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'I want to see more from football in getting black coaches through ranks'

One year into the job, sports minister Helen Grant has crucial issues to address before next year's election. By **Alan Hubbard**

Sports ministers come and go. Since Harold Wilson first created the role for Denis Howell exactly 50 years ago, there has been a steady procession of the good, the bad and the utterly hopeless. And there have been quite a few of the latter, mostly some of the dismal tail-enders sent into bat in the Thatcher years.

The jury may still be out on the latest Tory incumbent, Helen Grant, a year after her surprise appointment following the outstanding Hugh Robertson's elevation to the Foreign Ministry. But the indications are that, having survived a few opening bouncers, she is digging herself in for a respectable innings – at least until next year's election.

"A dream come true" is how the first black – and only the second woman – British sports minister described her new job to me, when I introduced her to a predominantly macho world at a boxing event the night she took office 12 months ago this week.

Since then the 53-year-old former lawyer's profile has been somewhat lower than most of her more recent predecessors. There are those who would like to have seen the former teenage judo champion publicly throwing her weight around a bit more and putting the stranglehold on discrimination in sport.

As a black female, football's corridors of power are not a natural habitat, as Heather Rabbatts, the former executive chairwoman of Millwall, has discovered. Rabbatts was chosen to sit on Greg Dyke's Football Association Commission but was soon deriding it for having "absolutely no representation from the black and ethnic minority communities".

Dyke has finally delivered his verdict last week but one of the hottest topics in football right now, the lack of black managers in the League – and the possible introduction of American Football's Rooney Rule, whereby ethnic minority candidates must be included in the interview process for such posts – is surely likely to rise to the top of Grant's agenda soon.

The minister says she is an ardent advocate of meritocracy. But she does acknowledge that more needs to be done to widen the talent pool and get black coaches to the top.

She told *The Independent on Sunday*: "The lack of black and ethnic minority managers in the game is a concern. I want to see more from the game in getting black coaches through the ranks. The FA are making some progress but there is still more to do. I want a talent pool of people from all walks of life qualified and knocking on the door for the top jobs."



Civil service: Helen Grant has already earned glowing plaudits from the Opposition bench after her first year in charge

But Grant insists: "I don't have any problems doing business with those I deal with in football. I have a very good working relationship with both the Premier League and the Football Association.

"We have honest exchanges about ways in which we can work together to improve the national game. I meet them regularly with recent discussions focusing on what more can be done to improve the general governance of the game."

But she has already earned plenty of plaudits for her work in the lower echelons of sport – which would no doubt please Dyke – and a clear measure of the different way she has decided to do things has come in the rare testimony of approval for a Government minister from the Opposition benches.

"I like her very much," said Labour's Kate Hoey, the first female sports minister. "We were in Geneva together recently when Wembley



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HELEN GRANT

won the right to host the final stages of the Euro 2020 Championships. She is obviously enjoying the job and getting to grips with the intricacies of sport.

"It is a hugely complicated business and it takes time," she added. "It is not just being there as a cheerleader. She has clearly learned a lot from Hugh [Robertson] and I am pleased we have someone who knows the importance of supporting and nourishing the grass roots. Too many sports ministers have been totally obsessed with football."

Sentiments that are echoed by Robertson – now Sir Hugh, who said: "Helen has quietly done a fantastic job of rolling up her sleeves and getting on with supporting and encouraging grass-roots sport. This sort of work rarely attracts the headlines but it makes a huge difference to all the volunteers and participants on the ground."

Controversial she isn't, and

certainly no Tony Banks when it comes to expressing forthright views – when I once asked the late leftie, as sports minister, for an on-the-record quote, he responded: "On the record? Effing bollocks!"

Grant is, not surprisingly, far more circumspect. "Like the rest of the country, I was disappointed that we didn't progress further at the World Cup in Brazil. It was always going to be a tough group to get out of. But the experience gained by our younger players will surely be a benefit for the future."

Never mind Banksie. Robertson was always going to be a hard ministerial act to follow. "I've picked up the baton from Hugh and am working hard to ensure that the legacy from the Olympic Games continues," she says. "Sports participation in this country is at an all-time high and I am pleased with the success that we have had in raising the profile of women's sport, which is one of my top priorities."

"I am pleased that we're making good progress. There are now more young women, aged 16 to 25, playing sport than ever before. The broadcasters like BBC and Sky Sports have certainly upped their game too and we're seeing more coverage in the press as well. But there is still more to do."

"It's now about keeping up the momentum. I am hosting a major conference at the end of the month at Lord's on the subject as we look to galvanise the sports world and businesses to do more to support women's sport."

"I am also looking to do more on sports facilities, specifically 3G pitches, working with the football authorities. We are also close to finalising an expert group of people from across football that will look at what more can be done to represent fans' interests in the way their clubs are run."

Perhaps her greatest breakthrough so far has been in banging heads together at UK Sport and Sport England to effect a rethink over basketball's shameful loss of funding. "I strongly believe basketball is a sport with huge growth potential in this country. It is popular in our inner cities and can reach young people from all sorts of backgrounds, particularly BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] groups."

"We need a national team competing rather than facing extinction, and that is why I personally stepped in and asked Sport England and UK Sport to put their heads together and come up with a solution. We're not there yet but are close, and I am keeping up the pressure to get the right deal done to benefit the sport."

"It is essential we give the kids that are competing and learning the sport at the grass roots something to aim for and a pinnacle to aspire to."