Demons, Dandelions and Dolls: The Rise and Fall of the National Women's Football League

By: Lyndsey D'Arcangelo and Britni de la Cretaz

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646-688-4822

"Before the NFL can truly be called America's game, it must be more about inclusion than it has been. To date, women who make their impact in football are primarily seen as outliers—when, in fact, they should be seen as contributors on the rise. Beyond the coaches, executives and broadcasters you may know, this detailed history of women in football is necessary. We need to know the whole story, so that we have the proper context as women continue to rise in the sport and the league."

~ Doug Farrar, NFL Lead Scout, Bleacher Report, and author of *The Genius of Desperation*

"I am so excited for Demons, Dandelions and Dolls*. There is a glaring lack of cohesive and comprehensive book-length writing about women's contribution to football. This book has the opportunity to fill that gap and in the hands of two writers this talented, I have no doubt they are up to the task."*

~ Dave Zirin, Sports Editor, *The Nation* and co-author of the recent *NY Times* Sports Bestseller, *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable* with Michael Bennett

"From referees to scouts and executives to owners, powerful women have helped break barriers in the game of football. If the future of football is to be more female, the challenges, strategies and achievements of those women must be understood and built upon. Their stories matter, not just as inspiration, but as a tool to continue the push for greater female representation in America's most popular sport."

~ Sarah Spain, ESPN personality and host of the sports podcast, That's What She Said

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I. Overview

In 2019, Mitchi Collette is one of the most well-known figures in women's football. Seventeen years ago, she founded the Women's Football Alliance's Toledo Reign, and serves as their head coach. There's no one more qualified to run the team — 46 years ago, Collette played for the Toledo Troopers, the winningest team in pro football history (men's or women's) and part of the National Women's Football League, the first women's pro football league in the U.S.

In 1967, a talent agent named Sid Friedman put an ad in a Cleveland newspaper looking for women who wanted to play tackle football. The team, which would be known as the Daredevils, was supposed to be a gimmick. He imagined them wearing tearaway jerseys and miniskirts, and said it was "a barnstorming venture more than a competition." Much to his surprise, women answered his ad that fall, and the newspapers eagerly announced there was a "gal's team," which Friedman told reporters "could take on any college team in the country."

But Friedman made the mistake that men had been making throughout the history of the sport: he underestimated the talent, drive and determination of the female athletes who showed up to play. His team would eventually leave him behind and expand into 14 teams from Philadelphia to San Diego, forming the National Women's Football League in 1974. Over its 14-year existence, it would spawn the winningest team in pro football (men's or women's) history — the Toledo Troopers — as well as become the blueprint from which current football leagues, like the Women's Football Alliance (WFA) and the United States Women's Football League (USWFL) were developed.

In many ways, the 1970s were the perfect time for a women's professional football league to take hold. It was during the pinnacle of second wave feminism and the women's liberation movement, and women were gaining ground in athletics, as well. There was the passage of Title IX in 1972 and Billie Jean King's victory in the "Battle of the Sexes" in 1973.

They set the stage perfectly for the NWFL to debut the following year. But perhaps the world wasn't as ready for the league as the athletes may have hoped.

In the press, their looks were always described before their playing abilities. They had to answer questions about whether playing football meant they supported women's lib. They always had to talk about what their (male) partners thought about their affinity for this contact sport.

They played against each other. In some cases they even hated each other. But what they all had in common was a love for a game society told them they shouldn't be playing. In 14 cities around the U.S., women broke the mold for what a football player was supposed to look like. Thousands of people came to watch —perhaps to gawk at first, but then, in the end, to cheer.

They were Linda Jefferson, the best halfback to ever play the game, who had five straight seasons where she rushed for over 1,000 yards and averaged 14.4 yards per carry, who would go on to become be the first Black woman inducted into the Semi-Pro Football Hall of Fame and one of only four women in the American Association Football Hall of Fame. Collette has also become a legend in the sport and keeps a women's football team going in Toledo to this day, almost 50 years later.

While the groundbreaking story of the NWFL's most successful team—the Toledo Troopers— is beginning to be told, particularly in a forthcoming documentary, the rest of the league remains largely unknown. It remains kept in a yet-to-be-explored time capsule in library archives and in basements and closets in players' homes—full of newspaper clippings, hand-drawn football plays, team schedules, weathered gameday programs, old team clothes and uniforms, and many other significant items of that era. Beyond the physical collections however, are the voices of the players themselves, the stories of their lives on and off the field, and what the NWFL meant to them.

These women came from all ethnic and racial backgrounds, from all walks of life. They were gay and straight, they were factory workers and mothers, they were beauticians and truck drivers. They overcame sexism, injuries, exhaustion, stereotypes, harassment, skeptics, and their own lack of training to become the first women's pro football league in U.S. history. From California to Pennsylvania, this is the story of the girl gridders who took America by storm: the women of the NWFL.

The seeds of the league were planted in a time before Title IX, before women were given equal footing on the field of college and amateur athletics. According to an article published in New York City's *The Sun*, the first known football contest between women occured in 1896 and was set up as playful entertainment at Sulzer's Harlem River Park before a masked ball for a men's social club. The men were expecting something light and gentle. But the women came to play, *really* play. They weren't there to pussyfoot around for the sake of entertaining men. The game got rough. Police eventually arrived to shut it down. The idea to use women playing football as a gimmick continued and teams like the 1926 Frankford Yellow Jackets employed women to play at halftime for entertainment and laughs. While women continued to play for the amusement of men over the next few decades, many aspired to try and form teams and leagues of their own.

Newspaper coverage of the team from 1972 suggests that several of the Toledo Troopers could be "candidates for the 'Thighs-man Trophy.'" Another story, from 1973, calls female football players "freaks," and in the upcoming documentary about the Troopers, called *Perfect Season*, a former player recounts the heckles about getting back in the kitchen the team had endure while they practiced. Despite all of this—and the fact that the players played for free or received only a small stipend of $30 or less per game and travel expenses as compensation—they managed to win seven world championships over six undefeated seasons, and were inducted into the pro football hall of fame in 2014, which was long overdue.

Not all teams were as successful on the field as the Troopers, of course. And that was to be expected from adults with no football experience. Toledo's biggest rival was the Detroit Demons. It wasn't an on-field rivalry so much — the Demons didn't stand a chance against the Troopers — but there was "no love lost" between the teams, according to Troopers outside linebacker Collette. There were literal brawls on the field — in one case, Troopers player Gloria Jimenez describes using her helmet as a weapon to swing at Demons players and coaches on the sidelines— and in one game, the Troopers were winning 26-0 at halftime so the Detroit team decided to just go home.

But that Detroit team is remarkable: they began as part of Friedman's outfit as a gimmick named the Detroit Fillies. But once the women got a taste of the game, they wanted to be taken seriously as a football team. They rebranded themselves as the Demons and joined the NWFL. The press was not kind to them. When the team decided to become a serious football operation and many of the original players left, "they left behind a team of not-so-gorgeous women who wanted desperately to play football, and a bunch of patrons who, after seeing one game, never returned," wrote the *Detroit Free Press*. "It seems that once the girls put on the pads and helmets, the pretty, perfumed sight became bloody bad football."

Even still, they were undeterred. Just one year later, the press rebranded them from a fledgling group of terrible football players to a bunch of edgy women trying to subvert patriarchal ideas of femininity. *The Times* of Shreveport, Louisiana ran a story describing a mother of five who swigged beer in just her shoulder pads in the locker room after the game, players whose boyfriends wouldn't watch them play for fear the women would be injured, and a player who wanted to make sure people knew they may be playing football but they weren't members of the dreaded women's lib movement. They may have been threatening to the status quo in some ways, but not in any *real* way. These women just want to play football, though a 1973 newspaper article about the league included the DEK "Now Even Pro Football 'Liberated.'"

