The History of
Women's Professional Football

By Stuart Kantor

This history of women's professional football, although not as glorious nor abundant in record or mythology as the NFL, reaches back to the early days of the NFL, when teams like the Frankford Yellow Jackets employed women's teams for halftime entertainment purposes. That was 1926. For the next 39 years, women's professional football was either non-existent or restricted to sandlot status.

The modern frame of reference for women's pro football starts in Cleveland, Ohio, 1965. A talent agent named Sid Friedman started a "gimmick" semipro tackle football league and billed it as the Women's Professional Football League. From a two-team barnstorming effort (one in Cleveland and one in Akron), the WPFL blossomed to include teams in Bowling Green, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Dayton, Pittsburgh, and Toledo.

As the 1970s began, the semipro Orlando Panthers made football history, for it is believed that the first woman ever to play on a men's semipro football team suited up a Panther. Her name was Patricia Barzi Palinkas. Yet, as the early 70s saw Friedman's WPFL disappear, 1974 saw the formation of one of the more successful women's leagues – the National Women's Football League (NWFL). The NWFL's charter lineup included: the Dallas Bluebonnets, Fort Worth Shamrocks, Columbus Pacesetters, Toledo Troopers, Los Angeles Dandelions, California Mustangs, and Detroit Demons.

How much indirect success did the NWFL achieve in only its first year? Linda Jefferson, a running back for the Troopers, was named *Women's Sports* magazine's 1975 Athlete of the Year. Her football career included five consecutive 1,000-yard seasons and a fourth-place finish on ABC's *Women's Superstars.*

Come 1976, growth propelled the NWFL into three divisions: the Eastern, Southern, and Western. The Eastern Division was comprised of the Columbus Pacesetters, the Detroit Demons, the Philadelphia Queen Bees, the Middletown (OH) Mustangs, and the Toledo Troopers. The Southern Division consisted of the Oklahoma City Dolls, the Houston Hurricanes (a.k.a. Her-ricanes), the Dallas-Ft. Worth Shamrocks, the San Antonio Flames, and the Tulsa Babes. Finally, the Western Division teams were the Los Angeles Dandelions, California Mustangs, San Diego Lobos, and Pasadena Roses.

As it turned out, the Toledo Troopers were the league's dominant team. From 1971 to 1976, the Troopers were an astonishing 39-1-1. Yet, all was not well with the California-based NWFL. Dandelions' owner Russell Molzahn formed his own spin-off league, the Western States Women's Professional Football League. The WSWPFL was comprised of the NWFL's California squads, plus the Hollywood Stars, Mesa (AZ) American Girls, Phoenix Cowgirls, Tucson Wild Kittens, Long Beach Queens, and the Southland (CA) Cowgirls. Expectedly, both leagues suffered financial hardships, and by the early-to-mid 1980s, were all but out of operation, although a rebound effort as late as 1998 was tried under the slogan "Women … It Is Time That We Get A Chance At This Game!"

A chance at professional football is what women received, albeit not stateside. In 1986, the American Football Verband Deutschland (American Football Association of Germany; AFVD) was formed and is currently being run by the German Games Organisation, who humorously define football as "committing attempted murder in the act of gaining 10 yards."

What started with the Berlin Adler Girls losing 56-20 to the Hannover Ambassadors/Cologne Crocodiles has expanded to a 10-team league today with the season culminating in the Ladies Bowl. Teams vying for the coveted trophy include the Berlin Adler Girls, SG Braunschweig/Wolfsburg Blue Lions, Cologne Crocodiles, Frankfurt Gamblers, Hamburg Maniacs, Hanau Witches, Hannover Ambassadors, Mulheim Shamrocks, Munich Cowboys, and the Nuremberg Hurricanes.

For more than a decade, women have been playing professional football in Australia too. The West Australian Football League formed in 1987. Today, the league boasts seven teams – the Belmont Bombers, Forrestfield, Gosnells Hawks, Innaloo Piranhas, Melville Dockers, U.W.A. Unicorns, and the Warnbro Swans.

Strangely enough, however, no serious attempt at staging a women's professional football league in the US has proved effective. Rugby has become immensely popular among women on college campuses, and flag football's groundswell has inspired the formation of numerous city leagues and even an international association, the International Women's Flag Football Association. Betsy Berns wrote *The Women's Armchair Guide to Pro Football* in the mid-1990s, and Dallas Cowboys Special Teams Coach Joe Avezzano finds himself teaching 700 women the basics of pro football in a three-hour course held three times per year. Thus, it was obvious another attempt to sustain a women's professional football league needed to be made. After all, the WNBA and other women's professional sports are achieving great successes.

In 1999, Terry Sullivan and Carter Turner, both veterans of minor league football operations, launched the Women's Professional Football League (WPFL) with the Lake Michigan Minx and the Minnesota Vixens as the charter franchises. Attracting some of the finest women's talent in the country, the WPFL plans to succeed where others have failed. Fiscally sound and markedly superior in marketing, the WPFL already eyes expansion over the next few years into Miami, central and north Florida, Atlanta, Alabama, Savannah, Tampa, Minneapolis, Chicago, Green Bay, St. Louis, Detroit, Cleveland, Columbus, Canton, NYC, Baltimore, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Atlantic City, Boston, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Hawaii, and Seattle, thus making the WPFL a truly national league.

With television and radio coverage, corporate sponsorship, and a superb cast of talented players, the WPFL claim of "No Limits" should prove accurate, allowing it to become the first women's professional football league on American soil to truly reach a national audience.