

A Family of Renegades

ESPN and ABC have recently aired “Born To Play”, a documentary covering the Boston Renegades, the 2018 and 2019 Women’s Football Alliance Division I Champions. Like most sports teams around here, they do our city’s fans proud.

By Kurt Smith



Viridiana Lieberman took a chance on her dream documentary having a letdown ending.

It almost didn’t work out.

Fortunately, the team she chose to cover lived up to its city’s recent formidable sports reputation.

Lieberman’s 90-minute feature “Born To Play” tells the story of the Boston Renegades, the women’s tackle football team, and their 2018 season. The ride is rough early on, with the logistical problems of a struggling sports league... including games getting called for lightning, opponents not showing up, and half-full grandstands.

It grows bleaker as the season progresses. The Renegades fall to the Pittsburgh Passion and their arch rival DC Divas, and will have to go on the road against both teams in the playoffs.

Spoiler alert: it works out fairly well. If you’re a football fan, if you’re a Boston sports fan, watch “Born To Play”.

The ending is great, you’ll love it.

Wait, what? Women’s tackle football?

Yes, Lieberman heard that a lot too. She couldn’t, she says, count on one hand the number of people who had heard of it in conversations she had. But yes, there is a league, the Women’s Football Alliance, with close to 70 teams that play throughout the country.

She faced plenty of pressure to focus on the surprise factor of women playing football, but she refused to budge on presenting the Renegades simply as professional athletes. “Born To Play” isn’t a women’s interest film. It’s a football film.

“It was about giving them the cinematic treatment that their male counterparts have gotten for so many decades,” Lieberman says. “Of course women can play football. It’s just a matter of, you didn’t know they were playing in this established league, that the rosters were this deep, that they had an entire coaching staff.

“I had a fantasy that I was going to write my own ‘A League of Their Own’, that I could turn into a film. Then I got into documentary, and well, it exists. So that was what set me on my track to find the team to follow.

“Undeniably the Boston Renegades.”

“My goal is to create awareness, and hopefully help them get the resources they need to grow their sport, but also get some butts in the seats and start cheering them on, because they deserve it.”

The Renegade players that were kind enough to speak with BostonMan never spent a second equating themselves with the Patriots, even though they’re all far better football players than most males will ever be.

Quarterback Allison Cahill, for example, possesses a pinpoint cannon of an arm. She has a career 60.7% completion percentage and a 115.96 QB rating. Chante Bonds, a multiple position player, played well enough on both sides of the ball to be the 2018 league MVP. Cornerback Briannah Gallo is a three-time All-Star and a member of every Boston championship team, including when they were the Boston Militia.

Cahill, who emerges in the film as a quiet leader, downplays their considerable abilities.

“I do believe we have a place,” she says. “We’re not contending that we’re as good as NFL players by any stretch of the

imagination. People don't do that with high school teams. They don't go to an Everett High game and expect to see the Patriots."

Bonds is similarly humble for a league superstar. "Spectators are looking to watch women's basketball, expecting to see what the NBA does. If you settle in and you're watching, these women play at a high level, then you're going to understand the game on a different level and you're going to enjoy it."

Indeed, you can see some exciting football in the WFA. "Born To Play" showcases a particularly epic Renegades battle with the Chicago Force, a game that benefited from a better than usual broadcast.



Bonds carries the Renegades on her shoulders throughout the game, making key plays on defense before going on offense for the last play of regulation...and catching a 40-plus yard touchdown pass. The touchdown and two-point conversion ties the game, which the Renegades then win in OT. The game even features Divine Intervention, with heavy rain and winds suddenly vanishing as the touchdown pass is thrown.

The Renegades are arguably the most dominant team in WFA history. Since the league began in 2009, the Renegades have won four Division I titles, including two as the Boston Militia. They're also the current champions, having won the last two campaigns.

With players not being paid, that success results from excellence for the sake of it. The Renegades' achievements are dependent the entire organization understanding that.

Michelle McDonough, the team's Director of Business Development, speaks about the dedication to putting a quality product on the field. "Practicing the way you're supposed to practice, coaching the way you're supposed to be coached, an overall commitment to the sport.

