

J. Willard Marriott Library
University of Utah
Electronic Reserve Course Materials

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction, which is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses a photocopy or reproduction for or purposes in excess of "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Sports Illustrated Women
December/January 2002

Reel
F-13

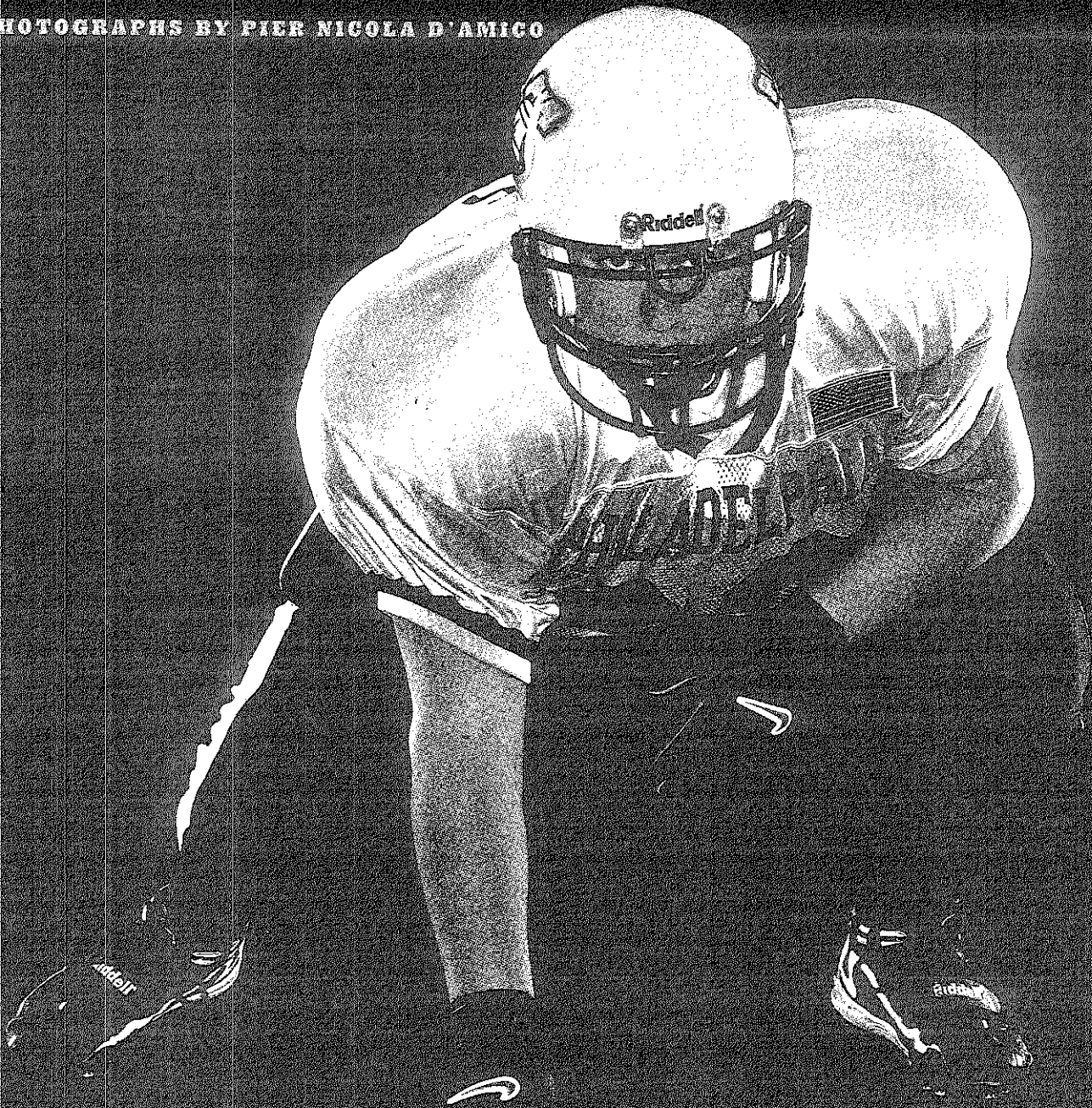
GENDER #21

LADIES AND YOUR PHILADELPHIA

MAD DOG: THE PRINCESS: THE UNDERTAKER:

