



Flag on the play: League started with dad's inspiration

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A New York bond trader named Jeff Lewis had his epiphany for the American Flag Football League years ago, while coaching his son's youth league team.

At the end of a game, Lewis watched what looked like a surefire, game-winning touchdown pass to his son on the last play. Instead, it turned into a painful near-miss when an opposing defensive back swooped in at the last possible moment and snatched Lewis' son's flag at the goal line.

Lewis still remembers the flag fluttering to the ground with no time remaining.

His reaction? "If third graders could do something that beautiful, what would the world's greatest athletes do with it?"

Lewis staged a flag game at the San Jose Earthquakes' stadium. Former NFL standouts Michael Vick and Terrell Owens led two patchwork squads in what Lewis now refers to as the TV pilot version of the league.

All of it was meaningless. And it was fun. So much so that 2.9 million people have watched the demo game on YouTube since it was played in June 2017.

A Wired magazine story summing up Lewis' experiment was headlined, "Pro Flag Football — Just Like the NFL, But Exciting!"

The AFFL has played two full seasons, with as many as 130 teams composed of 12 players. Lewis told Sports Business Journal the league follows a European football governing model spanning various skill levels. NFL Network carried games in past seasons, and Lewis said a new two-year broadcast agreement with an unnamed media partner will be disclosed soon.

Teams play 7-on-7 with a running clock for two 30-minute halves. No helmets, no pads, no blocking, no kicking, no fumbling and — obvious but unspoken — little chance for encountering the kind of concussion problems plaguing tackle football.

In 2021, the league returns after a one-year hiatus — and with a new women's division that will vie for the same top prize money as the men: \$200,000.

A \$5 million grant initiative announced by the NFL and Nike last month to help make girls' flag football a high school sport has Lewis envisioning a much larger talent pool in the near future.

"We're so excited to see what's going to happen," he said. "With girls, I think it's going to explode."



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