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## **University of Birmingham student signs with Aston Villa in Tier 2 Super League**

After joining the Women's Football club when she started at the University of Birmingham in 2015, Ellen Martin signed her contract to play professionally for Aston Villa last week.

The third-year Physical Education and Coaching Science student was selected for the first team when she joined the University, and through the support and motivation of the club, coaches and Performance Centre, finally achieved her dream of playing professionally.

Last year, the University was selected as an official FA High Performance Hub due to its outstanding efforts at bringing the beautiful game to more women and girls throughout the region, and Ellen is a perfect example of what the football programme pathway can do for an aspiring athlete. Her journey from playing Sunday League grassroots football, to first team BUCS, to a professional player, shows the value and credibility of university football on a player's development pathway.

Having played county level up until the age of 15, Ellen lost motivation and drive to continue playing competitively, until she started looking at universities. After hearing about the fantastic football programme the University of Birmingham offers, Ellen chose Birmingham as her institution of choice. Despite easily making the first team during trials in her first year due to her brilliant technical abilities, Ellen had lost her match fitness. It was through regular one-to-ones with women's football head coach, Gemma Davies, and through working with the Performance team, specifically on nutrition and strength and conditioning, when she finally found the confidence and motivation to push through and develop her fitness to align with her technical capabilities.

'The main reason I'm playing at the level I am today is because of the support of the programme at the Uni,' Ellen comments. 'If it wasn't for the support of the club and coaches, the Performance Centre and especially things like strength and conditioning training that I wouldn't have had access to otherwise, I wouldn't be where I am today. I'd never considered all the extra bits that you need to be a professional player – things like understanding how to take care of yourself through nutrition, or how to develop fitness to maximise performance. I chose Birmingham because of the programme, and I'm so proud of what it's helped me achieve.'

The University of Birmingham has also transitioned eight students into the Women's Premier League structure, after being part of this pathway and through the connections the programme offers. Gemma Davies, Head of Women's Football, says it's really exciting to see one of the team make it to this Tier 2 level through the programme.

'Ellen was always one of technically best players, but her fitness levels and motivation weren't at the same standard. It's so exciting to see first-hand the effect that the programme can have on a player - going from playing at a grassroots level to being signed to a Women's Super League team in three years is just amazing. Watching Ellen progress over the last 3 years into the player she is now has been truly fantastic – hopefully others will now follow in her footsteps!'

**ENDS**

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## Notes to the editor:

- The University of Birmingham is currently ranked in the top ten universities for sport in the UK.
- The University have invested in new indoor and outdoor sport facilities, including the £55 million Sport & Fitness Club which opened May 2017, new pitches and a pavilion.
- The University of Birmingham is ranked amongst the world's top 100 institutions, its work brings people from across the world to Birmingham, including researchers and teachers and more than 5,000 international students from over 150 countries.
- University of Birmingham Women's Football Alumni include Izzy Christiansen and Emma Follis, who play for Manchester City Women and Birmingham City Ladies respectively.
- The eight students and alumni who play for Premier League teams are Alison Hall, Elizabeth Steele, Laura Cooper, Katie Sorenson, Sharone Buckle, Nadia Bacciochi, Pip Harmison and Jess Howard.
- The University of Birmingham was selected in July 2017 as one of eight universities in the country which became official High Performance Centres for women's football. The initiative from the FA provides an educational and community-based setting to recruit, develop and deploy coaches, who will lead and inspire player development specifically in the women's and girls' game. The High Performance status enables the University to develop as a central facility of excellence for women's football, pulling all of the region's resources together to push the boundaries of the sport.
- Picture credit: Josh Hinds