(BETTER KNOWN AS ALISSA WYKES. 209-POUND FULLBACK. BLACK BELT. CAT LOVER AND PERHAPS

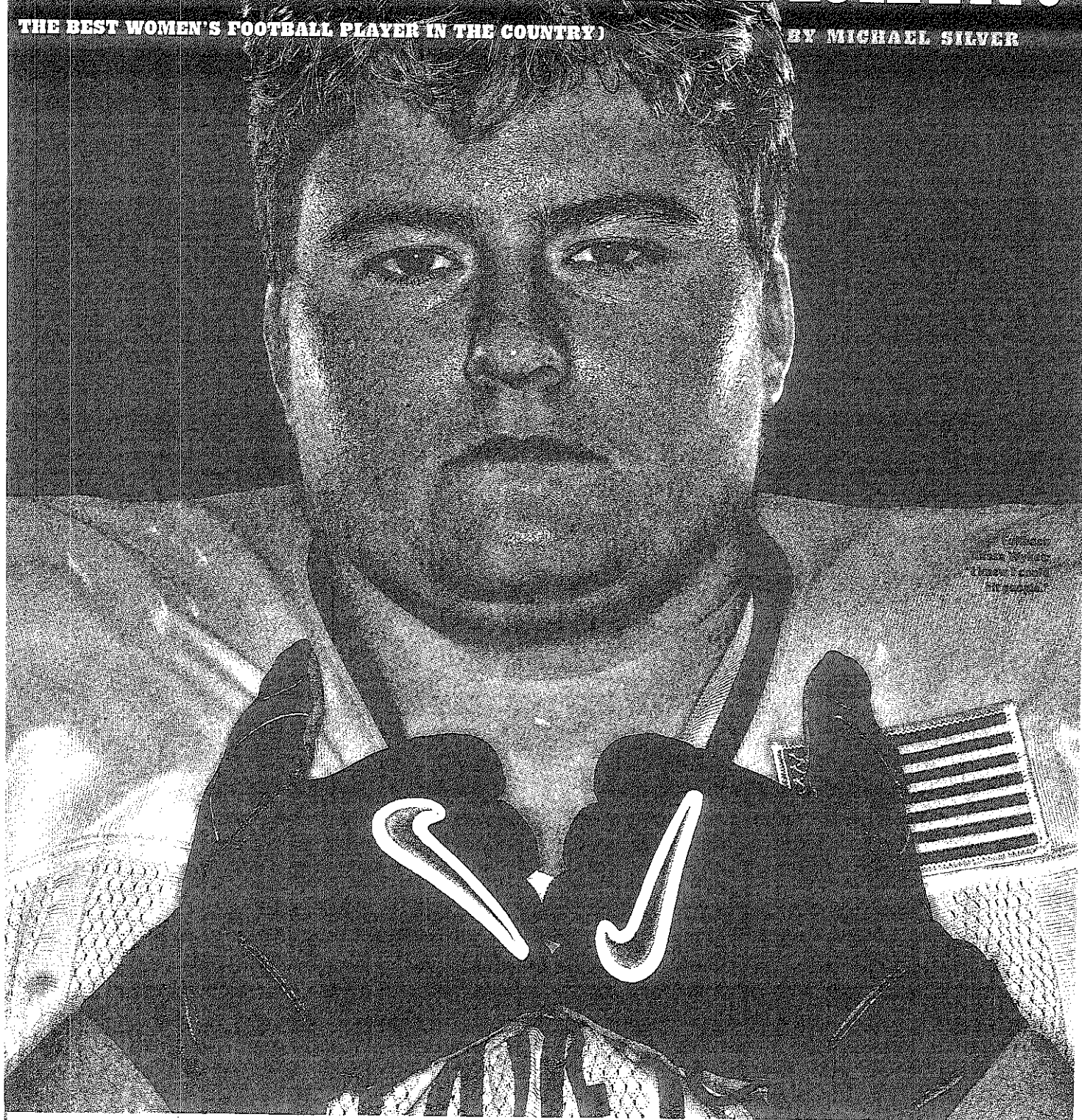
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIER NICOLA D'AMICO



GENTLEMEN, LIBERTY BELLES! AND, OF COURSE, THE A-TRAIN!

THE BEST WOMEN'S FOOTBALL PLAYER IN THE COUNTRY

BY MICHAEL SILVER



TAKE ONE LOOK AT ALISSA WYKES, THE 5' 6", 209-pound fullback for the Philadelphia Liberty Belles, and you'll never again utter the word *powder-puff* when discussing women's football. She sends shivers through opponents' shoulder pads, plowing into doomed defenders with all the subtlety of a Jennifer Lopez evening gown.

