

- NINA MOINI:** Minnesota finally has a professional football champion. The Minnesota Vixen captured their first Women's Football Alliance national title over the weekend, defeating the Pittsburgh passion by a whopping 42 to 14 in Ohio. It ended a championship drought for the country's longest continuously operating women's tackle football team. The Vixen had reached four previous title games but had never won it all. Now, under head coach Connor Jo Lewis, they're bringing a championship back to Minnesota. And Connor Jo Lewis joins us now on the line. Congratulations, Coach.
- CONNOR JO LEWIS:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having us.
- NINA MOINI:** This is so exciting. We need more championships in Minnesota. We love to see it. What have you been feeling like these past few days as you're processing what this means for you?
- CONNOR JO LEWIS:** Yeah, I mean, it's been amazing. We have 27 years, and we have players that have been playing for 27 years, Red Bryant, as part of the 1999 original team. And one of my coaches, Coach Brown, who coaches the O line, was a player on the '99 team. To see their emotion after the championship, after we won and holding the trophy, just put in perspective for all of us how much work dedication they put in over the last 27 years to finally come out on top. We're all on cloud nine, still trying to put it into words how it truly feels.
- NINA MOINI:** What a beautiful long history, too, that the franchise has been around since 1999. I didn't know that. I'm so happy to learn more. Joined the Women's Football Alliance in 2017, and like I mentioned, your team has been to the championship game before. Were you at some of the games where you all didn't win? And then what was it like to finally have this great victory?
- CONNOR JO LEWIS:** Yeah, I've been a part of the team since 2017, originally as a player. So I went to the national championship in 2018 as a player and then '21 and '22, which were the first two times we were at the pro division. And we played the Boston Renegades, and they were on a six-year dynasty run.
- NINA MOINI:** Whoa.
- CONNOR JO LEWIS:** And we gave it our best shot. But we were, in a sense, happy to be there, where, this time around, we were going for the championship. This whole year, we felt that we could do it. It was a very special team. And going to the game, game planned all two weeks leading up. We never played Pittsburgh before. You never quite what you're going to get on the field. Film can only show you so much. But the first drive, we forced a strip sack by number 44 Noble, and we got the recovery. And we're off to the races after that.
- NINA MOINI:** What's it like when you do have a really big lead? 42 to 14, you were at. I know you can never rest. But I wonder, is it fun to play a game like that? Does it become fun at some point, or are you kind of always on edge?
- CONNOR JO LEWIS:** I'm never comfortable as a coach until the clock hits 0. But going into halftime up 35 to 7, we definitely had somewhat of a mindset shift of, hey, we want to keep doing us and make sure we keep playing hard every rep, whoever gets in there. But we have a lot of players that put in a lot of time and maybe don't get the playing time to match, and being on that stage, we wanted to make sure we got everyone got a chance to get in the game and step on that field and represent the Minnesota Vixen.

NINA MOINI: So fun. It's like a fun ending to a movie. I love it for all of you. So you were coaching now, right? Is it different? Do you ever feel like, oh, I wish I was out there on the field?

CONNOR JO LEWIS: That's a good question. The announcer, Brian Sweeney, asked me this as well going into the championship game, of which do I like doing more? And I had three ACL tears playing. So me and turf don't get along. So I switched to coaching in 2020.

And even as a player, though, I really enjoyed watching my teammates do something really well. So transitioning to coaching, where I get to help them do what they love and learn and get together a coaching staff that can teach everyone the fundamentals, but also the next level of football, because there's layers to football, I get so much joy out of that. And leading this team is one of the greatest blessings I have in my life. And I still love playing sports, but leading this team, there's nothing better.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and it's such a unique vantage point. Because I feel like sometimes players might not be able to take it all in, and maybe you're able to take it all in. So women's tackle football, though, does still fly under the radar for some people. Or what do you wish Minnesotans knew about the sport?

CONNOR JO LEWIS: Yeah, the biggest thing for me, it is true tackle football. We play by NCAA rules, but 11 on 11, full pads, everything the same, except our players, most played college sports. We only get to practice three days a week. We have limited resources. Some maybe have never played football until they try out for us, which is coming up in September and October. You can already sign up for tryouts on mnvixen.com.

NINA MOINI: Nice.

CONNOR JO LEWIS: But we have these players that come in that have the desire to learn and are giving their time, their money, their bodies to this sport. And with only practicing three times a week, starting in January, the level of product we put out on the field, I'm extremely proud of, and that was showcased on the highest level of media and national stage that we could get with ESPN2. And it's so amazing what we can do with the limited resources that we have.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Have you been attracting more fans in recent years? You mentioned the team has been around in some form since 1999. But then in the last 10 or so years, joining this organization, what do you feel like-- do you feel like there's growth there? Do you feel like more people are learning about it?

CONNOR JO LEWIS: Yeah, I definitely think so. I mean, just out and about, there's more and more people that will recognize someone wearing a hat, be like, oh, I've seen you play, or I used to watch you when you were on Town Square Television. Or oh, the games at Hamlin this year, our crowds, we had really-- I think we had about 1,000 per game in the stands this year. So our crowds were absolutely amazing.

And that's going beyond just the family and friends that support these athletes and coaches. So it's definitely improving. And getting to play at the highest stage, we've definitely had an uptick in publicity within the Twin Cities through all different news sources. So we're still working our way up, and we're still working to get that attention. And I think, if you watch the games, you will appreciate the product that we're putting out on the field.

NINA MOINI: It's an exciting time. I wish we had more time, but I would love to know what you told the team before the game and what you told them after, if you're able to share. I don't want you to give away any coach secrets, but just to get people hyped up. What did you say before? What did you say after?

CONNOR JO LEWIS: Yeah, so before the game and leading into it, one of the biggest things was, hey, this is just a football field. The cameras are brighter. The lights are brighter. But still, it's just a football field. Let's play some football.

We play the best when we're having a good time. Play hard, clean football. I have one of my coaches, Coach Kobi, he always does the pregame, gets people to breathe, walk in. And his big thing was recruiting a legacy. Let's go create this legacy on the field. And then afterwards, I said, hey, y'all, we earned it. We put in the time. Let's enjoy it.

NINA MOINI: Oh, thank you so much for stopping by *Minnesota Now*, Coach. So happy to talk with you. And huge congratulations. Enjoy it.

CONNOR JO LEWIS: Thank you so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: That was Connor Jo Lewis, head coach of the Minnesota Vixen.