

Pigskins and Pigtails:

A Winning Combination



Everybody knows that Philly is a 'football town'. Cut us open, we all bleed green and white. We've grown up hearing the stories of "Concrete Charlie" Chuck Bednarik, Tommy MacDonald, and the Miracle at the Meadowlands. We learned that football is "a game of inches" and on "Any given Sunday...". You know how it goes. Come October, all over the city players of every age will be stepping onto football fields and dreaming that one-day they'll don the green and white and catch the winning pass in the Super Bowl. But, look closer. The times, they are a changing. Is that a ponytail I see hanging out the back of that helmet? Did I just hear that coach say, "Atta girl?" Yes, young girls are catching the football bug. Long gone are the days of "sugar and spice and everything nice." These days, young girls want to be the next Donovan McNabb, Brian Westbrook or Brian Dawkins. While the girls may have the same dreams, we all know football isn't like golf. There is no Michelle Wie who's going to get an invite to the Eagles training camp at Lehigh. So, what's a girl who wants to 'play like the pros' have to do to get in the game? Fortunately, there is an answer: the Philadelphia Phoenix women's tackle football team.



Founded in 2003, the Philadelphia Phoenix (formerly the Liberty Belles from 2001-2002) is the Philly entry in the National Women's Football Association (NWFA). The home games are played at Northeast High School. The NWFA, which was created in 2001, consists of thirty-four teams from cities across the country, with four more expansion teams joining the league for the 2008 season. From April through July, these teams compete to earn the right to play in the Championship Game. Philadelphia is always in the playoff hunt, and they have shown that they are for real and that, sur-

prisingly, there is a place for those young girls who dream of one day playing tackle football like the pros.

Unlike their male counterparts, these women don't get huge signing bonuses or sign lucrative sponsorship deals. In fact, they don't get paid, at all. These women all work full-time jobs, some even have families and children at home. They are teachers, nurses, plumbers, bartenders, athletic trainers and social workers. However, several nights a week, they put all that aside and head to the football field where they strap on the helmets and

shoulder pads and try to smack the stuffing out of the helmeted player on the other side of the ball. If you think their employment backgrounds are diverse, their athletic backgrounds are equally unique. Some of the players have played competitive sports their whole lives, many have played flag football, and some have never played a minute of team sports. Many don't even know the rules of football when they arrive. All of this changes in a hurry though, especially if these girls are to make it in this league.



Anyone who has played organized football knows the time commitment is significant. Unlike softball or basketball where you can show up five minutes before game time, football requires that you be a student of the game. Unprepared players get their clocks cleaned! For these 'gridiron girls,' the commitment is no different. From the time tryouts conclude in October, time is spent in the gym, and in their playbooks gearing up for practices, which begin indoors in January. The weather does dictate when the team moves outside. However once there, all preparations kick into high gear as the coaches prepare the team for the eight game regular season.

So, the next time you're driving by a football field, pull over and take a good look. Is that a ponytail you see sticking out of the helmet? Don't just assume it's some punk kid who needs a haircut; it very well may be the girl next door!

For more information on the team, log onto www.philadelphiaiphoenix.org.