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Seat Of Power

Dany Garcia is making history as the first woman to co-own a pro sports league. Now she and her partners are trying to make the XFL strong enough to last.

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A Heavy Lift

Dany Garcia brings a football mindset, years of business success and some strong supporters to her role as chairwoman of the spring football league that is back for a third time

By Michael Bradley
27 February 2023



Garcia is the first female owner of a professional sports league. **MIKE CARLSON**

Dany Garcia is a competitor. A professional bodybuilder. And someone who has always wanted to be more than just a spectator. So when she stood on the sidelines in Arlington, Texas, last month watching XFL players during training camp for the league's 2023 reboot, the league's chairwoman and owner couldn't help but trade barbs with them.

"The players would taunt me," she said, laughing. "They were like, 'Come on!'"

Garcia never took up the challenge, but that doesn't mean she lacks a football mindset.

"I identify as a middle linebacker," she said.

Anyone who has encountered Garcia in the business, entertainment or athletic worlds can understand that characterization. Her passionate, aggressive approach to projects she tackles is the embodiment of a defense's leader.

Garcia has used that mindset to build a vast portfolio of businesses under the umbrella of The Garcia Companies. Now, as the first female owner and chair of a professional sports league, she is tasked with making the third version of the XFL a success. Together with longtime business partner (and former husband) Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson — whose career she manages — and Gerry Cardinale's RedBird Capital, Garcia has a vision of the spring football league as a developmental vehicle for players with NFL dreams and a unique sports and entertainment experience for fans.

"She is a powerhouse," said Russ Brandon, XFL president of league and football operations and the former president of the Buffalo Bills. "What she has accomplished as a professional athlete and multimedia executive is impressive. She's a tremendous leader on and off the field. She's extremely supportive as we have built this."

The 54-year-old Garcia's business résumé is filled with noteworthy entries, including film projects, athletic clothing lines, live event experiences, social justice initiatives and even a premium tequila, Teremana, all of which has helped her build a net worth reported to be in the range of 10 figures.

Garcia is deeply involved in each business endeavor she undertakes, and the XFL is no different. She is involved in most of the league's day-to-day business efforts, leaning on her relationships with Disney (through her production company) and Under Armour (with which she works on Johnson's Project Rock apparel line) to negotiate the fledgling league's media and team uniform deals with those respective properties, and helping design those uniforms.

But the XFL is something different for her, Johnson and Cardinale. Even though Johnson played football at Miami, and RedBird has worked intimately with several sporting concerns — including multiple players associations through OneTeam Partners and with the NFL through On Location while also investing in Fenway Sports Group and AC Milan — none has direct experience operating an entire league. And the history of spring football is rife with failures, from the first USFL to the Alliance of American Football to two previous versions of the XFL. The first XFL debuted in 2001 as a joint venture between WWE and NBC but lasted only one season. WWE founder Vince McMahon tried again almost two decades later, but XFL 2.0 didn't even make it as far as 1.0 did, ceasing operations midseason due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Garcia and Johnson bought the league for \$15 million, with unspecified backing from RedBird, in August 2020, four months after the XFL folded. In December of 2021, she announced in an Instagram post that the league would begin play in February 2023. Six months later, the league landed a five-year media rights deal with Disney, and from there the league rolled past one milestone after another. The eight franchises were announced in July 2022; nicknames, logos

and brands were revealed in October; the draft took place in November; and she and Johnson unveiled the uniforms live on “SportsCenter” the next month.

“She brings a dynamic energy,” said Brandon. “She’s always focused on what’s right for the league, what’s right for the athletes, what’s right for the fan base, what’s right for our partners and for the venues. She does a great job articulating the vision. She gives you the playbook and lets you color between the lines. Her vision is impeccable.”

When the league officially kicked off on Feb. 18 with the Vegas Vipers visiting the Arlington Renegades, Garcia and Johnson were front and center. Just like they were for the second game that night in Houston. And for both games the next day, one in San Antonio and the other in Washington, D.C. It was the culmination of a journey and the reflection of one of her true passions. “I love football deeply,” she said the day before the launch. “I just love football.”



Fellow owners Gerry Cardinale of Redbird Capital Partners and Dwayne Johnson joined Garcia at the league’s first game in Arlington on Feb. 18. **AMANDA WESTCOTT**



The daughter of Cuban immigrants, Garcia grew up in Belleville, N.J., less than a dozen miles from Manhattan. She has been fascinated by bodybuilding since she was 13 — in 2014 she earned an IFBB Pro Bodybuilding card — and ran track in high school. When she headed to the University of Miami, she switched to crew. It was there that she met Johnson, and the two

would sometimes watch game film together. They married in 1997, have a daughter, Simone, and divorced 10 years later.

