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She never threw in the towel

Despite tough moments growing up, Grisafe kept pushing toward dream

By David Murray, Special to the Tribune

11:00 PM CDT, June 12, 2010 Last Saturday in the humid Kansas City twilight, Chicago Force quarterback Samantha Grisafe slouched on the bench, her long blond hair a sweaty tangle, red rings around her eyes, blood oozing from a cut on her elbow.

"That was the worst game I've ever played in my life," she said, her words quiet and slowed, likely by the effects of several brutal collisions in a 33-12 road loss to the K.C. Tribe that sent the Force into the Independent Women's Football League playoffs a solid 7-1 but limping.

Their season ended on a two-game skid with a 27-20 loss in Dallas in their playoff opener on Saturday despite three Grisafe TD passes.

The thing is, the 25-year-old Grisafe had climbed a long, steep hill for this dubious privilege — a hill about as long and steep as the growth curve in women's tackle football.

Unlike most of her teammates, who played traditional girls' sports growing up, Grisafe has been a footballer since age 10, when, after a few years as a little league baseball pitcher in her hometown of Redlands, Calif., she attended a football clinic.

"She loved it, and begged me to play," says her mother, Kim Grisafe. "I said, 'Sami, you're already the only girl on your baseball team.'" Kim called the president of the youth football league. "He said he'd give us a full refund if she didn't like it after the hitting started."

When the hitting started, she only liked it more. She started at quarterback for four years in youth football, and on her eighth-grade team.

She generated a lot of media interest, including an approach from Disney, which wanted to make a TV show about the pretty girl quarterback. Not wanting another wedge between her and the team, young Grisafe rebuffed most of the inquiries.

As she moved into high school, things got more difficult.

"She always had to be twice as good to be considered half as good," her mother says

before reeling off a series of slights by coaches uncomfortable with having a girl quarterback.

One family legend that mother and daughter repeat: She was the backup quarterback on her freshman team. The first game of the year, the starter went down with an injury, and the young Grisafe buckled her chinstrap and prepared to go in. The coach put in another kid instead.

"I cried my eyes out," Grisafe says. "I was furious and heartbroken."

Eventually she got playing time that year, and wound up being made a team captain. But varsity was another story; Redlands High School is a Division I team that faces players such as future NFL quarterback Matt Leinart.

She played very little her sophomore year and soon came to realize she was better off playing volleyball and pursuing more sensible interests, in acting and singing.

More sensible to her and her professional-musician parents, anyway. Grisafe won a statewide monologue competition and got a scholarship to the Chicago College of the Performing Arts at Roosevelt University.

But then football came back into her life. She joined the Force in 2007. Theatre auditions aren't compatible with the demanding football schedule, so she tends bar at Carmine's on the North Side.

She also has regular singing gigs: A strapping woman with a gritty voice and a comically small ukulele.

At a Force home game earlier this season, Grisafe sang the national anthem; she had to remove her shoulder pads, as they were getting in the way of her instrument.

But these days nothing gets in the way of the football. Gone are all the inherent distractions of being a girl quarterback on a boys' team.

"Now I just get to be an athlete and a teammate," she says. "That's why this feels so great. Finally there's nothing except for the game."

No excuses, either. It hasn't been a particularly good season for Grisafe, and against Kansas City, Grisafe fumbled twice in the first half and threw two interceptions during a desperate second half that saw her running to the sideline to get plays from head coach John Konecki, sometimes in tears of rage at the play-calling, yelling so the whole sideline could hear, "I hate you right now, coach!"

She better make up with him soon, because the two of them are traveling to Stockholm, Sweden, this month with a group of American all-stars that Konecki is coaching in a first-of-its-kind international women's football tournament, against teams from Germany,

Sweden, Austria, Canada and Finland.

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