Even out of uniform, tossing back pints at a roadside tavern in suburban Philadelphia on a Saturday afternoon, Wykes makes Brandi Chastain look like a Barbie doll. "I have no reason to juke anybody," says the woman known as The A-Train. "I'll hit and spin and hit some more before I worry about busting any moves."

There is one thing that can derail

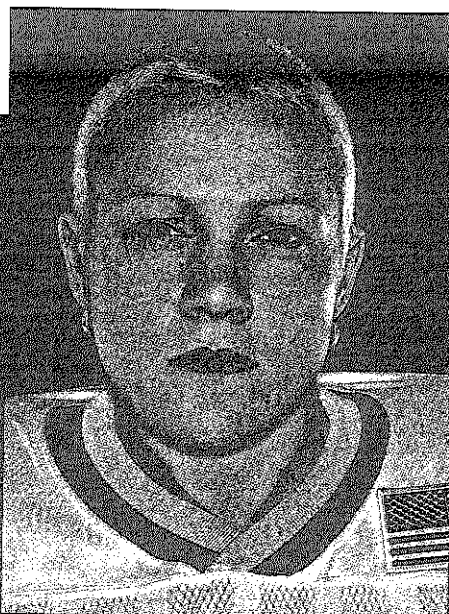
Big year, too: Wykes led the Belles to the inaugural National Women's Football League championship in July, finishing third in the NWFL in rushing despite a pair of anterior cruciate ligaments that resemble Tony Soprano's favorite linguine dish in mid-bite. And big softie: Wykes, 34, plays mother to 12 frisky felines, augmented currently by 11 foster cats. On her left ankle she sports a tattoo of her Siamese, Dasha, who recently died at age 20. She's involved in a long-term romantic relationship, and for a pittance, she makes time to coach the Bryn Mawr-Haverford women's rugby team.

Someday, if the organizational mish-mash that is women's pro football straightens up and flies right, Wykes might be remembered as a rugged pioneer in the vein of Bronko Nagurski.

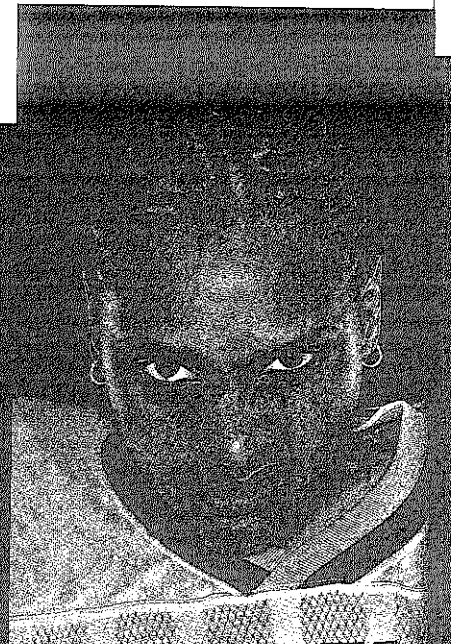
winning six of seven games to tie the Massachusetts' Mass Mutiny for first place in the NWFL's Northern Division, Philly needed to preserve its points-differential advantage over the Mutiny in the regular-season finale to clinch a spot in the title game. The Belles responded by creaming the Connecticut Crush 74-0, then traveled to the Florida panhandle to face the undefeated Southern Division champions, the Pensacola Power. Taunted on their website by Power players in the days leading up to the championship game—one would-be intimidator wrote, "We're on steroids and have played together for three years"—the riled-up visitors rolled to a 40-7 victory, with Wykes carrying 21



Quarterback Zeffi Angelikas



Middle linebacker Jen Pastore



Nose tackle Trina Ricketts

The A-Train, though, at least conversationally. Beer is her Kryptonite. Halfway through her second Yuengling's ale, Wykes sheepishly stops mid-sentence and excuses herself. Can it be that for the second time in 10 minutes The A-Train has to pee? "I have a very small bladder," she explains. "Big legs, small bladder. Big torso, small bladder. Big heart..."

Though it's unlikely the punishing Hall of Famer and Chicago Bears star of the 1930s, or any of his dentally challenged, leather-helmeted peers, spent much time supervising litter births in their living rooms as Wykes has on seven occasions, they would surely appreciate the way The A-Train and her Bellemates roll over opponents. After

times for 177 yards and two touchdowns.

