

Women Warriors

Portland Shockwave brings the pain

by Joshua Ryan • Photos by Xilia Faye

Little-Known Facts About Women Warriors in History #1:

The Rig-Veda, an ancient sacred poem of India written between 3500 and 1800 B.C., recounts the story of Queen Vishpla, who lost her leg in battle, was fitted with an iron prosthesis and returned to battle.

Sitting inside the gymnasium of Shahala Middle School in Vancouver, Wash., you can feel the floor vibrate and build like the undercurrent of an earthquake preparing to explode. The floor shakes beneath the 60-odd feet of the rough-and-tumble women who are running in place, their knees lifted high, almost parallel to the ceiling. Again and again, they run with their faces tightly focused and hair pulled back in sweatbands or ponytails.

They quickly break into a large circle that runs from one end of the gym to the other and continue to run in place, then fall down to their stomachs, only to push themselves back up quickly and run even faster in place. They run. Fall to their stomachs. Jump back up. They are trying to impress me. And impress me they do.

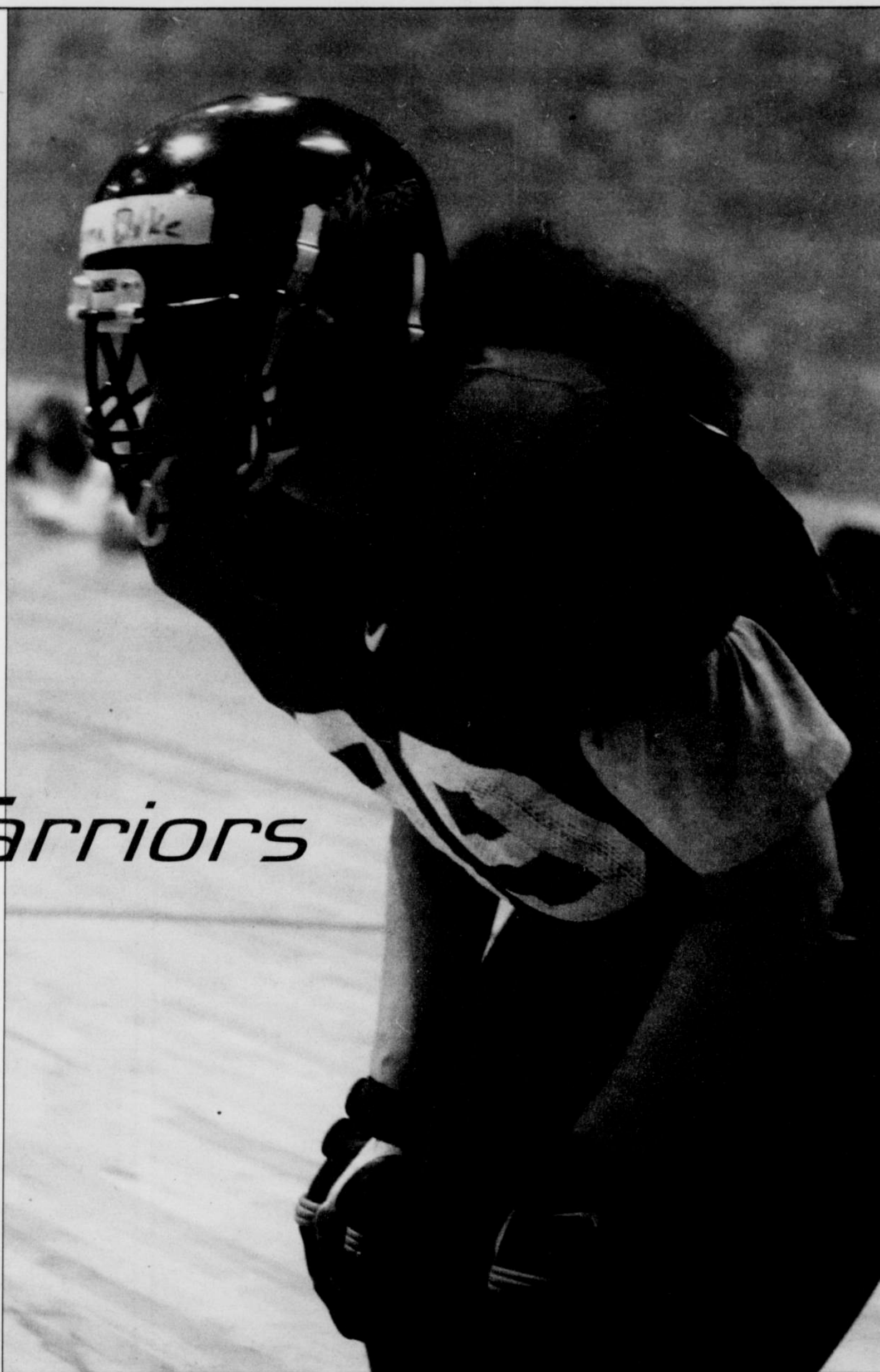
They then shift to one side of the gym against the wall and run sprints back and forth. This is the first chance I get to see the members of the Portland Shockwave, the Rose City's tackle women's football league. I can see that some are small, average-sized women who could be playing soccer or climbing the Stairmaster at Gold's Gym. Others are considerably heftier—broad-shouldered (especially those wearing bulky football pads) with thick, muscular legs and wide-set, imposing hips. I bet these women can kick my ass.

Little-Known Facts About Women Warriors in History #2:

Between 1570 and 1546 B.C., Queen Aahhotep I of Egypt led armies against Thebes and helped unite Egypt under one rule.

The women, ranging in age from 19 to 44, begin wind sprints from one end of the gym to the other. The coach wants to build their speed and develop their endurance. The weight of shoulder and hip pads along with helmets must slow down some players. I am surprised that some of the smaller women lag behind their behemoth counterparts.

The coach blows a whistle, and the women remove their helmets and sit around



Between 200 and 500 fans attend each Portland Shockwave home game at Lincoln High School.

a chalkboard, just like in classic football movies. Those films often feature players and coaches, but rarely women—unless, of course, they are cheering from the sidelines or mothering their men to victory. Not here.

"I was around football my entire life," says team owner Rebecca Brisson, who was named Defensive Player of the Year in 2004. "My father loved the game, as did my mother. Every Sunday at our house was spent sitting around the television watching football."

Brisson continues, "I have always wanted to play football for as long as I can remember." That is at the heart of this story: Without a doubt, what drives these women to play football is the fact that football is in their hearts. Simply put, they just love the game.

Brisson is 30 years old, stands 5-foot-2 and weighs 135 pounds with bright, intelligent eyes and wavy brown hair pulled back in a no-nonsense band. She is the last person you would expect to see playing football. A lesbian, she works in athletics for her day job—as an associate product line manager in Nike's Team Sports Equipment Division—and she plays football at night and on weekends. In her world, it all makes sense.