Garcia, who is now married to bodybuilder and trainer Dave Rienzi, earned a degree in international marketing and finance at the U, and after graduating, she worked at Merrill Lynch before starting her own private wealth management firm. She remains an angel investor for entrepreneurs and startups.

Over the past several years, the scope of Garcia's business interests has grown considerably under her Garcia Companies auspices. Her Seven Bucks Productions company has been responsible for shows like the HBO hit "Ballers," which starred Johnson as a former NFL player-turned-financial planner, and the "Baywatch" reboot. She has also formed partnerships with companies such as Voss water and Atom Tickets. At every stop she has made a mark.

"When I have been able to be around her, it has been inspiring and powerful," said Tim Reed, ESPN's vice president of programming and acquisitions.

The key for Garcia, Johnson and Cardinale will be inspiring the country to care about yet another attempt at spring football, and this time when the reborn USFL has a head-start. The early returns for XFL 3.0 were mixed. While it was just one week, none of the four opening games were sellouts, and the early viewership figures were far from rock solid. The Vegas-Arlington game had 1.54 million viewers on ABC, a 54% drop from the 3.3 million who watched the first XFL game on ABC in 2020, and far below the 2019 debut on CBS of the short-lived AAF (3.25 million) and the 2022 debut for the USFL, which got 3.07 million on Fox. ABC also aired a game on Sunday afternoon that drew 1.57 million viewers, while the primetime games on ESPN and FX drew 1.14 million and 918,000, respectively.

The league has designs on producing a profit in three to five years, Garcia said, adding that Cardinale is comfortable with that time frame, though she didn't discuss specifics. She hopes the league will be able to expand, and there are some major markets that were part of the XFL's 2020 version that are not hosting cities this time around, namely New York and Los Angeles. And it recently announced a founding partner in Westgate Resorts, has league partners in Zoa energy drinks and Progressive insurance, and several more expected to be released soon.

As someone who has worked with McMahon and the WWE through her management of Johnson, Garcia also understands the need to create a product that will be entertaining to fans.

"We know how to build an appropriate business model and how to build something special on the field," Garcia said.

Disney's involvement across multiple platforms, including broadcasting every game on either ABC, ESPN, ESPN2 or FX, is vital. The league is putting an emphasis on greater access to players and coaches, with an on-screen score bug that includes betting information and live coverage

of the in-game review process by Dean Blandino, vice president of officiating and rules innovation.

In a league where the coaches are more familiar than the players — Pittsburgh Steelers legend Hines Ward, Pro Football Hall of Fame member Rod Woodson and former Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops chief among them — ESPN is making a concerted effort to sell the players' NFL dreams.

“We want to drive home the player personalities and storytelling,” said Reed.

Brandon estimates that 65% of the players drafted by XFL teams have some kind of NFL experience, whether it was in training camps, on practice squads or in actual games. There are certainly some players with notable football backgrounds, including A.J. McCarron, who quarterbacked Alabama to two national championships and played for three NFL teams, and Josh Gordon, a former NFL All-Pro wide receiver.

But the players won't come close to making NFL money. At the high end of the spectrum is Vegas Vipers quarterback Brett Hundley, who was on the roster of four NFL teams and signed a one-year, \$200,000 deal. The average XFL player makes \$5,000 a week, with win bonuses of \$1,000 per player. The league also pays for housing and two meals a day during the season.

The XFL's unique rules are designed to create conversation, too, thanks to different kickoff alignments, tiered run/pass point-after options, the opportunity to connect on a fourth-and-15 play instead of attempting an onside kick, and a running clock after incompletions and out-of-bounds plays prior to the two-minute warning each half. It's something of a laboratory for the NFL, which will no doubt keep an eye on the effectiveness of the new rules.

“It's about advancing the game of football,” Brandon said. “We feel as if we are stewards of the game.”



The real goal is to create an experience that is equal parts football, entertainment and engagement. And it has required Garcia to use everything she has learned during her years as an executive. “There is not one aspect of what I have done in the past that doesn't show up in the XFL,” she said. “I am fiercely committed and extremely innovative. That's unusual in leadership. I'm also extremely flexible. It's one of my best attributes. I will work all 24 hours a day to get the job done.”

Her vision now extends to a longer view for the league. Garcia is part of a team that needs to win on a variety of levels, and she's already looking ahead.

“Our season ends May 13,” she said. “On May 14, we will ask ourselves, did we deliver a dynamic product? Did the players advance themselves? Did the coaches advance themselves? And did the fans see something they haven't seen before?”

Garcia has already given the NFL, and sports, something it has never seen before. Building a sustainable league will be a heavy lift. But she's comfortable with that.