



Why Diana Flores Believes Flag Football Deserves a Professional League

The captain and quarterback of Mexico's National Flag Football Team shares her journey to winning gold at the 2022 World Games, how being a competitive athlete has shaped her relationship to her body (and to dating!), and how a professional league would change the sport she loves.

Alicia Menendez:

Diana Flores is a flag football superstar. When she was 16 years old, she became the youngest player ever to join the Mexico women's flag football team. Eight years later, she won gold for Mexico, at the 2022 World Games. And she made history as the first flag football player to be part of the exhibition at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And, of course, we all fell in love with her, when she burst onto our screens, in an NFL commercial, during the 2023 Super Bowl. Diana and I talk about discovering the sport, when she was just eight years old, but the year she spent angling and working to become a quarterback and teach other ambitious Latinas and why her commitment to women in sports is bigger than herself. Diana, thank you so much for being here.

Diana Flores:

Thank you for inviting me. I'm so happy to be here with you, finally.

Menendez:

We saw you in that Super Bowl ad and we were like, "Oh. We have to get this girl." You started playing flag football, when you're eight years old?

Flores:

Yes. When I was very little.

Menendez:

And it's your dad who realizes very quickly that you have potential? What is it that your dad saw? And how did you begin working together, to cultivate whatever that early talent was?

Flores:

My dad used to play football, when he was in high school and college, so I think that rather than he seeing something on me, he wanted me to experience a love and the passion for that sport, so that's what took him to bring me to my first flag football practice. And I fell in love with the sport.

Menendez:

When you're 16, you join the Women's National Team and there's already a quarterback, so you played wide receiver, you played linebacker? First, what did you learn playing other roles?

Flores:

As you mentioned, I started my journey with the National Team, being the youngest player, with players that were more experienced than me. Most of them already had gold medals on their chests. So, I think that that experience taught me to focus on my strengths, to try to learn from everybody around me, from every situation, rather than looking at them as obstacles. And that has pushed me to be my best version, so far.

Menendez:

You say that you fought for your position, you fought to become quarterback, what did that fight entail?

Flores:

I've learned, not only during this process, but since I was little, the power of no. The power of people telling you, "No. You can't play the sport. It's not meant to be for you. You're a woman. You're too young. You're too small. You're not going to be a great leader because you're not going to handle the pressure, as you're the youngest player on the team." But somehow that power of no learned me to empower myself and, I don't know, level up my willpower. It took me nine years to get where I wanted to be.

And, of course, I thought many, many times on giving up. I even started doubting on myself because I think that that's the most dangerous thing that you can make, to let the world, all those nos get into your head and make you doubt of yourself, of your dreams, of your abilities. So, I think that was a mental fight. That's what I mean with, "Fighting for my position," the mental fight of just staying on the road, of giving one step at a time, of not giving up, of believing that what I was working for was going to come, at one point in life. And it came.

Menendez:

There is embedded in the critique that you were getting a fundamental truth, which is it is very challenging for young leaders to lead people who are older than them, if those people don't want to see them as a leader-

Flores:

Mm-hmm.

Menendez:

... if they want to diminish them, for their youth. I wonder if there is a time, a story you can tell me, when either you weren't able to wrangle the team, or when there was conflict around your age, or when you were able to level up? And what it was that that required, what that took to get people to listen to you and take you seriously?

Flores:

Hmm? I think that leadership is not a matter of age. It's a matter of believing in yourself, to trust in yourself and be self-confident to lead others. If you don't have those qualities in you, it doesn't matter how old are you, you will not be able to lead others. It only started to happen, when I started believing in myself, when I started seeing myself as the leader I wanted to be, rather than waiting for me to turn, at some point in life, into that leader, if that makes sense. Sometimes I feel that we wait until someone gives us the platform and then feel secure to speak, but I've learned that somehow sometimes it works the other way around.

Menendez:

You alluded to this, what is the closest you ever came to walking Away?