The legacy of the NWFL and its players endures today. More and more, women are becoming an integral part of professional football at all levels, from reffing and commentating to coaching and being NFL owners. There are three semi-pro tackle leagues operating in the U.S. today, none of which would have existed without the NWFL; even while relegated to the sidelines and not given equal opportunity or access to participate in its evolution, women have persistently managed to find a way to immerse themselves in the sport. Today, statistics show that the number of girls who play football is on the rise, while the number of boys is declining. And it's a trend that's only increasing: Utah Girls Tackle football started in 2015 with 50 girls and is expecting over 400 this year, literally doubling in size each season. All-girl tackle teams have also popped up in Indiana and Georgia. Beverly, Mass. just announced an all-girls flag football team beginning this summer. This rapid expansion can be credited to the increasing visibility of girls who play: *if you see it, you can be it.*

Along with this growth is this increased media attention. In the last year, multiple media platforms have run features about girls playing football, including Newsday, NBC News, GOOD, *Teen Vogue*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The week of the Super Bowl alone, CBS ran a feature on women and girls tackle football, *Teen Vogue* did a story about how football affects the brains of teen girls, and Britni's story about brain injury in girls tackle football ran in the print edition of the *New York Times*. But often left out of these tellings are the pioneers who started it all, the ragtag groups of women who came together to form the NWFL.

Demons, Dandelions and Dolls takes readers on the unique journey the women of the NWFL took to be a part of America's most popular sport, and highlights the many achievements and contributions that have impacted every aspect of women in football, from youth leagues, women's football leagues to the NFL as coaches, front office staff, television analysts and more. That the women of NWFL made these contributions despite efforts to

keep them out of the sport altogether only speaks to the determination and heart that these athletes brought to the gridiron. Through systemic discrimination, harassment, bullying, and being told again and again that girls can't play football, women have persisted. Their stories and accomplishments deserve to be celebrated—both because of what they've done and because of what they've overcome to do it.

Visibility matters, and without proper recognition the achievements and broken barriers these women have accomplished will continue to go unnoticed. The cycle of invisibility and erasure will only continue to keep female athletes marginalized in the ways they have always been, keeping them off the gridiron, out of the history books, and reinforcing systemic inequality. With this book, the history will be adequately written, the education will be at hand, and the women of the NWFL will finally be inserted into the narrative of the game of football, where they've always been and undoubtedly belong.

II. Target Audience

Statistics don't lie. The number of girls in football is on the rise, while boys' participation is on the decline. Pop Warner, the country's largest youth football organization, estimates that young girls make up at least 1 percent of its 250,000 registered players, which averages out to 2,500 girls in America's most popular youth football organization playing tackle football. If you take the same percentage and apply it to the 2.5 million youth football players across the country, the average number of girls participating rises to 25,000. In women's football leagues in the U.S., there are currently close to 5,000 active players and the Independent Women's Football League believes they've had over 17,000 players involved with the league since their inception in 2000. Furthermore, women make up 45 percent of the NFL's audience, and football is the most watched sport in the U.S. An estimated 86 million women watched the NFL in 2017, and Super Bowl LII in 2018 brought in 103.4 million viewers, making it the tenth-most watched program in U.S. television history.

While our core audience is women who love, watch and/or play football (as demonstrated above), our overall audience is comprised of women who love sports in general — after all, women comprise 40 percent of all sports participants and roughly one-third of major sports fans are women, according to the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport. But this book will also appeal to people interested in untold histories, people interested in feminism and feminist history, and anyone interested in football or sports histories.

These target readers aren't just NFL and women's football fans. They are people who are reading sports memoirs, watching ESPN's 30 for 30 documentary series and sports biopics on Netflix, following sports reporters and writers on Twitter for the latest sports news and features on both men's and women's sports, and staying up-to-date on women's sports overall. While a lot of people assume that only women care about women's sports, that's actually not true: only 28 percent of *espnW's* audience is female, according to the 2017 comScore multi-platform report. This is important information, because it means that stories about women's sports appeal to people of all genders, including men.

This is also a really pertinent time for women's sports. Female athletes are finally beginning to be taken seriously and interest in women's athletics is increasing rapidly, across the board. During the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, women received more NBC primetime Olympic broadcast television coverage than men for the first time ever in a Winter Olympiad, the third highest proportion for women's athletics ever documented. The women's gold medal hockey game between the United States and Canada drew 3.7 million viewers, according to NBC. It was NBCSN's best-ever late-night rating. The 2015 Women's World Cup final was the most-watched soccer telecast ever in the United States, with 26.7 million viewers, topping the previous record of 26.5 million for the 2014 Men's World Cup Final. The telecast also drew $40 million in ad sales—up 400 percent from 2011 numbers.

But wait—there's more. The Portland Thorns National Women's Soccer team attracted an average of 17,653 fans per game in 2017—more than 15 NBA teams, 13 NHL teams and one MLB team. WNBA attendance achieved its highest mark in six years with a total of 1,574,078 in 2017 and merchandise sales were up 18 percent. The 2018 WNBA season opener on ESPN2 drew 297,000 viewers—up an astounding 38 percent over the previous season.

People are hungry for women's sports content and the numbers show that when the coverage is offered, the audience is there

III. About the Authors

Lyndsey D'Arcangelo is a sports writer for The Athletic and a seasoned freelance writer based in Buffalo, NY. Her articles, columns and profiles on female/LGBTQ athletes have appeared in The Ringer, Deadspin, espnW/ESPN, Teen Vogue, ThinkProgress, *The Buffalo News*, The Huffington Post, NBC OUT and more. She appears regularly on The Tim Graham Show, a Buffalo-based sports talk radio program. Her first Young Adult LGBTQ novel, *The*

Trouble With Emily Dickinson, won a 2009 Golden Crown Literary Society Award for Debut Author, and she received Notable Mention in the 2018 *Best American Sports Writing* anthology for her story, *My Father, Trump and The Buffalo Bills*. Having been a writer for over 15 years, Lyndsey has numerous connections with various people throughout the national media landscape.

Britni de la Cretaz is a freelance writer who focuses on the intersection of sports and gender. She is the sports columnist for Longreads and formerly the sports and culture columnist for Bitch Media. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, espnW, *Vogue*, *The Washington Post*, *Teen Vogue*, The Ringer, Bleacher Report, *The Atlantic*, and more. Her work on racism in Boston sports media received the 2017 Nellie Bly Award for Investigative Journalism from the Transformative Culture Project, and that story was also a Notable Story in the 2018 *Best American Sports Writing*. Her writing on the queer history of women's baseball for Narratively was nominated for a prestigious baseball writing award, the 2019 SABR Analytics Research Award. She has a large platform with over 11,000 Twitter followers and has been interviewed as an expert source by The Nation, ESPN, and NPR, among others.

IV. Competitive Titles

***Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* by Liza Mundy, Hachette Books, 2017**

This book details the lives and courageous efforts of a group of women who not only valently contributed to the war effort, but successful helped to save lives and shorten the war. Despite their stories being essentially erased from the history books because of their vow of secrecy and lack of credit, the author created a space for those women still living to proudly share their stories and give them the recognition they rightfully deserve. Similarly, *Demons, Dandelions, and Dolls* seeks to give women who have made exceptional and noteworthy contributions to the game of football their rightful place in history, as well as a platform to share their untold stories.

***Football for a Buck: The Crazy Rise and Crazier Demise of the USFL* written by Jeff Pearlman, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018**

This recently published book has been on the *New York Times* list for the three months since its release. It tells the story of the United States Football League, which ran for three seasons and was the last league to come close to challenging the NFL. Similarly, *Demons, Dandelions, and Dolls* tells the story of a mostly forgotten football league, one that broke barriers and established football legends like Linda Jefferson.

***Rad Women Worldwide: Artists and Athletes, Pirates and Punks, and Other Revolutionaries Who Shaped History* written by Kate Schatz and illustrated by Miriam Klein Stahl, Ten Speed Press, 2016**

This *New York Times* bestseller tells "fresh, engaging and amazing tales of perseverance" about women throughout history who have made impactful and everlasting impressions on the world. It shows the wide scope of what women can do and what they have already accomplished on a global scale. With *Demons, Dandelions, and Dolls*, we aim to continue the

conversation and showcase what women can and have already accomplished on the football field, even in the face of incredible obstacles, outright misogyny and sexism, and the overwhelming odds stacked against them.

Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race **by Margot Lee Shetterly, William Morrow Paperbacks, 2016**

The story about the black female mathematicians in *Hidden Figures*, who broke into a male-dominated industry and were instrumental in helping put a man on the moon, is only known now because someone had the wherewithal and fortitude to write about it. Without this book or subsequent articles about these amazing women, their invaluable contributions to NASA would continue to be unrecognized and uncelebrated. *Demons, Dandelions, and Dolls* is taking on a similar task in that we want to highlight all of the incredible accomplishments and contributions that women have made and are still making in the NFL and football in general. Without proper recognition, their stories will continue to be erased from the sport and severely undervalued.

Play Big: Lessons in Being Limitless from the First Woman to Coach in the NFL **by Jen Welter and Stephanie Krikorian**, **Da Capo Press, 2017**

This book was written by the first woman to coach in the NFL and discusses her experiences playing in women's football leagues, and also offers advice for anyone who wants to succeed against big odds. *Demons, Dandelions, and Dolls* will also mention women throughout history who have coached football and who have played the game, focusing on more than just one woman's experience.

V. Marketing and Promotion

As co-authors of this book, we plan to promote it both individually and as a team. Our target audience regularly consumes sports-centered media sites such as espnW, Bleacher Report, Sports Illustrated/The MMQB, The Ringer, and FanSided, but also feminist, multicultural and LGBT-based sites like Teen Vogue, The Nation, Bitch Media, SB Nation, The Undefeated, and OutSports, and history-based sites like Smithsonian and The Atlantic. We are both closely associated with/ have written for many of these sites, and plan to use those connections to help promote this book to our audience by soliciting reviews, sharing preview excerpts from the book, and pitching/writing articles directly related to the book itself.

Some article ideas might include:

• Extended profiles/feature stories on some of the women mentioned in the book
• Stories/accounts from history of women in football
• Personal essays on how football has influenced us personally as women
• Updates/profiles on any new initiatives happening within the NFL as well as women who are newly hired as coaches, executives, etc.
• Commentary pieces on current news happening in the NFL from a social standpoint
• History stories about the queer women who played in the league and how it connects to LGBTQ athletes today (along the lines of the viral story Britni wrote for Narratively last year about the queer women in played in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in the 1940s and 1950s.)

Another promotional goal of ours is to book podcast/radio shows in order to talk specifically about the book, what it has to offer and why it is a necessary read for every woman and young girl who loves football. The following podcasts are dedicated to feminists, history, multicultural and LGBTQ issues in sports: Burn It Down, Edge of Sports, Only A Game, The Football Girl, Past Present Pod, and more. We have connections with the

producers of these particular podcasts, and Bill Littlefield, who hosts NPR's Only A Game has offered to provide a blurb for the book and would likely be willing to promote the book on his show, which is heard on 300 stations across the U.S..

Lyndsey also appears regularly on the Tim Graham Show, a Buffalo-based live radio show featuring former ESPN and currently *The Athletic Buffalo* senior writer, Tim Graham. Tim has already enthusiastically agreed to discuss the book on the show and help promote it because he is a firm believer that women deserve better and bigger coverage in sports overall.

We understand that promotional blurbs are a key aspect of publicizing our book, even before its expected release date. The influencer grid below outlines the social media reach of some of the big name media personalities and writers in the NFL and sports world at large who have not only expressed interest in supporting this book but are also committed to contributing a promotional blurb for the book.

As most of our individual writing for media outlets centers on the intersection of sports, culture and underrepresented athletes (LGBTQ, women, non-binary athletes), both of us have the experience to speak intelligently on current issues/topics in sports media as well as the core importance and relevance of this book. We could sufficiently serve as expert sources on sexism in football, women's football leagues, girls who play Pop Warner or high school football, the effects of the current concussion crisis in football on women and girls, women in football, and where their roles are headed in the future.

As a guest on a sports talk radio show, Lyndsey offers a voice to underrepresented communities in sports. In her past, with her LGBTQ YA fiction books, she visited high school and youth GSA groups continuously. She has also been a guest speaker at a handful of LGBTQ conferences.

Britni has spoken on an assortment of panels and conferences, including BinderCon, about media, representation, and sports. She also makes frequent visits to schools in the Boston area, from middle school to college, to talk to classes about the issues she covers in her work. She is a frequent guest on podcasts like Hardball Times Audio and Refinery29's hit podcast "Strong Opinions, Loosely Held," which has over one million downloads and is a top ranking podcast on iTunes.

Influencer Grid:

Personality	**Known For _____**	**Twitter**	**Facebook Likes/Instagram**	**Book, Radio Show, Podcast, etc.**
Tim Graham	Feature writer for The Athletic Buffalo (previously ESPN)	37,300	141, 000 FB (The Buffalo News)	The Tim Graham Show
Shea Serrano	Writer at The Ringer, author of NYT Bestsellers *Basketball and Other Things* and *The Rap Yearbook*	270,000	N/A	Villains Podcast
Dave Zirin	Sports Editor of The Nation Magazine, NYT Bestselling author	93,600	628,262 (The Nation Magazine)	The Edge of Sports Podcast

Katie Nolan	ESPN	454,000	179,000 IG	Always Late With Katie Nolan
Maggie Gray	Sports Radio Host on NYC WFAN	24,400	2,500 IG	Hosts Carlin, Maggie & Bart Show
Melissa Jacobs	Former SI.com NFL Editor, now runs TheFootballGirl.com	20,600	N/A	The Football Girl Podcast
Doug Farrar	NFL Reporter, USA Today Sports	53,800	N/A	Author of The Genius of Desperation
Jen Welter	First woman to be hired as an NFL coach	41,300	18,800 IG	Author of Play Big: Lessons in Being Limitless From the First Woman to Coach in the NFL
Sarah Spain	ESPN	181,000	15,392 FB 49,800 IG	That's What She Said Podcast/Host of

				Izzy and Spain on ESPN Radio
Beth Mowins	Sports Broadcaster for ESPN	30,400	N/A	First woman to ever call a live, nationally-televised Monday Night Football game
Amy Trask	Football Analyst/CBS Sports	49,800	N/A	Former CEO of the Oakland Raiders
Bill Littlefield	Host of NPR's Only A Game	7,900 (Only A Game) 73,400 (WBUR) 7.56 million (NPR)	6,500 (OAG) 94,300 (WBUR) 6.3 million (NPR)	Only A Game
Totals	**_____**	**8.89 million**	**7.42 million**	_____

VI. Chapter Summaries

Introduction

In the early to late 70's, the National Women's Football League (NWFL) featured the nation's most successful football team of all time—the Toledo Troopers. The women who played for the Troopers and in the league not only knew what it meant to run a route, they knew about "blocking schemes" and "gap A assignments." They knew how to read and run plays. They knew how to tackle and block. More importantly, they lived for the chance to play professional football. They trained five nights a week, three hours at a time, while holding down full-time jobs during the day. So did all the players on the 13 other teams in the league.

But it has become abundantly clear that many people in and out of the football landscape are unaware of the NWFL or the Toledo Troopers' historic win streak. Because women are seen as less than and their place in football and sports in general comes second to men, there isn't enough information out there or visibility on these women who participated, played and were a part of the game. Therefore, the general public remains unintentionally ignorant to the same fact.

Our goal with this book is to bridge that gap between the general public, awareness and visibility, much in the same way that the stories and lives of LGBTQ athletes have been shared via OutSports.com and the histories of athletes of color have been shared in numerous biographies and memoirs, so that the next time someone wonders aloud about women and their active roles and contribution to the game of football, they can page through a copy of *Demons, Dandelions and Dolls,* immerse themselves in a whole new aspect of the sport that they never knew existed and learn about the women of yesterday who paved the way for the ones who play today.

Chapter 1: The Herstory of Football

According to an article published in New York City's *The Sun*, the first known football contest between women occured in 1896 and was set up as playful entertainment at Sulzer's Harlem River Park before a masked ball for a men's social club. The men were expecting something light and gentle. But the women came to play, *really* play. They weren't there to pussyfoot around for the sake of entertaining men. The game got rough. Police eventually arrived to shut it down. The idea to use women playing football as a gimmick continued and men's teams like the 1926 Frankford Yellow Jackets employed women to play at halftime for entertainment and laughs.

