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Flags Are Flying

Florida's hottest new sport is luring girls from track and softball to the gridiron

Posted: Wednesday May 2, 2007 9:39AM; Updated: Wednesday May 2, 2007 9:39AM

By Kelli Anderson

When Brianna Lauer moved to the new Seminole Ridge High in Loxahatchee, Fla., last year, she decided to take a break from softball, a sport she had played since she was seven, and try flag football. Lauer, a junior, is now the Hawks' quarterback, and softball is a memory. "Flag football is so much more fun," says Lauer, whose 14--0 team plays in the state tournament this week. "It's such an adrenaline rush. You're always moving."

Flag football is the fastest growing girls' high school sport in Florida—one of two states, along with Alaska, in which it is played at that level. (No states sanction flag football as a boys' sport.) In 1998, the first year Florida began tracking flag football participation, 17 schools fielded girls' teams. Five years later the Florida High School Athletic Association recognized flag football as an interscholastic sport and began holding a state championship; now more than 4,000 girls at 146 schools participate.

The games, with four 12-minute quarters, follow National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association rules: seven players to a side, everyone is eligible to receive, and a dropped ball is a dead ball. This makes for a lot of pitchouts and laterals, much like rugby. Tackling is not allowed, though it happens. "In one game I got so pumped up, I accidentally picked up this girl and slammed her to the ground," says Palm Beach Gardens junior receiver-cornerback Meagan Kaufman, a former competitive cheerleader who was thrown out of that game for her transgression. "Sometimes you just get so into it."

Some coaches say flag football is thinning the field of athletes for traditional spring sports such as track and softball. Bill Weed, the AD and assistant girls' track coach at Palm Beach Gardens, says that in the mid-1990s he would get 70 girls out for track; now he gets half that. "Gee, do I want to run six 400s in 70 seconds or run fly patterns and catch a football?" he says. "The second option sounds more fun."

The sport has also created a buzz in the halls. "People say, 'You should go out and see the girls play football,'" Lauer says, "because no one thinks the girls can play football."

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