Flores:

I think it was after 2018 World Cup. I was working so hard. I even started training with my team, playing the position I wanted, quarterback. And we were doing great. We were having amazing practices. Then, we arrived to the World Cup, we started winning. I started as QB-1. And then, the coaches made a decision to put me out the field and put another player in. And then they just changed the position. I started playing wide receiver and center and other positions. I couldn't understand, at that moment, like, "Why are they doing this, if I am doing great?" We ended up in fourth place, losing important games in such a bad way, and I just feel so frustrated. I felt that I worked so hard to be there, but then I was not being allowed, just to do what I worked for.

So, I came back from that World Cup feeling that I didn't have the power to shape my future or to shape what I wanted to do, as an athlete on the field, feeling that I didn't have the power to make decisions and that everything was in other people's hands. I started to think that they were right and it was me just dreaming or me being unrealistic with myself and my abilities. So, I spent six months, not wanting to train, at all, not wanting to practice, at all, because I thought that it was not worth it. But then, I think, at that moment, what helped me a lot was just to come back to my roots, come back to my why. I mean, "Why am I doing this?" Just because I feel happy, I feel free, I feel like my truest self on the field. That should be my reason why, not me trying to achieve or to prove others that I am strong enough or that I am good enough to fill some blanks on the field.

Menendez:

You can pass on this question if you want, but I am genuinely curious what it is like to date, when you are a female professional athlete, who has become a household name, by virtue of having been in a Super Bowl commercial?

Flores:

How it is to date?

Menendez:

Mm-hmm.

Flores:

So, I have a boyfriend now. We have been together for two years now, so even before all of this craziness started. And I feel so lucky to have just a person that supports me and that goes through this journey with me.

Menendez:

I just imagine men being on dates with you and wanting to see if they can run faster than you, wanting to see if they can throw a ball farther than you can. I would imagine it takes a specific type of guy, to not be intimidated by your athletic prowess.

Flores:

So, he's an athlete too. So, that's just an amazing thing because we can share those experiences. And, to be honest, it is so funny, our first dates, I remember they were not traditional dates, when you go to restaurant, or to the movie together, or whatever. Our days were like, "Oh. Do you want to go training?" "Okay. Yes. Let's meet at the track. Yes. 10:00 AM, in the morning. Okay. Let's do it." And it

has been like that, during all of those years. I feel that's what makes it easier because, yes, he's competitive. I am competitive. We push each other to be the best versions of ourselves. And it is just so fun.

Menendez:

I don't know if you'll agree, but I think a lot of women, I'll speak for myself, a very fraught relationship with my body. It took a long time, before I appreciated my body, as something that was strong and could do things for me and not just as a physical thing that I could judge. And so, I wonder, when you come up through sports, if it changes the way that you think about your body?

Flores:

Yes. So, I think that's something that, especially we, as women, that we have to go through. It is like a process. It is a process of self-love of self-care. And I have to say that it is not as easy as it seems to be, since society always push us and try to put us on this box. Even for us, as athletes, there's this... How do you say? Of mindset, or this concept, or this vision, to see, "Oh. An athlete. It has to be super skinny, super strong, tall," and all those stereotypes that shape our society, not only for athletes, but for women, but for et cetera, et cetera. I feel that we, as athletes, we are under those stereotypes too. And I've been through that. When you look at yourself, at the mirror, and you start judging yourself in such a hard way.

But the way I've been able to go through that has been just being grateful with what I can do, with what I have, with what my body allows me to do. Being aware that, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what the world thinks about you, or how the world wants to see you, or the stereotypes they have. Any one of us, we are not going to be able to achieve those stereotypes, since they're unrealistic, 100%. I've been able to go through that, just by focusing on my strengths and on my personal and athletic growth, rather than judging myself or judging that growth on a physical way or in a... How do you say it? Like a-

Menendez:

Aesthetic? Just the looks?

Flores:

... Yes. Yes. Just aesthetic looks.

