

Can women like football without being unladylike?

I popped the popcorn, my roommate poured the diet pop and off we ran like a couple of two-year-olds to the living room to stare contentedly into the television screen for the next two and a half hours.

But it wasn't Dallas or Dynasty, or even the likes of Simon & Simon that we'd waited all week in great anticipation to see. Those shows were, of course, still high on our list of priority viewing, but they lacked the literal punch of our seasonal favorite — ABC Monday Night Football.

Despite the long-held opinion that most "ladies" are oblivious to sports-mania, the pair of us had been at this weekly NFL nighttime craze for months, and by the end of last season nothing — not even a solid week of finals ahead — was going to keep us from getting our junkie-like fix of pigskin pitching.

In past years, however, my enthusiasm for the sport had not been so great. For the most part, in fact, I hated football and thought it was totally boring. I see now that this ho-hum attitude was due to my absolute ignorance of football.

It wasn't that there weren't eager fans around me willing to let me sit in on a game with them or even buy me a ticket to a real-live one at Autzen. It was just that my family was too busy watching to explain the play-by-play action and my friends were usually plastered from too much parking-lot socializing to help.

Not even my years of high-school cheerleading helped either. I always chose sidelines

gossip over trying to learn what it was that the guys were doing out there on the field and relied instead on the home-crowd's reaction for clues. If they clapped, I jumped — nothing to it.

It wasn't until I unknowingly moved in with the private game-plan consultant to Bill Walsh that I was forced to learn the game. As a seasoned arm-chair quarterback, my roommate (who shall remain nameless or I will become homeless) was not about to switch the channel, thank you. So my options on Monday nights were either to clean the toilet or read my anthropology

Commentary

book ... or watch football.

To make a long story short, I soon learned the referee's penalty signals, a scant amount about game plans, and could recite most of the NFL's divisions and conferences without coaching. She also explained that the guy with the ball isn't meaning to run into the pile of linebackers on purpose and that he can't just run up the side and make a touchdown as easy as I thought he could.

In addition, what I thought was just a bunch of idiotic bone-crunching was really a series of carefully thought-out maneuvers. And the three numbers the quarterback yelled out at the beginning of each play were not the measurements of his girlfriend, or his safe combination, they were in fact play calls, of which the men

had memorized hundreds, possibly thousand of times during their careers.

Finally, I came to believe that those big blobs of color with numbers were actually human beings, and intelligent ones at that — at least a good percent of them. Many of the professional football players were also professionals outside the stadium as doctors, accountants, stock brokers, etc., she informed me.

I look back now and marvel at her patience. Over and over we rehearsed the official rules, regulations, pass formations, and so on until finally I could slap my leg and swear without having to turn and ask her if what happened was "good" or "bad."

What I enjoyed most about this newfound knowledge was being able to understand what the huddles of guys at parties were talking about. Sometimes I even added my own comment to the conversation, but doing so drew more blank and astonished looks than phone calls for dates the next week, so I shut up.

My mentor, however, wasn't afraid to ruffle the feathers of the jock-minded set, and there were a couple of times where she unmeaningly put them in their place with her remarkable insight of the game.

For the most part, I found, men just couldn't handle the fact that a woman might know anything about this manly sport. Many were quite chauvinistic, and one even admitted he couldn't visualize the two of us watching football and



Graphic by Craig Lande

really enjoying it. We were really watching it just for the tight-fitting pants, he said.

Much to her dismay, some of these macho characters labeled her a "freak," "fanatic" or "know-it-all," and only the best of male friends had the grace — as well as brainpower — to talk football with her.

No matter — my favorite

coach and I will soon be back in front of the big-screen cheering on our favorite team. And the door will be open for any fellas out there — Raiders fans excluded — who are big enough to admit to a little ignorance and don't mind watching a great game in the presence of a couple of unladylike fans.

By Julie Shippen

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