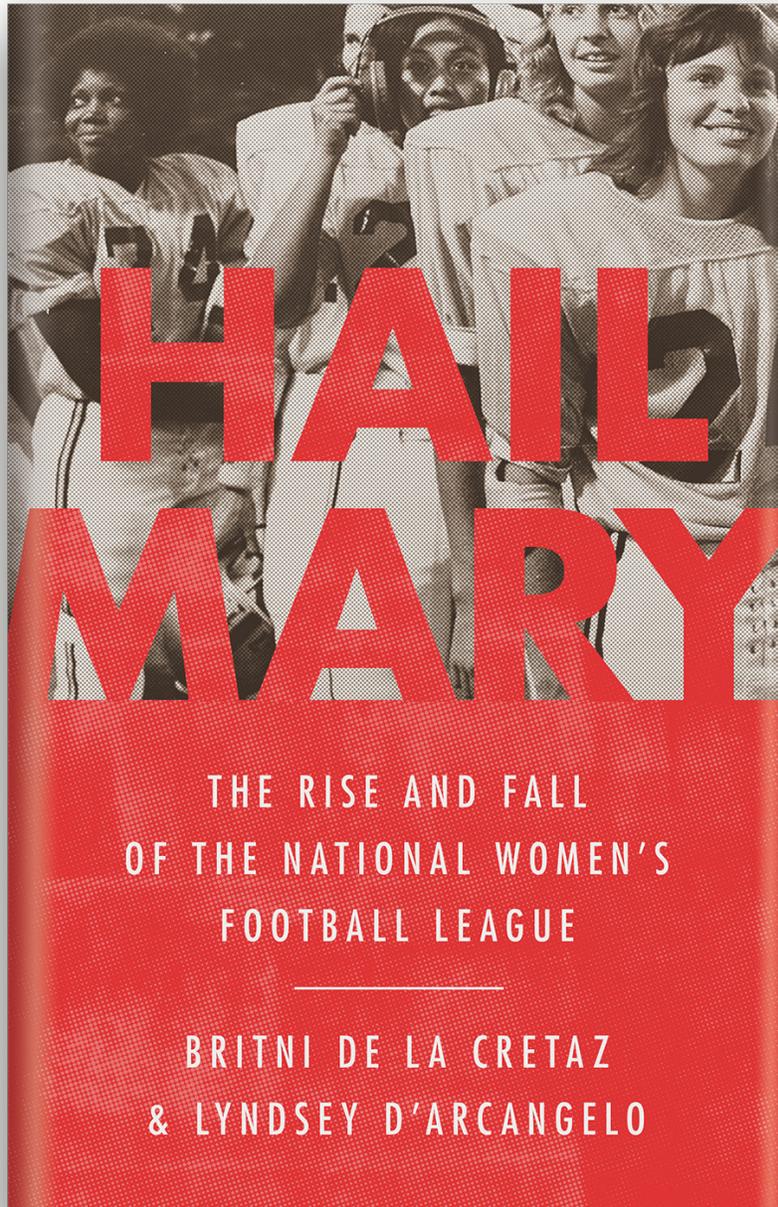
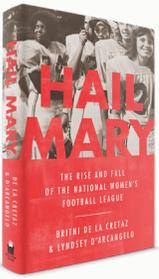