Menendez:

I wondered, Diana, for someone who was born in Mexico, raised in Mexico, the first time you come to the United States to play flag football, if there was, for you, that moment where you realized that you were in the United States, part of something different, part of this idea of Latinidad or being a Latina, in a way that I would imagine is less relevant, when you live in a country where everyone is Latina? If you had sort of that experience of either being made to feel different or being made to feel like you belonged to a group that was larger than yourself?

Flores:

When I was 14 years old, I started playing with a team from Philadelphia. They invited me to play the National NFL Championship there. So, I played Regionals first. And then, I played Nationals in 2012, in New Orleans. And the first moment I got this, I don't know, impression, was when they gave us... It was like a book with the rosters of all the teams on it. So, I opened it and I started just passing the pages, just to find my name. And I started seeing all this, of course, of American

names, last names and everything. And the only Latina last name was mine, like, "Flores," from all the teams. So, that was like, of course, as a 14-year-old, was like, "Wow. It is my name. I'm the only one." But then it was like, "Wow." I'm the only one."

Then, when we started playing at that tournament, I was so lucky to have coaches and a team that really supported me. But then, being there, I started to hear many other people, even parents or other players, saying, like, "What's that Mexican doing here?" Like, "What's she doing here? What's a Mexican doing here?" Blah. Blah. Blah. Or, I remember being on the field and listening to the other coaches saying, "Just go strong with the Mexican," or, "How the Mexican scored you? How did the Mexican could complete your pass?" You know? Those kinds of words.

And, to me, as a 14-year-old, to be honest, I feel that innocence somehow protected me a lot from all those comments. Because, for me, it was like, "Yeah. I'm the Mexican. Okay. Yeah. They are right." Like, "Yeah. I'm the Mexican." But, of course, later on, as years passed, I was like, "Okay. Maybe that was not a nice thing." But I feel that was the first time I got to experience those kinds of things, those kinds of comments, to feel how it feels to be a minority, somehow. And now, to be honest, one thing I'm so grateful for is that during this journey, this past year, I've been able to connect with a lot of women and people from the Latino community, especially in The States. And to be more conscious about the importance of representation. On how the representation can change lives. On how making people feel, that you care about them, that they matter, can just fully change many people's lives and the future for many of the young boys and girls that are coming.

Menendez:

To be in the Super Bowl ad in 2023, I wonder that level of exposure, given that, yes, you are an athlete, but in being an athlete, one also becomes a brand, a brand ambassador, what that level of exposure opened up for you, opportunity wise?

Flores:

It has been life-changing, to me. I am grateful now to have a big platform, a voice that is heard, to be part of this movement of women empowerment and for women in sports. The change we are making all together. I have, right now, not only more opportunities in terms of platforms, of partnerships. I have, I think, the opportunity to connect with amazing people that had helped me to be more connected with my life mission. And to have just a different and wider perspective of what I want to do and the legacy I want to build. I feel this experience allowed me to have this platform, to show the world how the power of sports can keep empowering women around the world. How the power of sports can break gender barriers, can break cultural barriers, and that we are part of the same thing. So, that's what I am most grateful for.

Menendez:

Diana, what is it you want to do next?

Flores:

One of my biggest dreams, right now, is to build a professional flag football league, to give women the opportunity to become professional at this sport and start earning money from this. So, for me, right now, everything I do, it is my masters, I'm studying innovation for enterprise development. And anything else is

about making those connections, learning from people, learning from sports business, and everything I can do, in order to someday, hopefully soon, make it a reality.

Menendez:

So, when I was calling you a professional athlete, have you actually made money playing flag football?

Flores:

No. Not any flag football player, right now, it is men's or women, can make money from a flag football. So, we actually pay money to practice this sport. Not even for us winning the gold medal at the World Games.

Menendez:

Oh my God. That's so-

Flores:

I know. It is crazy. Yes.

Menendez:

Diana, thank you so much for your time.

Flores:

Thank you.

Menendez:

Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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