

## **Semipro football: 'Softball on Saturday night,' plus big hits, insurance waivers**

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ST. PAUL — A crowd of 150 to 200 is silent as Brandon Mueller lies on the turf at Irondale High School.

The 5-foot-9, 190-pound running back for the Twin Cities Titans got caught in a violent collision. Two gigantic Minnesota Sting defensive linemen pulled Mueller in different directions, and his right leg buckled under the stress.

Tim O'Brien, the game's designated medical assistant, runs onto the field to help. With a degree in restaurant management and no official medical training, O'Brien is at the game essentially to "hold the bag" of first-aid supplies and, if necessary, call an ambulance. Mueller, who suffered an ACL tear four years prior, felt a "pop" during the play, but he eventually is able to limp off the field.

Three quarters later, he dives over the end-zone pylon for a touchdown that won't change the final result in the Titans' 14-6 loss.

"It's the love of the game," said Mueller, a 23-year-old native of Lindstrom. "Not a lot of people can play it. Being as young as I am, I don't want to let go of it yet, so I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing."

Most summer weekends, you can find hundreds of men playing full-contact football around the metro area. There are two primary leagues in the state: the Midwest Premier Football League, of which the Titans and Sting are members, and the Northern Elite Football League. Opportunities for women exist, too. Both the Minnesota Vixen and Minnesota Machine take on teams from across the Midwest.

They call it "semipro" football, but that's a misnomer; all of the players actually are funding teams with their own cash.

While thousands of former NFL players -- many who made millions of dollars during their playing days -- are suing the league for withholding information about the dangers of concussions and other health care issues, there is an astoundingly large contingent of local men and women who know the risks and still play.

They are paying anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000 in team and equipment fees to do so.

**'SENSE OF BELONGING'**

At first glance, a semipro football game looks a lot like a high school game. Most of the games are played in high school stadiums, and the screen-printed uniforms more closely resemble what you'd see on fall Friday nights rather than Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

But these games ooze personality. The banter on the field is of the grown-up variety. Receivers complain loudly about the quarterback's latest interception. Personal fouls are sometimes more common than touchdowns. The bulletin board material is great, too; with no media flocking to their games, the players create their own drama by tossing around insults on Facebook and Twitter.

Above all, the game is fun. That's why the teams exist. That's why the players sign up with money from their own pockets. That's why players dig into a big tub of chocolate chip cookies at halftime. There are still wins, losses and championship trophies, but they pale in comparison to the smiles on the faces of grown men as they shake hands after a game.

Many of the benefits go unnoticed.

"Our team has a strong sense of camaraderie, and it keeps a lot of these young men out of trouble," said James Jones, a 42-year-old defensive back for the Sting. "Some of these young men who are at risk ... just playing football gives them a sense of belonging. It's more than just winning the game."

The negative consequences cannot be muted, however. Jones is at the game, but he is unable to play. He stands on the sideline with a deep knee bruise he picked up while defending a fade route earlier in the season.

"The nature of the sport is really, really dangerous," Jones said. "But at the same time, I have work and I have benefits. This is fun and a great form of recreation.

But if I did have a family and kids, I don't think I would be playing."

Teammate Justin Hood has three young children, but he sees them as a reason to play on.

"I'm doing what I do best, and my kids get to see me doing what I do best," said Hood, a linebacker for the Sting. "One day, my son and my daughters are going to play sports. They will learn you can't really just do things by yourself. Sports teach you that you can rely on others while still being accountable for yourself."

It's a wonder the 30-year-old Hood is still playing. After playing for Harding High School, he was kicked out of his home. He didn't find his way back to a football field until five years later, when he tried out for the now-defunct St. Paul Maulers at age 23. During an early-season practice, he ruptured his Achilles' tendon, an injury that can take nearly a year to heal.

But the game drew him back in.

"There's nothing like football," Hood said. "It's America's pastime for a reason. For guys like us, we work normal jobs, and our bosses tell us what to do. It's a way for us to let out our aggression without going to jail."

Even when players are forced to quit, they stick around.

Brad Asplund shattered his fibula during the final game of the Sting's inaugural season in 2009. The team's co-founder is still at every game, but he's now in a much different role: vice president of operations.

He has helped the Sting become the premier semipro football brand in Minnesota. It is the only team in the state that practices indoors year-round (at the Vadnais Heights Sports Center), it has a state-of-the-art website, and it is 9-0 this season with its eye on playing in one of several national championship games.

