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Force behind the Force

Linda Bache is the relentless owner of the women's football team, but how long can she keep it up?

By David Murray, Special to the Tribune

10:55 PM CDT, May 29, 2010 For the Chicago Force, Linda Bache serves as co-owner, general manager, head of marketing and public relations, chief financial officer, high priestess and hard-driving field boss.

And until two years ago, the 48-year-old was also one of the team's fiercest players.

On a recent bus ride to play the Wisconsin Wolves in Madison, she was talking wistfully to a reporter about her playing days. Although she quit due to post-concussion syndrome—she's still so sound-sensitive she wears earplugs, and any rigorous exercise gives her massive headaches—she says she still lies in bed at night running a mental highlight film of "tackles and picks and fumble recoveries" she made during her six years as a Force safety.

This year, she spins a football in her hands on the sideline at practice and wonders whether the Force will be her life's work, or whether, in the end, running the team is just holding the cold hand of her dead football dreams.

"I thought that would begin to show itself this year," she says.

As the day wears on, it does.

After the players climb off the bus, Bache tells defensive coordinator Anthony Stone that his defense doesn't know how to tackle.

Even though his defense has given up only 12 points all year, the team always needs to maximize its place in the murky Massey Ratings formula, which the Independent Women's Football League uses to rank teams with similar records: points allowed and margins of victory often determine what teams host playoff games, and which teams travel.

Buying several dozen last-minute airfares for a West Coast road game can bust Bache's low-six-figure season budget.

So even with the Force on the way to trouncing the Wolves 49-0, Bache is pacing the sideline, eviscerating players for physical errors, for mental errors—and sometimes for the emotional error of not being as competitive and downright mean as she is. A common sideline scene: An opposing player lies prone on the field, someone yells, "take a knee, ladies," all the players kneel as a sign of goodwill toward the injured player, and Bache mutters to no one in particular, "God, I hate that." To her way of thinking, knocking an opponent out of the game is a good thing, simple as that.

And yet, this is the same woman who cajoles, jokes and hugs her way to just about every one of the sponsorship dollars and public relations partnerships that keep the team afloat.

Bache says the Force breaks even financially: It costs about \$100,000 to operate, and they take in about that amount through fees and sponsorships and fundraisers.

She doesn't do every administrative duty. Co-owner Kim Duffey, also an ex-player, handles the considerable logistics: uniforms and equipment, travel, game day operations and fundraising activities. She and Bache "both deal with numerous personal issues that players need assistance with," she says.

Duffey also serves as the liaison to the IWFL, a role that sometimes puts her in conflict with her co-owner.

Bache, whose day job is as a sales account manager for a fuel company, gives a smiling saleswoman's lip-service to the greater good of the IWFL: It tells girls they can do anything they want, it tells the world that there is nothing—not even tackle football—that women cannot do.

But while those ideas sell sponsorships and sway sentimental reporters, they don't put butts in the bleachers, they don't pay airfares and they sure don't win ballgames. When Bache looks to the future, she frets. About the next game, a crucial season-ending road game against the defending champion Kansas City Tribe. About next season. And about the sustainability of the whole enterprise.

Even though she proudly believes the Force is one of the best-run teams in the league, she says, "The organization deserves more."

But then she imagines leaving, and watching the organization fade.

"And I wonder," she says, shaking her head, "How will that feel? How will that feel?"

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