While women continued to play in gimmick matches for the amusement men over the next few decades, many aspired to try and form teams and leagues of their own. In this chapter, we examine the untold histories and stories of those women who were courageous and kickass enough to toss the archaic opinions and views of men aside, bringing both imagery and emotion to the century-old her-story of football, as well as expose the blatant sexism behind their exclusion from it.

Chapter 2: Sid Friedman's Fantastical Football Vision

In the late sixties, the idea of women playing football—or any sport in a professional competitive capacity—was still viewed through skeptical eyes. But women were making inroads in the sports world. According to *The Sport Journal*, "the push for Civil Rights, which culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, helped increase the status of women and minorities." And thus, dribbled into the sports landscape. Women were vying for equality on the playing field as much as they were off of it, from high school to collegiate athletics up to the amateur and professional level.

A talent agent named Sid Friedman, wanting to capitalize on the heels of this growing women sports momentum, put an ad in a Cleveland, Ohio newspaper looking for women who wanted to play tackle football in an organized league. But those women who answered his ad weren't looking to be a part of another "gimmick." They were looking to be a part of a team and to finally be able to play a sport they deeply loved. In this chapter, we take a look at women in the world of sports as Title IX began to take shape and how Friedman's league—initially dubbed the Women's Professional Football League—served as a test run for what would eventually become the NWFL.

Chapter 3: The Reign of The Toledo Troopers

When the NWFL officially became a viable league in 1974, women's professional football was no longer seen as a novelty or a stunt. Launching a team cost about $10,000. Friedman's initial vision, however rudimentary and short-sighted, evolved into something he never imagined—a real, competitive, entertaining and talented football league featuring women. And one team in particular not only demonstrated this on the field to perfection, they embodied it.

From 1971 to 1979, the Toledo Troopers were the winningest team in American football history—men's or women's—with an overall record of 61 wins and four total losses. Between the WNFL and the NWFL, they dominated the gridiron for almost ten years. Key players like half back Linda Jefferson displayed uncanny athletic ability never seen before by a woman at the professional level as she rushed for 1,000 yards or more in five consecutive seasons. Throughout their entire reign, the Troopers won a total of seven back-to-back league championships. In this chapter we'll examine these amazing achievements by Troopers, highlight the stories of other the women who accomplished them.

Chapter 4: Demons Scare Detroit With Their "Bloody Bad Football"

Toledo's biggest rival was the Detroit Demons. It wasn't an on-field rivalry so much — the Demons didn't stand a chance against the Troopers — but there was "no love lost" between the teams, according to Troopers outside linebacker Collette. There were literal brawls on the field — in one case, Troopers player Gloria Jimenez describes using her helmet as a weapon to swing at Demons players and coaches on the sidelines— and in one game, the Troopers were winning 26-0 at halftime so the Detroit team decided to just go home.

But that Detroit team was remarkable: they began as part of Friedman's outfit as a gimmick named the Detroit Fillies. But once the women got a taste of the game, they wanted to be taken seriously as a football team. They rebranded themselves as the Demons and joined the NWFL in its inaugural year. The press was not kind to them. When the team decided to become a serious football operation and many of the original players left, "they left behind a team of not-so-gorgeous women who wanted desperately to play football, and a bunch of patrons who, after seeing one game, never returned," wrote the *Detroit Free Press*. "It seems that once the girls put on the pads and helmets, the pretty, perfumed sight became bloody bad football."

Even still, they were undeterred. Just one year later, the press rebranded them from a fledgling group of terrible football players to a bunch of edgy women trying to subvert patriarchal ideas of femininity. *The Times* of Shreveport, Louisiana ran a story describing a mother of five player who swigged beer in just her shoulder pads in the locker room after the game, players whose boyfriends wouldn't watch them play, and a player who wanted to make sure people knew they may be playing football but they weren't members of the dreaded women's lib movement. They may have been threatening to the status quo in some ways, but not in any *real* way. These women just want to play football, which they did until they folded in 1978.

Chapter 5: These Dallas Bluebonnets Aren't Delicate Flowers

Like the Troopers and the Demons, the Bluebonnets began as part of Friedman's WPFL, in 1972. It was started by four businessmen. A 1974 story in the *Del Rio News Herald* began, "Players in the National Football League who went on strike for higher pay would get little support from a Texas professional football team known as the Dallas Bluebonnets. Each member of the Bluebonnets is paid the same wage: $25 per game, plus $5 a day for expenses when on the road."

Players ranged from 6'0", 230 pound linebacker, Ida Armstrong, to a 110-pound free safety named Karen Tumlinson. Center Super Sugar was featured on the front page of the *Dallas Morning Sunday News*, and the story on the team was also accompanied by a photo of fullback Mary Meserole cutting the hair of a male coach. It read: "Which one is the professional football player? Wrong. She is. He's just the coach." Dallas opened several seasons against the Dandelions in L.A.. The Bluebonnets never managed large crowds—just 300 people showed up to watch them play the legendary Troopers—and they eventually folded in 1976. They also had several players who were on both the Bluebonnets and the Dallas-Fort Worth Shamrocks, as there were two teams close to each other but not enough players to fill both rosters.

Chapter 6: L.A. Dandelions Take The Field

In 1972, a group of six California businessmen put their heads together and decided that Friedman's NWFL was a viable and growing investment, as one of the men—Bob Matthews— had a brother who had already invested in a women's football team in Dallas, the Bluebonnets. So they ponied up $50,000 to start their own West Coast team—the L.A. Dandelions. In order to fill the roster, they took out a few ads in local newspaper. And to their pleasant surprise, more women showed up than expected—120 to be exact.

The roster was whittled down to 35 players. One of those women was Lena Thomas, an 18-year-old law student at California State University. When she showed up for the tryout, she confessed her boyfriend had recently broken up with her because he didn't want to have to explain to everyone why his girlfriend was playing football. There were a lot of misconceptions about the women who played, including speculation of their sexuality. But Thomas didn't care what people thought. In an interview with the *Arcadia Tribune*, she said they weren't there to make a statement about feminism, they were just there to play football. "We never even discussed women's liberation. And we're not out there to prove that women are as good as men."

Lots of women in and around LA apparently felt the same way. By 1975, 65 women showed up to tryout for the eight open roster spots left on the team. The Dandelions played in the NWFL for five seasons.

Chapter 7: Columbus Sets the Pace

Included in the wave of founding teams of the NWFL in that inaugural season were the Columbus, OH Pacesetters. The fact that there were two teams in Ohio—the Pacesetters and the Troopers—is not surprising, considering that Friedman's outfit began in Cleveland. The newspaper article in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* that announced the team's existence declared, "it's no sewing circle" (it's true; a football team is indeed not a sewing circle). It described the game as "a spectacle" and called them "more social clubs with pads and cleats" than football teams. But "some," marveled the writer, "even possessed talent for the game."

The players were unbothered by the sexism lobbied at them by reporters. When asked whether playing football was unladylike, Pacesetters quarterback Lisa Perez retorted, "I don't know. How many ladies are left in the world?" And when a photographer asked to enter the locker room to take photos, Sherry Darling, wife of the assistant coach, joked, "We'll [just] tackle him if he tries anything."

While many of the players distanced themselves from the feminist movements of the time, Julie Sherwood did not. As a lesbian who was not out to her family, Sherwood found it challenging to find places that accepted her; the Pacesetters locker room, however, was that place. Even though Sherwood only practiced with the team before becoming their longtime trainer, the team was foundational for her to gain comfortable with her identity as both a feminist and a lesbian.

Chapter 8: Putting The 'Her' In Houston Herricanes

Janet Merritt was a music teacher at College Park Elementary in Houston. She had heard about the NWFL before and had even been to see the Dallas Bluebonnets play. So when she found out that a team was forming in Houston, she went to the tryout and made roster as a tight end. When she told her students, she said some of them didn't believe her. "The majority of them are excited about it," she told *The Deer Park Progress* in 1977. "But others have the attitude of, I don't believe it until I see it for myself."

