



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

North Stafford High School assistant football coach Desa Stone checks the scoreboard during a game at Brooke Point High School on March 19. She isn't the only woman having an impact on local boys high school football teams.

IN FOOTBALL, 'A COACH IS A COACH'

Women making headway on high school sidelines



Brooke Point assistant football coach Lindsay Sollers works with the team during practice. She played professional women's football with the D.C. Divas.

BY JOEY LoMONACO
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When the Brooke Point High School football team's film operation went down unexpectedly during a recent game against North Stafford High School, the Black-Hawks found themselves flying blind. Technical glitches prevented players and coaches from reviewing opponents' tendencies on a series of video monitors located throughout the bench area.

Fortunately, they had a contingency plan.

From a perch atop the press box, a Brooke Point assistant coach noticed that North Stafford's safety was cheating toward the center of the field on passing plays. Via wireless headset, that assistant relayed the information to head coach Dwight Hazelwood on the sideline.

"OK, what do you want to call?" Hazelwood replied.

Upon receiving the play call, quarterback Noah Sanders "looked at me like I

SEE COACHES, A5

COACHES

► FROM A1

was crazy,” said Hazelwood, “because he didn’t understand yet.”

But assistant coach Lindsay Sollers understood perfectly.

Exploiting the vulnerability Sollers spotted from atop the press box, Sanders dropped back and lofted a 33-yard touchdown pass just before halftime. Brooke Point would go on to win, 21–14, in overtime.

In her first season with the Black-Hawks, Sollers is already making her presence felt as a female coach in a sport dominated by men, and she’s not alone.

On the opposite sideline that night in mid-March, North Stafford assistant coach Desa Stone toted a clipboard as she huddled among a group of offensive linemen busy making their own adjustments.

Following a lifetime of interest in football—and, in Sollers’ case, a professional playing career—the two entered coaching. Sollers works with Brooke Point’s wide receivers, while Stone splits duties as the Wolverines’ JV special teams coach and a varsity assistant.

‘A COACH IS A COACH’

Following her softball career at Coastal Carolina University, Sollers was looking to replace the competitive element in her life. The North Stafford graduate thought she found it playing flag football, but even that wasn’t enough.

“I just wanted to take it to a different level,” she said.

So she tried out for the D.C. Divas, a Washington-based professional team that competes in the Women’s Football Alliance. Sollers, 37, would go on to play eight seasons for the Divas, lining up mainly at cornerback and safety.

Following her retirement, she coached high



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Lindsay Sollers speaks with Brooke Point head coach Dwight Hazelwood at halftime during a game.

school softball in Prince William County, but never lost her flame for the gridiron. She met Hazelwood through a mutual friend who works at Brooke Point and suggested he give her a call.

“I’ll give anybody a shot,” Hazelwood said. “If you’re a good coach, you’re a good coach. Doesn’t matter if you’re male or female. I met with Lindsay and she was like, on fire. It just seemed like a perfect fit.”

In 2018, Stone took a behind-the-scenes role with Brooke Point’s football program as director of NCAA eligibility and compliance. She launched a website—first at Brooke Point and later for all Stafford County high schools—that helps athletes navigate the various requirements for scholarships and competition.

When Stone’s son graduated from Frostburg State University, where he was a member of the foot-

ball team, she knew she’d have the flexibility in her schedule to pursue on-field coaching. While she’s less well-versed in some of football’s finer technical points, her dedication and attention to detail have been evident from the start.

“She’s a quick learner,” North Stafford head coach Neil Sullivan said of Stone. “She has a lot of coaching experience. The human body kind of moves the way it moves, and there’s been a lot of carryover. A coach is a coach.”

‘SHE MAKES THE GAME SO EASY’

Christian Taylor heard the grumblings. When Sollers showed up for her first Brooke Point practice, Taylor, a senior receiver, wasn’t sure whether his teammates would take a female coach seriously. Then, she opened her mouth and let forth a stream of football knowledge that quieted any po-

tential critics.

“When I can speak the lingo, I can line them up, can tell them how to run a route—that has built the foundation with me,” Sollers said. “That I actually know what I’m talking about.”

Taylor and his teammates were even more impressed by Sollers’ hands-on approach to coaching. After Brooke Point’s receivers struggled beating press coverage in their first two games, she designed a drill to target the weakness: swipe hands away, look for the ball and finish.

“She makes the game so easy,” Taylor said. “It was amazing to see how cerebral she was, how much a student of the game she was.”

While both coaches were initially apprehensive about how they’d be received by their teenaged wards, they ultimately had nothing to fear. Their competency spoke for itself.

“They listen, they don’t blow me off because I’m a girl,” echoed Stone. “I was very pleasantly surprised. I thought that would be the area where I’d get the most pushback, and it wasn’t the case at all.”

Shortly after Hazelwood hired Sollers, he pulled her aside to ask how he could help set her up for success. Her answer, much like her coaching style, was straight to the point.

“Treat me like any other coach, and if I’ve earned your respect just show it,” she said. “I don’t need to be treated differently just because I’m not a male.”

GAME CHANGERS

Sollers and Stone are part of a trend that has already taken root in professional football. Last year, NFL teams employed a total of eight female coaches.

The Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers had two women on its coaching staff. Callie Brownson, Sollers’ former teammate on the Divas, serves as chief of staff for the Cleveland Browns.

North Stafford and Brooke Point are among several Fredericksburg-area teams that feature a girl or girls on their roster this season. For Brooke Point punter Kylie Thuot, having a female coach has changed the game in ways big and small—she’s no longer the only one dressing in an empty girls’ locker room.

“It’s really nice to see a woman coach on staff, because being in a football setting isn’t so hard when you have a role model to look up to,” Thuot said.

Stone said that while female players were often pigeonholed into kicking and punting in the past, that’s no longer the case. One of Stone’s JV players, Zoey Dowdy, has made a habit of harassing opposing quarterbacks as a pass rusher, while another, Abby Morris, catches passes at receiver.

“I love that they’re letting girls have the opportunity to show this isn’t a one-hit wonder or anomaly, that this could be the norm,” Stone said.

Sollers hopes her success, and that of other female coaches, reinforces that jobs shouldn’t be viewed as gender specific, but based on qualifications alone.

“If this is what you want to do and you go for it and you’re good at it, then do it,” she said. “Who cares what outside opinions are? If you’re good at it, somebody’s going to recognize it and give you that opportunity.”

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North Stafford assistant coach Desa Stone points out a play on video during a game at Brooke Point. Female coaches are changing the game, for girls and boys.