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MAKING IT  
MAGICAL

# faces



*Baltimore*, by Andra Douglas.

## GRIDIRON PASSION: MORE THAN JUST A GAME

Andra Douglas owns a top women's tackle football team which she incorporates into her art and uses to inspire young girls.

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*Joiah*, by Andra Douglas.

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An "Evening in Chicago" inspires proceeds of \$1.2 million for pediatric care: **Page 138**



# GRIDIRON PASSION



Andra Douglas owns the New York Sharks professional women's football team, which is part of the Women's Football Alliance. She is also an accomplished artist who spends time between New York City and the Tampa Bay area.

BY KATHERINE SNOW SMITH  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES BORCHUCK

**A**ndra Douglas owns a football team that has no endorsements, makes no money and is never on TV. “Yet we survive,” said the Zephyrhills-born owner of the New York Sharks women's tackle football team. “We've been doing this for 17 years. I love it.”

Her first stint — as quarterback playing at Mitchell Field on Long Island in 1999 — was what sealed the deal. She no longer plays, but is a big advocate for female tackle football's roughly 60 U.S. teams that include the Tampa Bay Inferno.

While it seems most people are unaware that female tackle football exists, there are devoted athletes across the country and the world who pay their own way to play, and owners like Douglas who keep them going.

“We've got teachers, doctors, nurses, trainers, techies, truck drivers, poets, students,” she said of the 40 women ages 18 to 50 who play for the Sharks.

Douglas grew up an avid football fan, going to games at Zephyrhills High and Florida State University regularly. She played on flag teams any chance she had. After graduating from Florida State, Douglas went to Pratt Institute to get a master's in fine arts and joined a women's flag football team in Brooklyn. Since it had the best record in the country, when two female tackle teams in the Midwest wanted an opponent in 1999 for an exhibition game they called on the women from Brooklyn.

“They said, ‘We'll send you the pads and the helmets.’ We beat them 12 to 6,” Douglas recalled with a laugh.





Brilynn, by Andra Douglas.

“For girls who haven’t had a chance to do a lot of things, when they can say to themselves, ‘Hey, I can throw that football’ or ‘Hey, I pulled that flag,’ that gives them a new sense of confidence.”

ANDRA DOUGLAS

The next year organizers started a women’s tackle league. It cost \$20,000 to join. Fresh off their victory, the Brooklyn flag-turned-tackle team tried to find a buyer to pay their way to the league. When no takers emerged, Douglas spent her savings to buy the team herself. It became one of the first 11 franchises in the country.

The Sharks play April to August in high school stadiums in front of about 200 spectators. Douglas has tried to get TV coverage and more national attention, but for now, it’s not happening. So the games are largely for the players.

“I think this is always something they’ve wanted to do and they didn’t know it existed,” she said. “Some come and they get hit once and they don’t come back. Most of them say ‘this is great.’”

But with plenty of flag football opportunities for women to pass, run and catch, why do they want to add the component of being knocked down?

“I think it’s the knocking down that they like,” she said with a sly smile. “I asked a ref once what was the difference in how we play. He said, ‘The women smell better. Other than that there is no difference.’”

Football is Douglas’ passion, but graphic design was her day job for many years. As vice president of creative at Atlantic Records’ WarnerVision Entertainment, she designed packaging and marketing for Jane Fonda exercise videos and Led Zeppelin and Natalie Cole, among other projects.

More recently she has been a design consultant in New York and co-manages development and conservation of her family’s K-Bar Ranch in Pasco and Hillsborough counties. She commutes regularly between New York and Tampa Bay. An artist as well, Douglas’ latest works depict female football players and coaches. She photographs them, prints

them in archival ink on bamboo paper, then overpaints the images with oils, colored pencils and other mediums.

Women smile and glare behind face masks with black grease under their eyes and hair flowing from their helmets.

“They make great subjects. They are so real, they just bubble up,” Douglas said. She also paints more relaxing scenic shots of the Hamptons and Zephyrhills. She has homes in both.

Her work will be in Miami’s Art Basel show in December, and shows are planned for St. Petersburg, Charlotte, N.C., and New York in the spring.

As proud as Douglas is of the Sharks, her favorite day of the season is not a game day. It’s a weekend in the fall when the team coaches about 75 girls ages 13 to 17 from across New York at a football camp. The team’s Fins Up Foundation, which Douglas started in 2003, provides transportation for girls from at-risk neighborhoods to the free camp, where they play flag football and meet female mentors and sometimes an NFL player or two.

“For girls who haven’t had a chance to do a lot of things, when they can say to themselves, ‘Hey, I can throw that football’ or ‘Hey, I pulled that flag,’ that gives them a new sense of confidence,” Douglas said. Whether the girls have goals of being a football player, doctor, truck driver or coach, seeing strong women doing what they love inspires them.

Three current Sharks players attended the Fins Up camp as young girls.

Another big event coming up will be the Women’s World Games Jan. 21-29 in Orlando. A vetted U.S. team, as well as players from other countries, will compete at the ESPN Wide World of Sports.

Yes. A wide world of sports, indeed.



Brooklyn, by Andra Douglas.