



Dallas Diamonds Anne "Kip" Watson and Holly Headen

photo by Chris Fritchie

Diamonds in the Rough

By Lynda Haschke

THERE IS NO NEW stadium underway for one four-time world champion professional football team from Dallas. Their cheerleaders are mostly friends and family. Their sponsors are local. And, they get a guaranteed salary of \$1 per game.

How 'bout those 'boys? Nope. Girls. Women, actually. This four-time world champion professional football team from Dallas is the Dallas Diamonds. Sure, the Cowboys have five championships – but they've been around since 1960. The Diamonds have won their four championships in the past six years, since their formation in 2002 as part of the Women's Professional Football League (WPFL). They are the most dominant professional football team in Texas...that no one knows about.

To say they play for the love of the game is merely stating the obvious. There's no money and certainly no fame. No endorsement contracts, no free automobiles. Wait, check that... an article did appear recently on one of the newest players, Danilynn Welniak.

But not because she was a member of the team that was 8-0 in regular season play in 2008 and headed towards a world championship game in Chicago (which they won in OT). It was because she's the former Keller Central High prom queen. It's news when beauty becomes beast.

And women's professional football is the same beastly game that men play. Full contact, no "powder puff" about it, and the refs are the only ones with the flags. Diamonds head coach Todd Hughes, who has coached men at the high school and college levels, says the fundamentals of the game are the same for both sexes but finds the Diamonds players are "sponges" when it comes to learning the intricacies of the sport.

"The main difference in coaching the women versus the men is that we don't have as much time to spend practicing," said Coach Hughes. "I've found that the women tend to study the game and watch it on TV more as a student than a fan, to pick up everything they can."

Frisco resident Anne "Kip" Watson

joined the Diamonds last year as a defensive safety and blogs about her experiences on the field as the "Football Chick" at neighborsgo.com. Ms. Watson, 42, grew up in Ohio as a diehard Ohio State Buckeyes fan and channeled her sports energy into gymnastics as a young girl. But part of her always yearned to be on the football field. Fast-forward 26 years and she got her chance at the Diamonds tryouts last January. "My husband thought I was crazy until he watched the tryouts and said, 'Hey, you just might have a shot,'" says Ms. Watson. She and her best friend, fellow Frisco resident Holly Headen, both made the team and realized a dream that few rookies get to experience: a world championship.

"I went to tryouts just thinking this would be a good workout and probably a good laugh," said Ms. Headen, a 45-year-old IT implementations manager for Pepsi Bottling Group who wound up playing offensive right guard on the 2008 world championship squad. "It's a lot

harder than you think; growing up as a woman, you don't learn about hitting someone."

Ms. Watson talked about why she thinks the women play hard in her Football Chick blog following the Diamonds' 35-29 win over the Chicago Force in overtime for the world championship title. "From what I have observed and experienced as a Rookie Diamond, these women keep coming back to play, keep sacrificing and keep overcoming for two reasons: they love each other very much; this team is like a family. Secondly, they love football and love being a part of this incredible game," she wrote on the blog.

There are 43 women on the Diamonds active roster, ranging in age from 19 to 50. Yes, 50. The oldest member of the team is Esther Pichardo of Hurst, who is a founding member of two WPFL teams and has been playing professional women's football for seven years. She was the team's second-string center during the 2008 season. The youngest member is the aforementioned Danilynn Welniak, the Keller prom queen who has delayed her academic scholarship to the University of Hawaii to play one more year for the Diamonds. She is being profiled in an upcoming issue of *Cosmopolitan*, no doubt in part because of interesting quotes like the one she gave the *Dallas Morning News* when asked why she plays, "Getting to hit people, legalized assault is so much fun."

According to Ms. Watson, most of the players are in their late 20s to early 30s. The Diamonds' season starts in April and runs to the playoffs in late July. There are eight regular season games and the home field is Pennington Field in Bedford. In 2008, the Diamonds played away games in Miami, Albuquerque, Seattle and Kansas City. Travel expenses are paid by the team, covered in most part by local sponsors, but sometimes fall far short of what is needed.

"When we made it to the championship game, we didn't have the money to take



provided by Kip Watson



Dallas Diamonds RB Odessa Jenkins runs it up the middle against the Chicago Force (top); Diamonds Anne "Kip" Watson & Holly Headen (bottom) photo by Chris Fritchie

the entire team to Chicago," said Ms. Watson. "We just felt that wasn't right. The team really rallied together to get some extra sponsors – we even had some people donating their airline miles – and thankfully, Diet Pepsi Max came on board so we could take everyone."

Tryouts for the 2009 squad started in late September and Coach Hughes expects to have some holes to fill. "We have a few veteran players in their 40s

who I don't expect to return," he explained. "We had some great rookies last year and we're hoping they return and we're also looking for some new talent." Coach Hughes will hold three mini-camps prior to the beginning of the 2009 season in April and also has initiated an off-season conditioning program to keep his players in shape.

Ms. Headen, who had surgery to repair the damage to her left knee during the off-season, is eager to return. "You won't find a better workout, even if you do end up looking pretty battered," she said, noting that the shoulder pads were particularly troubling to her until she found a solution from one of her Frisco gym partners, ex-Cowboys legend Randy White.

"Randy told me to wrap my arms in bubble wrap and tape to cut down on the bruising," said Ms. Headen. "But I just couldn't do it...I can survive the bruises a lot better than the hazing I'd get once they heard all those bubbles burst when I got hit."

In late 2007, the Diamonds left the WPFL to join the Independent Women's Football League (IWFL). Based in Austin, the IWFL is a full tackle women's football league dedicated to making the sport a household name and currently has over 1,600 women playing on 41 teams in the U.S. and Canada. The Diamonds are in the Tier I Mid-South conference with the Kansas City Tribe and Iowa Crush.

Oh yeah, about those names... Dallas is one of the "girliest" named teams in a league that features monikers like Palm Beach Punishers, Orlando Mayhem, Detroit Demolition, Atlanta

Xplosion, Shreveport Aftershock, Oakland Banshees, Redding Rage and New Mexico Menace. There are a couple of other more feminine candidates, like the Las Vegas Showgirlz and the Carolina Queens, but as far as world championships go, Diamonds remain a gridiron girl's best friend.

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