You won't find many amateur organizations as hypercompetitive as the Sting, but Asplund focuses on the small stuff. Look past the bone-crushing hits and extensive time commitments, and the team is simply one more option for weekend recreation.

"It's just like softball on Saturday night," Asplund said.

## **FOR WOMEN, SAFETY FIRST**

Many local football fans know there is a women's semipro team.

What they don't know is that the scantily clad Minnesota Valkyrie of the lingerie-mandated Legends Football League aren't the only representation of women's football in the state.

It's a perception members of the Minnesota Machine are trying to change. The Vixen, which bill themselves as the "longest continuously operating women's tackle football team in the nation," and the Minnesota Machine are the other teams fighting for attention. They are fully padded and clothed, don't promote themselves with overtly sexual video advertisements and love the game as much as anyone else.

"Women don't know that we're here," Machine quarterback and president Danielle Thompson said. "They don't know that it's an option."

The Machine's season ended in early June, but on this night, some players are helping out their "brother" team -- the Sting -- by running the chains. The men repay the women during their season by volunteering their time, and the teams often get together to scrimmage.

"We hit them, and they hit us," said Machine lineman and vice president Krista Clausen. "It helps us a lot, especially with so many women who have never played

before. The guys are super helpful. They like to teach as well, so it gives them an opportunity to help us out."

Though the Machine have the advantage of practicing against tougher competition, the team faces an uphill battle every season. Lack of local competition means it has to travel around the Midwest to find games. This season, the Machine rode in an old school bus to Nebraska (twice), Kansas and Missouri for games.

Road trips create an unfortunate barrier to entry: money. New players must fork over \$500 in team fees and then purchase \$100 to \$500 of equipment.

And there is another mandatory payment.

"We require insurance," Thompson said. "It's not optional. You can't even be on our sideline without it. We don't mess around with that stuff. We all have to work real jobs."

The women are clearly ahead of the men in terms of safety. They require an athletic training staff and medical doctor -- provided by Health Partners -- at every home game, and they enlist the National Dizzy and Balance Center to perform concussion testing.

By contrast, the men's leagues do not require players to carry personal insurance. There is only a mandatory waiver that clears the team of liability in the event of an injury. Jones says he is covered by his work. Hood has a temporary six-month insurance plan with a local agency that covers him for football season.

At the Titans-Sting game on this night, nobody from the National Dizzy and Balance Center is to be found. There is no medical staff. No doctor. Just the 54-year-old O'Brien, who acknowledges he has seen several injuries that are beyond his level of expertise. But he isn't too worried.

"These are all top-tier players," O'Brien said. "They know what they're doing. Some of these guys are amazing specimens."

The extra precautions for women's games are a good thing, certainly, but they make it difficult for prospective players to sign up if, for instance, they are already having trouble just paying their rent.

If local women can cover insurance costs, they are more than welcome to try out for the team in the fall. The Machine are in the midst of a recruiting campaign, which included a stop at the Pride Festival earlier in the day that netted contact information for 60 potential players for the 2014 season.

"It's about getting the word out," Clausen said. "I think there are a lot of women out there who want to play."

## **NEXT STOP: EUROPE**

Football is a gateway for Mueller, the Titans running back.

He wants to play in Europe, and he sees the Titans as a way for him to prove he is healthy and able to compete at a professional level. For now, that dream seems far off; no official contract is in place, and the Titans lost 6-0 to the Brainerd Lumberjacks on July 13 at the Midwest Premier Football League playoffs.

A chance to play overseas would likely be his final gridiron hurrah before settling down.

"If I had kids, it would probably change a lot," Mueller said. "When you get kids, it becomes a huge factor in your life."

A concrete construction worker in Minneapolis, he comes from a pigskin-loving family and says no one in his life wants him to quit.

"My family has always been huge into football," said Mueller, favoring his knee after injuring it during the game. "They all have faith in me that I won't get hurt."

Serious injuries have ended countless professional careers, but the stakes are even higher for a young man like Mueller. Debilitation and construction don't go hand in hand. He doesn't have a million-dollar signing bonus to fall back on or a legitimate lawsuit to pursue after the fact.

If Mueller had torn his ACL in the game, it could have been a career-ending injury. But he doesn't think about that.

What he thinks about is this: 200 people saw him get back on the field after being injured. Two hundred people saw him dive over the pylon for a touchdown. Two hundred people saw him celebrate with his teammates.

"If you've ever played football and you want to keep playing it, it's a hell of a sport," Mueller said. "Thank God we've got football."