The Herricanes also ran into a snag with their name. They used "her" instead of "hur" as a play on the idea of an all-female football team, but a North American Soccer League team launched with the same name shortly after. The Herricanes filed a trademark infringement lawsuit and immediately sought a court order prohibiting the NASL from calling its new Houston team the Hurricanes because it caused confusion. On March 9, 1978, Texas State District Judge Jack Smith denied the Herricanes' request for that injunction.

The Herricanes, known for its small roster and size, were the only team to defeat the dominant Oklahoma City Dolls during the 1979 season, 7-6.

Chapter 9: These Dolls Came to Play

By 1976, the seven inaugurating teams had expanded 14 and the NWFL had three divisions—Eastern, Central, and Western. It was the Oklahoma City Dolls who would eventually hand the undefeated Troopers their first ever loss, six seasons into the latter's existence. Even more shocking than the fact that Toledo had finally been beaten was the fact that the team to do it was brand new. It was 1976 and the OKC Dolls had just taken the field. They were started by Mike and Hal Reynolds, brothers who had read a magazine story about women's football and wanted to start their own. Seventy-five women showed up to the first tryout; about a third made the cut.

Of the game winning play to defeat the Troopers, quarterback Jan Hines said, "I remember rolling out to my left, and I can remember seeing my receiver [Debra Sales], and it was almost like looking down a straw, and I could see only her. And the ball just kind of jumped out of my hands and jumped into hers. And I was never really conscious of throwing it. But I guess I did, 'cause that's what they said in the paper."

The Dolls and Troopers met again in that season's championship, which was ruled a tie after the fact in a decision that's still controversial four decades later—both teams are still equally convinced that theirs was the true winner. The two shared the 1976 NWFL Championship. But in 1978, the Dolls won a championship that was all their own. They played a fourth and final season in 1979, and were awarded the championship when the Columbus team declined to play OKC for the championship. "When we played our last game, we didn't even know it was our last," says Hines. "It was sad." The league consolidated after that season, leaving the Dolls without enough opponents, and the NWFL's structure began to further collapse. The team's four-year record was 32-3-1, posting 1–1–1 in NWFL championship games. In 1981, a local television station made a made-for-TV movie about the team.

Chapter 10: The Babes Of Tulsa

It's fitting that the Oklahoma City Dolls and the Tulsa Babes had a fierce rivalry, since they were established in the same state. But it was a one-sided affair, much like the rivalry between the Detroit Demons and Toledo Troopers. The Dolls were a dominant team and the Babes were not. When head coach Bill Van Burkleo first held tryouts, over 100 women showed up. But the number quickly dwindled when they found out football was rougher than they anticipated. "A lot of them came out thinking it would be a great way to get a little exercise and take a few inches off their waist," Burkleo told the *Daily Oklahoman* in July 1977. "Then the found out that's not what it is and they're gone."

Cindy Turner stuck around. She grew up playing football with her eight brothers and sisters and knew how rough football could get. That's why she loved it. At the time of the tryout, she was a stay-at-home mother and thought she'd give it a try. Her goal wasn't to prove that she was tough, she already knew that. But she wanted to show that women were perfectly capable of playing football. Turner played quarterback for the Babes from 1976 to 1978. They were 6-4 in her first season, but only managed to win a couple of games during her second, which she blames on the coach. "We had a different coach that year," she told the *The Town Talk* in Louisiana. "He was a little fat guy who didn't know what he was talking about."

Turner had to stop playing football due to injury. But she was always proud to be a Babe, if only for two seasons.

Chapter 11: A Pack Of Wolves In San Diego

In 1975, John Mulkey Jr. and Helen Moore paid the $10,000 franchise fee to join the NWFL. With an operating cost of $50,000, they created the San Diego Lobos—the Spanish name for wolves. Tryouts took place at Balboa Stadium in May 1975. Mulkey, who assumed head coaching duties for Lobos, was optimistic about his team and the future of the NWFL. He was often quoted sticking up for his players. "Some women libbers have been cutting us

down," he told the *Chula Vista Star News* in 1975. "But the girls have been sticking up for themselves. I don't think the girls lose any of their feminity by playing football."

Doreen Gutzmer wasn't as concerned about losing her femininity. She was just focused on making the team. The 40-year-old mother of five was one of the oldest women on the Lobos roster, but she still ran a 5.0 in the 40-yard dash. "I know one thing, I'm going to have to work out there because they're looking youth," she told the *Chula Vista Star-News.* "I expected that, of course, so I'll just have to work harder." Gutzmer not only made the team, she started at running back for the next two seasons. The rumor is the entire team like to "wolf whistle" at men while riding the team bus.

Due to financial problems, the San Diego Lobos' players agreed to play without pay in 1976. They folded the following year.

Chapter 12: Fanning Football Flames In San Antonio

The San Antonio Flames started out as the San Diego Roses. But after reorganizing in 1975, they emerged like a phoenix and were renamed the flames. The new name might have had something to do with the fact that a team in Pasadena already had the roses as their mascot. Charles (CR) Robinson coached the Flames during their short-lived existence in the NWFL, and during that time, a variety of women with unique personalities played on his roster.

There was Mary Jane Knipp, a 42-year-old defensive tackle who liked to hit other players, hard. A teacher and a coach, Knipp drove 140 miles (round trip) to nightly practices and didn't miss a single one. Lil Brownfield, a military instructor, was also a dedicated team member. She once played in a game against the Houston Herricanes even though she had the flu. And then there was Krisi Dinkla, who was voted the team's "sex symbol." She had wanted to play tackle football ever since she was in high school, but never got the chance. Now she had the opportunity of a lifetime.

"Two years from now, when this thing is blows wide open, they'll be status symbols," said Flames assistant coach Pat Oaks, during a midseason interview with *The San Antonio Express*. But during their second season in 1976, the Flames had to sponsor bake sales and car washes to raise funds for travel expenses and they weren't able to pay the $1,000 fee to the NWHL the following season in order to keep playing. They were forced to fold.

Chapter 13: The Ultimate Demise of the NWFL

When Sid Friedman initially set out to promote and establish women's professional football, he was trying to make a quick buck. But ironically, he ended up creating a viable women's sports league that lasted for almost a decade. Having done this without substantial support from the media and no television contracts is quite a remarkable feat. At the same time, it was ultimately the league's undoing. Without media attention or any kind of promotion and extensive marketing, almost all the teams in the league had a hard time drawing fans. Many of them functioned in the red and lost money throughout their tenures. While most teams paid their players $25 per game, some couldn't afford to pay a salary at all. A lot of women ended up playing for free and raising money for travel expenses on their own.

Another contributing factor to the league's demise was dissention among the owners. In 1978, LA Dandelions owner Russell Molzahn decided to form his own spinoff league comprised of all the teams located on the West Coast and called it the Western States Women's Professional Football League (WSWPFL). Part of the reason Molzahn decided to branch off was because the NWFL couldn't afford to pay travel expenses for out-of-conference games, and matchups were limited due to proximity. Since the West Coast teams were only playing against each other anyway, it made sense to Molzahn to start another league. Still, the financial burden was too much. And by the early eighties, most—if not all—of the teams in the NWFL and the WSWPFL folded.

This chapters examines the eventual fall of the NWFL, the reasons behind it and what, if anything, could have been done to save it.

Chapter 14: The Enduring Legacy of the NWFL

Fighting against decades upon decades of toxic masculinity in sports is an exhausting task, especially in the world of football. But history has shown that women are determined to keep working hard for a seat in the locker room, the press box, the coach's chair, the front executive office, the owner's box, and even on the field. Today, women are involved in every aspect of football, from the youth to the professional level. The fingerprints of NWFL players are everywhere: Linda Jefferson and the Toledo Troopers have been inducted into halls of fame; Mitchi Collette is a legend in the world of women's tackle football; former NFL Buffalo Bills outside linebacker Marvcus Patton credits his mother, Dandelion Barbara, with teaching him how to play football. And as the inroads to the gridiron keep growing, one can reasonably look back to the NWFL as not only a significant piece of women's football history but a catalyst for all that followed.

