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By Judy Etzel

The familiar encouragement of "you go, girl!" ought to be lettered on the front of an Oil City High School football jersey worn by an Oilers senior who has earned the highest respect from her teammates, teachers and coaches.

Ashlee Douglass, 17, is a defensive and offensive lineman for the undefeated Oilers, who will seek their fourth win of the year tonight when they travel to Warren.

Douglass is not new to the game, having played as an elementary student on a flag football team and in the Little Drillers football program. In high school, she has been a junior varsity player and is now on the scout team and plays on special teams for the varsity.

"My dad and I would toss around a football in the yard a lot when I was little," said Douglass, who is listed on the Oilers roster as 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighing about 200 pounds. "And I was watching a lot of football games with my dad, too. I thought, 'I want to play football and so I'm going to play football.' It wasn't like this isn't normal - it's my normal."

'So proud of her'

Douglass, an honor roll student who also earned varsity track letters as a shot putter and discus thrower, isn't the first female to be a member of the Oilers football team.

"Yes, there were other girls but I don't think there were any who played consistently over the years," said Douglass, an articulate student whose pretty countenance showcases a wide smile and twinkling eyes. "I've been playing football since first grade and still at it."

Douglass, the daughter of Matthew and Miranda Douglass of Oil City, wears number 77 on her jersey. It is the same number worn by former Oilers standout Logan Stahl, the son of high school principal Scott Stahl and brother of present Oilers quarterback Holden Stahl.

The high school football program, his sons' involvement as players and his respect for Douglass makes the elder Stahl beam.

"Ashlee didn't just say 'I'll give it a try' - she is giving it her all and truly loves the sport," said Scott Stahl. "The whole team respects her and they treat her like everyone else on the team. And they see her as a real leader because she always gives it her best. We're so proud of her."

For Douglass, the respect shown to her by coaches and fellow players has been inspiring.

"The coaches have always been pretty good about me playing," she said. "In our community, the idea has always been you have to earn it. Our coaches know that and have been accepting and respectful. But, they expect you to work hard and prove yourself."

'I'll hit them hard'

Initially, the junior varsity and varsity experience on the field was questionable, if only because of the nature of hard, physical contact as a lineman.

"In the beginning, there was this thing from players that, 'oh, it's a girl. I don't want to hit her or hurt her.' Now, they know that if they don't hit me hard, I'll hit them hard. I'm not here to be a girl. I'm here to be a football player. And they know that," said Douglass.

The desire and talent she brought to the football field changed attitudes, she believes.

"I think the players believe that they better hit me or I'll get all the tackles," Douglass said with a smile. "And there's no special treatment given to me. I wouldn't do it if there was. I just want to be an athlete."

'A sharp, sharp young lady'

Ritt Smith, the Cranberry High School principal and an offensive/defensive line coach for the co-op Oil City-Cranberry football program, is one of Douglass' primary coaches.

"She's among the top in her senior class and a sharp, sharp young lady," said Smith. "On the team, she's just one of the players and I've never heard anyone say 'that's Ashlee - take it easy.' When they are all suited up, it never crosses your mind that 'oh, she's a girl.' She's a football player and that's how I picture her."

For Smith, having the opportunity to coach a player like Douglass is a gift.

"It's not easy to be a varsity player because you're getting hit every day and running all the time," he said. "I've never heard her complain. She always jumps in when we need her. She is a worker, whether it's in the classroom or on the field. She is just one of the most grateful, generous, honest young people I know."

While the rough-and-tough football experience plays a big role in her life, there are other pursuits, too. Douglass was chosen last year for the Cranberry Festival court and was a 2020 Oil Heritage Festival court member.

She is busy with her family, too, which includes three siblings.

"I haven't really gotten involved in a lot of other things because I don't want to spread myself too thin. I do what I can in my community but football and track keep me pretty busy. If I do things, I

want to be fully there for something, not leaving early or not taking on responsibility because I have to be somewhere else," said Douglass.

Surprised that the newspaper would take an interest in her story, Douglass said, "I don't do this for the recognition. I'm an athlete."

For young girls who may be eyeing a chance to play football, Douglass is encouraging.

"What would I tell them? Sports hurts, maybe football a little more because it is a full hit. But don't be afraid to try it and don't be afraid to not try it," she said. "Some say to me 'super cool, you play football' and that's fine. The thing is to not be afraid of being good or bad because you don't have to be so good to simply enjoy it. For me, it allows me to improve myself, to stay fit and to be involved in something I have always loved doing."