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No Tackling, but a Girls' Sport Takes Some Hits



Marc Serota for The New York Times

Brittany Lear, Jupiter High School's senior quarterback, playing against Dwyer High School last month in Florida.

By KATIE THOMAS
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JUPITER, Fla. — Flag football, long relegated to family picnics and gym class, has quietly become one of the fastest-growing varsity sports for high school girls in Florida. A decade after it was introduced, nearly 5,000 girls play statewide — a welcome development in a state that, like others, has struggled to close the gender gap in high school athletics.

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Marc Serota for The New York Times

Jupiter High School's Megan Higgins facing Dwyer High School in a game in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. Flag football has become one of the fastest-growing varsity sports in Florida.

But rather than applaud the new opportunities, some women's sports advocates call it a dead-end activity. Flag football is played only at the club and intramural level in colleges, and unless one counts the [Lingerie Football League](#), no professional outlets exist. Alaska is the only other state that considers it a varsity sport.

"No one is saying flag football isn't a great sport to play," said Neena Chaudhry, the senior counsel at the [National Women's Law Center](#), which has brought several cases against high schools alleging violations of Title IX, the federal law mandating gender equity in education. "But I do think it's relevant to ask questions about whether girls are getting the same kind of educational opportunities as boys."

Florida does not recognize any boys'

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Raton High School. "That has all changed because of Title IX."

Varsity flag football had its start in the 1990s, after the Florida Legislature required high schools to report athletic participation numbers. Mr. Massey and other athletic directors in Palm Beach County, facing a dearth of female athletes, considered sports like field hockey, lacrosse, water polo and badminton to increase participation, he said, but a survey of students favored flag football.

By the time the [athletic association](#) set up a state championship in flag football for the 2002-03 academic year, 75 high schools were fielding teams. Still, despite the addition of flag football and other sports like competitive cheerleading, which was added in 2007, the proportion of girls who participate in high school athletics in Florida has remained constant. In the 1997-98 school year, when schools began playing flag football, girls made up 41 percent of Florida's high school athletes, according to the state association, compared with 42 percent in 2008-09.

Of course, girls can and do participate in a range of sports that are traditionally available to both boys and girls. But one advocate for women's sports said that by recognizing sports like flag football, administrators were artificially pumping up girls' participation numbers.

"It did not come from a groundswell," said Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a Jacksonville law professor and three-time Olympic gold medalist in swimming, who sued the Florida association last year over a scheduling issue that she argued violated Title IX. The case was settled out of court. "It was done by school administrators, not by kids."

Coaches disagree. Interest in flag football is so high, some high schools field freshman, junior and varsity squads and still make cuts. Its popularity has led to grumbling by coaches of other spring sports, who say they have lost their best athletes to flag football. In Palm Beach County, a recreational program has started for girls as young as 6.

Donna Lopiano, a former chief executive of the Women's Sports Foundation, said the sport was inexpensive and offered opportunities for girls of all body types. Ms. Lopiano, [who now consults on gender-equity issues](#), said if she worked for a school facing scrutiny of its athletic program, "I would do this in two seconds."

Alaska recognized the sport five years ago to address Title IX concerns, said John Andrews, the director of special events for the [Alaska School Activities Association](#). Eight of its high schools offer flag football.

It is also played at the club level in Texas, North Carolina, Georgia and elsewhere, said Samantha Rapoport, who runs an [N.F.L.](#) program that promotes the sport.

"Girls just think that running around catching a football is more fun than waiting for a softball in the outfield or running around a track," she said.

Demi Cissell, a linebacker for Jupiter High School and a former cheerleader, said she never

sports that have the limited future beyond high school that flag football does.

The sport's supporters say that such criticism misses the point. The aim of high school sports is to encourage students to develop healthy habits, athletic officials say, and few become college athletes. Supporters also ask for patience, saying the sport is still in its infancy.

"Soccer didn't exist in the 1970s in most high schools for women," said Bill Massey, the athletic director at Boca

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considered herself an athlete until she played flag football.

"I tried it out, and I just loved it," she said. Her team won the state championship last year. Girls, she said, "like to do what the guys do, because all the guys say girls can't play our sport."

She added, "And even though it's not tackle, it's still pretty close."

In Florida, flag football is a seven-on-seven game. The field is 80 yards long, and teams have to advance the ball 20 yards in four downs to get another set of downs. Instead of tackling, a defensive player must pull a flag attached to the ball carrier's waist. The sport favors fast, nimble athletes who are skilled in the kind of blocks and screens used in basketball.

Mr. Massey said the game did not always get respect. "They think it's a powder-puff game that you sometimes see during homecoming week," he said.

Although coaches acknowledge that many scores are lopsided, they say the game becomes increasingly sophisticated in the playoffs. The coaches, many of whom also coach boys' football, scout opponents and devise complicated plays to foil them.

"It's become much more polished than it was 15 years ago," Mr. Massey said. "A lot of naysayers haven't even seen the game."

Players in Florida said the game's limits contributed to its appeal. Many girls are burned out from having played the same sports for years.

"We take it seriously, but we have fun at it, because in the end, you can't get a scholarship for it," said Brittany Lear, Jupiter's senior quarterback. She has played on travel soccer, swimming and volleyball teams and is hoping to secure a college scholarship in volleyball.

But in flag football, she said: "Our scholarship is basically winning states. So that's what we strive on."

The lighthearted approach was clear during a recent district semifinal, which Jupiter won, 32-0. On the sideline, Jupiter players sneaked text messages and took turns playing with a coach's toddler.

Ms. Hogshead-Makar, who also serves as the senior director for advocacy at the Women's Sports Foundation, said girls missed the educational benefits if they did not take a sport seriously.

"That's one of the things that makes sports such an important experience," she said.

"You're always striving to get to that next rung."

Ms. Hogshead-Makar said flag football's time should be up.

"We've had 10 years of girls who have not been given other sports opportunities," she said. But she said she would be open to changing her stance if she saw commitment by universities or the [National Collegiate Athletic Association](#).

Erik Christianson, a spokesman for the N.C.A.A., said it had received inquiries but no formal requests to add flag football to the list of four [emerging women's sports](#).

Quarterback Gia Castellino helped William T. Dwyer High School in Palm Beach County win the state championship in 2005. She led her [University of Central Florida](#) team to the 2008 national intramural title and is now an accountant in Jupiter.

If colleges offered flag football scholarships, she said, "I would go back to school and do it again."

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