Crawford, Russ. Women’s American Football: Breaking Barriers On and Off the Gridiron. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 408 pages. 24 photographs, 1 appendix, index. Hardcover $34.95

Reviewed by Lisa Timpf

I’ve played flag and touch football in women’s leagues, and enjoyed the game immensely despite my limited prowess. There’s something intriguing about the sport of football, with its oddly-shaped ball and the skill required to throw and catch it, the complexity of play-calling, and the finite amount of attempts you get to achieve certain targets before being forced to turn the ball over to the other team. But throughout my half-dozen years of play, and beyond, I never imagined that in other parts of Canada, and in fact the world, women were playing the tackle version of the game.

In that lack of imagination, that lack of seeing, I was not alone. In *Women’s American Football: Breaking Barriers On and Off the Gridiron,* Russ Crawford returns repeatedly to this point: despite the impressive number of women playing the tackle game, they haven’t garnered a lot of visibility.

Though the end notes to the book provide evidence of the vast extent of Crawford’s research, it’s the personal touch that makes the story more compelling. Crawford attended a number of women’s tackle football games, and therefore is able to provide first-hand accounts of the action. In addition, he completed interviews with over 240 women, as well as a few men, as part of his research. Drawing on the comments of those who have been involved with the game as players, coaches, and administrators adds depth and context to the book.

The initial chapter, which chronicles the early beginnings of women’s football in the United States, is itself eye-opening. Women played football in the 1920s, despite societal pushback, but it was in the 1960s to 1980s that women flocked to the game. After a brief hiatus, women’s tackle football enjoyed a resurgence starting in 1999. Interest remains strong. In the introduction, Crawford states, “Women and girls on more than 150 teams play tackle football in around ten leagues in the United States, and there are also hundreds of flag football leagues for females of various ages across the country.”

The book’s early chapters discuss in detail the more prominent women’s tackle football leagues, including the Independent Women’s Football League, the Women’s Football Alliance, the Women’s National Football Conference, and the United States Women’s Football League, among others. These chapters underscore the fact that in many cases, women played in relative obscurity, with little press coverage and few fans. Often, players had to offset at least part of the cost of playing out of their own pockets. Putting the facts about prominent teams and players together in a logical fashion is a bit of a challenge given the fluid nature of the women’s leagues, which, as Crawford observes, “come and go with alarming regularity.”

Crawford devotes a chapter to the X League, which has been referred to at various points in time as the Lingerie Football League and the Legends Football League. This organization, regardless of name, featured scantily-clad women wearing less protective padding than their fully-kitted counterparts. Crawford does a masterful job of portraying both the negative and positive responses to the league from a variety of sources. Many in the media and academia have commented on the league’s tendency to play up the athletes’ physical attributes rather than their athletic prowess. To add insult to injury, the scanty padding and attire puts players at greater risk of injury. Crawford wryly notes that, in one televised game, “the announcers’ comments sexualized the players and the event even further than their uniforms already had.”

Counterbalancing this negativity, Crawford notes some positive reactions from players. One LFL competitor, asked “what she thought about having to play in the skimpy uniform,” replied “I’ve run track all my life, so yeah, I think I’ve been accustomed to having to perform in a two-piece uniform so it wasn’t really a problem for me.” She added that “The uniform . . . kind of blinded people to the athletes and the athleticism that was in the league.” Crawford delves into the issues around “lingerie” football, and its relationship to fully-kitted women’s tackle football, making this a well-rounded chapter. Regardless of whether one loves, hates, or is indifferent to the league’s operating philosophy, it has historically enjoyed a higher profile than women’s tackle football played in more traditional attire. Crawford notes that “since 2009, if Americans have considered women’s football, they have more than likely thought of the LFL. This causes a great deal of disgust among the women who play full-kit football.”

Chapters on the burgeoning efforts to introduce tackle football leagues for girls, and on international play, were also of interest. In the section dealing with tackle football leagues for girls, Crawford gives the reader an appreciation of the efforts made to give young women the opportunity to play. He highlights some of the female athletes who have excelled on boys’ football teams, mostly as kickers, with some exceptions. Concerns from school officials “who continue to hold that football is too dangerous for girls to play with the boys,” along with similar concerns from parents, helped to spark the formation of leagues specifically for girls. Crawford notes that these leagues have proven “to be amazingly popular with girls from grades 4-12 and with their parents.” In addition to talking about girls’ football in the United States, Crawford also comments on girls’ leagues in Manitoba, New Brunswick, and other locales. Popular as the game may be, controversy remains, with some critics contending that the potential for injury makes the game risky for individuals of any gender, and Crawford provides some perspective on this issue as well.

In the chapter on international play, Crawford discusses the Women’s World Championship, which demonstrates that enthusiasm for women’s tackle football extends well beyond the borders of the United States.

What does the future hold for women’s tackle football? In the book’s postscript, Crawford notes that “the current state of women’s football seems to be improving, although the athletes still compete in relative anonymity . . . if you care to remove your blinders, there is a good chance that you will see that they are still out there. Everywhere.”

As noted earlier, “removing the blinders” is a recurring motif in the book. By providing in-depth information about the women who have played the game and the leagues and organizations that have shaped that play, Crawford gives women’s tackle football greater visibility. Just the other day, I was chatting with someone who mentioned their daughter had expressed an interest in playing football. A few months ago, I might have dismissed that notion as fantasy. Crawford’s book illustrates that playing women’s football is not such an unreasonable aspiration after all.