

Gridiron girls

Football isn't just for the boys anymore



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer

Twelve-year-old Chakira Habeebullah (center) and a couple of her male teammates listen to instructions from their coach.

By Shariq Torres
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Coach Clarence Croop has players on his team that any coach would love to have. They're stronger, faster and bigger than their opponents. But on Sunday mornings, they just happen to trade their helmets in for dresses.

That's right, they're girls. Eleven-year-olds Tia Habeebullah and Nicole Malone and 12-year-old Chakira Habeebullah are playing a game that Americans feel epitomizes the very essence of masculinity.

In a way, each girl inspired the other to play.

Nicolle, who is a center, originally got into the sport after seeing a sign for tryouts while riding with her father. She's been playing in the Reams Road Athletic Association for the past two years.

"I guess I thought it would be fun," Nicolle said. "My friends mostly thought it was weird; some thought it was cool."

After Tia saw one of Nicolle's games two years ago, she pestered her mother to let her play.

"I saw her and told my mom, 'See, there's other girls playing,'" recalled Tia. "She was one of the people who inspired me."

Tia's older sister, Chakira, became interested after going to her sister's games.

"They always thought of me as the girly-girl of the family," Chakira said. "The best part is that they don't expect me to be able to do this."

Jeff Layne, the head of the association, said that every football team, save for flag football, has at least one girl on their teams this season.

For the mothers on the sidelines, the sight of seeing their sons playing the game with girls is empowering.

"I love it. Football shouldn't be limited to guys," said Tanisha Stockton. Stockton's son, Hasaan, is on the same team with Tia and Nicolle. "If they're capable, they should play. Those girls are integral to the team."

Team mom Kim Creech feels that the sight of girls on the field will inspire other young girls to give the sport a try.

"It's sisters seeing their older sisters play and wanting to play themselves," Creech said. "Football is a universal sport. Girls play it in the yard, in the street. We can do the

same."

Preteen boys are a notoriously raucous bunch, but surprisingly, Tia and Nicolle's teammates don't give the two girls a hard time and are happy the girls are on the team.

"It's different, but you get used to it," Hasaan, a running back, said.



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer

Chakira runs the ball during a practice play.

"I told them from the beginning that they were going to be treated as football players and not girls," said Croop, Tia and Nicolle's coach, "and at times they perform better than the boys on the team."

That's not to say there haven't been growing pains.

"My son plays quarterback and was very adamant about not putting his hands between Nicolle's legs to take the snap," Creech related with a laugh.

"It was a respect type thing. He didn't feel comfortable touching a girl like that, but I explained it to him that it was a part of the game, and it was ok."

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