

G CHANGER M E

She kicked off her career as an Arsenal and England player before becoming one of the most exciting voices in sport. But don't think that **Alex Scott** is done with the goals. Here, TV's sunniest pundit opens up about surviving online hate, the pressure to freeze her eggs and why her ultimate win – championing women – has only just begun

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hink back to your worst teenage job and, chances are, you thought it was a stinker. But Alex Scott's was genuinely a nose-pincher: in her early years at Arsenal, the then 16-year-old washed the Premier League men's kit to make ends meet. There's a photo of her at the club she would go on to captain, beaming beside Ian Wright, with boxes of kit stacked behind her – quite literally doing the blokes' dirty work. Only Alex Scott – Olympian, the first female football pundit on Sky Sports and seeker of silver linings – could spin sweaty shorts into a life lesson. 'It's [about] taking those moments where you can learn. I [got to] watch the male players train, I was learning from *Arsène Wenger*,' she fan-girls, with true TED-talk wisdom.

It's the Monday before football almost came home when Alex's face appears on a screen in mine. This isn't all that unusual; I'm a huge football fan, and over the past year, I've seen more of her than some of my own friends. As we connect on Zoom, there isn't a trace of the HD make-up Alex might wear while presenting on *The One Show*. The sequins from *Strictly Come Dancing*, on which she came fifth in 2019, have been replaced by a Nike running top, simple gold

studs and a ponytail that she's fixing into place, having just returned from boxing. On this rare morning off, she isn't at the office – the *Football Focus* studio – but at home in north-west London. Getting an audience with the voice of 2021 has been a game of diary tennis: studio call-ins thwarting our chats to the point where I joke about how she ever arranges a date. Not that it should come as any surprise that our cover star is in demand: people have wanted a piece of her since she was scouted aged eight.

PAVING THE WAY

I'm reluctant to use the word 'journey', since it's more hackneyed than hipster bike shops selling expensive coffee, but Alex has certainly been on one. Brought up on a council estate in the east London borough of Tower Hamlets, Alex and her brother Ronnie were raised by their mum Carol, a pub manager, after Alex's dad walked out when she was seven. Playing football was her escapism, and her Wembley was an enclosed pitch known as a cage. 'It was four walls, concrete, we had big gas works cylinders around us. When you picture it, there's no inspiration from it, but that cage was everything: a place of freedom, where I could dream of being somewhere else.' It was pure skill that paved the way for Alex when, aged eight, she joined her brother's team for a tournament and caught the eye of Vic

'In sport, you have so many amazing stories and I don't think they get told'

Akers, founder of Arsenal's women's team. Alex worked her way up from youth to senior team, using the men's laundry room to supplement an income that would otherwise just cover her bus fare. It was only after Alex was drafted to join Women's Professional Soccer – a new professional league in the US – at 25 that she could finally ditch the pants part-time jobs. 'Fast-forward to where the game is now for female footballers and I'm proud that we're in a space where they get paid, they have sponsorships, they've got enough to be like, okay, this is a good salary.' Pay in the Women's Super League (WSL), England's top tier, starts at around £20,000, but can reach £200,000 a year. Sure, it's nowhere near the average Premier League salary of £3million, but it cements 'female footballer' as something it wasn't when Alex started – a proper job.

There's zero doubt that Alex's 16-year football career – in which she represented Team GB at the 2012 Olympics and won six top division titles, seven FA Cups and a Champions League before playing her final game in May 2018 – spurred that elevation. I've interviewed many former athletes, and the push to retire is pretty identikit: injury, age or bowing out before the two aforementioned force you out. For Alex, the idea to start using her voice off the pitch was planted almost a decade before she'd actually

retire. 'I'd been frustrated,' she admits. 'In sport, you have so many amazing stories and I don't think they get told. I used to see my teammates – full of personality – give interviews and they would be a totally different person: they'd be scared, their guard was up. We weren't shining a light on sportswomen. It was all, "look how muscly she is", always in this negative way. It felt like there was a new thing I needed to do to help my sport move forwards, and that was transitioning to [a job in the] media.'

Keen to prevent criticism that she'd been given a leg up, Alex used her evenings to study for a degree in sports journalism and broadcasting. As she neared retirement, TV cameos began to trickle in. And as the public lapped up her insightful, well-prepared commentary, Alex made firsts happen – at the BBC (becoming the first female pundit at a men's World Cup), on Sky Sports, then as the first permanent female host of

Football Focus. A few days after our interview, Alex's team confirmed that she will be the first female commentator on *FIFA 22*, the world's biggest sports video game, when it's released next month.

ATTACKING PLAYER

But while Alex was beaming across TV screens, dark things appeared on social media. Sexist abuse. Racist abuse. Death threats. 'Being an athlete, you're used to criticism, and I could always take that as a footballer in terms of: "I don't think you had a good game." But trolling – it's not related to what I can improve. I went from being on screen doing a job I love to thinking: "I know what's going to happen as soon as I step off this chair." Do I carry on? Is it even worth it?' In the short period between our interview and this magazine going to print, not only does Alex tell us of her devastation when three of England's youngest male players –

● PREVIOUS PAGE:
BIKINI TOP, JADE SWIM
TROUSERS, H&M
● DRESS, STAUD
BOOTS, REISS





BLAZER, AISSATA
IBRAHIMA
BIKINI BOTTOMS,
MYRA SWIM
BOOTS, NA-KD

RIGHT:
SHIRT, LETOIT AT CULT MIA
BIKINI BOTTOMS,
JADE SWIM

Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho – are subjected to unthinkable racial abuse on social media after they missed penalties in the Euro final, but she sparks a controversial debate of her own. While presenting the Olympics coverage, Alex was criticised by ex-House of Lords member Digby Jones for her ‘inability to pronounce her g’s at the end of a word.’ She retorted by saying she was proud of her accent, and her background.

