'Football connects our family across three female generations'

*Age is no barrier for 60-year-old Ramutė Kartavičienė from Lithuania, who has set up a football team of grandmothers, and is immensely proud that the sport can unite three generations of her family.*

Every month, as part of its #EqualGame campaign, UEFA is focusing on a player from one of its 55 member associations. This person will be an example of how football promotes inclusion, accessibility and diversity; his or her story will exemplify how disability, religion, sexuality, ethnicity and social background are no barriers to playing and enjoying football.

"A football is a round ball – but it is capable of doing a lot." Simple but effective words from Ramutė Kartavičienė, a 60-year-old grandmother from Lithuania who has seen football unite her family.

"Football really is a powerful thing. In our family, it even brings together three generations: grandchildren, children and grandmother," she says. "We are all happy kicking the ball together and we have become a united family."

Ramutė is a natural-born leader who has taken football to her heart after being inspired by her grandchildren to take up the game. The sport plays a big part in family life, and also led her to set up a grandmothers' football team in the Lithuanian town of Keturvalakiai, some 170km from the capital Vilnius.

Getting involved was relatively simple. "We wanted to play football and we did," Ramutė explains. "When we first arrived, a coach said, 'What are you doing here? You are women.'" But Ramutė, who served as a police officer for over 29 years until retirement, was not going to be put off easily.

Another coach, Martynas Karpavičius, then provided Ramutė with the idea of starting a grandmothers' team. "It wasn't difficult for me – I created a team," she recalls, adding that she soon found four people in her village who were eager to play. "We carried on playing – and then more and more people came to enjoy our team."

Ramutė, who displays plenty of passion on the pitch and is always hungry to hone her skills, is confident there are "more and more grandmothers who want to play football". Her message to those wishing to participate is simple: "Come and join us. Create your own team and we will meet on the pitch."

Her desire to show how football can be a force for good and have a positive impact on life resonates with UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin's belief that football transcends differences and gives young and old alike reason to dream.

"Our new #EqualGame campaign is proving an excellent vehicle in transmitting core values of diversity and inclusion – and is proving that football is a game for everyone, no matter who they are, what they are and where they are from," Mr Čeferin says.

Even when she is not playing, Ramutė and her family enjoy going to watch football, although emotions sometimes run high. "We watch football with enthusiasm, emotion," she says. "If somebody scores a goal or misses a chance, then the emotions start to flow."

Ramutė's love of football runs deep. She has always had some connection with the sport since childhood, and regularly kicked a ball around with her daughter. However, work commitments prevented her taking to the field as much as she would have liked for most of her adult life.

"I got involved with football again because of my grandchildren," she reveals. She loves playing regularly with her grandchildren, thinking it important to teach them to have "strong role models" so that they "look for solutions instead of giving up" when facing difficulties in life.

"I think being a strong woman is great," Ramutė reflects. "My daughter has followed me since her childhood and that's how she learned to be strong. My grandchildren are proud of me and follow me as well." Although Ramutė knows how to take control of a situation, equally she has the awareness to step back when needed.

"In our family, all the women are strong, with strong personalities," she goes on. "Of course, sometimes we disagree with each other's opinions. It can be difficult as we have strong opinions, especially my daughter and I, but we respect each other's personalities and opinions, so we find solutions that suit everyone."

"Women's football has considerable potential, and we are striving to change perceptions of it," says UEFA head of women's football Nadine Kessler. "Whether you are playing in the UEFA Women's EURO final or in the park with your friends, football has the ability to give you so many positive things, and I am really happy that Ramutė is proving such a wonderful influence not only on her grandchildren but also for women her own age."

The game has also helped fill a void in Ramutė's life left by her husband's death a few years ago. Originally trained as an engineer, she followed her husband into the police force where she remained for almost three decades. "When I lost my husband, it was a big shock for our whole family," she remembers. "After the loss, I had to stay strong. Of course it was difficult."

With the help of those around her, and in particular her grandchildren, Ramutė has managed to overcome the bereavement. "Of course people have to move forward in life ─ and football has filled that void," she notes, emphasising that she now watches the sport with "even more enthusiasm". She also relishes the camaraderie the game brings: "When we meet up [to play], there's a smile on our faces straight away."

Ramutė has certainly found her footballing path – and she urges people of all ages to do likewise. "Whatever goal you set yourself, keep that in your mind," she says. "Move forward and try to achieve that goal."