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**Breaking gridiron ground: UW-Stout triumphs in first-ever women’s flag football league sponsored by Minnesota Vikings**

**Blue Devils finish with 8-3 record; UW-Stout becomes first four-year university in Wisconsin to field a sponsored team**

Written by Tom Giffey, University of Wisconsin–Stout

Just a handful of months after being recruited for a brand-new team in a brand-new league, the members of the University of Wisconsin-Stout’s flag football team hoisted a championship trophy April 26 on the field at the Minnesota Vikings’ TCO Performance Center.

The history-making nature of their victory in the Midwest College Women’s Flag Football League Championship was not lost on UW-Stout players or coaches, who grabbed the opportunity to join the Vikings-sponsored league and ran it right into the end zone.

“I think it’s something that we’re going to look back on and be in awe that we were part of the first flag football season,” said student assistant coach **Rosella Wille**. “We’re going to look back and tell our daughters and granddaughters, ‘That was us.’”

It was a joyous ending to the team’s 8-3 season in the new league, which includes six universities from the Upper Midwest. UW-Stout was the sole competitor from Wisconsin, putting the school at the vanguard of a rapidly growing sport as the first four-year university in the state to field an officially sponsored team.

Few of the 24 women on the Blue Devils squad had previous experience playing organized football, but they demonstrated plenty of athletic talent – not surprising, considering most have taken part in other varsity or club sports teams on campus.

The team was quarterbacked by senior **Allison Letcher**, also a member of the women’s basketball team, which reached the NCAA Division III Final Four in March just weeks before the first flag football game. Other players came with experience in gymnastics, soccer, softball, golf, rugby and track, but they bonded quicky as they learned football fundamentals.

“It was all so much fun – the energy around it,” said junior running back **Anna Odisho**, also a member of the varsity soccer team. “It happened so fast, and everyone was all-in on it.”

“Every moment leading up to that was memorable,” fellow running back **Adalyn Lehman** said of the championship game against Augustana University. “There was so much joy that whole day.”

**Blue Devils blaze a trail**

About a year ago, UW-Stout Athletic Director **Duey Naatz** became part of a conversation about forming a women’s flag football league that involved other universities in the region as well as both the Vikings and Green Bay Packers. Ultimately, the Vikings committed $140,000 to kick-start the collegiate league, and by the beginning of the academic year UW-Stout was finalizing plans for a team and starting to recruit players on campus.

“It worked because of the Vikings’ support and their communication,” said Naatz, Stout’s onetime varsity football coach who returned to the sidelines to lead the flag football team. “We knew it was a reality, and that we wanted to be a part of it.”

While flag football isn’t yet an official NCAA sport, it’s expected to be designated an “emerging sport” for women by the NCAA next year. As such, UW-Stout made the decision to treat flag football as a varsity team, Naatz said.

“We wanted to be a leader in providing opportunities in our state, so having it as part of our sports module was important to us,” he said.

The league – whose other founding members are Augustana, Concordia College Moorhead, Gustavus Adolphus College, Bethel University and the University of Northwestern, St. Paul – was officially announced in March, and practices began soon after.

Members of UW-Stout’s squad said they joined the team for the chance to play a sport they loved but had rarely – if ever – had a chance to play.

“I joined rugby because I loved football and it was the closest thing I could get to it, so flag football was a no-brainer for me,” said senior receiver **Halle Maki-Waller**, a member of the school’s rugby team, a club sport.

“Every game was a learning experience, and we were learning the rules alongside the other teams and the coaches and the refs,” Maki-Waller said.

Lehman, a graduate student who was part of the track and field team during her undergraduate career at University of Minnesota Duluth, hadn’t planned on joining an organized sport at UW-Stout. That changed when she saw a poster advertising the new team. She soon found a strong camaraderie with the other players as they drilled on the game’s fundamentals.

While in many ways similar to standard football, flag football has certain significant differences – most notably, tackling is replaced by pulling off one of the flags worn around a player’s waist. Games are 30 minutes long and are played with five players on a side, and the offense must make it to midfield within their first four downs, then reach the end zone within another four plays.

Lehman credits the experienced coaching staff and the team’s focus on building skills with their early success. “I think it gave us an advantage because we worked on fundamentals first, so then in our first jamboree we did so much better than the other teams,” Lehman said.

The Blue Devils won the two games they played in their debut jamboree on April 5 in St. Paul, then went 2-2 during a jamboree they hosted on campus at Williams Stadium on April 12.

Two weeks later, they traveled to the Vikings’ state-of-the-art training facility in Eagan, Minnesota, for the league’s double-elimination championship tournament.

**Team bounced back in final game**

Wille, the student coach, said the team tackled the challenges of a new sport while bonding quickly over the course of a relatively brief season. “They faced adversity really well. Anything that came their way, they just ran through a wall,” she said.

At the final tournament, the Blue Devils were seeded fourth in the six-team field, so they knew they had something to prove. As the day progressed, they beat Augustana, Augsburg, and Concordia College to reach the championship bracket. There they again faced the Augustana Vikings, who had fought their way through the consolation bracket. In the rematch, the Blue Devils fell short on a two-point conversion when going for the win in overtime, losing 41-42 and setting up a final, winner-take-all game.

With no time to wallow after their narrow loss, UW-Stout returned to the field and persevered in the championship final with a 46-31 win.

“It took effort to get there, but that’s what we wanted,” Odisho said. “No matter what happened throughout every game that day we were just thinking, ‘Championship, championship. We’re not losing, we’re not going home, no matter what.’”

At the end of the day, the team did go home – but not until they hoisted their trophy and reveled in the landmark moment.

“It’s been a wonderful experience to be a part of,” reflected Naatz, who will retire in September after a 35-year career at UW-Stout. “I’m glad I was a part of history.”

Already, UW-Stout is beginning to field inquiries from would-be student athletes who want to come to Menomonie to play flag football, Naatz said. As the sport continues to grow, he hopes it ultimately becomes an official Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Conference sport, giving the Blue Devils a chance to compete against their Wisconsin peers.

Until then, he said, “We’ll continue to be leaders in this area. Once you see them practice and compete, why wouldn’t you provide that opportunity?”