**PREDATOR PORTRAIT**

**TONI DUGGAN**

**BY AMIE CRIPPS, VERSUS**

They don’t come much better than Toni Duggan. The Merseyside maestro has been kicking a football her entire life. Grew up a diehard Liverpool fan but got her big break when she signed for Everton in 2007. Made her mark with Manchester City where she lifted the Women’s Super League trophy before mastering tiki-taka football with Barcelona and Atletico Madrid. The striker has seen it all. From Champions League finals to World Cup medals. Duggan has played with some of the world’s best footballers in recent years, or more importantly: they’ve had the chance to play with her.

They say winners aren’t born; they’re made. But in the case of Duggan, she was always meant to be a footballer. More than that, she was always meant to be a game changer. “Wanting to be a professional footballer when I did, not many people really understood why I’d choose that type of life for myself. Women’s football wasn’t really ‘recognised’ at that time. It wasn’t on the television, there weren’t that many female role models in the game - and if there were, you didn’t know about them because women’s football wasn’t visible in newspapers. So, when I said I wanted to pursue a career in football people were shocked. Including my family. Especially my two brothers. They were my biggest critics! But that was probably because I was better than them at football!” Toni Duggan and ‘taking no for an answer’ are words that don’t belong in the same sentence. But it’s only by overcoming challenges, that one of the world’s top strikers has developed a dogged determination to play the game she loves.

“I think one of the biggest challenges I’ve ever had as a footballer is making sure I continue to believe in myself. Especially at the beginning when I was facing a lot of criticism and scepticism for wanting to play football. Even at that age, you’re still trying to find your place in the world. Where you want to live, what you want to do or what type of person you want to be! They’re big things for young people to comprehend, let alone all while trying to break down barriers and play a male dominated sport. But something inside of me - I don’t know what it was, maybe the support of my Mum - just kept my belief alive. I knew I’d find a way to play football, even if I had to move far away to somewhere like America. I knew I’d do it. Now, I can sit here and proudly say, I’ve been a professional footballer for almost ten years. I am really proud of myself for sticking with my decision at such a young age.” Something the football world is also grateful for.

Duggan’s advocacy for change has been apparent from the very beginning of her career. She is a player that’s always wanted to make sure women’s football is at the cutting edge of advancement. Her time in Spain only helped to further fuel her desire to level the playing field. “When people talk about equality, they immediately think players are referring to pay. But when I talk about equality in football, I am also talking about an U16 boys’ team getting priority over pitches instead of a women’s first team. I am talking about inadequate facilities on and off the pitch for female players. I’ve played games in Spain before - at a time when football wasn’t professional - and match officials were drawing the penalty spot onto the pitch five minutes before kick-off.” Duggan’s bravery to routinely speak up on issues within women’s football - as well as her prowess on the pitch - is why she’s a perfect fit for the Predator Edge campaign.

“We can talk about my achievements in terms of trophies and medals, but the thing I am most proud of is the role I’ve played in the development of women’s football so far. Knocking down boundaries, fighting for change, standing up for other players and proving to everyone that ‘we’ are good enough! adidas has been incredible since I joined the brand in helping players like myself to achieve those things. I never thought I’d be a part of a boot launch like the Predator Edge. I just wanted to be a professional footballer! And I didn’t know what came with that, but I certainly didn’t think I’d follow in the footsteps of someone like Steven Gerrard. It’s the proudest moment of my career to date, and I hope it shows other kids that it’s the norm for huge campaigns to be fronted by both men and women.” Representation matters. And without the likes of Duggan, football would be a sport that doesn’t reflect its fans. The people who make the game what it is. A beautiful one.

Some things are written in the stars, and despite Duggan’s initial disbelief when asked to be involved in the Predator Edge campaign, destiny was definitely at play. “My first pair of boots were actually a pair of Predators! The Predator Precisions with the velcro tongue, and the iconic white, red and black colours. I felt like the coolest kid when I wore those! I’d walk onto the pitch full of confidence, and that’s something you still feel when you’re an adult. When I get a new pair of boots nowadays, as soon as I put them on, I genuinely feel like a kid again! It’s a great feeling.” Duggan’s joy at being able to help little girls be ‘seen’ as a result of the Predator Edge campaign is just another indication of her determination to keep moving women’s football forward.

“I’ve had messages from parents before who’ve taken their little girl to buy boots and they ask them: ‘Is this the boys’ section?’ Because when they look around, all they see are images and videos of male players. It makes them feel ‘different’ just for wanting a pair of boots. And now thanks to this campaign, girls can look up and say they want to wear the same boots as Wendie Renard, or Abby Dahlkemper and I think that’s amazing! Visibility is so important as it means people don’t feel out of place in an environment they belong in.”

For someone who’s played thousands of football matches and worn hundreds of boots, Duggan’s love for the game is just as strong as it was when she signed with The Toffees fifteen years ago. The sweet victory of success hasn’t gone to her head. And maybe that’s because of her brothers and their criticism, or the fact she’s still - at heart - that girl from Liverpool that can’t believe she’s playing football for a living. One thing is for certain though, her role on and off the pitch has inspired countless girls and young women to follow in her footsteps.