

Metrowest beat: Ladies of the gridiron set for season

By **Albert Breer**/ Daily News Staff
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You ask a woman, "Do you want to play football?"

And there's a natural, "What!?" that follows.

But once Mike Correia can get an athlete over the initial confusion, here's what he finds: curiosity.

Even better, that curiosity, more often than not, makes it past the conversational phase. Correia, for the last four years, has been coaching women's semi-professional football.

Yes, American football, the kind that's played on Friday nights, Saturday afternoons and Sundays in the fall. This year, he'll lead the New England Intensity into its first year as a member of the Women's Professional Football League, the highest rung of this fledging game.

They'll play their games at Medway High, and go to battle as, y'know, a real football team. And this is more than a novelty.

"I think we're the best kept secret in New England," he says. "I can go anywhere wearing a shirt that says 'Women's Tackle Football' and if I had a dollar for every time I heard, 'Women play tackle football?', I'd be a rich man. And as long as that exists, we're gonna struggle.

"But the girls love the game."

So does Correia. He graduated from Milford High in 1978 as a football letterman and went on to play for the semi-pro Marlborough Shamrocks of the Eastern Football League. In the 1990s, he got into coaching, first with Milford Pop Warner, then under Ernie Richards at Uxbridge High.

Four years ago, he was approached about helping out with the New England Storm, another area women's team.

"I just thought it was neat," he says. "I knew the prejudices they would endure, but I'd been coaching for 12 years and I liked the idea of the challenge."

What he quickly found with the now-defunct Storm was that it wasn't really different. It was football.

He moved on in 2003 to become head coach of the then-Rhode Island Intensity, playing in the IFWL. And after three years there, he and owner/quarterback Tricia Donovan decided it was time to move to the oldest and most-respected league, the WPFL.

"The timing was right," he says. "The WPFL is the best league, no question, and they don't have the convoluted rules some other leagues have."

No, they play by real NFL rules.

And they play with real athletes.

Donovan played lacrosse at Brown. Slotback Lauren Manfred was a collegiate softball player. Tackle/linebacker Maggie Koosa was a Division I volleyball player and still plays for an elite club.

Donovan and Correia find players through barnstorming. They send letters to colleges, go on publicity campaigns and try their best to spread word-of-mouth messages that, yes, there is this opportunity.

There's trepidation, of course. Then, excitement.

"I have a girl, Jenna Edwards, and she's 5-11, a defensive end and tight end and she doesn't know it, but she's gonna be All-Pro," Correia says. "She told me she'd played flag football, but had some concerns about the hitting. And let me tell you, that's not her problem. All she does is hit."

Edwards, like all the others, quickly took to the game.

The interest is there. Correia thinks now it's a matter of time.

Right now, they're still on a shoestring budget. Players pay a \$550 fee and, to play in a nationwide league, the Intensity's going into 2006 with a \$30,000 travel budget. There are sponsors that help and fundraisers held to make ends meet.

But people in the league swear they have something.

They're not looking to promote it as a sideshow. Correia runs an honest-to-God multi-flex system with more than 1,200 route combinations and a 4-4 defense that mixes coverages and fronts.

The problem, for now, is that there are a lot of these leagues.

"Once a sponsor steps forward, I think we'll whittle it down to the real ones," Correia says. "Then, we'll have something comparable to (other women's sports). They have women's pro softball and basketball, so why isn't this on TV?"

If it was, he thinks people would identify it as real football.

So they set out to keep building this thing by spreading awareness for it. By doing that, more women might decide to give it shot. And the league will grow.

"I really think people, if they go and see it, will appreciate and recognize it as football," Correia says. "Especially those 13-to-15-year-old girls who have been denied access to the game or have to play with boys."

Through his own love of the game, he thinks women will take to it like guys do when they put on the pads for the first time.

And if you don't think it's the truth, Correia will urge you to catch the season opener against Toledo on July 22 in Medway.