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Irondale aide Kelly Lund a trend-setter

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Kelly Lund, at right, is a rare female coach trying to break into the male-dominated world of football. (Tyler Mason/FS North)

Irondale aide Kelly Lund a trend-setter

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Tyler Mason was born and raised in Minnesota. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2009, he worked for the Faribault Daily News prior to joining FOX Sports North.

Players on the Irondale High School football team were hesitant about it. Even the coaching staff didn't know what it was getting into by hiring a woman as an assistant coach.

But in her first year as the assistant offensive line coach for the Knights, Kelly Lund has squashed all doubts by becoming "just like a regular coach" despite being female.

"If I'm being honest, coaches, kids, parents, everyone was not negative but kind of like, 'What? Are you sure?' Just I think because it's different," said Irondale head coach Ben Geisler. "Any time you see something different, it makes you take a step back and go, 'Huh.' But I haven't had resistance. I haven't had one negative feedback."

Lund, a 2004 graduate of Irondale High School in New Brighton, Minn., admits she didn't know much about the game of football before taking the job. She was a two-sport athlete while attending Irondale, playing basketball and volleyball for the Knights. Lund later played Division I basketball at the University of Northern Iowa for two years before transferring to Concordia University in St. Paul.

Now, she's learning a new sport as part of her on-the-job training.

"From Day 1 to Week 7, I've learned so much, just about football in general, about dealing with boys — men, I should say," Lund said. "All the kids are great. They respond to me well. They respect me. It's just like I'm another coach. Now they don't really see the difference."

So how did Irondale end up with a female on its coaching staff? The opportunity came about for Lund when Geisler was looking to hire an offensive line coach prior to this season. He had seen Lund working with his players and other Irondale athletes in the school's strength and conditioning program the previous two years, and Geisler was impressed by how she dealt with the students.

Geisler approached Lund about the job, and after thinking about it for a few days, Lund accepted.

"I was able to watch how she interacted with the kids, how she pushed them, and I just thought she did a really nice job," Geisler said. "Even though she may not understand football X's and O's as much, she gets what it takes to be successful. So she has a lot of things that she can bring, and the X's and O's are coming. She's actually come a long way with that."

Ask the Irondale players, and they'll say Lund is one of the toughest coaches on the staff.

She's constantly yelling "Hustle!" during practice, turning a slow walk back from a water break into a jog. Perhaps nothing less should be expected from a former prison guard — Lund previously worked at the Oak Park Heights maximum-security prison in Stillwater, Minn., before coaching.

Her experience at the prison helped prepare Lund in some ways for coaching football, she said.

"Calling people out, that was a big no-no in prison. You can't call somebody out in a group. You've got to take them aside. That holds true with football as well," said Lund, who's currently pursuing her Masters degree in counseling and psychological services.

"Just showing that you're confident, too. Even though you don't really know, like when I first started working at the prison, I didn't know anything. I was faking everything. I was walking around like I knew what I was doing but really I didn't. I think that kind of carries over, too. I had to walk in there like I wasn't scared."

So while Lund was confident from Day 1, it took the Irondale players a bit to warm up to the notion of having a female coach. Connor Fritz, a senior left tackle for the Knights, admitted there was some hesitation on the part of the players, "until we had to start doing up-downs," he said.

"She really pushes us past our limits," Fritz said. "Even when it's not easy, she helps us persevere through the tough times. She's really become a part of this team and the coaching staff and just really helps us reach our full potential."

"It was weird, because I was like, 'Do I know that she knows what she's doing or not?'" added junior left guard Alonzo Walker. "But once we got the feel for her, she really knew what she's talking about. She's a big asset to the team."

Lund said she hasn't heard any negative comments from opposing teams, coaches or fans. There was one instance, however, in which an opposing coach asked if she was the team's athletic trainer.

"It was kind of funny," Lund said.

Other than that, there haven't been many differences for Lund as she's broken boundaries into a male sport. Well, there was one scenario Lund recalled that might not happen with other teams.

"I had to be late (because of) a hair appointment once," Lund said with a laugh. "Coach Geisler's like, 'That would have never happened with any other coach.'"

All joking aside, Geisler said he'd love to keep Lund around for seasons to come, and Lund would be happy continuing to learning and coaching the sport.

"Part of the reason why I did hire her is she's an Irondale grad, so she has a vested interest in Irondale. She cares about the program. She cares about how successful we are," Geisler said. "Hopefully, knock on wood, we can keep her around and make it a permanent thing."

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