

# **Goal Line Stand: the National Women's Football League and the American Resistance to Women on the Gridiron**

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This paper explores the history of professional women's football, primarily the National Women's Football League (NWFL) of 1974-1985, and accounts for the inability of women to effectively penetrate the male fortress of football. Professional women's football was a phenomenon that scanned twenty years in dozens of American cities, involving hundreds of women and thousands of fans in an endeavour that was unique in the history of American sport. However, even at the height of its success, professional women's football received scant national attention, and by the time of the NWFL's demise in the mid-1980s, few in the world of sport seriously challenged the notion of football as a male sanctuary. Twenty years after the founding of the NWFL, the onetime existence of professional women's football remains virtually unknown to both scholars and sports fans alike.

In an effort to reclaim a place for women in the history of football and a place for football in the history of women, this paper offers a narrative history of professional women's football and explores what the game meant to the women who played it. What attracted these women to such a traditionally male sport? How did they reconcile the apparent disparity between the values of football and hegemonic notions of femininity? What was their relationship to the feminist movement that helped to shape the larger society in which they lived? After examining the experiences of the women of professional football, this paper tackles the larger issue of the resistance of the American people to the notion of women on the gridiron and the failure of the NWFL to permanently break the exclusive male hold on the game. Why, in the era of women's rights and Title IX, were the American media and the American public so unwilling to accept women on the football field? What gender boundary did the women of the

NWFL cross that their colleagues in sports such as tennis and golf left intact? How did football differ from other sports in which women made significant inroads in the 1970s? These are just some of the questions that this paper addresses in its analysis of women's football.

The primary sources of evidence for this paper consists of NWFL documents from the Pro Football Hall of Fame, such as press releases, game programs, team rosters and schedules. In addition, numerous newspaper and popular magazine articles provide access to the perspective of the players to illuminate popular attitudes about female athletes and the sport of football itself. These sources demonstrate that by the 1980s, despite the rhetoric of equality in athletics, underlying attitudes about women athletes and the enduring association of football with masculinity proved exceedingly hostile to the notion of women on the gridiron. Furthermore, the timing of the NWFL actually served as an obstacle, as it attempted to sever the link between football and masculinity at a moment in which that link seemed to be all that men had left on which to hold, given the era's sudden and sharp transformations in gender relations. This paper argues that the persistent belief in the incompatibility of women and football combined with mounting anxiety about the loss of male preserves to spell the end of women's football and ensure that it did not assume a place in the mainstream of American sport.

This paper augments our knowledge of women's sporting activities by exposing the history of a previously unexamined phenomenon, women's professional football, and it highlights the experiences of the pioneering women who dared to enter the gridiron. Moreover, it demonstrates that women have been systematically and deliberately excluded from the football field - a central arena of American culture. This marginahzation of women football players and of female athletes in general serves to reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity and therefore sustain gender asymmetry both on and off the field.