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From Militia to Renegades: Women's football returns to Somerville

On April 18, the locker room at Dilboy Stadium was filled with a quiet energy as the Boston Renegades went through their pregame rituals preparing for the home opener against the Central Maryland Seahawks. Players put their pads on and braided their hair. Some chatted with teammates while others sat quietly. Hugs and high fives were shared.

In many ways it was a typical locker room scene. But five months ago, when many of the Renegades were still known as the Boston Militia, it seemed unlikely to happen. A few weeks after getting their rings for their third Super Bowl win, the team was told their owner was ceasing operations.

The team that called Dilboy Stadium their home and brought three women's football championships to the Boston area was no more. But a determined group of players and alumni would not let a season go by without a women's football team playing in Somerville.

Renegades member Amanda Alpert, 31, had been playing football her entire adult life and wasn't going to give it up.

"You can't be doing something like this for so long and then just stop doing it," Alpert told the Journal.

High life and high tensions

The team started playing at Dilboy Stadium in 2007 when billionaire and car dealership owner Ernie Boch Jr. brought together the Mass Mutiny and Boston Rampage to create the Militia. Before Boch owned the team, players like Vicky Eddy played for teams that practiced on tennis courts because they were the only place they could practice for free with lights, traveling to games in vans that would break down, and staying in cheap motels.

With Boch they no longer had to worry about things like that. They just had to show up and play. The Militia had a paid staff of coaches and management who took care of all the logistics. He even flew them to the 2014 Super Bowl on a private jet.

"It was probably the closest that any of us got to feeling like a professional athlete," Eddy said.

The Militia went on to win three championships — the Independent Women's Football League (IWFL) in 2010, and then in 2011 and 2014 as part of the Women's Football Alliance. But Goodwin said that Boch's outsized support also brought with it grumblings throughout the league that the Militia they had bought their championships, though she points out that other teams paid their coaches as well.

And adding to the ill will, the Militia's regular seasons were full of blowout victories over their opponents. The team's only competition were the D.C. Divas, the Chicago Force, and the San Diego Surge, Boch told the Journal, and each year the league gave them fewer games.

"They [the WFA] couldn't provide a schedule for me," Boch said. "They said, 'Hey Ernie, these teams aren't going to travel four-five hours and have the their ass kicked by 50 points and then go home. They don't want to play you.'"

Shut down

So Boch decided to discontinue the team.

"I said to myself that I have a decision — I can go on with the team and play at a lower level or I can just call it a day leave on top and hope that someday they'll combine the leagues and I'll be able to play at the level I want," he told the Journal.

On December 20, 2014, Boston Militia quarterback Allison Cahill went into a meeting with Boch and other team leaders. Her teammate Vicky Eddy, who had been a part of those conversations, remembers Cahill calling her before the meeting and telling her it could be really good or really bad.

"She called me on the way back and said, 'It's pretty much really bad and the worst case scenario,'" Eddy said.

"We were on such a high, we had already been getting e-mails about tryouts and stuff so there really wasn't much forewarning," Cahill said.

She immediately started a group text message with some of the team leaders, trying to figure out how they would still be able to play football in the 2015 season. But before they could figure out how and what to tell the rest of the team, Boch put an announcement on Facebook and the Militia website on Jan. 5 that he was discontinuing the team.

To many of the players, the days after Boch's announcement are now a blur. They were supposed to start practicing, but they had no fields. The players scrambled to work with alumni and community connections to keep their weekly Tuesday and Thursday practices at gyms. They worked in small spaces doing



Boston Renegades linebacker Vicky Eddy (right) puts eye black under linebacker Jennifer Dulski's (left) eyes as they prepare to play their first game against the Central Maryland Seahawks at Dilboy Stadium, April 18. (Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Sam Goresh)

workouts led by Cahill and running what drills they could.

Taking control

Looking for new leadership, Eddy reached out to Molly Goodwin, a Militia alumni who retired in 2009. Goodwin called two other alumni, Erin Baumgartner, and Mia Brickhouse. The three took over the organization of the team, letting the players once again focus on playing.

Goodwin said that some of the vendors and PR firms they approached about building the team told them they were crazy to try to create a football team so quickly and that they only had one shot to roll out their team brand. While they were trying to be helpful, they didn't realize the drive behind the team, she said.

"The one thing I think they didn't understand was the girls don't care about the name, they don't care about the logo, they don't care about the rollout," Goodwin said. "All they want to do is play football."

The players chose the name Renegades.

Setting up the team took more than a name, though. The trio worked with the league to secure the team's game schedule, and worked with a design team of alumni and fans affectionately named, "Team Nerd," to create a website, and an alumna created the logo. Many more alumni began to come out to help with fundraising and game day preparation. Some former Militia coaches came to work with the team, and alumni joined as well, all of them volunteering their time.

Additionally, Goodwin, Baumgartner, and Brickhouse started the separate organization Boston Women's Football LLC to grow the sport of women's football locally by giving more women and girls the opportunity to play. And they worked on building their relationships with the teams in the WFA and IWFL. In March a group of players and coaches drove to Philadelphia to play in scrimmages against IWFL teams — teams that had not wanted to play the Militia.

For Goodwin it was an opportunity to connect with other team owners. For some of the rookies it was their first time playing against other teams as well as wearing helmets and pads and getting hit.

"It's been remarkable what those three [Goodwin, Baumgartner, and Brickhouse] have done," said Cahill, echoing similar sentiments from other team members and staff. "This is essentially a full time job for them. This is huge that they're doing it for us and for women's football in Boston, past present and future and it's just amazing."

Ready to play

Once the snow started melting they came back to Dilboy Stadium to prepare for their first game against the Seahawks. The routine continues -- Tuesday and Thursday practices at Dilboy, starting with film or chalk talk before hitting the field. General Manager Ben Brown films the practices, putting them online for the coaches to share their insights with the players before the next practice.

"It feels like a family again," said Alpert, "Everyone has their part and everyone is in it, not just because we love the game, but we've grown to love each other and it's amazing how much everyone has put in to make this team happen."

Because the Seahawks were stuck in traffic, April 18's game started almost an hour late. Even with the late start and the chilly weather the fans stayed in the stands screaming and cheering for each touchdown and field goal. And in scoring the Renegades resemble the Militia – they beat the Seahawks 57-0.

However, the Renegades only have one other home game, against rivals D.C. Divas on Saturday, May 2. They know they have a tough road ahead but are still optimistic about the rest of the season, though. While they have a new identity on their uniforms, the Renegades see themselves in continuity with their former success.

"Our logo is different and I don't know how other teams see us, but our main focus is defending our title," Cahill said.