# Reading Group Guide



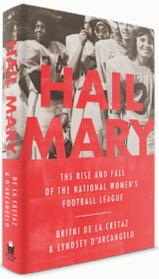
**BOLD TYPE BOOKS**





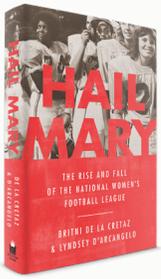
# Discussion Questions

1. Hail Mary, the title of the book, is significant, as it represents some of the prevailing themes throughout the book. What are those themes? And what specifically does the title represent to you?
2. In chapter one, A Heated Contest, the book opens right in the thick of the 1976 NWFL season and in the middle of an intense football rivalry between the Oklahoma City Dolls and the Toledo Troopers. This was intentional by the authors. What purpose do you think it serves in the larger narrative of the book?
3. Despite his many shortcomings, Sid Friedman plays a pivotal role in the evolution of women's football. What is his legacy and how did he set the groundwork from which the NWFL was eventually built?
4. Before Sid Friedman formed the USA/Cleveland Daredevils in 1967, women and young girls had aspired and attempted to participate in football since the sport was invented. What are some examples of this and what are some patterns you notice in many of these stories?
5. From its inception, women's football has flourished in the Rust Belt region and, more specifically, in Ohio. The NWFL was no different. Why were women's football teams so prevalent in this region of the country?
6. There are key lessons to be learned from the way the owners mismanaged some of the teams and ran the league itself. What could they have done differently? Have women's sports leagues of today learned from those mistakes? What could they be doing differently?



# Discussion Questions

7. The players in the NWFL were largely covered in the media as a punchline and a novelty. They were often asked about their feminist beliefs, their sexuality and quizzed on their football acumen. Their looks and bodies were often the main focus. How did the male-dominated lens of the sports media industry influence that coverage?
8. Throughout the entirety of the NWFL's tenure, the players fought against numerous stereotypes while giving their all to a sport most of society said they shouldn't be playing. What are some of the ways in which women athletes of today face similar challenges and scrutiny?
9. NWFL players were routinely shoehorned into a narrative that positioned them as members of the women's liberation movement. The truth was much more complicated. What are some of the misconceptions people may hold about the players' involvement in women's lib and what was the reality of the way the league intersected with the second wave of feminism that was peaking at the time?
10. Title IX affects interscholastic sports and the NWFL was an independent pro league. Even so, the groundbreaking legislation that gave women and girls more access to sports was passed in 1972, just two years before the NWFL launched. How did Title IX, in some ways, pave the way for a league like the NWFL to exist?
11. Not all of the players in the NWFL were gay, but many of them were. The authors made an intentional choice to include stories that highlighted the openly queer players and the ways the NWFL teams intersected with the teams' local lesbian communities. Why do you think that choice was made? What does it add to the larger story?



# Interview with the Authors

Frankie de la Cretaz and Lyndsey D'Arcangelo

## 1. How did you two come together to write this book?

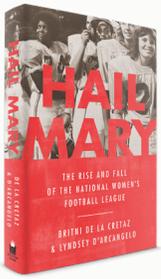
**Frankie:** Lyndsey and I met in a Facebook group for sports writers of marginalized genders. I was working on a column at the time for Bitch magazine about the current state of women's football and was looking for a book that would give me some historical context for the game. The only books I could find were super sexist and implied that women would only want to learn about football so they could watch with their man. I complained to Lyndsey that there weren't any books and she told me I should write one. I joked that she'd have to write it with me. And here we are.

## 2. How did you decide to write about the NWFL, specifically?

**Frankie:** This was actually the second book we tried to sell. Our first idea was a much more generalized book about the history of women's football, both on the field and off, including the fans on the sidelines and coaches and officials. That book didn't sell and the main feedback we got about why was because it didn't have enough of a narrative arc. But in the process of researching that book we discovered the Toledo Troopers, who are the winningest team in pro football history, men's or women's. In researching them more, we had a lot of questions about who they played and who else had been in this league and could find very few answers. It became clear very quickly that this was the book we needed to write.

## 3. What is each of your relationships to the game of football?

**Lyndsey:** I have loved football ever since I was little. I often played with my brothers and their friends in school lots, backyards and on the street. Being from Buffalo, I grew up being a Bills fan and watching games with my father. I had always wanted to play organized football, but wasn't



# Interview with the Authors

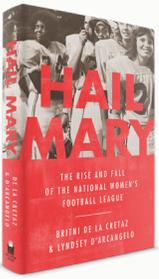
Frankie de la Cretaz and Lyndsey D'Arcangelo

allowed to participate at the youth level because of my gender and my parents' fear of the threat of injury. Yet, my twin brother was allowed to play. This disparity stuck with me. I can identify with the players of the NWFL, because they were often told the same thing throughout their lives – football is a game they shouldn't and couldn't play.

