remain the primary vehicle to grow women's sport. In the past decade, women's [rugby league](#), [cricket](#), [soccer](#) and netball (via a [revamped league](#)

) have joined the longer established

[Women's National Basketball League](#)

in creating elite national competitions.

One misconception is that the AFLW and other new leagues should seek to grow quickly by converting existing fans of the sport. Such a view is not strategic and overly simplistic.

Just as cricket's Big Bash League was not created to cannibalise support for other forms of the game, the AFLW was never solely aimed at attracting existing AFL fans. Rather, it is about attracting a new and growing audience to the sport and providing a platform for women's sport that can boost investments and participation rates on both the elite and grassroots levels.

Delivering future growth

Ever since 2015, when [301,000 people watched a televised exhibition match](#) between Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs, the AFLW's development has been fast-tracked.

When the competition launched in 2017, the AFLW's first job was to attract a small core of committed "early adopter" fans. But subsequent growth requires engaging new consumers by building familiarity and connection with the league and its teams, while also offering something tangibly different from the men's game.

Read more: [***Growth of women's football has been a 100-year revolution – it didn't happen overnight***](#)

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From 2020, all but four of the 18 AFL clubs will be represented in the AFLW. On one hand, quickly embracing more clubs – all of which have existing brands and fan bases - provides new opportunities to attract more attendees and more viewers. More games will also result in more income, more media content and a stronger claim for professional status and pay equality among the league's players (the top-earning players receive just [A\\$24,600 per season](#) , compared with the seven-figure contracts given to the sport's top male earners).

But this rapid expansion also spreads the available talent pool thinly, which could impact the quality and competitiveness of some games and ultimately even cause fans' interest to wane.

Read more: [***Mark! Kick! Tackle! The reality of fast-tracking women into elite AFL***](#)

Critics of the AFLW conference system were disappointed that the 2019 season would only feature 25% more regular season games than 2018. Yet the [cumulative regular season attendances for this longer season dropped by 6%](#) , suggesting a bigger league schedule doesn't necessarily attract a proportionally bigger fan base.

Globally, there are examples of going too big, too soon. The Canadian Women's Hockey League [folded this month](#) after being deemed "economically unsustainable". The circumstances in this league are markedly different from the AFLW. The teams changed frequently and were not aligned with established brands, and the league's popularity was undercut by a rival US-based competition. But it nevertheless shows that even popular sports (Canadians really love ice hockey) don't necessarily equate to a sustainable product.

AFLW clubs know their league has come a long way in a short time, but that there is still a long way to go in terms of player development, competition structure and staking a claim as a fan favourite in a crowded sporting market. Looking at the next steps for AFLW, slow and steady may win the race.

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Dr Adam Karg consults to and conducts research for a number of professional leagues and teams across Australia and globally. His research has received funding from organisations including leagues and/or teams spanning the Australian Football League, Big Bash League (Cricket Australia), National Rugby League, Super Rugby, A-League, as well as professional netball teams and leagues.

Authors: Adam Karg, Senior research fellow, Swinburne University of Technology

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