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BY LEE NESSEL

Little Girl's

PRO FOOTBALL DREAM COMES TRUE



WHEN 5-YEAR-OLD MOLLY WINSTEN TOLD HER DAD THAT SHE WANTED TO GROW UP TO BE AN NFL WIDE RECEIVER, HIS RESPONSE WAS, "ONE CAN ALWAYS DREAM."

Molly's hometown friends and family gathered to watch the Renegades' 2022 championship game on ESPN2.

Molly did more than dream, though. She played her way to the gridiron's highest honor — her signature is on a football alongside those of her national champion Boston Renegades teammates, forever enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

Introducing No. 99 of the Boston Renegades offensive line. The operations manager at Freedom Bakery and chef specializing in gluten-free recipes has the most delicious outlook on life and a delectable Instagram feed to match. Her teammates call her "Snacks."

When not sharing her culinary creations, she moonlights as a member of the 7-time Women's Football Alliance (WFA) national champion Renegades.

"If you told me, 'Not only are you going to play pro football, but you're going to be in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, 5-yr-old Molly would say you're off your rocker,'" the 29-year-old said.

Like Molly, the women of the WFA have other careers. They don't earn a salary and in fact, pay dues to pursue their love of football. The dedication of

the Renegades players has translated into four straight national titles and a 31-game winning streak, the longest in WFA history.

Some important folks took notice of the Renegades' dominance contributing to Boston's "Title Town" tradition. Just how did the team get from Boston to Canton for the past two championships? Aboard the New England Patriots' jet, courtesy of the NFL team's owner, Robert Kraft.

"You're a true team, so I think what you represent is special," Kraft told the team at a celebration at

Gillette Stadium.

FOR LOVE OF SPORT

Molly speaks about her athletic journey with tangible joy. The 2011 Holy Trinity graduate played varsity softball, soccer and swimming. She then rowed on the Division I crew team at Stetson University.

Having no remaining eligibility to play NCAA sports when she went off to graduate school, she joined Boston University's rugby club at age 22 and played for three years.

"I didn't know life

without sports," Molly said, describing parallels between football and rugby. "(Rugby) was great, I loved the physicality of contact sports. I've wanted to play football since I was a kid and never had an opportunity."

After grad school, she helped build Freedom Bakery from the ground up. In 2019, she played recreational volleyball and soccer.

"I'm a really competitive human, but (rec sports) was social and it wasn't meeting my needs," Molly said.



Molly holds the 2022 WFA Championship trophy in the New England Patriots' trophy room at Gillette Stadium.

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Ironically, even with a women's football team existing in Boston since the early 2000s (the Renegades were formerly known as the Militia), Molly didn't learn about it until she was searching the Internet for her next sports adventure.

She didn't initially get her hopes up when she discovered the Renegades in 2020. They'd already hosted tryouts and preseason started. But she "slid into their DMs and the social media coordinator forwarded Molly's information to the general manager — who called her within an hour.

The 5-foot-11 former soccer goalie who had played softball and rowed was an attractive prospect.

"He ended the conversation by asking what I would bring to the team," Molly said. "I didn't even know, I've never played (football),

but as a teammate, I know my value and my worth.' Football is not something most females grow up playing so most don't enter with a specific skill set, you have to find out where you fit."

Molly played on the offensive line her first season — an altered experience in 2021 due to the pandemic. They even played some games wearing masks.

But playing in her first national championship game as a professional football player lived up to the dream.

"I couldn't even keep my right straight from left at that point," Molly said.

Starting right tackle Erin Truex went out of the game with a possible concussion and pulled Molly in before she hit the field.

"Terrified to leave the game in such a big moment and

leave our quarterback vulnerable, I grabbed Molly and told her under no circumstances can anyone get to the quarterback. She proceeded to break her arm and continued to play, adamant that she wasn't going to let me down on her promise," Erin shared.

FAMILY SUPPORT

As good as the 2021 season was, Molly said 2022 went beyond — and her family got to witness it.

Dad Keith Winsten, executive director at Brevard Zoo, admitted the Renegades seemed like "another crazy Molly dream," just another team sport.

"The thing that turned it for us was when we found out they were flying on the Patriots plane, that's when we started taking it seriously," Keith said. "We were all in."

The Winstens filled a party bus to bring some Brevard cheer to Molly and the Renegades at a game in Tampa. They took notice of who else was in the stands — young girls.

"This sport has a growing fan base, and they know it's important to the next generation of women, the next generation of Mollys," Keith said. "That feels like a little bit of a wonderful responsibility."

Does mom, Marlene Winsten, worry about injury potential?

"I probably worry less about her playing football than playing college rugby," Marlene said. "It's a tremendous community to find as a young adult woman outside of college."

DEDICATION

While the women of the WFA don't earn salaries, they are professional

athletes in every other sense. The 2022 championship game was broadcast live on ESPN2. They put in the work on the field, watch films, study plays, work out on their own, and commute — all while maintaining their income-earning careers.

"I didn't quite know what I was getting into, the level of intensity and level of commitment of being on this team," Molly said. "How cool is it that we get to live our childhood dreams together."

And the ultimate validation was signed, sealed and delivered.

"When she signed the ball that was put in Canton, Ohio, mission accomplished," Keith said. "She blows me away. The girl never says die, she just has a lust for life." ■