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## Women in the Trenches: Divas Play Tough

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They travel to their road games by bus. Their pads and equipment are secondhand from a high school football team. The 13-person staff of coaches and trainers works on a volunteer basis.

Players for the D.C. Divas football team aren't vying for multimillion-dollar contracts. If they're lucky, each will make about \$1,000 for the inaugural season, depending on commissions from tickets and merchandise.

In just about every sense of the word, this isn't your traditional professional football team.

The team is one of 10 in a full-contact, two-division women's league started by a Tennessee businesswoman.

Washington's franchise in the new National Women's Football League ended its first season June 23 with a 52-0 rout of the Tennessee Venom at Eastern High School.

With its defeat of Tennessee, the 45-member Divas finished with a 3-4 record. Despite the below-.500 showing, the players expressed optimism about their season and the future of the franchise.

"We started out with a pretty frustrating loss, but it got so much better over the season," said Donna Wilkinson, who played fullback and defensive end.

Wilkinson, 27, is a wellness consultant and personal trainer who tried out for the Divas after playing flag football for two years.

Wilkinson said she's normally relaxed and easygoing, but playing football lets her show a decidedly different side of her personality.

"I always say the hitting is my favorite part of the game," Wilkinson said. "It's always nice to go out there and hit people."

With players relying on commissions from sales of tickets and merchandise, as well as several fundraisers throughout the season, the Divas are less like a National Football League franchise and more like a grass-roots community organization.

The team is the only one in the league without an owner, said Catherine Masters, the league's founder. With crowds averaging between 500 and 800 a game, the Divas are in a hot market, Masters said.

Masters, who hopes to expand the league to about 20 teams by next season, said there is interest in adding another team to the area.

The players represent a cross section of ages, backgrounds and occupations.

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Nearly all of them work full time in addition to their hectic schedule of practices and games from mid-March to late June.

"It was pretty hard, trying to manage all this schedule," said Jane Reynolds, 28, a running back who takes law classes at night at American University. But she said the effort was worth the time commitment.

Football "is in my blood, definitely," Reynolds said. "This was just a great stress reliever and a way to bond with people."

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