

Missing Abby

As the years go by, a footnote in professional football history becomes a lasting influence on one athlete and the people she inspired

On a typical hot, humid Kansas day in early August of 2005, an atypical scene unfolded. Abby Vestal put on a helmet and pads in preparation for the first of many infamous two-a-days at one of the toughest, most revered programs in the state. And Lawrence High School's head football coach, Dirk Wedd, soured when he noticed she was 15 minutes late. Perplexed and annoyed, Wedd ordered Vestal to the end of the field where a litany of ferocious bear crawls awaited. Vestal, silently, obligingly and solitarily carried out the punishment.

"I told her the same demands I put on the young men I would expect her to live up to," says Wedd.

Vestal complied that day, and each day afterwards, as she attended summer strength and conditioning, warmed up with the team, completed sprints and drills, and worked to uphold the tradition and standards the Chesty Lions had established and maintained for more than a century.

"I made sure I was there," says Vestal. "I put the time in that they put in. I did everything, so they didn't have a doubt I was there for the team. I wanted to win just as much as they did."

But she did ask for one, small exception.

During a break, Vestal approached her still somewhat peeved head coach.

"Uh, Coach, could you open up the girls' locker room tomorrow morning for me, so that I'm not late?" she asked.

At that point, Wedd's assessment of his first-ever female player changed dramatically.

"It was entirely my fault that she was late, and she was so tough," Wedd recalls. "I would have had 100 boys whining about 'Coach, the locker room wasn't open—that's why we're late' or 15 excuses for being late, and she had a legitimate excuse. Right then, I had an idea she was going to be pretty special because that's a lot of toughness right there."

PROMISING ROOKIE

Vestal's mother, Amy, says she thought her daughter could become a great piano player because she was born with "long, long, long, long, long fingers." But her father, Dale, noticed those same hands were perfect for catching. As she grew up in Lawrence, Vestal competed against her younger brother, Coulter, in some form of



sport or activity daily. She wanted to play baseball, not softball. So, she pitched, caught, and played infield and outfield.

"I was such a tomboy growing up," says Vestal. "I always wanted to play with the boys. I knew in my heart I wanted to play football since the time I could catch."

At age 16, she got that wish when Wedd, who had noticed Vestal's power as a soccer player in girls' leagues, approached her and asked: "Do you want to come out and try and kick for us?"

Vestal's dad, with the help of former University of Kansas kicker Matt Davis, was instrumental in helping her prepare for the Lawrence High School football tryouts.

"We marked off distances and got the motion down," says Vestal.

Vestal had been playing soccer since age 5, but kicking a football required her to adjust her entire approach and mechanics so that the ball would continue moving skyward.

Fortunately, Vestal was a natural.

In the first three games of her senior season, she hit 10 of 11 extra-point kicks and won the starting position, as well as the full respect of her teammates and coach.

"She was never given anything," says Wedd. "She earned everything. That's what I most admired about her."

HOWL-LELUIAH

Toward the end of her senior year, Vestal signed a professional contract with the Kansas Koyotes, a Topeka-based indoor-football team with the American Professional Football League. The Koyotes threw Vestal into the mix of kickers vying for the top spot, and when she hit an early field goal on the comparatively narrower posts, Vestal became the first woman to score in American men's professional football history.

Then she was placed on the inactive list.

It's a benching that still troubles Vestal more than five years later.

"The coach only wanted the publicity, not the kicking ability I had," says Vestal.

Rick Peterson, a sportswriter at the *Topeka Capital-Journal* who covered the Koyotes that year, says he didn't notice an intentional effort to undermine Vestal. He thinks the high-number scoring system of the indoor league and their limited practice time

Abby Vestal (above and right) poses in her Koyotes uniform. She made history with this Topeka-based indoor football team when she became the first woman to score points in a professional men's football league.

TRADITION

Though Abby Vestal made history with the Kansas Koyotes, she says her best football experience was with the Lawrence High School Football team. Her joining the LHS squad as the first female player was only one milestone in the program's celeb rated history. LHS has 31 undefeated seasons, the most for a high school football team in the United States. The Chesty Lions won the High School National Championship in 1960 and won five consecutive Kansas State High School Activities Association state championships in Class 6A from 1989 through 1993.



just meant that special teams, and the few extra points a kicker could earn, simply weren't a priority.

