**Fight Like a Girl: Teen Battles to Become Her School’s Starting Quarterback**

**By Andre C. Fernandez, Miami Herald**

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MIAMI, Florida — Faking a play and running through a crowd of defenders is just another day on the field for this quarterback. Unlike most football players though, this quarterback faces tough competition. Many of the players are a foot taller or twice her weight.

After gaining a few yards, a big lineman in the 300-pound range wrapped her up in a bear hug, prompting the end of the play.

Holly Neher, standing 5 feet 2 inches tall — tiny compared to her opponent — shrugged off the "tackle" with a smile, but she wanted more.

"When I ran the ball there, I was really hoping they'd just hit me," Neher said.

**High Honors**

Neher is a junior at Hollywood Hills High. She is one of three quarterbacks competing to be the Spartans' starter, and the battle is still going as the team heads into the final week of preparation to begin its season. Neher is currently the second-string quarterback behind senior Ramon James.

Thursday's practice game at Hollywood Hills High was the first tackle football game experience for Neher. She has been a quarterback for the girls' flag football team the past two seasons, and she has been working and training with the Spartans throughout their offseason program.

"She doesn't treat this as 'I'm a girl on a tackle football team,'" said first-year Hollywood Hills coach Brandon Graham. "She sees it as 'I'm a quarterback on the (Hollywood Hills) football team.' That's something I really appreciate about her."

**Playing With the Boys**

Other girls have played football. South Plantation's Erin DiMeglio saw action in 2012 and became the first to play in a game in Florida. Pine Crest's Sofia Caro played running back and linebacker last season. Samantha "Sami" Grisafe was the first to play quarterback in a game in California in 2000.

If she is named the starter at any point, Neher would become the first high school female to start at quarterback in Dade or Broward County. It is believed she would be the first in Florida history. Graham has considered her capable since she first took the field earlier this summer.

"She probably came out here in the summer with the best mindset of all the quarterbacks," Graham said.

All summer at Hollywood Hills, Neher practiced and participated in every activity with the boys. They have grown to care for her like family.

"She's like my little sister," wide receiver Alexander Shelton said. "It would put a smile on my face to see her be the starter."

**Determination Comes From Her Family**

Neher's mother, Paula, raised Holly and her younger sister, Victoria, as a single mom in Hollywood. When Neher was 7, her mother was very sick with breast cancer. Paula was given a very slim chance of survival. Doctors were able to save her life.

Paula said Holly's determination and independence to accomplish what she has in school and athletics was all learned by helping her as she got healthy again. Holly took care of Victoria while Paula was getting better. "She made sure she was OK. She stood by me, held my hand. She made sure everything was good," Paula said. "She has always been very independent, just like me and my mother."

**It Is Worth the Risks**

Holly is the goalkeeper on the Hollywood Hills soccer team, a 4.0 student and a member of the National Honor Society. Her dream is to become a lawyer, and she hopes to study criminal law at Florida State University.

Holly and her mother see the risks of playing football as far less dangerous when compared to what they have already been through.

"If she does get hit, we'll go right through it together," Paula said. "I want her to do everything the best she can."

**One Pass Closer to Her Dream**

On Thursday, Graham let Holly run 20 plays, which is about the equivalent of a quarter. The best of those plays was a screen pass to Shelton that he caught and ran 60 yards for a touchdown. Neher recalls what her coach said to her after that touchdown play. "My coach was like, 'Yeah, Holly, you did it,'" she said. "I was like, 'Oh my God!' I started jumping. I was so happy. I'm trying to fight for that starting position."

Neher completed three of seven passes for roughly 65 yards, the touchdown pass and two interceptions in the game. Graham likely won't name a starter until Monday but said Neher didn't do anything on Thursday to play her way out of the running. "I wanted to see her with the starters," Graham said. "I'm still trying to evaluate her, and she handled herself a bit better than I anticipated."

Neher hugged her mom tight on Thursday after the practice was over. Paula Neher cried tears of joy as her daughter took another step toward living her dream. "I'm so proud and so happy for you," Paula said. "You are everything I can ever imagine and more. You always surprise me. I'm so proud of you, my love."