

# Force stronger than ever in its 10th year

BY ROSS FORMAN

The Chicago Force celebrates its 10th-anniversary season this spring, boasting its most talented and experienced team ever.

The team has more than 40 returning women from last year's 9-1 team, including many with four years of experience or more.

"It's hard to predict from year to year how a team will develop," said Linda Bache, the Force's owner and general manager. "Even with this many veterans, you don't always know what you're going to get from them. Everybody wants to win a championship—the question is, what is each person willing to do to make it happen?"

"It's about sacrifice and commitment every day. It's about wanting it more than your opponent every day. It's not yet clear how badly these players want it."

The Force—with a combined 68-20 record over the past nine seasons—kick off the eight-game regular season Saturday, April 14, in Kansas City.

"We are excited about this year's team; we have tremendous potential," said Bache, 49, who lives in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood. "There's no substitute for experience, and that is the strength of this year's team. We feel confident about our experience, our coaching staff, and the overall talent level of our returning veterans and first-year players."

The schedule is Bache's biggest concern, she said.

"We have games on six consecutive weekends before we get a bye," Bache said. "We have two new teams on our schedule this year, the Cleveland Fusion and Columbus Comets, [and] both are teams that have won division titles and gone

to the playoffs."

Plus, the Force play host to the St. Louis Slam May 5. The Force home game against St. Louis in 2011 was the most physical game of the season, Bache said: "It will be critical to keep players as healthy as possible as we won't have a break until Memorial Day weekend."

The Force home opener is April 21 against Columbus, with kickoff set for 5 p.m. All home game will be played at Evanston Township High School's Lazier Field, 2285 Church St.

"We have a difficult schedule and it really starts out with a bang. We open on the road against our arch rival, the Kansas City Tribe," Bache said. "The last four seasons, each of our games [against the Tribe] has been won by the home team, so we'll be trying to break that pattern. They're a very fast, disciplined, talented team. Beating them on their home field will be an enormous task."

The Force ran the regular season in 2011 undefeated for the third time in organization history. Chicago then defeated Pittsburgh in the first-round of playoffs, but lost to the defending champion Boston Militia. Chicago ended 9-1.

"It was particularly difficult to accept the loss because we did not play well," Bache said. "It's one thing to lose to a better team; it's another to feel like you had a bad game at the worst possible time. Boston went on to win the championship for the second year in a row. They are an exceptional team, but I can't help but wonder what the outcome might have been if we had played our best."

The Force lost four key members of the 2011 roster: outside linebacker Ro Soper, wide receiver Albi Zhubi, running back Jessica Springer and



The Chicago Force in a 2011 game. Photo by Ross Forman

defensive end Angie Bandstra.

Zhubi, now living in New York, has been a perennial award-winner and top contributor, particularly on offense. Soper, the 2010 team MVP, had to retire for medical reasons, Bache said. Springer was the Eastern Conference Offensive Player of the Year. Bandstra was coming off her best season, Bache said. "We will miss these four players both on and off the field."

The top two newcomers to the team were previously core members of the Detroit Demolition, a Force opponent during 2006-2008. April Fowlkes and Porcha Ferguson were both top players for the Demolition, so, "we're very happy to have them on the Force," Bache said. "We're also very pleased with the development of our rookies, particularly Stephanie Precourt, Mary Choules, Chaya Barba, Elisha Okrey, Jen Kelly and Lisa Kadelak."

## Here's a detailed look at the 2012 Chicago Force:

—Offense: "I don't know if our offense will be quite as dominant or explosive as last year, but we're going to score a lot of points," Bache said. "With the amount of talent and experience we have, I think that we'll be very effective."

—Quarterback Sami Grisafe: She was the Offensive co-MVP last year and is entering her sixth season with the Force. She is, arguably, the most accomplished QB in women's football. "We're fortunate to have that kind of talent and experience at such an important position," Bache said. "But Sami's music career is taking off, so she will not be able to participate in all of our games this season. We have several of our top athletes taking reps at QB, such as Jeanette Gray, Ashley Berggren, Elizabeth Strozinsky and Kari Pfeifer. All have shown promise and will be capable of stepping in when Sami is touring."

—Running game: Melissa Smith has returned to the team and is the starting running back. She last played in the 2008 championship game. "Melissa is a powerhouse and it's a huge asset to have her back on the field for us. She is a gifted player and a selfless teammate," Bache said.

—Passing game: "We feel very good about our passing game," Bache said. Wide receiver Jeanette Gray is back and she led the league in receptions last year and was the team's 2011 Offensive co-MVP. Several other key veteran receivers are Brandi Srda, Ashley Berggren, Trish Harper, Martha Dantuma, Elizabeth Strozinsky and Dana Vermilye.

—Coaching staff: John Konecki is back for his fourth season as head coach and offensive coordinator. "He is extremely talented, very dedicated and one of the most respected coaches in the sport," Bache said. Konecki boasts a 33-7 record with the Force, and he also coached the women's Team USA to the gold medal in the 2010

World Championship in Sweden. The Force has a new defensive coordinator: Adam Lewandowski. "Coach Lew is a great motivator and teacher, and he is intent upon returning the Force defense to its previous glory," Bache said.

—Team defense: "I'm expecting our defense to be much improved this season," Bache said. "The first five or six years of our existence, the Force dominated opponents by virtue of a gang-buster defense. That dominance had diminished the last couple years. We've made defense a top priority and we're willing to sacrifice in others areas if necessary to carry that through."

—Team outlook: "This team can go as far as it decides to go," Bache said. "I know that we're capable of going to the championship, but ability is only a part of what a championship requires. Adversity will reveal what kind of team we will be. Starting the season with a hostile road game against one of the top teams in the league will provide significant adversity right out of the gate. If we can meet that challenge, we'll grow as a team by leaps and bounds. I'm very excited about our potential, as are all the coaches and staff members."

**Note:** The Chicago Force won its season-opener Saturday, April 14, defeating the host Kansas City Tribe 21-14. Chicago struck first, but the Tribe quickly answered and it was 7-6 after the first quarter. The Force regained the lead early in the second quarter when Brandy Hatcher scored on a 5-yard run and the team then converted a two-point attempt. It was 14-7 Chicago at half-time, and 21-7 at the end of three quarters. The Tribe cut the lead to seven with 1:52 remaining to play, but Chicago held down the stretch to secure the victory.

## Bears tackle to help open Force season

The women's full-tackle football team the Chicago Force will hold its home opener Saturday, April 21, versus the Columbus Comets at 5 p.m. at the newly renovated Lazier Field, located at Evanston Township High School, 2285 Church St., Evanston.

Chicago Bears defensive tackle Israel Idonije will toss the coin at the opener.

There are eight games total in the season, not including three rounds of playoffs, a conference championship and the national championship, which will be broadcast from Pittsburgh Aug. 4 on ESPN.

Linda Bache, the owner and general manager of the team, stated, "This is the most experienced and talented team we've ever had. We are working very hard in hopes that we will be one of the two teams to make it to the championships on ESPN."

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