

FROM THE STANDS

When it comes to West Ham United women, there's not many supporters who will go as far as Allie Coker. In celebration of her thousands of miles racked up in support, Allie reveals all about her journey...



What kind of person clocks up over 7,500 miles in one season following West Ham United women's team? Well, I'm an east Londoner who moved up north as a teenager, but I've never forgotten where my loyalties lie.

It was my mum who made certain that I grew up a West Ham fan. I've always believed that if you're a Hammer, you should support anything West Ham – the men, the women, the Academy; everything!

As a huge fan of women's football, I was so excited when I heard that West Ham would be joining the Barclays FA WSL, but I couldn't anticipate how I would feel the first time I managed to make the journey down from Manchester. Watching the girls in Claret and Blue was a completely different experience to any game I'd been to.

There's no feeling like cheering on **your team**. The result didn't matter; those were my girls. From that point on, I knew there was no going back – I wanted to get to every game, home and away.

Planning the travel has been a military operation. I live 220 miles from Rush Green and, for most of my travel, I've been reliant on public transport. Even home games take a full day of travel.

The first time I went to Rush Green, we worked out that I had a longer journey home than the travelling Yeovil fans. When the time came for the reverse fixture, it would take two coaches, three trains and an overnight stop in Bournemouth to get me there. Out of 48 hours, I was travelling for about 34 of them. At least it made for great blogging material!

I love going to Rush Green because you really feel like you are part of the West Ham family. We are all one, all there for the same reason.

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There's always something to be said for away games too! There have been times where it's just been me and the players' families cheering on our girls. You have to be that voice for your team. You've got to be extra because you're not in the majority.

It didn't take long before word got around that I'm 'the girl who travels'. At Arsenal away in September last year, I got chatting to one of the staff members. We had lost and he was trying to console everyone that at least it wasn't too long of a journey home. I piped up with "speak for yourself, I've got another five hours".

He clearly had a word with the team because by the next game, people started making a point of coming over to speak. I have to say a huge thank you to everyone at West Ham who've looked out for me. It could be lonely doing all of this travel, but I always know there'll be at least one friendly face at every game.

The players have been incredibly welcoming and supportive too. The first player I got talking to was Claire Rafferty. She was the first big signing to be announced and I mentioned on Instagram that I was going to get her name on the back of my shirt. When she spotted me wearing it, she stopped in the middle of her warm-up and ran over to thank me. Fair warning, though; if you do the same, you might find yourself in the middle of a bidding war amongst the players over who gets to be on your next shirt!

I love seeing families bring their kids to games because they know they can see top quality football in a safe environment. Of course, you still have your friendly rivalries, but they are just that – **friendly!**

The other great thing for kids is getting to meet the players they idolise. I was lucky enough to meet some of my favourite players when I was young, but they were all male players. As much as I love football, I never thought that I would be able to play for West Ham.

It's so cool to watch little girls meeting Gilly Flaherty or Kate Longhurst, and you can see the dream running through their minds – "I could do that!" It's a bit late for me now but it's amazing to see our girls inspiring the next generation.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that my biggest highlight so far was getting to see our girls make it to the FA Cup Final. I'd been to every round, involving lots of last-minute travel – including missing my coach at Reading because I'd not anticipated extra time and penalties! I had to buy a very expensive train ticket home but there's no pay-off quite like a trip to Wembley.

Here's hoping we can get there again soon!

Allie can be found on Twitter @axlsgirl and her blog can be read at adventuresinclareandblue.com.



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