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Flag football for girls begins its first season in Lamorinda

By Jon Kingdon



Sample of Campolindo flag footballers, from left: Rose Lipson, Kyle Pearstein, Zoe Lehman, Lane Massa, Jeevan Dhaluwal, Lucy Ross, Coaches Lisa and Joe Waldo Photo provided

support. "The district sent out an interest form to every student in the district and we had about 40 girls that expressed interest in flag football," Acalanes Athletic Director Randy Takahashi said. "In the spring, we had about a dozen girls that showed up and there were others that were interested but unable to show up at that meeting. We had a meeting with the girls over what we needed to do to get started and they were really excited."

"When it was greenlit in the spring, all of the athletic directors were scrambling to make sure we could field a team in the fall," Miramonte Athletic Director Sean Hennessey said. "Once it was confirmed that we were going to have a team, I sent out a mass communication to the Miramonte community and the interest has been good. When all is said and done, I anticipate that we will have 18 girls on the team. Having the opportunity for these girls to have a team is what is important this year and we're really excited about starting the team."

Since each team in flag football only has seven players on the field at a time, having 12 to 18 players has proven to be more than sufficient. Other rules unique to flag football are that the two halves of the games are 20 minutes each, with the first 18 minutes being running time and the last two minutes of the game stopping the clock when appropriate.

Dave Cutaia, the head of the Contra Costa Football Officials Association, will be providing the two officials that will be working each game and he shared some of the unique aspects to flag football. "The size of the field can vary," Cutaia said. "The width of the field can range from 30 to 40 yards wide and from 50 to 80 yards long, along with the 10-yard endzones. Mouth guards are the only equipment required for the players and sunglasses and jewelry are prohibited though med alert buttons can be worn, though not loosely and religious medals can be worn under the jerseys. Also, we're always looking for new officials and anyone that would be interested in joining our group can contact us at newofficials@ccfoa.com."

The scheduling of games at this point is still a fluid situation but it's anticipated that each Wednesday, there will be three teams at one site with each team playing two games along with a Saturday Jamboree with a number of teams participating.

Finding a coach was a key mission for the athletic directors. Coaching Acalanes will be Victor Silva, a former football player, who also coaches the school's softball team. "I'm excited but no one knows what this is going to be like because we haven't done this before in our area," Silva said. "We anticipate at least 14 girls on the team and I'm still waiting for some freshmen who I hope will be coming out as well."

Silva is not above accepting help with his coaching. "I spoke with (former Don) Kaylee Pond who played flag football when she was younger and has been explaining the nuances of the game," Silva said. "(Acalanes Head Football Coach) Floyd Burnsed has also offered himself and his assistants to help out in teaching the fundamentals and I've taken him up on it."

Lisa Waldo, the school psychologist at Campolindo, was asked to coach the team by Ray Meadows when he saw a football helmet in her office from the time when she played professional football for the Minnesota

As most football fans know, the National Football League plays on Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays, the colleges play the majority of their games on Saturdays, and Fridays remain the purview of the high schools. This year, a whole new sport is being introduced into Northern California - flag football - which will be played exclusively by the high school girls in the Diablo Athletic League on Wednesdays.

When the California Interscholastic Federation approved flag football as a sport last spring, the high schools, starting from scratch, have been working tirelessly to get things up and running and have received unanimous support from the schools' athletic directors. "All of the schools are looking to expand our programs," Campolindo Athletic Director Ray Meadows said. "Flag football gives another opportunity to play for our female athletes, so it was an easy idea to get behind."

Getting the word out once the schools were committed to having a flag football team was met with a lot of

Vixens. "Ray learned that I was a defensive back and backup quarterback and how tenacious a player I was," Waldo said. "Playing on that team and working with so many different personalities gave me the skills to succeed in life and that's what I want for these girls, giving them that confidence and seeing them get more aggressive and build on those skills. Each day I can see them getting better and that's kind of cool. It's an opportunity to get to know the kids on a whole different level and to help them develop into better human beings by teaching so much more than just football skills."

Waldo's husband Joe, a former football player, will also be coaching the team. "Some of the quarterback skills are probably the toughest to pick up and we've also been working on pitches and handoffs," Joe Waldo said. "Starting in May, Lisa encouraged the players to work on their football skills, playing catch every day and working on their agility."

Jennifer Lezcano, the attendance technician at Miramonte will be the Matadors' coach this season having learned to pass and catch as a youngster and after having children, began a Thanksgiving tradition of having a football game at the local elementary school with family and friends.

Last year Lezcano stepped in when there was a need for an assistant boys' volleyball coach. "It was a great way to connect with the kids and having been a teacher most of my career, I had missed the developmental side of working with kids. Watching a person learn and grow as a student-athlete was a very rewarding process that I have missed since becoming an office administrator and when Sean Hennessey approached me about coaching the flag football team, I knew it would be a great opportunity."

Lezcano sees a parallel between coaching and teaching: "I believe it is important to inspire the student-athletes and to teach them to have confidence, credibility and to challenge them on and off of the field. I am thrilled to be a part of a new and exciting program and to learn with my athletes. I look forward to providing them with a meaningful experience."

There are already youth programs starting up that should prove to be a foundation for future flag football players. Former Miramonte and NFL football player, Drew Bennett, has two daughters Dylan (11) and Blane (8) who will both be playing flag football this fall. "Even though they were born after I retired, they grew up in a football family and were enthralled with my career in football and would ask me questions about the sport and loved watching the games and they really got into it," Bennett said. "Flag football is really awesome because football used to be only for dads and sons and now fathers can have those same conversations with their daughters."

Dylan will be playing her second year of flag football on the Bulldogs team in Monte Vista in the Next Level League and did have a head start on her teammates. "I would play catch with my dad," Dylan said. "At first, it was a lot to take in, but it got a lot easier as we went along."

There are not a lot of rules at the junior level, Dylan said: "It was pretty much whoever had the ball, you pull their flag," she said.

Even at the youngest level, the game can be a little physical, but for Dylan it's been really enjoyable. "After catching a ball, you may get tripped," she said. "It's been a lot of fun playing with my teammates, especially when you score a touchdown and I found that people were impressed when they heard that I was playing flag football."

Dylan's advice to new players: "Don't be intimidated. It's hard to start a new sport but it's really fun when you get the hang of it. I'm looking forward to playing in high school."

Last year, flag football was played in Southern California and proved to be very successful. Corey Thedford, the flag football coach at Hawthorne High School, was excited at the growth potential of the sport. "I don't think everybody understands how big this thing is going to be," Thedford said.

When the first American woman won a gold medal in wrestling in 2016 at the Olympics the number of females going out for wrestling skyrocketed. All 32 teams in the National Football League have a community liaison aiming for the sport's inclusion in high school and other arenas and the league is working very hard to see that flag football will be an Olympic event in 2028 in Los Angeles and will be anticipating a similar jump in participation after those games.

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