**Frankie:** I never played football but I was a cheerleader. Cheerleading not only taught me a lot about the sport itself – you have to understand what's happening on the field in order to know which cheers to call—but it immersed me in game day culture. For a lot of girls who have been denied access to the sport on the field, they involve themselves through cheerleading or fandom, both of which I think are minimized when it comes to their roles in creating, maintaining, and participating in American game day football culture.

## 4. You were telling the story of a league that had largely been undocumented and forgotten outside of the people who participated in it. What was the research process like?

**Frankie:** The first thing we had to go on were newspaper articles from the time the league started. There was a lot of interest in the teams when they were new because they were a novelty or a curiosity. The newspaper coverage gave us names of their opponents, which is how we began to compile a list of teams, and it also gave us player names and we could begin to look those players up. Facebook and cold calling were both big parts of our reporting. A lot of trial and error as we tried to track down players. But once you found one player, they often were still in touch with at least one former teammate and many of them had saved newspaper clippings, game programs, playbooks, and so much memorabilia. That's where the full rosters came in and the players began to fall like dominoes after that. Then it was just a process of patchworking together archival documents, player interviews based on fading and sometimes faulty memories, and our own research.



# Interview with the Authors

Frankie de la Cretaz and Lyndsey D'Arcangelo

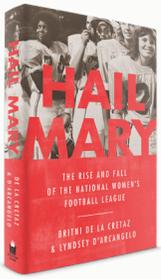
## 5. Who was your favorite player to interview?

**Frankie:** For me, I think it was a player for the Dallas Bluebonnets named D.A. Starkey. She's kind of become a breakout character in the book, according to reader comments that I have seen. She's a very brash, very outspoken butch woman who was one of the first players to really openly talk to me about the gay culture of their team and her life at that time. She ended up unwittingly having a very big impact on me, as I was in the process of deciding whether to leave my husband to live a more authentic and openly queer life for myself. As a queer elder of mine, she inspired me a lot and was a good reminder that we had always been here.

**Lyndsey:** I would say Rose Low. She was the quarterback of the LA Dandelions. At first, she was hesitant to talk with me due to the fact that NWFL players weren't treated well by the media. And also because she holds her time in the league very close to her heart. She wanted to make sure she could trust me with her story, and the story of her teammates. After a few texts and phone calls, Rose opened up. She is incredibly sweet and thoughtful in both her personality and with her words. Rose provided us with rich information, shared her personal experience, and offered support. She also sent me care packages during the writing process. I'm happy to say that we had the privilege of meeting Rose in person at the LA Times Book Festival in April 2022.

## 6. What was the most surprising thing you learned while reporting this book?

**Frankie:** I think for me it was how embedded this league is with the history of the game of American football itself, and how entwined it was with the NFL. So few people know about the league but at the time, the Dallas Bluebonnets were sharing a stadium with the Dallas Cowboys, the Detroit Demons were wearing jerseys that have been handed down to



# Interview with the Authors

Frankie de la Cretaz and Lyndsey D'Arcangelo

them by the Detroit Lions. In some ways there is direct lineage between women who played in the NWFL, like LA Dandelion Barbara Patton, and their children, like Marvycus Patton who spent 13 seasons in the NFL. It also became incredibly clear to me how much of a direct line there was from this league, which had the first Black coach in pro football history and the first woman to coach in pro football history, and the (very slow, still-in-progress) inclusion that has happened in recent years in the NFL.

## 7. What do you hope this book will do for the game of women's football?

**Frankie:** My biggest hope is that the women of the NWFL get recognized as the trailblazers that they were. I would love to see them in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio somehow, even if that is just a display that commemorates their existence. These women deserve to be recognized.

