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Hard hitters hit it off

Force veterans keep coming back for the contact -- and the friendships

By David Murray

2:46 PM CDT, April 25, 2010 Before their road game against the Wisconsin Warriors, whom they'd blown out 42-0 in their home opener, the players and coaches of the 2-0 Chicago Force insisted that weren't looking ahead to the May 1 showdown against the the Kansas City Tribe, the league's defending champions.

After three quarters in Kenosha, they trailed 7-6. Quarterback Samantha Grisafe had thrown two interceptions and fumbled once, her running backs had fumbled twice more, her receivers had dropped a half-dozen passes. Fourth-year offensive tackle Dawn Pederson limped off the field with a knee injury -- "I heard it pop about four times" -- and third-year wideout Albiona Zhubi was half-carried off with an ankle she said felt "loose and crunchy." Luckily for the Force, about half the team is made up of reliable old pros.

When you think of women playing tackle football, you might think of it as a novelty: girl jocks get to play asport they've been jealously watching the boys play.

For most of them, that's how it starts. But for some, the first 50 practices and 10 games don't get the bug out of their system. They come back year after year. Why? The chance to knock other people silly. The relationships. And the liberation.

Fourth-year defensive tackle Kim Marks likes the hitting. But she also appreciates the chance to play a sport all-out. She was frustrated playing high school basketball, where she observed that fouls were called "much sooner and for a lot less contact" in the girls' game than in the boys'.

She says there was a double-standard applied to acceptable intensity levels.

"I can remember being told on occasions to calm down, after the referees or umpires felt that I was too excited or too worked up over something that had just occurred," she says. "The boys were able to show every emotion from excitement to pure anger and they were never told to calm down. Instead the referees would simply pass off their anger as playing hard and aggressive."

Trash-talking and other expressions of competitiveness, allowed and even encouraged in boys' sports, were discouraged for girls.

"I came to understand relatively quickly that in order to excel in women's athletics, I had to find a balance between the aggression and tenacity I felt, and what would be tolerated on the field," she says. Playing with the Force places no such limits. "I am able to channel that aggression into every tackle and every hit," Marks says. "I will not be chastised for hitting too hard or playing too rough."

And Marks, a tax lawyer by trade, offers a glassy-eyed recollection of her "first clean tackle."

"It was during a kickoff in my first year playing. It was a perfect form tackle and I can remember hearing the reaction of my teammates and the people in the stands. That is the best part of this game to me. Listening to the reaction of those around me when everyone can hear that satisfying pop of the pads as someone delivers a clean blow."

The players range in age from early 20s to late 30s.

For the younger ones, the Force is mostly a competitive adventure. But the veterans are more sentimental, and tend to see the team as an ersatz family.

"Football is such an aggressive, mental sport that teammates are more like sisters," says fifth-year center Stacey Baker. "I will do anything on the field to help out a teammate and believe that each member of the team feels the same way. And that is often true off the field as well."

Elementary school teacher Malsch and sixth-year linebacker and architect Tricia Charbonneau met when they joined the Force. Both said they hoped to use football as a way to get back into shape after having given over their 20s to their jobs.

In a defensive-line drill during their rookie year, Charbonneau was frustrated by her inability to move the taller Malsch. "So I punched her in the stomach," she says impishly. Love at first fight: They moved in together shortly afterward and recently registered as domestic partners.

In their mid-30s, they're co-captains, and team moms. During sometimes-raucous postgame parties, "I take the opportunity to partake and get a little drunk," Malsch says, then giggles, "But I'm usually in bed by 10."

In the fourth quarter of the game against the Wisconsin Warriors, the Force scored 24 unanswered points to win 30-7.

The next day, Pederson says her knee is swollen and aching.

"I can barely walk today and a lot of my friends will ask me why I do it," says the school teacher and former field hockey player at Ohio State. "If they have to ask they will never understand."

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