

## Girls who make passes

With a dedicated player-owner and experienced coaching staff, the New England Intensity have built a solid team this season. Now they need a game plan to build a strong fan base for women's professional football.

BY GREG ELIAS

With pads on, everyone looks the same.

Helmets crack, a quick first down still requires 10 yards and a successful Hail Mary pass is still one of the most moving plays in sports.

New England has become a football Mecca in the wake of three Super Bowl wins by the Patriots. With interest in indoor arena football on the rise and the sport's journey overseas and across borders, what keeps the New England Intensity of the Women's Professional Football League under the radar?

The team is 5-1 in 2006 after a 6-0 victory over the Empire State Roar on Saturday, Sept. 16. Now tied for first place with the Dallas Diamonds in the American Conference and guaranteed a home playoff game if they win the next two games, the Intensity are demonstrating in Tricia Donovan's words, that "women athletes can play some serious ball."

Donovan wears the helmet of a player and the hat of an owner. The 36-year-old Portsmouth resident, who joined the team in 2004, is a backup quarterback and starting wide receiver. Seeing the financial challenges facing the team and the sport, she said she offered to help with the day-to-day operations and soon found herself a silent partner in the team's ownership. When the previous owners of the Intensity decided to take a knee in November 2005, Donovan took the reins.

"I bought the team because I felt the girls deserved better," said Donovan, a standout athlete on the field hockey and lacrosse teams during her four years at Brown University. She now works as sales director for Pittsburgh-based IT and business consulting company Blue Hammock.

"I thought through my business knowledge, contacts and work ethic, I could turn the program around to offer a safe and competitive learning environment for players, a marketing channel for sponsors and a true competitive football environment for coaches, players and fans."

Partnering herself with head coach Michael Correia and Coach Ben Brown, Donovan set out to build a solid program.

"Prior to Tricia Donovan, the Intensity was a joke, but the ladies' commitment to it wasn't," Correia said. "The previous owners had no plan, money or even any knowledge as to whether the ball was stuffed or inflated."

Many of the women on the Intensity roster this season have previous athletic experience, from high school varsity to the highest level of collegiate sports, or a military background. Others rediscovered their athletic calling after having taken a break.

Captain Lauren Manfred, a running back and defensive back, is one of those with a noteworthy sports background. She was a three-sport varsity athlete at Westerly High School, Correia said, playing soccer, basketball and softball. Her versatility has come in handy on a team and in a league that suffers from a lack of bodies, forcing some of the athletes to play both sides of the ball. Correia said a skill position like quarterback, which Manfred has also played, is the hardest to fill.

Linebacker Stacey Martin, who is also the team's public relations coordinator, said she grew up playing sports. But after becoming the mother of three children, she said athletics got put on the back burner and "I lost part of myself."

The level of specialization seen at an Intensity practice would not have been possible last year, according to Brown. Correia attributed that to the 75 combined years of coaching experience on his 2006 staff.

Correia's predecessor left the team three weeks before kickoff of the 2005 season without calling

one play, according to Donovan. Correia was contacted by the previous owner and stayed on board after Donovan took over, keeping his 14 years of playing and coaching experience from the Pop Warner to semi-pro and women's professional levels on the sideline.

First and long

Games in the 15-team WPFL are played under NFL rules. It is one of the longest-standing women's professional sports leagues in America and spans the nation, but still has difficulty drawing fans outside of players' family and friends, according to Intensity players and coaches.

The 2006 season has already seen the Ambush of Albany, N.Y., dissolve, and constant schedule changes have affected each team. The end of the Ambush is documented on the Intensity site, but not on that of the WPFL or the Albany organization.

As for the fans, the stadiums aren't full.

"They have to come out and see it. It's not 'You hit like a girl.' Some girls take the hardest licks I've ever seen," said lineman Maggie Koosa, a high school math teacher who played varsity volleyball and lacrosse at Merrimack College.

If the team is contacted by someone interested in playing, Brown said they send a letter inviting them to a practice and telling them what to expect, noting that the sport takes "a high-caliber person."

"There are a lot of rookies this year, but they fit right in," Koosa said.

Correia said he wants to capture the hearts and minds of the sport's built-in fan base, using recognizable schemes he said would help draw the initiated fan.

The team runs a complex passing attack and blitz package, according to Correia, who emphasized the traditional style of play and covering all aspects of the game down to the on-side kick.

Securing corporate sponsorship is another key goal, he said.

"I think once we get on TV we're going to be more known," Martin said in statements echoed by Donovan. "It would be cool to see in 10 years if we're able to play games on TV. That would mean our groundwork had paid off."

It may be difficult, however, as Correia pointed out he feels major media outlets treat women's tackle football as a sideshow always relegated to the periphery of accepted and respected sport.

Correia said he wants the Intensity to recognize they are under a microscope and said every deed and action is a reflection on their entire gender.

"I constantly warn them of the huge prejudices they will encounter and that they ultimately are ambassadors for this sport as well as spokespersons for the next generation of it," he said.

'They're gonna light up someone'

Manfred said she feels women are ushered into cheerleading roles rather than encouraged to even attempt a run at football. Correia feels female athletes are relegated to place-kicking or acting as "blocking dummies" when they express an interest in the sport in high school.

After a "certain period of maturation," he said, "the physicality and obvious differences between the sexes becomes insurmountable."

Be it through the physical strain of summer on the gridiron or the bond of being underdogs in a football world unquestionably dominated by men, the Intensity have the swagger of a team comfortable with itself and a living machine able to support each growing part.

"You know you can contribute. You can rely on them and they can rely on you," Manfred said of her teammates. "If they see a girl get lit up, they're gonna light up someone."