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## Intensity is name of game

### Women committed to semipro football

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T&G STAFF

A 6-foot-tall defensive tackle, Torrance Brown, led the team in sacks last year. Coach Mike Correia called his player “one of the best defensive linemen in the game of football today.”

But much to the dismay of Coach Correia, the player known simply as “T” is sidelined this season and diagramming a different sort of delivery — next month, she’s having a baby.

Planning around the pregnancy of a star player is one potential pitfall of coaching the New England Intensity, the newest addition to the Women’s Professional Football League, which is a bit of a misnomer considering the women are paid \$1 per season to play but shell out \$550 from their own pocket to help cover expenses.

“You’re talking about 29 girls who are really committed,” said Coach Correia, as the helmet-clad women ran through their drills Tuesday night on a soggy, mosquito-infested baseball field in Hopkinton. “The courage and desire of these girls is incredible.”

How committed are they? Well, last season they used the headlights from their cars to light the practice field and later had to jumpstart their engines to get home. Quarterback Tricia Donovan drives an hour back and forth to practice three times a week from her home in Portsmouth, R.I., where she has a husband, two kids and a high-powered sales job. Last season, running back Stephanie Samuelson played for three weeks with a broken wrist without telling a soul and still managed to throw the sort of crushing blocks “that can rock your world,” Coach Correia said.

Coach Correia called me last week and, in a desperate Hail Mary attempt to drum up publicity for his team, said he had watched my boxing match last year and was “very impressed.” After proceeding to butter me up in a most appropriate manner, he then invited me to practice with the New England Intensity, apparently laboring under the misconception that I harbor aspirations to be the next George Plimpton.

I don’t, but I threw a few passes with the team anyway to be polite, and let’s just say I looked a lot sharper when playing Nerf football with my girlfriend’s 5-year-old son. Besides, Tricia Donovan insisted on upstaging me by throwing all sorts of bullets and spirals and then patting me sympathetically on the back whenever my intended pass landed in the dirt like a dud firework that doesn’t deliver.

“You didn’t warm up,” she said kindly.

That’s the thing about women — they’re way nicer than men while engaging in sports, even a contact game like football.

“You practice with men, and it’s completely silent during drills because they’re all vying for alpha dog status,” said Coach Correia. “Women cheer each other on and want each other to do well, even if they’re competing against each other.” He paused, shook his head and grinned. “It’s madness.”

Coach Correia stepped in last season and rescued the team — then known as the Rhode Island Intensity — when its coach quit three weeks before the first game. A football letterman at Milford High School, he played for the semipro Marlboro Shamrocks and began coaching in the 1990s, first with Pop Warner and later at Uxbridge High. He has a wife and a 4-year-old daughter, and he readily admits that part of his willingness to coach women comes from a desire to level the playing field for his child.

Otherwise, he considers it a kick. He shares coaching duties with Ken Gikas and Ben Brown, Torrance Brown’s husband.

"We can't pat our players on the rump," Coach Correia said. "And you have to yell 'Man on board,' when you walk into a locker room. Otherwise, you're not coaching men or women — you're coaching football. People don't believe girls can play on a higher level, but the learning curve is astonishing. They really honor the game."

The women on the team range in age from 18 to fortysomething. Many had no football experience before joining the semipro league, although 23-year-old Jody "Jo-Jo" Gauthier of Worcester has played football since she was 12.

"I love tackling," the 125-pound blonde noted pleasantly. "I love hitting people."

Ms. Donovan, who is also majority owner of the team, played varsity field hockey and lacrosse at Brown University and said she plays football for the same reason men do.

"I love it," she said. "Football is the ultimate team sport. The game is so intense, and the adrenalin rush you get is incredible. Basically, I'm playing because I can."

The Intensity opens its season July 22 at its home field at Medway High School against The Toledo Reign of Ohio. The team plays eight games, four on its home field. The Women's Professional Football League is one of several leagues available to women but the only one whose summer and fall season mimics men's football.

Most of the team's fans consist of friends and relatives, but it's hoping that will change when word spreads that these girls can really play.

"The novelty of watching women play football wears off after one game, so we know we have to be good, and we have to be entertaining," Coach Correia said. "The good news is, these women are on the cusp. They're not pampered athletes. They're literally paying out of their pockets for a chance to play."

Check out their Web site: [www.newenglandintensity.com](http://www.newenglandintensity.com). Then check out the birth of an exciting semipro team — along with Ben and Torrance Brown's newest addition to the lineup.

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