



PHOTO BY NANCY DEWEY



PHOTO BY BILL DEWEY

(Above) Snohomish County Vikings Quarterback Hal Bisnet and teammate Patrick Sullivan celebrate a touchdown. (Right) The team joins in.

A league of their own

By Katherine Luck

Amateur football leagues let promising players and former pros play

It's a story as old as the game itself: The star football player strives for glory year after year, hoping to make the pros ... and isn't drafted. Now what?

"What are these guys going to do? Where are they going to play? There are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of kids that graduate each year. The colleges can only take so many, and they can't [all] play professionally. They haven't lost interest — they just can't find anywhere to play," said Wes Fischer.

It was a conundrum Fischer himself faced. "I thought I was all done with football after high school because I wasn't going to college," he said.

Then he realized that if you can't go pro, why not go semi-pro?

"Semi-pro [football] has been around since the 1930s," said Dr. Randall Dreessen, CEO and general manager of the Seattle Stallions. An adult amateur football team in the Cascade Football League (CFL) — one of three semi-pro football leagues in the Puget Sound region — the Stallions suit up for a full-contact game every Saturday night during late spring and early summer. In fact, every Saturday night during the semi-pro season, there are as many as 10 football games being played around the Puget Sound, according to Dreessen.

For Fischer, amateur football became a major part of his life. "It gets in your blood," he said. "It all started in 1965. I started playing; I played 15 seasons."

When he couldn't play anymore, he began to coach his son's amateur football team. Today, Fischer is the owner and head coach of the Snohomish County Vikings, another minor-league football team in the nearly 50-year-old Northwest Football League (NWFL). Like the CFL, the NWFL gives talented non-professional football players one more chance to earn the opportunity to play college ball or even go pro. For other players, it's a welcome way to continue to participate in high-level football after their high school, college or professional career has ended.

Many football fans would be surprised by the caliber and competitiveness of these local amateur teams.

"They figure semi-pro, these are just a bunch of guys drinking beer on the sidelines," said Dreessen. However, "the majority of my players are former D1 players, NFL players, Canadian Football League players — guys who want an-

other go-around and a chance to play."

There are 60 players on the Snohomish County Vikings this year. "The professional ranks only manage 45," Fischer said. His players, ranging in age from 18 to 50, include a high school teacher, several former college players and even a few retired pros. One player has been on the team for 11 years.

The amateur football leagues are nonprofits — the semi-pro players aren't paid, nor are the coaches or owners.

"You don't make money. It's not a lucrative hobby," said Dreessen, whose team was founded in 2005 and played their inaugural season in the spring of 2006. "They get a chance to showcase their talent and their abilities. ... They get to play for their families, [as well as] the camaraderie of still being able to play the game."

Many of the teams participate in annual charitable events and fundraisers, such as "Harvest Bowl" charity game.

"We get players from any league [to play], and they kick in a fee and bring some toys for the Toys for Tots," said Fischer, adding that last year the officials donated their fee back to the charity, and "I darn near cried."

The need to pay the game officials, as well as the cost of the field rental, equipment and uniforms, can add up. Nonetheless, most teams

keep the cost of their tickets low; around \$8 for adults, with discounts for seniors or the military, and often no charge for kids.

This month, the two teams will have the chance to battle for county pride. On Saturday, June 12, the Seattle Stallions will face the Snohomish County Vikings on their home turf in Edmonds. The game will be held at 6 p.m. at the Edmonds District Stadium.

"Just about all my players are pretty spectacular as far as their abilities on the field," said Dreessen. "As of right now, my team will be ranked in the top two of the nation. ... We've only lost six games since 2006."

"We've got the potential. We've got a new offensive coordinator and a new defensive coordinator," Fischer countered. Even his oldest player is a force to be reckoned with: "He's had two hip replacements and he said this is the best he's ever felt. He's a touch guy."

For football fans, this clash of the titans will showcase up-and-coming players, as well as stars of yesteryear.

"The diehard football [fan] chomping at the bit waiting for the Seahawks to start back up in August can come out and see some great football," said Dreessen.

"I'm involved with guys who are as excited [about football] as I was. It isn't over," said Fischer. ■