This leads us to examine the future of women in football—Will the numbers of young girls playing youth football continue to grow? Will there be specific tackle football leagues created for girls only? Will professional leagues continue to grow and eventually thrive? Will NFL teams have more coaching positions available to women? Will there be something added like the Rooney Rule that will require NFL teams to hire more women? In this final chapter, we include additional quotes and feedback from some of the various women we interviewed for this book as well as conversations with current players, fans, media members, front office execs, etc. Because, in the end, they are the future of women's football.

VII. NWFL Player Quotes

"After watching [my sons] play, I was not satisfied with just being a spectator anymore. I had a secret desire to play football, not just watch it."

— Doreen Gutzmer, 40, San Diego Lobos, Running Back

"We may not hit as hard as men or run as fast, but we're determined. We don't do anything intentionally to hurt anybody, but we do enjoy seeing other players carried off the field. We got six against Dallas and four against Detroit, and none of ours were carried off."

— Lesa Thomas, 18, L.A. Dandelions, Free Safety

"I've always been interested in playing tackle football. But other than flag, there was just never an opportunity. It was the same way with little league baseball. I really wanted to play hardball but everyone said, 'no—you have to play softball.' Women have been given non-contact sports for a long time. I think it's time for a change. Maybe I'm just animalistic, I don't know."

— Lily Wong, 23, Pasadena Roses, Offensive Tackle

"The funnest part was hitting someone. I used to watch football all the time on television and they were so aggressive and everything, and that's what I wanted to be. I wanted to be that aggressive person and contribute to the team."

— Ramella, Toledo Troopers

"I wasn't aware that I was breaking any kind of barriers. But I knew I wanted to get young girls interested in athletics… We were the pioneers. If it wasn't for the things that we did back in the '70s, these women would not have the opportunity to have the things that they have now."

— Linda Jefferson, Toledo Troopers, Halfback

VIII. Sample Chapter

Almost Undefeated: The Forgotten Football Upset of 1976

How the Toledo Troopers, the most dominant football team of all time, met their match.

Mitchi Collette has been playing football, in one form or another, for 46 years. The 5'7" spitfire with grey, spiky hair is the co-owner and coach of the Toledo Reign, a team in the Women's Football Alliance.

Collette is an effective coach in part because she knows firsthand what it's like to be on the gridiron — she understands how to execute a play. The 65-year-old former outside linebacker knows what it feels like to put on the pads and the helmet and slam your full body weight into another person. She knows what it sounds like when bodies connect and the smell of grass and dirt when you're thrown to the ground.

Collette's football story started in 1973, when her friend and coworker at UPS, Linda Jefferson, urged her to try out for the Toledo Troopers. She had no formal football experience, and though 80 other women attended the tryout, Collette was one of 25 that made the cut. What she didn't know then, what she couldn't have known then, was that she would end up as part of one of the most legendary teams in sports history. Collette and the Troopers are regarded as the winningest team in pro football history: Over the course of their nine-year existence, the Troopers were virtually unbeatable. Confirming an official record number is challenging. An upcoming film about the team say 61–4; a website chronicling NWFL teams says 59–4; Steve Guinan, a Troopers historian, says 59–5. What all these numbers have in common is that they're incredibly impressive — and unprecedented in the modern era.

But before they were champions, they were housewives, factory workers, beauticians, mothers — a ragtag group of unlikely sports heroes. A bunch of women who just wanted to play football in the National Women's Football League, the first women's pro football league in the United States. But every legendary team has a blemish — no team is perfect, after all.

While the Toledo Troopers were pretty damn close, the story of their first loss — a crushing overtime defeat in 1976 to the Oklahoma City Dolls, a team that would become the Troopers' nemesis — is almost more interesting that all of the team's wins. What happens when the winningest team finally loses a game?

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Even though women's football leagues have existed prior to the passage of Title IX, the belief that women don't play football continues to persist: At least three semi-professional women's tackle football leagues exist in the United States (including the WFA). Reporters still write the same stories about the novelty of women playing American tackle football — stories that mention the ponytails sticking out their helmets, that talk about how people don't think women play the game, that emphasize that they'll be treated *just like one of the guys* — but it is the same variation on a story for more than 100 years because for much of the history of the sport of American football, the women's game was a gimmick.

In 1896, one of the first known football contests between women occured at Sulzer's Harlem River Park, playful entertainment before a masked ball for a men's social club. The men expected something light and gentle, and the players accordingly wore sailor suits and short dresses. But the women came to play. The game got rough. Police eventually arrived to shut it down, fearful that one of the women would get hurt.

Women playing football persisted as a gag. The 1926 Frankford Yellow Jackets, a Pennsylvania-based NFL team that existed for nearly a decade, organized women's games so as to entertain the crowds during halftime of their games. That sentiment failed to change during the intervening decades: In the aughts, the Legends Football League (formerly the Lingerie Football League) debuted as a pay-per-view alternative to the Super Bowl's halftime show. The concept was simple: People — presumably men — could pay money to watch women play football in their underwear.

The NWFL's roots are similar. In 1967, a Cleveland talent agent named Sid Friedman conceived of a barnstorming operation in which a team of women toured the country

playing men's teams. According to the *Detroit Free-Press,* his idea focused less on football and "more from a show viewpoint." Basically, Friedman reportedly wanted "a Harlem Globetrotters setup." At one point, he allegedly proffered *Hustler* magazine a photo shoot with the league's Detroit franchise. But like the women who came before them, when women answered an ad to join a football team, it was because they wanted to actually play football. The Troopers began in 1971 as part of Friedman's Women's Professional Football League. They were coached by Bill Stout, a former all-city nose guard for DeVilbiss High School in Toledo whose pro football dreams had crumbled. Before he began coaching the Troopers, Stout was a struggling factory worker with a gambling problem. He felt like he was out of options, so he turned to coaching women's football — which he didn't take seriously until he saw the dedication and determination of his charges.

The crowd thought "it's a joke or something," Stout told the *Toledo Blade Sunday Magazine* in 1974. "But when the game starts and they see these girls play, they realize it's a football game. These girls play great football." This, of course, was not always the case. Eight days before Stout was quoted in the *Blade*, a story in the *Detroit Free Press* described the Detroit Demons as playing "bloody bad football" for a crowd who "after seeing one game, never returned."

But by 1974, several teams started talks to break free. A meeting was held in California that year to unite Friedman's WPFL and several other fledging women's football outfits, with the intent to create a single, national league. Thus, the NWFL was born; the inaugural seven teams included those in Toledo and Detroit, and by the start of its third season in 1976, the league had doubled in size to 14 teams and three divisions — Eastern, Southern, and Western. One of those new teams was the Dolls.

According to Andrew D. Linden, an assistant professor of sport studies at California State University Northridge whose research focuses on football and social movements in the 1970s, many of the players did not particularly identify with the women's movement that was going on at the time. (One newspaper article quotes a member of the Detroit Demons telling the reporter that she's not a women's libber.) Even still, the second wave feminist

movement paved the way for these women to be on the gridiron. Essentially, the NWFL existed because the timing was right. “It’s Billie Jean King becoming a cultural icon [with] the Battle of the Sexes in 1973. Title IX passes [in 1972], the fight for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment” is constantly in the press, says Linden. This push for gender equality in sports was unprecedented, and opened the door for a league like the NWFL.

Even still, Dolls quarterback Jan Hines, now 65, says she didn’t tell anyone she was playing football: “In some people’s eyes you were a cult hero. And in other people’s eyes you were just the biggest heathen ever. And I just didn’t want to deal with any of that, so I just didn’t.” Her parents only found out when they saw her on television.

When the Dolls and the Troopers faced off for the first game of the 1976 season, the Troopers were prepared. They’d been training with Stout in Toledo’s Colony Field, which was more of a prairie than a sports field, but they made it work. They practiced 15 hours a week, despite the fact that most of them held down full-time jobs during the day (“Heaven forbid you ever miss a practice,” Collette says). Sometimes 200 spectators would watch them from lawn chairs; there were times cars would drive by and men would shout “Get back in the kitchen!” out the window at them. But the Troopers were undeterred.

