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Women's tackle football: Is it worth it?

Players evaluate their roles after playoff loss

By David Murray, Special to the Tribune

1:02 PM CDT, June 19, 2010 The Chicago Force started the season 7-0. Two weeks and two losses later their season was suddenly finished — and they had a long, lonely trip home after losing in the playoffs to the Dallas Diamonds 27-20.

"Sleeping in a chair for six hours at the Dallas airport after being beaten up, losing, drinking away the pain and being awake for 24 hours is not the way to start a week," wrote one player on Facebook.

As the week wore on, the players began making softer sounds in their Facebook posts, about missing their teammates already. And they found time to answer a reporter's questions about what the season, and the sport, meant to them.

Rookie cornerback Melissa Whyms refers to herself as "Assassin," but she's also the mother of a 6-year-old son. Early in the season she found herself questioning her decision to play with the Force. "Not being home to help him with homework, to prepare him dinner, giving him a bath, and just time to relax and bond began to weigh heavy on me," she says.

By the end of the season, she realized they had bonded through football and their mutual love of the sport. (He plays pee-wee football.) "I think that both me and my son have a newfound respect for each other," she says, "on and of the field."

For other players, the absorbing nature of the game is sweet respite from outside pressures.

Sixth-year linebacker Tricia Charbonneau is an architect who juggles deadlines and budgets and contractors all day at work. She uses football to "give myself the luxury" of switching work off. Her season over, she found herself swamped at work. "All my days of leaving work early for practice have finally caught up with me!"

Head coach John Konecki felt the same way during a year when his days were spent fearing the impact of looming budget cuts on his job as an administrator at Crete-Monee High School and dealing with the premature birth of his second son. Football practice and film study and games were a break from all that: "To be honest, trying to figure out how

to win football games was relatively easy."

Some players say football actually helps them in their daily lives.

"Law and taxes are similar" to football, says tax attorney and defensive lineman Kim Marks. "It is all about strategy and how you choose to deploy the tools at your disposal. And no matter how complex something I am working on may seem, I always remind myself that it cannot possibly be more complicated than breaking down game film."

Though some of these players plan to return next year, others will retire. They're left to reflect on what football has meant to them — and what it will have meant to them if they never play again.

Receiver Kristen Mertens hasn't decided whether to return after two seasons, but she thinks of herself as a pioneer. "I talk to my grandma and she tells me how, when she was young, girls didn't really play any sports," she says. "And here we are, a small amount of girls in the world playing a violent 'boys' sport."

Veteran defensive end Amanda Malsch echoes that, telling a story from a few years ago, when her mother met an older woman at the gym. "My mom started talking about my experience with the Chicago Force Women's Football team — the injuries, struggles, financial obligations, the push for our league to make it as a serious sport."

The woman told Malsch's mom to tell Malsch to "stick with it," and she knew of what she spoke.

"As it turned out, her name was Ellie Dapkus and she was a member of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball Team and played for the 1943 Racine Belles. Obviously my mom was floored and honored when Ellie pulled out a baseball card from her purse, signed it and asked her to give it to me. I still keep it on my desk at home as a reminder of how I might feel 40 years from now — that it was all worth it."

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