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### Women pay price to follow football dreams

**The women of the Chicago Force, an 8-year-old football franchise, spend hundreds of dollars for the joy of practicing three nights a week and playing a violent game to the detriment of their bodies. First in a series.**

By David Murray

Special to the Tribune

April 11, 2010 This is supposed to be the season. After heartbreaking playoff losses the last two years, the 8-year-old Chicago Force is among the favorites to win the Independent Women's Football League championship.

But as the team wrapped up its last practice before the April 3 opener, it wasn't exactly the 1960s Green Bay Packers breaking training camp. The women had bruised one another in practice, some players still were uncertain of their assignments, and coaches were apprehensive about some of their players -- not to mention the seemingly infinite loose ends that attend semi-pro football.

"Wear your black jerseys Saturday," team co-owner Kim Duffey instructed. And be at the old Winnemac Stadium two and a half hours before kickoff.

Every year, about 60 Chicago women pay several hundred dollars for the privilege of being screamed at by coaches, practicing three nights a week, studying game film and playing a violent game -- often to the detriment of their careers and their bodies.

Two years ago, defensive lineman Megan Finnegan tore the ACL in her right knee before the first game. Last year, also in spring training, she tore her left ACL. She's back this year for one more try, but don't tell her mother; she doesn't know.

Undersized backup receiver Kristen Mertens barely played last year, even before she broke a finger in practice. But little No. 33 is back, chinstrap buckled and ready if she's ever called .

Veteran linebacker Jennifer Benson is prone to mental mistakes. She drew so much obscenity-laced criticism from coaches that she considered not coming back. By the end of the season, her self-esteem had taken a hit. She reminded herself that in her real life, "I'm a competent professional." As the offseason wore on and coaches' rebukes wore off,

her desire returned.

And running back Cat Converse commutes -- from Kalamazoo, Mich.

"I love to hit people," she says. "I can't give it up."

Kicking it off

No one was so single-mindedly sanguine about the opener against the Wisconsin Warriors, an eventual 42-0 victory for the Force.

Starting cornerback Katie Romano was one of several players out of the lineup with an injury. At practice, she sat on the bench, icing a Technicolor bruise on her lower back.

"The doctor won't clear her to play Saturday," co-owner Duffey tells co-owner Linda Bache.

Some veterans were smarting from demotions or reassignments. Last year, Martha Dantuma made the IWFL All-Star team as a fast and rangy wide-receiver. But after too many drops in practice this spring, she moved to safety. She's still trying to figure out how to get her tall body low enough to tackle.

Bache was ragged from a desperate, last-minute scramble to find a new field when last year's facility suddenly became unavailable. It was just one more object in her perennial logistical and financial juggling act that went worst-case last year when the team made the playoffs but had to travel a budget-busting road trip to Seattle.

"We need to host the playoffs this year," Bache says grimly.

And the usually voluble head coach John Konecki seemed comparatively distracted and distant.

He has a new baby at home. With budget cuts in education, his job as a teacher at Crete-Monee High School has been stressful. He's trying to change his coaching persona, because his high-intensity act was intimidating some players to the point "they were actually regressing," he says.

He admits to being "scared" of the first game, against the Warriors, a second-tier IWFL team that nevertheless scored 20 points on the Force last year.

"They've had a year to prepare for us," Konecki points out. And as with any opener, there were untested rookies and untested team chemistry. "You never know what you're going to get," Konecki says.

But that's not exactly true -- which is the main reason the Force is expected to vie for the IWFL title. All-star quarterback Sami Grisafe is returning for her fourth season, and a

veteran offensive line is largely intact. The defense is anchored by two six-year-veteran captains: linebacker Tricia Charbonneau, back after sitting out last season with a broken foot; and defensive end Amanda Malsch, known for her vast wingspan and for playing games in black eyeliner, black mascara and eye shadow the color of which, she says, "depends on my mood."

Who are these women?

Many are former college jocks whose competitive itch recreational sports just didn't scratch. And most harbored an almost unconscious desire to play tackle football. The most common story is the oh-my-God-where-do-I-sign-up moment when each heard there was a tackle football team for women.

Bache's experience is typical.

She had played softball at Michigan State in the 1980s and flag football in Chicago in the 1990s. When she went out for the tackle team, she thought she'd be disqualified for being 40, so when she scrawled "1962" for the year of her birth, "I made the 2 look like an 8." She starred at running back and safety for six years before retiring in 2008.

And she paid for the opportunity. A little bit amazing, yes?

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Expanding league goes international

Their starting quarterback down with an injury, the Wisconsin Warriors fell to the Force 42-0 in Week One of the Independent Women's Football League.

Their first two home game -- the Force plays at Jorndt Field, near the corner of Foster and Damen Avenues -- are against teams that occupy the official second-tier in the IWFL.

Formed a decade ago, the IWFL has grown from four teams to 46, 19 of which are in a top tier from big markets -- Portland, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Seattle, Chicago, Houston, Kansas City, Dallas, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, Washington, D.C., Miami, Atlanta and Baltimore.

Remaining teams generally draw smaller rosters from smaller markets, although inter-tier games are occasionally competitive.

In all, more than 2,000 women play in the IWFL each season. This summer, an elite squad, including Force players, are traveling to Stockholm to play in a first-of-its-kind international tournament, against teams from Sweden, Austria, Canada, Finland and Germany.

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