"Abby was as good, if not better, than the other place-kickers they had," says Peterson. "But I always thought the special teams in that league were always kind of an afterthought. Sometimes you would score 40, 50, 70—I even saw games go into the 100s. So one extra point isn't necessarily a priority. Were they bad at that, yes? But I didn't see anything that suggested it was intentional."

For whatever reason, Vestal had to draw her conclusions from the sidelines. But she finished her commitment to the squad, attending remaining practices and games.

"I did what I was supposed to do," says Vestal. "I was a player. That's what you're supposed to do. Keep going."

LEGACY

At the end of the season, Vestal walked away with compensation of \$20 for gas and a couple of McDonald's coupons. But there were other takeaways.

Vestal's father says he recalls a conversation with a team official, who told him about countless requests from people wanting to purchase jerseys with Vestal's number on them. And even in games when she didn't play, Vestal would be surrounded by kids—particularly girls—after the clock ran out.

Number 14 insists the fans left more of an impact on her than she on them. Today, Vestal works for the Boys and Girls Club of Lawrence, and she cites the post-game interactions she had with so many children as the impetus in choosing her current professional career.

"The experience was fantastic," says Vestal. "I would love for it to have been different, but I would not trade it for not having done it at all. At the end of the day, no matter all the stuff that happened, it was worth it to be a role model to little girls everywhere."

Vestal still competes, playing rugby for the University of Kansas club team and participating in the local kickball league. She played women's tackle football in Kansas City for a couple of years, but she says it didn't create the same level of excitement that arena did. Even more memorable than her professional career were her years at LHS playing soccer, basketball and especially football, and the teammates she refers to as brothers, who accepted and respected her.

"It was the best team I will ever play for," says Vestal. "The structure, the discipline, the team, the tradition—it was unbelievable. There are some things I still do with sports that were drilled into my head from high school football. I miss it. I miss putting the helmet on."

And the Chesty Lions say Abby's legacy has opened the way for other quality female athletes to fight for a spot on the team.

"She had great work ethic," says Wedd. "I wish we would have found another one like her last year. We were very successful last year, but we could have used a really quality kicker like Abby. I miss her." **LM**



ABBY VESTAL IN THE TIMELINE OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL HISTORY

- ⇒ **1896** Two teams of women footballers compete in New York City.
- ⇒ **1926** The Frankford Yellow Jackets of the NFL host women's teams during home-game halftimes.
- ⇒ **1930** Two women's tackle-football teams based in Toledo, Ohio, go on a Midwest tour, playing exhibition games against each other. The tour dissolves when first lady Lou Hoover sends a letter admonishing the teams and accusing their coaches of abusing womanhood.
- ⇒ **1965** Sid Friedman, a talent agent in Cleveland, founds a women's tackle-football league and names it the Women's Professional Football League.
- ⇒ **1970** Pat Palinkas, with the Orlando Panthers, becomes the first woman to play in men's professional football (Atlantic Coast Football League).
- ⇒ **1974** The National Women's Football League is formed.
- ⇒ **1983** The Pro Football Hall of Fame names the Toledo Troopers (a women's professional tackle-football team, 1971-78), with a record of 68-3, the "Winningest team in all football history" (men's or women's).
- ⇒ **1995** Joyce Mungari becomes the first (and only to date) woman to play linebacker on a men's college football team (the junior college squad of Contra Costa College in California).
- ⇒ **1997** Placekicker Liz Heaston of Willamette University (then an NAIA team) becomes the first woman to score points in a college football game.
- ⇒ **1999** Catherine Masters forms the National Women's Football Association.
- ⇒ **2001** Placekicker Ashley Martin of Jacksonville State University becomes the first woman to score points in a men's NCAA Division 1-AA college football game.
- ⇒ **2003** Placekicker Katie Hnida of the University of New Mexico becomes the first woman to score points in a men's NCAA Division 1-A college football game.
- ⇒ **2003** Tonya Butler of the University of West Alabama (Division II) becomes the first woman to score a field goal in a men's college football game.
- ⇒ **2007** Placekicker Abby Vestal of the Kansas Koyotes becomes the first woman to score points in a men's professional football league (APFL).
- ⇒ **2013** Current women's football leagues (serious and otherwise) include the Independent Women's Football League, the Woman's Football Alliance, the Lingerie Football League and the Women's Spring Football League.