Wykes and her teammates are throwbacks in other ways as well. They keep their day jobs for one; everyone in the NWFL plays for free. And then there are the nicknames. Joining The A-Train on Philly's roster are quarterback Zeffi (The Princess) Angelikas; running back Rachele (Pretty) Pecovsky;

6'1", 230-pound nosetackle Trina (The Undertaker) Ricketts; defensive end Tracy (Mad Dog) Settle; and middle linebacker Jen Pastore, a.k.a. The Professor of Pain. But the Belles don't just have the names; they've got game. "I expected men, especially, to look down on this, but guys have told me, 'The way you all hit, I couldn't tell if it was men or women out there,'" says Pecovsky, a caterer who wears her Belles jersey while moonlighting as a part-time bartender. "Random guys are constantly asking me to arm wrestle," adds Philly wide receiver Amy Love. "We get a lot of sarcasm in the gym. I think the men are a little bitter because when we follow them on the machines we don't change the weight."

After learning of the newly launched

Wykes blasted through a pair of Connecticut defenders, stiff-armed a third and shed a fourth before a fifth player finally dragged her down.

"Wherever Alissa went," says her teammate, "the ground was littered with girls."

league from a newspaper article in November 2000, Wykes showed up to watch a tryout session and smirked at the "women who looked like they should've been aerobics instructors." However Wykes, who for the last six years has played defensive back for a flag-football team, was intrigued enough to return for the final tryout, this time as a participant.

Coach Russ Carfagno instantly pegged her as an anchor for the offensive line, but she persuaded him to give her a look at fullback. "I wanted him to withhold

judgment until I put on the pads," she recalls. "I wanted to be running the ball, and I knew I could hit people."

This would appear to be an understatement. Just ask the Philly defenders who found themselves in her path during practice. "She's like a bulldozer," says Chris Donnelly, the Belles' 5'4", 128-pound safety. "In the beginning we said, 'We're not going to be able to bring her down.' Three times in a row she ran right over me. I had footprints on my jersey. It felt like I'd been hit by a concrete wall." Opposing teams could soon commiserate. On Philly's first offensive play of the season big number 22 blasted through a pair of Connecticut defenders, stiff-armed a third and shed a fourth before a fifth player dragged her down 15 yards later. "Wherever Alissa went," says Belles tight end Karen Ericsson, "the ground was littered with girls."

"I did a double take," says Massachusetts linebacker Linda Caruso about the first time she saw Wykes. (The Mutiny handed the Belles their lone defeat.) "We were thinking, 'They breed them a little differently down there.' She's a tank who's also mobile, and it's pretty intimidating when she comes across the line and steamrolls right

over you." That didn't stop the 5'3", 145-pound Caruso, a Suffolk County sheriff's deputy who knocked two Baltimore Burn players unconscious in a game last spring, from addressing Wykes as "fat ass," to which Wykes daintily replied, "I'll kick your ass, you little shit."

WHETHER AMERICANS EN MASSE ARE ready to embrace this smashmouth sorority is hard to say, but winds are at least starting to blow in that direction. High school football participation among girls has spiked sharply in recent years—779 females played

nationwide during the 2000 season—and former homecoming queen Ashley Martin recently gained national attention as a kicker for Alabama's NCAA Division I Jacksonville State. Surveys show that football is the favorite spectator sport among females, who comprise 43% of the NFL's fans.

"Women's football is largely ignored, but as soon as people check it out, they tend to keep coming back," says Sean Pamphilon, a Brooklyn-based filmmaker who is directing a documentary focusing on the Austin Rage of the Women's Professional Football League. "The energy level and the excitement of the players are very infectious. These women hit hard." (Trust Pamphilon on this: The 6'3", 195-pounder participated in a full-pads practice with the Rage and fractured his left shoulder.)

Part of the sport's problem stems from a bewildering alphabet soup of rival leagues. The original league, the WPFL, launched with great promise in 1999, beginning with a two-team barnstorming tour and evolving into 11 teams the following season. But shady financial dealings and disorganization burned through the WPFL's cash midway through its second year, leaving only four of its teams intact. Meanwhile four other leagues entered the fray: the WAFL, the IWFL, the UWFA and the NWFL, formed by a onetime WPFL consultant. The NWFL seems most likely to emerge out of that acronymic pack—set to expand from 10 to 20 teams in 2002—but the prognosis is murky.

"I can't help but think that the people we need to impress—the NFL, Nike, major equipment suppliers—are looking at us and just shaking their heads in disbelief," says Jodi Armstrong, director of operations and starting fullback for the Minneapolis Vixens, a onetime WPFL franchise that now plays without a league.

"We had a chance in '99 to do something incredible, and through mismanagement, poor business decisions and

having the wrong people in the wrong positions, we managed to flush it down the toilet, with a Drano chaser."