"This is more than a hobby, for every person involved in

Supporting The Renegades



Partially due to simple lack of awareness...something Viridiana Lieberman was hoping to address in her film... the Renegades don't often play to filled grandstands. They survive on T-shirt sales, concessions at games, league entry fees, whatever they earn at the gate, and donations. Traveling for most WFA teams is particularly difficult and expensive, and sometimes teams can't pull it off, as the film shows.

Michelle McDonough is aware that the WFA has a tough mountain to climb. But the situation is improving.

"The documentary touched a lot on the competition and the leagues and how difficult and challenging it can be for teams that don't have depth to run a full season. To know that you're going to come in and play against Boston, and potentially have a tough time competing.

"Injuries get the best of you. Money gets the best of you. There are many reasons not to fulfill your obligation that are at no fault to a love of football or the game.

"But I think that as a whole, things have been getting better. As we look at our division and our schedule, teams that don't have enough people are few and far between, and teams are becoming better funded, and have stronger commitment to their own physical wellbeing and ability to keep players on the field."

On the Renegades' website, www.bostonrenegadesfootball.org, you can become a team sponsor, order a 2018-2019 National Champions T-shirt, or make a donation to help the team cover expenses. And of course, learn more about the team and its history.

Finally, when football starts again, get out and see some tough athletes play some football. The Renegades play their home games in April and May, at Harry Della Russo Stadium in Revere.

our organization, at every level. When they decide they first want to join, they either convert to have the same interest and commitment that Al and Chante and Bri have shown over the years, or they move on.”

Cahill agrees. “We take a lot of pride in passing along the tradition of women’s football in Boston, and what that level of commitment means.”

She credits upper management too.

“We are really dependent on high quality coaching, and even attracting high quality coaches comes from a competent and well-run management team.



“Our general manager, Ben Brown, does an amazing job of recruiting and bringing in new hungry athletes. And from there, it’s the job of everyone else to indoctrinate them.”

Strong word, indoctrinate. Are there hazing ceremonies?

“We can’t tell you that, come on,” Cahill says with a chuckle.

Of late, this town has a way of breeding champions too. Bonds believes it truly is a regional thing.

“I was having a conversation about being raised or raising a child on the East Coast vs. the West Coast. The conversation was basically around grit and toughness and perseverance. I’m a little biased, but I feel like East Coasters have all of that. Just being in this weather for eight out of twelve months of the year and surviving that is one piece of great perseverance.”

About Boston, Cahill adds, “I think about work ethic, I think about education. I think that those are two things that have set us apart. Just how hard we study, how hard we prepare, the lengths we go to for our physical preparation. I like to think those are woven into who we are and where we’re from.”

Gallo agrees it’s part of the New England psyche. “When you look at Boston sports teams, it’s not always about that one standout athlete. We have Chante and Allison, who are probably two of the best female football players in the

league in their positions, and they’re the most humble athletes.

“New England is very fast paced,” she continues. “People have a certain type of attitude. It’s a different character, a different animal here. I think that that truly makes all of us collectively better because you can relate to one another.

“We just truly are a family.”

As “Born To Play” shows, not even the reigning WFA champions are playing in front of packed houses. The team continues to survive on the single-minded devotion of women who work day jobs to pay league fees, and then put their bodies on the line during the game.

Allison Cahill, Chante Bonds, and Briannah Gallo aren’t likely to sign six-figure contracts to play football in their lifetimes. But impact isn’t measured in dollars. Gallo shares a story of what the Renegades have meant to one young athlete.

“I work in the sports retail business. I was at work one day and I was helping a family. There was a little girl that was playing football for the first time. The mother had a list of everything they wanted the players to have, and I helped them. I never said who I was. After I got her everything, the mother asked me how I knew so much.

“I was in Plymouth, nowhere close to Boston. I said I play women’s tackle football for the Boston Renegades.

“The little girl’s face lit up. She got so excited. She started jumping up and down because she followed our team, her dream was to play football. As she walked away, she was tapping her mom saying, ‘I can’t believe I met one of them!’”

Bonds has similarly learned that the people who matter most, the adults of our future, are watching.

“When the documentary aired, I had a watch party at a family member’s house. Seeing my nieces, one who’s thirteen and the other who’s seven, glued to the TV screen watching me and our team made me really, really proud.

“Just being a part of something that was so special, that is so special, and showing my nieces. It’s like, you can do this.

“Whatever it is that might seem nontraditional? It’s possible with the right people around you.”

Images courtesy of Mitzi Velez Lorenzana