One hopes Alex’s past experiences of criticism, while heartbreaking, mean she’s more resilient than when she first faced her own trolls – telling no one and quietly falling apart. ‘I was in a dark place and I’ve spoken about turning to drink...’ (at her lowest, Alex would drink a bottle of wine a night to fall asleep). ‘I was lonely. I’d go home and it felt like I was all on my own. [I’d think], I’ve got no one to talk to, no one knows what I’m experiencing or going through. Until, eventually, the only thing I could do was tell everyone. That was my, “I can’t take it any more, I need to tell you all what I’m going through” moment.’ Alex discovered Sporting Chance Clinic – a mental health service for athletes, founded by former England and Arsenal men’s captain Tony



Adams. And vocalising her struggles with a professional proved transformative. ‘Going to therapy was the most enlightening thing I’ve ever done in my life. I love it. I will never stop,’ she enthuses.

As you might have gathered, Alex has become an open book – even when it comes to her personal life. When she

FIGHTING FIT

Nor is Alex about to apologise for her lifestyle since retiring from professional football. Yes, multiple wines were just mentioned. While she enjoys eating a healthy diet for the most part – breakfast is a smoothie or juice, and she’s edging towards a vegan diet after watching

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appeared on the *WH* podcast, *Going For Goal*, last October, she told Editor-In-Chief Claire Sanderson that she was considering freezing her eggs. Now, a month before Alex turns 37, I ask if she did it. ‘It’s still something I go back and forth with,’ she shares. ‘Sometimes, my friends put pressure on me: “Alex, you’re not getting any younger, you need to do this.” But right now, I’m loving life – so why add pressure on myself because other people are saying it’s time to freeze your eggs?’ I tell Alex that I’m impressed by how frankly she talks about a subject as tiptoed-around as fertility. But she likens it to talking about therapy. ‘Therapy’s helping me, so why am I not going to talk about it? With a woman’s decision to get her eggs frozen – you do it for you, forward-planning, why be ashamed of that? It’s [about] taking away those stigmas that other people put on you. I get that all the time: “Why are you single?” Like, sorry, do I have to be with someone?!’ she laughs. ‘On my days off, all I want to do is hang out with my girlfriends, go out to a theatre show, listen to music or have a couple of wines. I’m not going to apologise for being single.’

Seaspiracy on Netflix – the snack table at work often derails her intentions (hey, we’ve all been there). As for her approach to exercise, it’s rather more bounded. She’s of the ‘get it done first thing’ school of thought. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, it’s a boxing session, on the other days, it’s a 5k run, with Sunday serving as a rest day. If it sounds like a militant routine, it isn’t, she tells me. ‘It’s not like I need to work out, it’s just I know how pumped it makes me feel afterwards.’

High energy levels are something of a non-negotiable when you’re as booked up as Alex is right now, and as we run through her forthcoming reporting roles – the Olympics, *Football Focus*, Soccer Aid – I’m conscious of spending too much time hogging some of the most in-demand vocal cords in the game. But before we go our separate ways – Alex will grab a quick walk in Regent’s Park, hoping to spy the giraffes in neighbouring London Zoo, before she settles in for an afternoon of work-based Zooms – I ask about the last time she appeared in *WH*. It was 2016, back when Alex was playing for Arsenal, that she gamely stripped to her birthday suit as part of our Naked Issue. She was 31 and pure muscle. How does she feel about that photoshoot now? ‘When I look at that image, I see someone who was an athlete, whose body – my body – was super strong, but on the inside I wasn’t. Whereas now, it’s totally flipped. My body isn’t built like an athlete’s, but because of my experiences, because of therapy, I’m stronger.’ And whether she’s cheerleading young girls into sport, evolving the representation in broadcasting or using her voice to shatter taboos, Alex is employing every ounce of that inner strength to bring about change. Mark her words.

ALEX'S STAR WELLNESS PLAYERS



LAUGH

'I don't ever think: "What if I say something wrong on live TV?" If I do say something stupid, I'm going to laugh at myself.'



LEARN

'I love podcasts with interviews - you get lost in them. Glennon Doyle's *We Can Do Hard Things* is next on my list. I love it when people say, "Alex, you need to listen to this," because they're telling me I'm going to get something from it.'



WALK

'My moment to switch off is going for a walk, which I learned about myself over lockdown. I know it gives me calm. When I had my dog [Alex's boxer passed away two years ago], taking her on a walk was my meditation, and I've reconnected with that.'



MOTIVATE

'I use the Nike Running Club app to track my 5ks. As I'm on that run, I'm like, "I could do that faster, I'm going to beat my PB." It gives me motivation.'



SWEAT

'I've not done hot yoga again since the Covid restrictions started easing, but I miss it. I loved the stretching; I'd feel like I'd detoxed my body. I can't wait to go back.'



LISTEN

'I can go from S Club 7 to Taylor Swift to hip hop. I was team DJ in the Arsenal and England changing rooms and music is a great way to bring a team together.' **WB**



BLAZER, APRIL & ALEX BIKINI TOP, JADE SWIM BOOTS, KARL LAGERFELD