

OPINION | MOLLY GOODWIN

Jen Welter's NFL job speaks to women's strength



VERNON BRYANT/THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS VIA AP

Jen Welter put her helmet on at a Texas Revolution practice in 2014. Welter has been hired by the Arizona Cardinals as a coaching assistant intern.

By Molly Goodwin | AUGUST 03, 2015

LAST WEEK, I got to make a 7-year-old girl's dream come true. The Boston Renegades, the city's women's tackle football team, held its first skills clinic for girls. One girl, dressed in a well-worn Patriots jersey, walked toward the

field saying, “Mom! I’m living my dream!” She can now dream a little bit bigger, because of Jen Welter’s hiring by the Arizona Cardinals as the National Football League’s first female coaching assistant intern.

Coach Welter’s football career began here in Boston in 2002 as a linebacker for the Massachusetts Mutiny, a women’s football team that preceded the Boston Renegades. Obviously, everyone involved in women’s football in Boston is proud that the city played a role in Welter’s career development, and we know she will excel in her new job.

But I am personally looking forward to a time when the decision to hire a qualified football coach with two X chromosomes doesn’t make front-page news. Rather than more people talking about female football coaches, the real goal should be to get to a place where people use the term “football coach” without the inherent assumption that they are male.

There is no question that many women and girls love football — watching it, coaching it, playing it. About 45 percent of the NFL’s 150 million fans are women — its fastest-growing demographic. Cardinals head coach Bruce Arians and Welter are opening the door to a new chapter in the story of American football. But that door won’t swing wide open overnight, and not without an increase in women’s representation in and access to the game. This is already happening in some places. There are more than 80 women’s semi-professional teams in the United States and the number of girls playing in youth leagues — while still a tiny fraction of the total players — is increasing exponentially. There’s even an all-girls league in Utah.

Getting girls involved at the youth level is crucial — virtually every man involved in professional football started playing and learning the game as a kid.



Welter embraces chance for coaching internship

The former BC rugby player is relishing her role as the first woman to hold any kind of coaching position in the NFL.

To get to a place where girls are welcomed on the field and talented coaches come not just from one half of the population, it is vital that girls and women are able to participate in football – on and off the field – in roles that are not sexualized and aren't centered around gender. They need to see that there are more options for women who love football than being a cheerleader or supportive mom, or the abomination that is the Legends Football League.

Other sports are making this kind of progress. The recent Women's World Cup final attracted a bigger television audience than any other soccer game seen in the United States – male or female. The ratings even surpassed this year's NBA and Stanley Cup finals. WBNA ratings also are up, and women are already involved in the NBA as coaches and refs, albeit in small numbers.

Making youth football more accessible to girls doesn't just extend to them the benefits that come from playing a team sport. It helps teach them that their bodies can be powerful – and that that's OK. Attendance at Renegades games

is increasing every season, and it is rewarding to know that while we are playing the sport we love, we are also normalizing the idea of women's strength.

But women and girls are not the only ones who stand to gain from a narrowing of the sports gender gap. Teams of all kinds are missing a huge pool of potential talent.

In announcing his decision to hire Welter, Arians said, "Coaching is nothing more than teaching." He didn't give her a coaching position to make her feel good about herself. He didn't do it as a publicity stunt. Arians hired Welter because he wants his team to win. He believes she can help. I do, too.

Molly Goodwin is the owner and linebacker coach of the Boston Renegades.

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