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## **Playing for Fun, and Little Else, on Football's Edge**

**By MICHAEL WEINREB**

It was just another night in the football career of Virginia Leon. Ice packs were wrapped around an elbow and a knee; a heating pad lay on a hip. Then her husband looked her over and decided he could not take it anymore. He considered his wife, who had broken fingers and torn muscles in service of her sport, who had been through three knee operations in the past six years, and he said, "How long are you going to do this?"

This is not an easy question for Leon to answer. Weeks later, she is still wrestling with it. She is 41 years old and, to make a living, she works as a substance-abuse counselor at a Staten Island hospital. But when she discovered a women's football team in New York in 2000, it was as if she had a spiritual rebirth. Even now, Leon, who is nicknamed Cha Chi, cannot discuss it without waving a hand in front of her face to fight off the tears.

"I just wish I was 26 when I first learned about this," she said. "I'd do it for the rest of my life if I could."

Leon, a running back and a cornerback, played for the New York Sharks of the Independent Women's Football League in the team's formative years. She tried to quit once, after the 2005 season, but she could not stay away.

So this spring, she once again chose to pay money out of her own pocket — the cost per player this year was about \$650 — to join the Sharks.

It meant driving to practice and home games at a series of locations, including high school fields in the Bronx and Staten Island. It meant adjusting to another new coaching staff, this one led by Debra Vance, the longtime coach of the junior varsity football team at Lehman High School in the Bronx. It meant playing in front of sparse crowds again— a couple of hundred for home games — and earning virtually no recognition for the game that was racking her body and straining her personal relationships.

And it meant Leon would have to come to terms with the fact that if women's football ever entered the mainstream of American culture, that time would come long after her retirement from the game.

The women's game continues to face an uncertain future, even though there are three leagues and more than 80 teams throughout the country. Attempts to join forces have been unsuccessful. Until recently, there were two teams in New York, both angling for the same sliver of spectators and sponsorship: the Sharks and the Dazzles of the Women's Professional Football League.

The Dazzles are embroiled in a legal dispute with their league and may not play this season, which begins Saturday.

The executive director of the W.P.F.L., Dawn Berndt, would not comment on the dispute with the Dazzles. A lawyer for the league, Don Adair, said he remained hopeful that the parties would reach a settlement. The owner of the Dazzles, Neil Scheier, an internist in Rochester, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

But this is just another in a long line of difficulties for the W.P.F.L., which emerged from a 1999 barnstorming tour involving two teams, the Minnesota Vixens and the Lake Michigan Minx.

"If we continue to butt heads and don't work toward a merger, it's not going to be around for the next generation," Berndt said. "The women's football community is torn into three separate sectors."

In addition to the 31-team I.W.F.L., which recently rejected a merger with the 17-team W.P.F.L., there is the 35-team National Women's Football Association. It is headed by the former music promoter Catherine Masters, who broke from the W.P.F.L. in its early days, and it has distanced itself from its competitors.

Masters charges a \$35,000 franchise fee to teams, the highest among the leagues. She also maintains autonomy over the league's operations, to the point that she does not mind being labeled a dictator.

"I actually make all the decisions," she said. "I don't feel it's in the league's best interest to let other owners make policy. I have no problems making decisions for the betterment of everybody."

Masters said she had received several calls from owners of teams in the other leagues, asking to join hers. She boasts of successes in cities like Pittsburgh, where the Passion has drawn single-game crowds of up to 4,000 fans, and of promotional activities like the Gender Bowl, a men-versus-women reality show that was put together last year by a Los Angeles production company.

She also points to this year's inaugural Whammys, billed in a press release as "the first black-tie-optional awards show for women's football."

But Masters has had her share of failures. A deal with the fledgling Football Network to televise league games fell through when the network failed to get off the ground. And her quest for a major corporate sponsor, for a company that can do for women's football what Virginia Slims did for women's tennis, remains unfulfilled.

"It's really frustrating," she said. "For the life of me I can't get the two things I need — TV and sponsors."

Like many others, Andra Douglas, the owner of the Sharks, figured that would eventually take care of itself. Douglas, 47, a former vice president at Time Warner, liquidated \$20,000 of her 401(k) to buy the team in 2000 — it was then a member of the W.P.F.L., but shifted to the I.W.F.L. in 2002 — and also played backup quarterback.

She runs the team's operations out of her Greenwich Village townhouse, and estimated that she had put in about \$250,000 of her money over the years.

But amid all of her difficulties in finding the Sharks a permanent base (they will play their home games next season at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn) and a suitable staff (Vance is the Sharks' first female head coach), Douglas has developed a measure of obliviousness to the disarray and the infighting that plagues women's football.

She still holds out hope that the women's game will someday break through to the mainstream. The National Football League has largely stayed neutral, but in the fall the Sharks will partner with the N.F.L.'s youth development program to offer their first series of clinics for girls ages 14-17.

"We had to be strange," Douglas said, so the next generation could be normal.

The Sharks made their fifth straight appearance in the I.W.F.L. Eastern Conference championship Saturday, losing to the Atlanta Xplosion, 35-14. The week before, Leon made a game-saving tackle on the final play to propel the Sharks over the Miami Fury.

And while the crowds remain sparse and the sponsors and television deals continue to elude her, Douglas insists that attitudes are slowly changing. A steady stream of women have contacted her about trying out for the team, she said, fresh faces who are willing to persevere — like Diana Gonzalez, a 22-year-old rookie wide receiver and a student at Rutgers.

"I keep thinking about next season already," Gonzalez said during a practice last week at Staten Island's Monsignor Farrell High School, on an evening when the Sharks shared the field with a men's team and a small army of mosquitoes.

Then she excused herself to make a phone call. She had skipped out of her part-time job to go to practice, she explained, and she wanted to make sure she had not been fired.

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