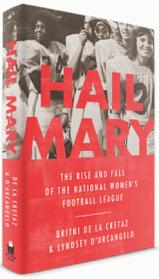
**Lyndsey:** I agree with Frankie. When we started this project, one of our main goals was to get these women the attention and recognition they are due. The NWFL was the first organized professional women's football league of its kind, and the women who played carved a path in



**Frankie DE LA CRETAZ** writes on the intersection of sports, culture, and gender. Their work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *espnW*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic*, and more.



**LYNDSLEY D'ARCANGELO** writes about women's college basketball and the WNBA for *Just Women's Sports* and *The Athletic*. Her articles, columns, and profiles on female/LGBTQ+ athletes have appeared in *The Ringer*, *Deadspin*, *espnW*/*ESPN*, *Teen Vogue*, *Huffington Post*, *NBC OUT*, and more.



# Timeline of Notable Events in Women's Football History

## November 21, 1896

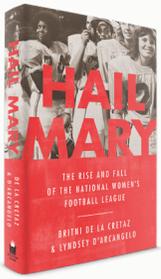
- The first known organized women's football contest was held at Sulzer's Harlem River Park for a men's social club event between Princeton and Yale.

## 1926

- The Lady Yellowjackets "cavorted" across the field and may have performed football moves during a Chicago Cardinals and Frankford Yellow Jacket football game.
- Cavor High School students organize a girls' football team due to lack of male participants, and played pregame matches before other South Dakota-area high school and college games.

## 1939

- The first full-contact women's football was played between the Chet Relph Hollywood Start and the Marshall Clampett Amazons at Gilmore Stadium in Los Angeles, California in front of 2,500 spectators. Life magazine was on hand to cover the event.
- In Atmore, Alabama, 17-year-old junior Luverne Wise became a kicker for the Escambia County High School football team on a dare from the head coach. She played again in 1940 as a senior, winning an All-State honorable mention at quarterback.



# Timeline of Notable Events in Women's Football History

## 1941

- A women's professional football league attempted to launch in Illinois, featuring eight teams, including the New York Bombers, Chicago Bombers and the Chicago Rockets. After an exhibition game in the middle of summer, the league never fully got off the ground.

## 1945

- Eastern State Teachers College in Madison, South Dakota, held its homecoming football game, despite not having enough male students to field a team because of World War II. A group of women took to the gridiron instead, in front of a large crowd.

## 1967

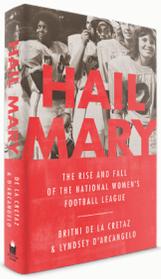
- Theatrical promoter Sid Friedman organizes the USA All-Stars, an all-women's football troupe in the same vein as the Harlem Globe Trotters that would tour the rust-belt area of the country and compete against men's teams in exhibition games.

## 1972

- Twenty-nine-year-old Gail Dearie of the independent New York Fillies is featured in a Life magazine photo that captured the nation's curiosity. Now, we'd say it went "viral."

## 1974

- The National Women's Football League is officially formed, consisting of seven original teams: the Los Angeles Dandelions, Dallas Bluebonnets, California Mustangs, Toledo Troopers, Detroit Demons, Columbus Pacesetters and Fort Worth (Texas) Shamrocks.



# Timeline of Notable Events in Women's Football History

## 1975

- Linda Jefferson of the Toledo Troopers wins "Woman Sport Athlete of the Year" for Billie Jean King's *Women Sports* magazine.

## 1976

- The first NWFL Championship game is held between the Toledo Troopers and the Oklahoma City Dolls. The game was declared a tie, 13-13. And though both teams shared the title, there's been a long-running dispute and conspiracy about the final score.

## 1979

- Some of the biggest teams, including the Toledo Troopers and the Oklahoma City Dolls, fold after this season and the NWFL struggles to rebuild itself.

## 1988

- The few remaining teams in the NWFL disband and the league officially folds.

## 1999

- Women's football returns. Since the turn of the century, many leagues have come and gone. There are a handful of semi-pro leagues in operations today.