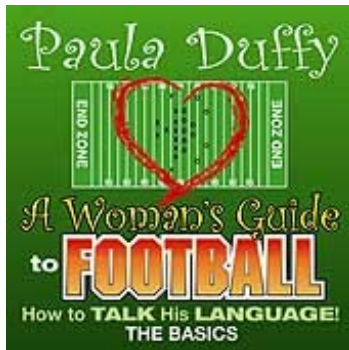


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X'S AND O'S: Paula Duffy's book aims to help women get in the game.

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Want to tackle football? It's a snap

By THERESA WALKER
The Orange County Register

When you hear the term "face mask," do you think of:

- a) Something you put on at the spa to fight wrinkles?
- b) Something your kids put on at Halloween?
- c) Something football players put on their helmets for protection?

If the only answers that occurred to you were the first two because you really don't have a clue about what football players wear or why, pull up a reclining chair.

It's college bowl season, and with 32 games filling out the schedule this year, sports consultant and commentator Paula Duffy figures now is the perfect time to learn to embrace the X's and O's of the gridiron.

X's? O's? Gridiron?

Relax, says Duffy, a Long Beach lawyer turned sports consultant and commentator whose mission in life is to get women into the game – be it football, baseball or basketball.

Football is not as complicated as it might sound – and look – to the novice, Duffy says. All you need to begin is a few basics.

"I want to show women how much fun it can be to have a new hobby," says Duffy, founder of the sports learning Web site www.incidentalcontact.com. "It can connect them to their children who play or follow sports, to their significant other, or help them find a nice guy if they don't already have one."

She's produced audio guides and quick-hit booklets. She also conducts group seminars and personal training – all while writing a daily blog.

Incidental Contact is aimed at women but can be helpful to anyone seeking better understanding of popular sports.

For those who might be turned off by professional athletes, college football can offer an alternative, Duffy says.

"College players are more like our own kids. They just happen to play football at a big-time school."

And, she adds, the commercials at halftime won't be as titillating.

So how do you get started on enjoying the game? Duffy offers these suggestions:

- Learn some of the rules and the lingo. Sit down with the football fan in your life or find a Web site such as www.firstbasesports.com or www.momsguide.com. Duffy's 43-minute audio lesson, "A Woman's Guide to Football," can be downloaded for \$9.98.
- Pick a team to root for. Otherwise, Duffy says, why are you watching? Go online or read the sports pages to get some background on the teams and the players. Knowing the stories behind the face masks – there's that term again – makes the competition more meaningful.
- Determine beforehand if the fans you are joining don't mind if you ask questions during the game or want you to wait until a commercial.
- Talking to the screen – making comments, not asking questions – is OK, if you're talking about what's on the screen.
- Don't trivialize the game. This is important stuff to football fans.
- Offer to bring something if you are a guest at someone's house to see the game.

You can get started tonight with the Emerald Bowl.

Emerald Bowl? No, that's not some new cleaning product that turns the water in your toilet green instead of blue.

That would be the game up in San Francisco that pits UCLA against Florida State. You can find it on ESPN at 5 p.m.

It's called the Emerald Bowl because Emerald Nuts is the corporate sponsor. That's something else you need to know about bowl games: Corporate sponsorship is the reason there are so many. Papa John's Bowl, Meineke Bowl, Chik-fil-A Bowl, Capital One Bowl and so on.

Duffy likes all the variety: "It gives you the opportunity to watch a game with schools that maybe resonate in your family. It gives fans all over the country a bowl to watch."

There's at least one college bowl game to choose from every day through Jan. 3, and then three more (Jan. 6, 7 and 8) concluding with the national championship game, when No. 1 Ohio State takes on No. 2 Florida.

Now, are you ready for some football?

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