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Women proving they are football fans, too

Statistics indicate they make up 40 percent of the sport's viewers

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Beer commercials featuring mud-wrestling babes notwithstanding, there will be quite a few members of the fairer sex watching today's Super Bowl, an estimated 50 million, according to the NFL.

Take fan Dorri Siler, who will be watching her favorite team compete for pro football's top bragging rights. What is it that Siler likes about her team? Is it their finesse on the field as they play their game in the manner of a high-level strategic battle? Is it the demonstrated commitment to their fans evidenced by their dedication to community service?

No.

"They're awesome," Siler says. "They're bad, they're mean, they've got attitude. They kick ass."

OK, so Siler's a Raiders fan. But many other female fans cite the game's visceral appeal, just as their male counterparts do.

"It's just exciting," says Jan McDermott. "I think baseball's boring compared to football."

She's not alone.

"Football is clearly women's favorite sport," says NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy, noting that in a recent poll, 24 percent of the responding women chose football as their favorite sport, with 13 percent citing baseball and 12 percent basketball. On an average weekend, 375,000 women attend NFL games, McCarthy says, and the league estimates its fan base at 60 percent men, 40 percent women.

The Super Bowl's gridiron action, halftime entertainment -- and, well, yes, probably those legendary commercials -- are a powerful lure for female fans. McCarthy says the Super Bowl now is considered the best opportunity for advertisers to snag the attention of female viewers, taking a spot that has traditionally gone to the Oscars.

What's the allure?

McDermott says part of the excitement comes from the feeling that this is, indeed, a level playing field.

"Anybody can beat anybody on a given day," McDermott says. "The guys are just more physical" than in other sports.

And, OK, there's another aspect to McDermott's ardor.

"I think they're cuter."

But there's more to it, McDermott adds.

"I know the plays," she notes. "I know what to call. There are a lot of men out there who think women don't know anything about football. They're surprised when they find a woman who does."

And McDermott isn't shy about sharing her knowledge when it comes to a bad call or muffed play.

"I'm pretty loud," she says.

McDermott isn't shy, either, when it comes to proclaiming her allegiance to the San Francisco 49ers. Her SUV license plate reads: "49ERSR1." The license-plate frame reads: "No 49ers in heaven? I don't wanna go!" Her home office and one bathroom are lined with 49ers paraphernalia. Her phone number even ends in the magic numbers.

"I paid extra for that," McDermott says.

Why the 49ers?

"I like the organization," she says with a shrug. "They're a class act."

She was a fan through the rough times, and stayed a fan when legendary 49er quarterback Joe Montana moved on.

McDermott and her husband have season tickets, but they sometimes end up staying in town and watching the game at the Santa Fe Mining Co., a dedicated 49ers bar.

"It's like a camaraderie," she says.

When McDermott's at the Santa Fe, Cathe Boudreau Alleger often is sitting across the room, and Alleger isn't a shrinking violet when it comes to football, either. She has been interested in the game -- especially the 49ers -- since her teens.

"My 17-year-old reason was when the guys bent over, their butts looked best," she says with a laugh.

A Boston native, her interest in football grew when the owner of the New England Patriots banned women from the locker room.

"Anytime they say you can't do something" because of gender, Alleger takes it as a challenge, she says.

In graduate school in the mid-'90s, she was working in a Cleveland Browns sports bar in San Francisco but was a closet 49ers fan.

She liked the team, she says, "because of the coaching. When (the coach at the time) used to make plays, it was so methodical and so definite. I love that kind of thing. I like people who think things through."

Then-quarterback Steve Young was a factor, too, but because his brains impressed Alleger.

"Here was a guy who went to law school. ... He and Jerry Rice (a wide receiver now with the Oakland Raiders) made the game exciting to me," she says.

Of football in general, she adds, "it's an evaluating sport. It's almost like chess on the field. You have to know how to place your players, how to know what the other guys are thinking. A lot of them are intelligent men."

She acknowledges that the appeal is not the same for all female football fans. At times, Alleger says, "I was the only female in the bar who wasn't trying to hit on some guy."

And Alleger says she sometimes feels a bit of prejudice.

"There are still a lot of people who think you don't belong in the locker room," she says. "They don't expect you to know what a flag means. They don't expect you to know what a halfback is."

"The fact that there are women's teams being formed will change all that."

But, she maintains, "you can still be feminine and be a football fan."

Raiders fan Leslie Holding says she knows many men don't appreciate female announcers, but she defends them.

"They know as much as men do, or they wouldn't have been hired for the job," Holding says.

And some feel that their football knowledge appeals to some men.

"I think they're glad that I do know the game," Siler says. When she met her husband, she noted, he was glad that she truly liked the game and wasn't watching just because of his interest. When they got married, "he took my Raiders stuff and added it to his collection," she recalls.

This is the biggest game of the year for NFL fans. After the Super Bowl, "it's over," Holding says with a sigh. "I don't think there are any other sports that are quite as exciting as this."

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