

SPORTS

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The Behrend Beacon

Football not just a boys club anymore

by Mary-Kathryn Craft
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Ashley Thomas is not afraid to wear her Pittsburgh Steelers gear.

She's got a jersey and a "terrible towel," the gold-colored towel fans wave during games.

One Sunday, while decked out in her Steelers apparel, she accidentally walked into a bar full of archrival Cleveland Browns fans.

The 22-year-old Myrtle Beach woman, who grew up near Pittsburgh in Toronto, Ohio, loves football and spends most fall and winter Sundays cheering as her favorite National Football League team battles it out on the gridiron. Thomas is part of a growing national trend — women football fans.

The Sunday "football widow," women deserted while husbands watch endless hours of football, is steadily becoming a thing of the past.

Sunday, millions of ladies will turn their attention to the field and get just as psyched up for the Super Bowl as their husbands, sons and brothers. Fifty million women in the U.S. avidly follow professional sports, according to a national survey released last month by Scarborough Sports Marketing, a New York research firm that studies consumer and lifestyle information.

Professional football is the top choice among female sports fans, according to the survey. Tara Goldstein, a spokeswoman for Scarborough Sports Marketing, said the research also looks at who the NFL fans are and what other interests they have. For example, female NFL fans are 48 percent more likely to attend NASCAR events than other women.

Today's women are more used to being integrated into all aspects of society than their predecessors, and young women expect to be included in everything, including sports, said Sylvia Kenig Snyder, associate professor of sociology at Coastal Carolina University.

Title IX, federal legislation passed in 1972 to ensure gender equity in government-funded sports and education programs, opened doors for girls to participate in sports training programs and paved the way for more female sports fans, she said.

"It's nice for women on one hand and then on the other it fits into capitalism," Snyder said. About 10 years ago, the sports industry began recognizing women as an untapped market, and women are now targets of advertising and money making endeavors, she said.

The NFL annually sponsors workshops that teach women the basics and history of football. The league has a Web site called NFL for Her (<http://www2.nfl.com/nflforher>) that offers basics, profiles women working in the NFL and defines football terms and lingo. University of South Carolina football coach Lou Holtz also holds clinics for female fans before each season. Women make up 43 percent of the NFL's fan base, and more than 375,000 women attend games each weekend, according to the NFL.

Rob Hoffman, general manager of Overtime Sports Cafe in North Myrtle Beach, said he's seen an increase of female fans in his restaurant and bar during the past two years.

"They're actually coming up in the jerseys," he said. "They're a lot more outgoing, and they get the guys into it." Overtime Sports Cafe, too, is marketing to the women, holding contests and giving away prizes to get females involved in the games. Like male fans, women are often drawn to sports because of a connection to a certain team.

Thomas said she doesn't remember a time when she wasn't a football fan pulling for the Steelers. Her dad taught her to be a Steelers fan, and most people in her hometown root for the team.

"I'm from a small town, and we got into our high school team and the NFL," she said. "My friends have always been football fans."



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM MURRAY/MYRTLE BEACH SUN-NEWS

Jamie Keehan, left, and Ashley Thomas watch their team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, in their playoff game against Tennessee in a packed Murphy's Law Sports Bar in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Female Fan Facts

There are 50 million female avid sports fans, according to survey by Scarborough Sports Marketing of New York. Football is the top choice among women.

Here are the sports women ages 18 and up picked:

- 31 percent National Football League
- 28 percent Major League Baseball
- 19 percent National Basketball Association
- 13 percent NASCAR
- 13 percent Professional Golfers Association
- 10 percent National Hockey League

(Note: Those surveyed were permitted to pick

more than one sport).

The study also indicated that loyal female NHL fans are:

- 34 percent more likely than the average woman to be age 18-34
- 23 percent more likely to be single
- 70 percent of loyal female NHL fans have purchased sports apparel in the past 12 months.
- More than twice as likely than the average woman to go in-line skating
- 76 percent more likely to participate in team sports than the average woman
- 44 percent more likely to go camping than the average woman

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The defense is anchored by linebacker Derrick Brooks, who was this year's Defensive Player of the Year. The Bucs allowed a mere 12 points per game. Tampa Bay's secondary gave up only a little over 150 passing yards per game (tops in the NFL). The Bucs were also best in the game at total defense permitting opposing offenses to gain just above 250 total yards per game.

Let's recap. Oakland gets 400 yards of offense per game; Tampa Bay allows 250 per game. The Raiders pass for 280 yards per game; the Buccaneers give up only 150 passing yards per game. Finally, the Silver and Black score 28 a game; the mighty Pewter and Crimson only permit 12. Something has got to give.

Adding to the drama is the fact that Jon Gruden abandoned the Raiders to take a job in Tampa Bay. Gruden built the Raiders into the caliber of team they are today and then jumped ship (no pirate pun intended) to the Buccaneers. He left behind his offensive coordinator/offensive line coach, Bill Callahan. Callahan used the offense Gruden left him, and rode it the whole way to San Diego. There is still a good deal of bad blood in Oakland about Gruden leaving a winning team while still under contract. The Raiders got two first round draft picks and \$8 million in exchange for the coach, but most Raiders fans are not very forgiving.

The final topic that adds spice to the championship game is the issue of age. Bucs coach Jon Gruden is the youngest coach in the league. He is leading his team to face the time-tested Raiders. Very time-tested. The Raiders three brightest stars are well on their way to collecting Social Security checks. Quarterback Rich Gannon (37) and legendary wide receivers Jerry Rice (40) and Tim Brown (37) are the new Over The Hill Gang in Oakland. The threesome was very effective all season, but they did not play a defense as physical as Tampa Bay. With players like Derrick Brooks,

Warren Sapp, Simeon Rice, and John Lynch hunting them every play, those old bones might feel a lot older real fast.

Gannon, Rice, and Brown are only a few of the old timers on the team, when you add in defensive starters Rod Woodson and Bill Romonowski, you have over a half century in professional football experience in 5 players.

Super Bowl XXXVII has all of the billings to be one of the better ones. Hopefully it will live up to all of the excitement. Last year the sports world was shocked when the Patriots were able to stay close with, let alone beat, the heavily favored Rams. Last year was a surprise great game, let's hope this year isn't a surprise blowout or even worse a dull 3-0 win.



KRT PHOTO BY GEORGE BRIDGES/KRT
Oakland quarterback Rich Gannon answers questions on Media Day for Super Bowl XXXVII on Tuesday.

The Raiders are favored by around four and a half points, but many in the sports world, including this editor won't be surprised if the underdog wins for the second year in a row.

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