



Columns

Women tackle football

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LONG BEACH -

Hard as it may be to believe among those of us in the Toy Department, not everyone in America is enthralled or energized by Steelers vs. Seahawks, *aka* Super Bowl Extra Large.

Some folks just don't care. They'll be at the movies Sunday.

Others might duck into the TV room to check out the commercials, or to watch the Stones at halftime, but will catch up on their conversation during the game. For them, a Super Bowl party is more about "party" than "Super Bowl."

Then there are those who really would like to get interested in the game, or to at least be able to follow the conversations that surround it, but find themselves put off by the jargon and apparent complexity of football.

"You don't have to know things like what the 'cover two' defense is," argues Paula Duffy, a one-time corporate lawyer who runs the "Incidental Contact" series of sports seminars for women.

"For the women who come to my seminars, and the men who call me and ask me to coach them on the side because they need it for business reasons and don't want to come to a class, I tell them: Forget about all that."

Duffy has been teaching these classes about various sports for the past year and a half, primarily in the Los Angeles area. She has produced an audio book, the "Girlfriend's Guide To Football," and she does a daily blog and podcast at www.incidentalcontact.com

In her seminars, she strips the games down to the basics. This is a football, this is how you score, these are the positions, etc.

(The cover two, incidentally, is essentially a zone pass defense. But heaven forbid that football people would ever refer to something in its simplest terms. That would defeat the whole purpose, which is to make those who don't play or coach think football is akin to nuclear physics.)

"Women who come to me tell me that they think they can learn baseball, or they think they know it already a little bit," Duffy said. "They think they can follow basketball, because it's just the same five guys running up and down the court, making baskets here, defending baskets here.

"But no one understands football. I think it has become too complex, and I think the networks, in their effort to make it more watchable, have actually made it more difficult ... It's exhausting, and you don't need to know all of that either to get started or to be a casual fan."

Duffy is not a casual fan. She grew up watching sports with her dad in New Jersey, continues to root for the Yankees and football Giants but, in a concession to living in Long Beach for the past 15 years, cheers for the Lakers, too.

The idea for the seminars came when she and a friend, Helen Franco, spent an evening at a sports bar.

"I was ... talking to the screen, which is one of my trademark phrases, and she noticed we gathered a crowd," Duffy said. "She said, 'My God, you should teach women to do this. Look at all the men we've got here. If you could teach me about what it means to get it into Shaq in the paint, then you can teach anybody.'"

(You may insert your own Kobe joke here.)

The idea of "talk to the screen," she explains, is that by commenting on the game -- i.e., what's happening on the TV screen -- a woman can establish common ground and strike up a purely natural conversation with a man.

A corollary of that philosophy is what Duffy calls "talk to the shirt." If that cute guy wearing the Brett Favre jersey strikes a lady's fancy, she can start the process by mentioning what a shame it is that Favre is considering retirement.

But this involves basic knowledge. If she's tempted to try to fake it, she's probably better off saying nothing at all.

"Women don't want to seem stupid," Duffy said. " ... If you just know a phrase or two, and you attract someone to speak to you about it (but) you can't go past that lingo, you now are a fake, and that's worse."

That brings us to our Super Bowl survival guide.

"Women like personality and stories," Duffy said, ticking off the obvious (Steelers running back Jerome Bettis' return to his hometown of Detroit) and the not-so-obvious (Seahawks quarterback Matt Hasselbeck, brother-in-law to Elisabeth Hasselbeck of "The View") as story lines with potential to draw the novice football fan.

Learn the back stories, get a grasp of the basics and don't sweat the complexities, then, and you're good to go.

"Will you know everything that's going on? No," Duffy said. "Will you know everything that the announcers say? No. But will you be able to get through it and actually realize that it's not as difficult as it's made out to be? Yes."

Meanwhile, red-blooded football fan, if your significant other is asking seemingly dumb questions about this week's game, you might want to exercise some patience.

After all, you may be asking similarly dumb questions when Olympic figure skating dominates your TV screen in a few weeks.

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