



Above, Brea Davis, left, and Harper Masingo, wear the same No. 20 on their jerseys. Davis plays on the 12U football team, while Masingo plays on the 8U team. (Photo submitted by Sean Kelly) Below, Harper Masingo moves to block a player on the visiting Hampton Roads Hokies. (Photo by Stephen Faleski)

Gridiron girls

Female linebackers take the field in Smithfield

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

At the start of a down, the No. 20 player on the Smithfield Packers age 8-and-under football team lunges toward and locks arms with the No. 88 player for the visiting Hampton Roads Hokies, revealing a braided, elbow-length blonde ponytail extending from behind her helmet.

Eight-year-old Harper Masingo's father, Kenny, who also coaches the Smithfield team, said the Sept. 9 game wasn't the first time a visiting player has had to do a double-take after being tackled or blocked by his daughter.

"She plays hard with no fear, which as a dad is awesome and scary at the same time," Kenny Masingo said.

Smithfield Packers Youth Sports, according to the organization's treasurer, Sean Kelly, has always been co-ed but has seen only half a dozen female players since 2010.

Harper is one of two girls playing this season, and the only one on the 8-and-under, or 8U, team. The other, Brea Davis, plays on the 12U, or 12-and-under, team alongside Harper's 11-year-old brother, Camden.

The two girls have become "sisters in shoulder pads," as Kelly likes to call them. Both wear No. 20 jerseys on their respective teams, identically styled mouth guards, and if asked, will give the same answer as to why they joined a formerly all-male tackle football team. They wanted the challenge.

Football has surrounded Harper in one way or another for most of her life. Her father played throughout much of his Air Force career, and began coaching Camden about seven years ago. The day Masingo taught Camden how to throw a football so that it spirals through the air, Harper learned too.

"When she would get home from school, before her brother's practices, she would ask me to go outside to throw with her," Masingo said.

Next came wrestling with Camden and his friends when they would come over to

play football.

"She's been to all of her brother's games, watching and cheering for him on the sidelines," Masingo said.

Harper's foray into athletics began with a year studying Jiu-Jitsu, followed by a year of softball. This year, instead of signing up for another softball season, she asked to join the football team.

"I want to be out there tackling those boys," Harper said.

Harper, at a solid 90 pounds, went from being the girl who didn't get any field time to the 8U team's starting offensive lineman, or more accurately, linewoman, within her first two games.

Davis, a cheerleader for her twin brother, Brennan's, team last season, this year asked to instead play alongside her brother on the field.

On the gridiron, Harper and Davis receive no special treatment. Both girls are now linebackers. Harper has also learned to play tight end and offensive line.

"They run the same drills," Masingo said. "The boys tackle the girls the same as they tackle each other."

When the team travels to an away game, the boys and girls travel together.

Harper is "tough as nails, but loves her nails too," her father said.

Davis' mother, Deidre Chisley, said her daughter has always been athletic, so it didn't take much time for her to adapt.

The girls have their differences as well. Davis attends Westside Elementary and is a Dallas Cowboys fan, while Harper, who attends Carrollton Elementary, cheers for the Washington Commanders. Harper's brother and father are Carolina Panthers fans, resulting in a divided house on Sundays.

Camille Wilkerson, now 20, was 7 years old in 2010 when she became the first female football player in the Smithfield program's history, blazing the trail for Harper and Davis.

A severe knee injury cut short Wilkerson's football career. She played for only a year.

But during her one and only season she



remembers fondly being "one of the guys," particularly seeing the expressions on the faces of opposing team members when they realized they were playing against a girl.

For Wilkerson, it was a desire to be different that motivated her to join Smithfield's tackle football team.

"A lot of people doubted females, that females could play football," Wilkerson said.

She was determined to prove them wrong. Though her time on the team was cut short, she remains in touch with several of her coaches, even after moving last year to North Carolina.

"I created a lot of bonds," Wilkerson said.

That same tight-knit culture endures within the Smithfield Packers Youth Sports organization 13 years later.

"I love how embracing the program has been for (Brea)," Davis' mother said. "Everyone has been supportive and encouraging with her joining. They have become her second family."

Harper's mother, Amber, says she too has seen the community rally around her daughter.

"I have been grateful at the amount of support Harper has received on the team. Not only from her teammates and coaches, but also the other parents," Amber Masingo said. "She is encouraged and cheered on, which is so special."



Harper Masingo faces off with a Hampton Roads Hokie in the lineup at a Sept. 9 football game at the Luter Sports Complex. (Photo by Stephen Faleski)