Bill Stout “made us champions,” says Collette. “He knew what it would take to become a champion. That’s the kind of coach he was. He always wanted perfection.” Collette tells a story to demonstrate what kind of coach Stout was. It was the first game of either the 1974 or 1975 season, and the Troopers played the Columbus Pacesetters. On the sidelines, Stout was beside himself. All he did was yell at them, berate them, throw a fit, and make a scene for the entire first half. At halftime, the team headed into the locker room. “And he’s screaming at us,” Collette says. Finally, one of the Troopers looked up at Stout and says, “But coach, we’re beating them forty to nothing.”

Yeah, says Stout, “but you look like shit doing it.” After the game, which the Troopers won by double-digits, Stout fired all the referees. He was mad that the officials had failed to

properly call penalties on his team, asking, “How do you expect me to have a perfect team if you can’t flag the mistakes my team does?”

Stout was the kind of coach that transformed a team of athletes with no football experience into seven-time world champions. And versus the Dolls on Saturday, August 21, 1976, the Troopers set out to do what they’d done all 28 times they’d taken the field for the past five seasons: win.

The Oklahoma City Dolls were the new kids in town that season. The team was the brainchild of Hal and Mike Reynolds, who had read a magazine story about a women’s football team and wanted to start their own. Seventy-five women showed up to the first tryout; more than a third made the cut. The Dolls had already played two games that season, against the Dallas Bluebonnets, and won them both. Despite the Troopers’ reputation, the Dolls felt confident.

“[That the Troopers were undefeated was] like all we ever heard,” says Hines. “Everybody knew that they had started the league and everybody knew they’d never been beaten.” Not only that, she says, the Dolls were concerned about facing Linda Jefferson, the Troopers’ star halfback. At 5’4”, 120-pounds, Jefferson, Collette says, “could run fast and stop on a dime and go into a different direction like you would not believe.” She had rushed for more than 1,000 yards in each of her first five seasons. The year before, Billie Jean King’s *WomenSports* magazine named Jefferson its “Woman Athlete of the Year,” and she would become the first Black woman inducted into the Semi-Pro Football Hall of Fame. She’s also one of only four women in the American Association Football Hall of Fame. At the time of her retirement in 1978, Jefferson had scored more touchdowns than Walter Payton, O.J. Simpson, and Jim Brown.

The week prior to the game between the Troopers and the Dolls, the match had been advertised in the local paper: “Okla. City’s Newest Professional Sport!” the adverts screamed, next to a black-and-white illustration of a smiling, helmetless football player whose long hair appeared to be billowing in the wind. The advertising worked. Three

thousand two hundred fans forked over the $3.50 for a ticket ($1.50 if they were a child), though that still left a lot of empty seats at Taft Stadium in Oklahoma City, which officially held more than 18,000 people. Hines says the fanfare around the game created “a big event atmosphere,” full of people who had shown up to watch the Troopers and to see what this new league was all about. Most of the crowd likely showed up because, at the time, women’s football was a novelty and they wanted to gawk.

The first half was scoreless. The closest either team got to scoring was in the second quarter, when the Troopers managed a first and goal at the 10-yard line. Three plays later, the Troopers made it to the two-yard line, but when quarterback Pam Hardy attempted a bootleg play — in which the quarterback runs with the ball in the direction of either sideline behind the line of scrimmage — on fourth down, she was stopped by the Dolls’ right linebacker, Cindy Herron. Meanwhile, the Dolls offense never made it past Toledo’s 27-yard line in the first half.

After a bad snap by the Dolls halfway through the third quarter, the Troopers finally struck: a five-yard rush by Jefferson finally put the Troopers on the board. After a 22-year-old hairdresser named Gloria Jimenez kicked the extra-point conversion, Toledo led 8–0 (under NWFL rules, teams could net two points after touchdowns, as opposed to one).

“I was a horrible kicker,” Jimenez says on a recent phone call from her home in Toledo. “For me to make that extra point was really a big deal because that kept us in the ballgame.” Jimenez, who is now 65, joined the Troopers in 1973 at the urging of her friend. She had virtually no experience with organized sports at the time. What she did have, however, was five brothers. “My dad always used to say, ‘I’ve got five sons and my daughter plays football.’ … I had more trophies than all my brothers put together.”

The Dolls immediately answered with a seven-play, 58-yard drive that ended with quarterback Hines rushing for 21 yards to score a touchdown. When Dolls kicker Mary Bluejacket’s extra-point attempt was blocked, it appeared the Troopers would pull out another victory. But two minutes later, trailing 8–6, Dolls defensive back Tina Bacy tackled

Jefferson for a two-yard loss; then came a six-yard loss for the Troopers. And, with 11 minutes remaining in regulation, a group of Dolls tackled Toledo punter Barbara Church in the end zone for a safety, tying the game at 8–8. The score would remain that way until the end of regulation.

Hines credits Bacy's defense with the Dolls' success that day. "She was tall and slender, and she was able to shoot the gap on the deep ends of line," Hines recalls. "And she was an extremely disruptive player. She caused a lot of problems for them when they went off end. She caused fumbles." Bacy also held Jefferson to less than 100 rushing yards for the first time in her career — and it was likely the only game she ever played for the Dolls. "I don't remember her before that game and I don't remember her after that game," says Hines. "But I remember her that game, and she was huge."

Reflecting on it now, Collette says that the Troopers innately realized they had met their match. "We were a small team as far as our average height was 5'4" and our average weight was 140. We were tiny, but we were mighty," says Collette. "When we went to Oklahoma City, their average height was 5'7.5" and their average weight was 195. They were good and so were we."

More than that, says Jimenez, is that the Dolls were playing on their home turf, and they had a sideline full of players. The Troopers showed up with far fewer players, meaning that many of their players played both sides or, in Jimenez's case, hardly came off the field at all. "That was the most beat-up I've ever been after a game," she says. "The team was very good."

Being on a relatively new team, Hines wasn't familiar with the league rules. After regulation ended with a tie score, Hines recalls saying to the referee, "Oh wow, I get to tell my grandkids that we tied." And he said, "No, you don't. You have to play sudden death." That's when Hines says her adrenaline spiked. "The tie end was kind of OK and that was something to brag about and tell people about, that you tied this team — but I just absolutely did not want to lose."

OKC received the ball to begin overtime and it didn't take long for them to pull out the victory. On their second play, they ran a hook-and-lateral, where Hines flicked a pass to right end Charlotte Gordon, who then lateraled the ball to halfback Doris Stokes for a 35-yard play. Three plays later, Hines ran a version of a flea flicker play, in which the defensive team is tricked into thinking the offense is going to run the ball when they really intend to pass it. Hines completed a perfect 19-yard pass to left end Debra Sales — the only pass reception of the night for the 5'5" player. Thanks to some unconventional play-calling, the Dolls won, 14–8.

"I remember rolling out to my left, and I can remember seeing my receiver [Sales], and it was almost like looking down a straw, and I could see only her," says Hines. "And the ball just kind of jumped out of my hands and jumped into hers. And I was never really conscious of throwing it. But I guess I did, 'cause that's what they said in the paper." Hines thought they still had to try to kick the extra point, and didn't realize the game was over, despite the fans she said rushed the field after the touchdown.

Even more shocking were OKC coach Mike Reynolds's comments about his team in a 2000 interview. "Most of the girls who were with the Dolls had previously played some kind of sport, but they didn't like to practice and they weren't used to the discipline needed for football," he told *The Daily Oklahoman*. "We had to start from scratch. Most of the Dolls had never gotten in a [football] stance or hit anybody before or ever gotten tackled. Once in a while there'd be some crying going on." (Hines disputes this characterization; she was a collegiate softball player — a member of the first softball team at University of Oklahoma, made possible by Title IX — and says most of the other players were lifelong athletes, as well. "It takes a certain kind of person that can take a hit and get up and do it again," she says.)

For the Troopers, the loss was crushing. Collette describes it as "devastation." They didn't expect to start their season losing for the first time in six seasons to a brand-new team. The way they saw it, they weren't training five days a week in the middle of a prairie, putting their bodies on the line and risking injury for essentially no money (they were only paid for

two or three seasons, according to Collette, and their pay ranged from $10–$40 per week) just to lose to a group of women who had just shown up on the scene.