Suffice it to say, no woman currently playing has much chance of topping Keyshawn Johnson's contract. Wykes works full time as a quality control manager for Polymeric Systems Inc., a manufacturing firm, and squeezes in four days' worth of rugby coaching, weekend softball, flag-football games, classes at West Chester (Pa.) University toward a master's degree in sports administration and an active role in an organization called Save The Cats. Other than that, it's all about the Belles.

A softball and basketball standout at Upper Moreland Senior High School, who also played trombone in the school's Pennsylvania state champion marching band, Wykes, who weighed 168 pounds as a senior, felt like an outcast because of her size. After earning a degree in biological oceanography at the Florida Institute of Technology—and putting on 50 pounds she ascribes to "pizza and beer"—Wykes stayed active. Among other pursuits she earned a first-degree black belt in karate. In the process she tore her ACLs, one in each knee, and elected not to repair either injury through surgery.

Her right hand bears the scars of the recent football season: a thrashed middle finger with a still-swollen knuckle and a large lump near the upper wrist, courtesy of a helmet shot in practice from The Professor of Pain.

Playing with pain is part of The A-Train's psyche, and that includes emotional scars. "It's not right for people to assume that because a woman is strong, self-assured and independent, she's a lesbian," Wykes says. "She should be able to play sports without being stereotyped." Wykes pauses for a beat and starts to laugh. "Of course I *am* a lesbian," she says. "I've had a partner for the last six years, and it's been awesome. I guess you can call

this my coming out party."

Tank or Princess, the Belles are bound by a common thread—unrepentant toughness. "Early on one of our players smacked another girl and then said she was sorry," recalls middle linebacker Carol Grubb. "The rest of us got all over her: 'You don't apologize in football!'" Not even if you're a Princess. Despite Angelikas's regal nickname—a designation she earned because, like most quarterbacks, she implores her offensive teammates not to let any defender so much as lay a hand on her—she has been known to engage in fistfights when necessity arises. "One of my friends was getting hassled in front of a bar, and I stuck up for her and started brawling with this other girl. It ended with me on top of her, scraping her head against the concrete before I got pulled off."

There's also DSL-fast running back Donna Garrett, an ER nurse and the other half of Philly's "Thunder and Lightning" rushing attack, who finished second in the NWFL with 1,042 rushing yards (Wykes had 741) despite the fact, teammates say, that she smokes cigarettes and loves to party. The final component of the Belles' three-back attack is Pretty Pecovsky, who combines power and speed into a 5' 8", 165-pound package, and who also has a more arcane nickname: House in the Hamptons. Leave it to Wykes to explain that one: "There's a long-standing joke in the lesbian community that if you get a straight girl to 'switch over,' you win a toaster oven. So one day at practice a bunch of us are joking about what we'd get for converting some of our teammates; a bagel slicer for one girl, a convection oven for another. Pecovsky overhears and blurts out: 'Hell, if you get me, you win a house in the Hamptons.'"

Wykes delivers the line with deadpan

"Early on one of our players smacked another girl and then said she was sorry," recalls middle linebacker Carol Grubb.

"The rest of us got all over her:

'You don't apologize in football!'"

precision, earning laughs from a group that includes her parents, Ernie Wykes and Sandy Sherman. The divorced pair have accompanied her to the Belles' team banquet, held in the Veterans Stadium restaurant, on an early September evening. Sipping a white zinfandel at a side table, Sherman, who owns and operates a go-go bar near Allentown, looks fondly toward her daughter who, decked out in a dark-blue-and-maroon pants suit, is picking up her team MVP trophy. "This wasn't what I had planned for my baby girl," Sherman says, "but she's always done what she wanted to do. She's always been a little, shall we say, adventurous."

Wykes returns to the table, takes a long pull on her beer, then gestures to the Vet playing field below. Her beloved Philadelphia Eagles will open their season here the following afternoon against the St. Louis Rams, and Wykes wants to talk about Donovan McNabb and Duce Staley and the Eagles' aggressive defense. "Do you think they can stop [Rams running back] Marshall Faulk?" she asks, then quickly adds, "Wait—hold that thought." She rises again and charges toward the bathroom, passing scores of teammates and friends on the way. Everyone waves at The A-Train.

Nobody slows her down. ♦



Running back
Kathie Pasovsky

Middle linebacker
Carol Grubb

Wide receiver
Amy Lovv

Safety
Chris Donnelly

Quarterback
Zofri Angelika

Nosetackle
Trisa Ricketts

Center
Robyn Fortsch

Tight end
Kares Ericsson

Fullback
Alisse Wykes

Middle linebacker
Jen Pastore