

Swedish Publisher Olika's Football Books for Girls

Five years in development, Olika's series about Sweden's top female football stars got a boost this summer with the popularity of the World Cup in France and the Swedish team's success.



Marie Tomičić (Image: Björn Lisinski)

By Porter Anderson

When the eighth edition of the FIFA Women's World Cup in France started gaining attention this summer, few publishers may have been as well positioned to capitalize on the excitement as Sweden's Olika Förlag.

Sweden's powerful showing—they defeated England 2 to 1 to win the bronze—was a proud accomplishment for the yellow-clad players who had come into the tournament ranked No. 9 in the world.

But Olika's founding publisher Marie Tomičić was set with a winning play of her own.

In 2016, she'd told *Publishing Perspectives* about a series of "books inspired by female football stars since there are so few girls in books about football."

Olika's first book on women's football was published in 2014, and the series has since grown to include more than 20 titles, most aimed at young readers six to nine years old.

This focus on women's football will surprise no one who knows Olika and its focus on diversity for young readers.

In an interview with Tomičić, we start by asking how the international enthusiasm for this year's FIFA Women's World Cup affected sales of her women footballers' series.

Marie Tomičić: This summer really helped the interest for our books. For example, this autumn, the Swedish Association for Soccer has spread the word about our books

in social media channels, arranging a contest in which they asked the public to share their best stories from the world championship in France. I caught a lot of attention, and great stories were shared.

Also, the match this month in which Sweden is playing against Slovakia is great for us. We've been invited to participate in the fan zone hosted by the Swedish Football Association, and we'll have a chance to speak about our book series together with one of our stars, Therese Sjögran, in a meetup arranged by Forza Football [which supports equal pay and play in the sport].

We have also started a new concept, *Tell Your Sport Stories*, where we'd love to expand with international stars because we strongly believe that this is a very promising direction.

The interest from various news media has also increased a lot because these women have such a strong voice and such an urge to change. It makes them interesting both as athletes and as people.

Publishing Perspectives:

As yet, your football series is solely focused on women, right?

MT: So far, yes, it's all been about female athletes, but we're working right now on a book with a male athlete. Our goal is to contribute to increased equality and that means mirroring strong female athletes but also mirroring male athletes working for equality.

When choosing male athletes, we choose people who want to contribute and who are, as people, contributing to equality. That's of utmost importance to us.

PP: When did you start work on this series, and what prompted you to develop it?

MT: The idea was born between me and journalist Johan Thorén. We met when we ended up sitting across from each other in a shared office facility for small companies.

We realized when we started to talk that there were very few books about girls playing football. Olika had just finished a series of books inspired by real children and the reactions were great.

So we took the same approach to this idea and started to look for stars.

We found one, Charlotte Rohlin, here in our city. And when she

said she'd like to be part of this we started to look for a writer that knew both sports and literature. Not so easy, but we found Jennifer Wegerup. And then we found Anja Gatu. And the rest is history.

We're impressed that our athletes have been so brave, saying yes to our projects—especially Charlotte and Kosse [Asllani] in the beginning. We believe in building collaborations like this to speed up the process for equality and gender equality, and we're happy they want to be a part of it.

PP: Where do these books lie in terms of fiction vs. nonfiction?

MT: We interview the athletes once or twice, and try to get a sense for who they were when they were young. To do this, we ask them about anecdotes, real anecdotes. And based on these interviews and anecdotes, we create a book's story.

The main goal is to make the story interesting for the readers, that's the top priority. So the quality of the story is very important. But we combine the nonfiction with fiction. We

want the story to feel immediate, not something from the past.

One anecdote, for example, is about how Kosse Asllani always got nervous when she would have to spend the night away from home. Our book is about how she handled that. Another example comes from Nilla Fischer, who had thought of herself as a forward when her trainer said she needed to change to a defensive position. And then there's Olivia Schough, whose mother was dying of cancer when she was young, and that became an important part of her life and story, of course. Her story helps children facing these very difficult themes in their own lives.

PP: In addition to adding books that feature male athletes, what are your plans for the series?

MT: We're expanding to more sports and would love to expand internationally. We think we have a great concept that seems to be working, and our dream would be to have athletes from all over the world sharing their stories and working for equality and gender equality. •

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