

CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

# Women's flag football players riding growth in Georgia to college scholarships

Marietta High senior 'making history' by signing with Thomas University; Reinhardt, Life getting programs off the ground



Marietta High School student, Cate Gruehn was awarded a scholarship to play flag football at Thomas University.

By David Aaro

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When Marietta High School senior Cate Gruehn tells people she's going to college to play flag football, the 17-year-old usually gets some surprised looks and some follow-up questions.

"They are kind of like, 'What? I didn't even know that was a thing,'" she said.

Looking back, it's also surprising for Gruehn, who took up the sport as a sophomore and quickly found a love for it. Two years later, she can't believe it's helping pay for her tuition. Gruehn is among dozens of Atlanta-area students who have earned college scholarships to play women's flag football, and she is the first at Marietta High to get one.

"It was just surreal realizing I could actually do this in college outside of my high school varsity sport," she told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "When I found that I could go to school and get an education basically paid for, that made me want to pursue it even more."

Girls high school flag football has exploded in popularity in Georgia since becoming a sanctioned sport a few years ago. It's grown from less than 100 schools during its first season in 2020 to roughly 250 this coming season, according to the Georgia High School Association. In college, flag football, which has typically been associated with intramural sports, is still young in a competitive sense for women. However, it also continues to grow quickly.

Eighteen schools are competing for a third season after the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) announced it would become a college sport during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic. A partnership between the NAIA and the NFL helped women's flag football get "emerging" status in June 2020, and the first season was held in the spring of 2021.

The sport is hoping to earn invitational, and later championship status, which will come when more schools commit to playing. As that happens, additional resources will be supplied and new conferences will be added, which will lead to an increase in funding, scholarships and exposure, according to NAIA Director of Championships Austin Bennett. He said 60 schools have told the NAIA they will start flag football in the next three to five years.

"With the backing, support and initiative from the NFL, I think it's absolutely going to blow up quickly," Bennett said. "It's growing faster than any other emerging sport that we've had outside of maybe women's wrestling."



Cate Gruehn, a senior at Marietta High School, recently signed a scholarship to play flag football in college. Watch her skills on display.

Gruehn earned a scholarship to Thomas University in South Georgia, one of two schools in the state competing in flag football under the NAIA umbrella this year. Thomas played its first season in 2022, while Reinhardt University in Waleska held its first game earlier this month. A third school, Life University in Marietta, will embark on its inaugural season in 2024. All three schools — and most around the country — give out partial scholarships.

Nearly a dozen women from Atlanta metro high schools have committed to playing at Life, according to coach Jenitra Shields. At Reinhardt, coach Toni Fuller said the school committed more than \$100,000 in scholarships to her players, the majority of whom are from the metro area.

Fuller is leading her all-freshman team two decades after playing intramural flag football as a college student at Vanderbilt University. How the times have changed.



Reinhardt University players huddle during one of the first games of their inaugural season March 2.

Fuller met Gruehn while recruiting and was happy to learn that she was staying in Georgia for college. She described the Marietta high schooler as "a star" who is "already fundamentally sound at the game."

"She's a competitor that I'll have to game plan around," the coach said. "I'm glad she's at Thomas so that we can keep this stuff on our turf and grow it in Georgia."

Ever since Gruehn was 3 years old, football has been a part of her life. She watched her older brother's flag football games as a child, sometimes with a pacifier in her mouth and a football in her hand. As time went by, she hung around her brother and his friends as they played high school varsity football and remembers competing against them at family events.



Cate Gruehn holds a football while attending her older brother's football game as a toddler.

An opportunity to play competitive football finally came knocking for Gruehn in 2020 when Marietta High held tryouts for the newly sanctioned sport. She ended up playing safety and wide receiver for three seasons and holds school records in several categories on both sides of the ball.



She finished her high school career with 111 receptions, 1,522 receiving yards, 24 receiving touchdowns, 15 interceptions and 68 flag pulls.

"From Day 1 she made an impression," Marietta High track coach and former flag football coach Nick Houstoulakis said. "She was all-in and recruited a lot of our members."

Gruehn's commitment to the sport included late nights, extra repetitions, workouts and even recording games of future opponents to get scouting information — sometimes in the pouring rain with her mother in tow, Houstoulakis said. She was lauded during national signing day at the school last month.

"It was a whole auditorium of people cheering for me," Gruehn said. "It made me realize I'm actually kind of making history. At my high school, at least."



The Marietta High School girls flag football team.

At Thomas University, Gruehn will be playing under second-year coach Chelsea Parmer, who calls her "Great Cate" because it "just has a nice ring to it and she usually lives up to the greatness." On the academic side, the 17-year-old is looking to get into criminology while pursuing an academic career in deaf education. She is interested in being an interpreter.

Still, those academic aspirations haven't stopped her from thinking about playing flag football after college, especially since ways to participate have started to open up in recent months. The sport is being considered for the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

Last month, the NFL ran a commercial during the Super Bowl starring Diana Flores, the gold medal-winning quarterback for the Mexican national flag football team at the 2022 World Games. The action-packed spot highlighted women in football as the NFL's "Run With It" campaign and featured famous athletes attempting to grab her flags.

"That was really cool," Gruehn said of the commercial. "A lot of people sent me like the video and were like, 'This is going to be you!'"

As women's flag football continues to grow, Gruehn hopes that all schools in Georgia will start a program in the next couple of years. Since the sport is so young, many girls are trying out for something they've never done before, which she said takes "a lot of courage and confidence."

March is Women's History Month, which celebrates the contributions of women across the world. For Gruehn, she is one of the many girls and women in the world of flag football blazing a path for others.

"I think like being the first to sign at our school for flag football has shown a lot of girls that even though it is a small sport, it's growing rapidly and they have the chance to pay for their academics with a talent they were born with," she said. "So I would encourage any girl that wants to try out for sports to at least try flag football, because it definitely changed my life and a lot of my teammates' lives, too."

## About the Author

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