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From football fan to coach: An Emerson mom takes to the sidelines

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EMERSON – Last week, Stefanie El-Ansari took her daughter to get a pedicure. But unlike the other salon patrons who might have been skimming through magazines or checking their phone – El-Ansari reached into her bag and brought out a pile of offensive football plays.

While football and pedicures might not be a typical combination, El-Ansari has never been typical when it comes to football, and the “paradox” of her pedicure experience wasn’t lost on her.

She was studying offensive plays as part of her new gig: This year she stepped out onto the sidelines as the Emerson Football Association’s first female coach.

The lifelong Washington Redskins fan has always been drawn to the high intensity sport – and this year, she decided to grab a clipboard and coach fifth and sixth graders on the gridiron.

“Watching football and coaching football are two very different things,” El-Ansari said, laughing. “But the Football Association has been amazing, welcoming and supportive; the parents have been wonderful. It’s really just been an incredibly positive experience.”

El-Ansari said she had spent years on the sidelines, watching her sons score touchdown after touchdown. She had always felt a yearning to be running down the sidelines, cheering and sharing in the moment.

So earlier this year, she asked her family if they would support her decision to coach football, which they all emphatically agreed to.

While coaching might not have always been on her radar, El-Ansari said football has been a lifelong passion.

When she was growing up in Washington Township, her father passed along his love of the Washington Redskins – she insists she was brought home from the hospital in a “Redskins onesie.” She admits she had plenty of memorabilia from the team in her childhood bedroom, and can easily rattle off dozens of her favorite players from years past.

When she attended Immaculate Heart Academy in the mid 1990s, El-Ansari said she tried to start a “powder puff” team, but ultimately had to settle for cheerleading as a way to get close to the game.

“My family came to games, and they would tell me I was the worst cheerleader ever because I would be on the sideline and look over my shoulder the whole time watching the game,” El-Ansari said. “But it was the closest I could get to the field, and I did whatever I could to get close to the game.”

Stepping onto the field as a coach was a culmination of her lifelong football passion, El-Ansari said, but she was particularly inspired by another female presence on the field – Noelle DeMagistris, a 10-year-old who is lighting up the scoreboard of Emerson’s junior team.

“She’s amazing,” El-Ansari said of Noelle. “I see this girl with hair hanging out of her helmet in a sea of boys, and I thought to myself if Noelle could have it in her to do this, I could certainly find it in myself to try and do it.”



DANIELLE PARHIZKARAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Emerson junior football coach Stefanie El-Ansari talks to her son Ashton during their first home game against Glen Ridge on Saturday, Sept. 19, 2015. Danielle Parhizkaran

Noelle, while modestly admitting that El-Ansari may have been overstating her skills, said El-Ansari has been helping everyone on the team compete at a higher level.

"She's great," Noelle said. "Everything that she teaches us, we take in. She makes us better and helps us learn the game."

El-Ansari said she felt the "time was right" for her to pursue coaching and mentioned Jen Welter, an Arizona Cardinals inside linebackers coach who was the first woman to hold a coaching position in the NFL and worked with the team during training camp and preseason games this year.

"I think during the first practice the boys were looking at me and were like, 'What is she doing here?'" El-Ansari said. "But I think by the second practice it was 'Coach Stefanie this,' and 'Coach Stefanie that.' They have been amazing, which is very uplifting when you think of generations and how we are getting better with certain things. If we are raising a generation of fifth and sixth grade boys now who don't see anything wrong with a woman being on the football field directing them and coaching them, I think we've come so far."

Mike Kudlacik, the head coach of El-Ansari's team, said she has been a positive influence on the team and everyone has taken to her extremely well.

"I think the best thing for me to say is that Stefanie coming in has been just like anyone else coming in and coaching," he said. "The reality of it is we are coaching a bunch of young developing athletes and they need guidance - which Stefanie is giving, just like anyone else would provide. For a lot of these kids, Stefanie is the first coach they've had - it just doesn't register that it's not a dad on the sideline."

Now, with the season under way, El-Ansari spends her nights coaching and drilling the kids on different offensive plays rather than watching her sons from the stands.

"It's been amazing," El-Ansari said. "And I got my moment - I ran down the sidelines screaming my head off when my kid scored four touchdowns."

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