

Female quarterback trying to make history at high school

By Andre C. Fernandez

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(TNS)**

The quarterback faked a handoff and ran into a crowd of defenders, some a foot taller and twice her weight.

After she gained 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-foot-2 – diminutive 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.

Neher, a junior, is one of three quarterbacks on the Spartans’ roster who is competing to be the team’s starter – a battle still undetermined as the team heads into the final week of preparation to begin their season. Neher is currently the second-string quarterback behind senior Ramon James.

Last week’s intra-squad scrimmage at Hollywood Hills High in Florida was the first tackle football game experience for Neher, who has been a quarterback for the girls’ flag football team the past two seasons. She has been working and training with the Spartans throughout their offseason program.

The regular season begins next week, and Neher can’t wait for the real thing.

“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 that about her.”

Other girls have played football, such as South Plantation’s Erin DiMeglio, who 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.

And others nationwide, such as Samantha “Sami” Grisafe, who was the first to play quarterback in a varsity game in California in 2000, have become pioneers for girls dreaming of playing the sport.

But should she be named the starter at any point, Neher would become the first high school female to start at quarterback in Dade or Broward (Fla.) County, and it is believed she would be the first in state history.

Graham has considered her capable since she first took the field earlier this summer.

“Just that no fear, the grit to be able to drive a team,” Graham said. “She probably came out here in the summer with the best mindset of all the quarterbacks – just being able to handle criticism, handle an offense, and really handle a bad throw and come back and keep going.”

Wearing her bright pink cleats and carrying a tiger-print bag containing a custom-version of the team’s playbook she wrote up on the second day of summer workouts, Neher was one of the first players on the field for the Spartans.

All summer at Hollywood Hills, Neher practiced and participated in every activity with the boys.

And 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.”

Neher’s mother, Paula, raised Holly and her younger sister, Victoria, as a single mom in Hollywood, Fla. When Neher was 7, her mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. Paula was given a very slim chance of survival and underwent surgery to remove both breasts in September of 2009.

The procedure saved her life, something Paula said doctors called “a miracle.”

Paula said Holly learned the determination and independence that’s helped her accomplish what she has in school and in athletics by helping her through her road to recovery.

“Holly took over taking care of Victoria for me while I was going through [chemotherapy],” said Paula, who has been cancer-free since the operation. “She made sure she was OK. She stood by me, held my hand. She made sure everything was good. She shaved my head when I went through chemo. She helped me every step of the way. She was very strong.

“She has always been very independent, just like me and my mother. That’s something she’s had since she was born. She always wants more.”

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

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

"If she does get hit, we'll go right through it together," Paula said. "I don't want her to second-guess anything. I want her to do everything the best she can."

Last week at practice, Graham let Holly run 20 plays, which is about the equivalent of a full quarter.

The best of those plays was a screen pass to Shelton that he caught and ran 60 yards for a touchdown.

"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 toss and two interceptions in the scrimmage. Graham likely won't name a starter until later this week, but said Neher didn't do anything last week to play her way out of the competition.

"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."

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