“The look on all my coaches faces was like, ‘Tell me that didn’t just happen,’” says Collette. “I remember getting on the bus and going back to the hotel and a lot of the players that had been there before me, they were crying. Because we never knew how it was to lose.”

Jimenez, too, remembers the crying. “It was total disbelief, total shock. It was a long way to travel to lose your first game in your entire career,” she says now. “It was a long ride home … a lot of crying, a lot of heartbreak.”

There was one thing that the entire team agreed on: There was no time to grieve this loss. They had a season to continue, and they were determined not to lose again — and they didn’t, winning their next 10 games, as well as their division. Meanwhile, the Dolls steamrolled their own schedule, losing only one game the rest of the season, to the Dallas Bluebonnets. Oklahoma City then beat Dallas in a playoff game to win the Southern Division.

That meant that the Troopers would get what they’d wanted all season: a chance at redemption. Toledo and Oklahoma City would meet in the NWFL championship game. “We wanted that game,” says Collette. She says it one more time for effect. “And [Stout] pulled out all the stops and was going to make sure that we had that game. It was a bloodbath.”

But for as much as the Troopers wanted revenge, the Dolls wanted to make their own statement. It was an “‘I beat you once, I’m gonna beat you again’ kind of thing” for them, says Collette. “I mean, it was a *game*.”

It was, indeed, a close game. The game was declared a tie, 13–13, and the teams shared the 1976 title. But the record book doesn’t tell the whole story.

“I’ll tell you exactly what happened,” Collette says. “It wasn’t a tie.”

The game is burned so permanently into Collette's memory that she can recall the date (December 11, 1976) and the weather (below freezing) without being asked. The field of the University of Toledo's Glass Bowl Stadium was covered in snow, and the turf had to be cleared off before play could begin. Collette describes it clearly: "I'll never forget this day as long as I live."

What's not in dispute: That Jefferson scored all of the Troopers points and rushed for 137 of the team's 140 rushing yards. That the Troopers scored two touchdowns, missed the extra point after their first touchdown, and made the conversion after the second touchdown. That Dolls' 5'8" fullback Frankie Neal scored both touchdowns and that the team missed the PAT on the second touchdown.

What is in dispute: the result of the PAT after the Dolls' touchdown in the first quarter. Referees ruled it no good on the field, which Collette still insists was the right call. According to Hines, though, one ref ruled it good while another did not, and she remembers the ball clearly going through the uprights.

OKC believed that their kicker Bluejacket's kick was good, and they filed a dispute with the league. "Obviously the call had an effect on the outcome of the game, or I wouldn't have filed the protest," Dolls coach Mike Reynolds told *The Daily Oklahoman*. "It was very obvious to us [the coaches] and the players that the kick was good."

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The two teams met again in the 1977 NWFL championship, which the Troopers won 25–14. The Dolls went on to win another championship, this one all their own, in 1978 — a season in which Hines says they averaged 35 points a game and allowed just eight points all season. They played a fourth and final season in 1979, and were awarded the championship when the Columbus team declined to play OKC for the championship. "When we played our last game, we didn't even know it was our last," says Hines. "It was sad." The league consolidated after that season, leaving the Dolls without enough opponents, and the

NWFL's structure began to further collapse. The team's four-year record was 32-3-1, posting 1–1–1 in NWFL championship games.

Meanwhile, the Troopers mostly kept winning until 1979, when financial difficulties sunk the team, though Collette is still unclear of the exact reasons. But her football career was far from over. In 1983, a new NWFL team — the Furies — formed in Toledo. Collette and Jimenez both jumped at the chance to play again, which they did until 1989, when the rest of league pivoted to flag football. "Toledo was just still standing there going, 'But we still want to play [tackle] football," she says, but "the league folded and no one really played again" until the end of the 1990s.

Jimenez describes being on the Troopers as "the greatest thing I ever did in my life. … I got to know a lot of great people. … It changed my life, it made me a leader, and I took that into my own role as my lifestyle when I went out into the world." In 1983, the Troopers were recognized by the Pro Football Hall of Fame as the "winningest" team of all time, and in 2014 they were the first inductees into the Women's Football Foundation Hall of Fame.

The Dolls were equally important to Hines. She describes her time with the team as "the best four years" of her life. Being a quarterback afforded her leadership qualities that she took into her off-the-field career: she worked as a line worker at Western Electric in Oklahoma City, and she was promoted into a supervisory role because of the assumption that she could lead a team, like she did for all those years as quarterback of the Dolls. She would eventually ascend to the level of director at Lucent Technologies, "just a hair short of vice president."

Both Collette and Hines would have kept playing indefinitely if they could have, but the political climate of the era more than explains the dearth of women's football leagues in the late 1980s and 1990s, says Linden. The '80s were a time of Reagan-era rollbacks of the civil rights progress of the previous decades. In 1984, there was a pushback on Title IX that specified only certain programs, like financial aid offices, would qualify to receive federal funding, and athletic departments weren't included (this was reversed in 1988 after a

congressional override). All of this contributed to a culture in which women explicitly understood that they didn't belong in male-dominated spaces like the gridiron. *The Women's Football Encyclopedia* refers to the absence of teams from the late 1980s until 1999, when the roots of the Women's Professional Football League were planted, "a deep freeze" on full-contact women's football.

In the early aughts, though, there was an explosion of teams exploring the tackle football fold, and the timing seemed right for Collette to step back into the world of football — but this time with her own team, the Toledo Reign. Seventeen years into her coaching career, Collette is a legend in the world of women's football; the Reign have had success in the WFA, winning division championships in 2012, 2014, and 2015, and a regional championship in 2017. Collette is the player she was and the coach she is because she learned from the best. Because she learned how to win, but also, because she learned what it felt like to lose.

Collette occasionally thinks of that championship game. The story did not end after the Dolls officially challenged the final score. According to Guinan, the Troopers historian who has written a screenplay and a book on the team, how the game went from a Troopers' victory to a tie related to video footage, which has since gone missing. Guinan has spent years trying to recover that footage, to be able to see for himself what NWFL commissioner Deborah Wright — a former Trooper — saw that compelled her to anoint co-champions.

Due to the snowy conditions on the field that day, the refs couldn't establish a position to clearly see whether the kick was good or not. Guinan says the PAT was waved off on the field, but the Dolls — and some of the Troopers — swore they saw the ball go through the uprights. Dolls coach Reynolds filed his dispute, and video footage surfaced that was apparently undeniable. (According to Hines, a local OKC television crew had traveled with them to Toledo and it was their footage that showed the successful PAT.) So undeniable that even a former Trooper felt she had to do something.

At the time, there was no protocol for replay, because in the 1970s it wasn't yet a thing (the NFL introduced instant replay formally in 1986). Through his research, Guinan discovered

that Wright felt she had to take action, and that was to declare the Troopers and the Dolls co-champions. Had the call on the field been correct, the Dolls would have won that game, but without a clearly outlined protocol for how to proceed, Wright did what she felt was, well, right.

“I don’t accept that,” says Jimenez. She is adamant. “I feel that we won. The end of the game, we won on the scoreboard. I don’t think you can just turn around … and go, well, it’s a tie now.”

Hines believes that the refs rigged the game for the Troopers, since they were local officials who knew the players by first name and had followed their history-making ascent in the NWFL. She places no blame on the members of the Troopers themselves. After a co-championship was declared, the Dolls were given a small trophy, but coach Reynolds paid out of pocket to have a duplicate trophy made, which looked identical to the one the Troopers received.

According to Collette, she asked Stout, her coach, about what happened years later. They went to dinner shortly before he passed away in 2012, and Collette’s story is a little bit different. “I went, ‘Coach, don’t you remember? I was the outside linebacker. I was there, I watched the ball get kicked over the upright — outside,’” Collette recalls telling him. “Oh, I know,” he told her. So why did it end up being called a tie? “He says, ‘I don’t remember, I think I just got tired of … them whining about [it].’”

Collette doesn’t much care what the history books say, though. “In my eyes, in my heart, I know that we won.”

Just don’t tell that to Hines. When asked if the Dolls won that game, she’s clear: “Oh, absolutely.”

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