

# *Fun While it Lasted*

“Machine Gun“ Molly Bolin is one of the original pioneers of professional women’s basketball. Bolin first made a name as a high school legend in her girls basketball-crazed home state of Iowa, where she excelled at the local variant of the sport known as “six-on-six”.

In June 1978, Bolin became the first player to sign with the fledgling Women’s Basketball League (WBL), inking a \$6,000 contract to stay at home and play for the Iowa Cornets. The WBL was the first effort to establish a nationwide professional basketball league for women and over the next three years Bolin emerged as one of its greatest stars.

By becoming one of her sport’s first professionals, Bolin gave up the chance to compete for the highest profile opportunity for women’s players of her era - a spot of the United States Olympic team. As a single mother, Bolin chose not to play overseas, which offered the most lucrative contracts for women in the 1980’s.

Instead, between 1978 and 1984, Bolin played in three chaotic domestic pro leagues, which attracted the best players of the era, but also suffered from chronic financial problems and instability. Despite the hardship, Bolin points out the great moments, like playing before 67,500 fans in the Hoosier Dome, shooting a Spalding commercial with Larry Bird, and leading her Iowa Cornets club to two WBL championship series.

Molly Bolin - known today as Molly Kazmer - spoke to Fun While It Lasted about the early days of women’s professional basketball on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

*Interview begins after the jump.*

**FWiL:**

No one loves girls basketball more than Iowans. Until the 1990's, girls high school teams in Iowa played a regional variation called "six-on-six" and that's what you grew up playing. Did the Iowa Cornets ever get negative reactions from local six-on-six fans who simply did not want to see women play by "men's rules"?

**Kazmer:**

Good question. We didn't really get "negative" reactions, but we did have to win them over. It helped that about half of the Cornets were from Iowa and our fans knew who we were. I'm sure the game was slower than they were used to but we still scored a lot of points. I think we averaged close to 100 per game and having a few home games televised and being in the papers made people curious to see us play.

**FWiL:**

The Cornets played home games all over the state, from big arenas to high school gymnasiums. There were several native Iowans on the team. Can you talk about riding the "Corn Dog" team bus all over the state and the reaction that you and your teammates would receive in these communities when you arrived to play teams from New York, Houston and San Francisco?

**FWiL:**

Well, as we became known thanks to a lot of press, people would honk and wave when they would see our bus. Once we played an exhibition game in Ottumwa, near my hometown of Moravia and a car load of guys pulled along side honking and yelling "Put Molly in the window!" It was really funny and of course I struggled against a few teammates who were trying to get me to oblige them! Once we got pulled over by highway patrol and I gave the trooper a Molly Bolin poster and we only got a warning ticket. Plus we did a lot of promotions at malls, stores, etc. to meet people and let them know who we were. In a lot of ways it was so much more comfortable riding that bus rather than flying. We could relax, eat, stretch out, sleep, play games, music or whatever and it was a great time for team bonding. Many of the teams we played were around the Midwest and not bad driving distance like Minneapolis, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Dayton.

**FWiL:**

Hardcore women's basketball fans can name perhaps 3-4 of the trailblazers who starred in the WBL. Players like you, Nancy Lieberman and Carol Blazejowski, or Ann Meyers, who had a tryout out for the Indiana Pacers and later married Don Drysdale. But who were some of your toughest opponents (or teammates) of that era whose names ought to be remembered alongside Lieberman, Meyers and Bolin?

**Kazmer:**

Well right off, it would be Doris Draving, my teammate who was an incredible rebounder and led the league with like 14 rebounds a game and was a top five in other league categories. She would have been a big star on any other team and I have always appreciated her unselfishness in just wanting to win games. She played many games with two sprained ankles taped really tight. You have to have a great center to win and she was a big reason why we played in two championship series. (And she had a great sense of humor and was so much fun to be around).

My second year in the league, Liz Silcott, who played for the St. Louis Streak was from Canada and an unstoppable offensive threat. We were both averaging over 30 points per game, but she had a lot of personal problems which robbed her of her potential to be a big star in the league.

The third season, Rosie Walker was a dominating force in the league but is not remembered as much as Nancy, Carol & Annie who had more high profile careers. Then there are many other players who would have emerged as stars had they been given a little more time in their WBL careers.

**FWiL:**

What are your memories of working for Iowa Cornets owner George Nissen?

**Kazmer:**

We all loved him, he was such a class act and it was a tragedy that we lost him as an owner. He had the team to his house for parties a couple of times and gave us all \$100 cash in a card at his Christmas party which was really big bucks in 1978! He always wanted to do things the right way and we felt he cared about us. I didn't have a personal relationship with him as the only time I saw him was at team functions.

**FWiL:**

After the Cornets lost the 1980 WBL championship to the New York Stars, there was a long offseason of uncertainty as George Nissen tried to sell the team to Dick Vance, a former disc jockey who had some outlandish promotional ideas for the team. As the team's star player, were you kept in the loop about what was happening with the Cornets during this time? How did you get the news that the Cornets were not going to play anymore?

**Kazmer:**

That was a difficult time as we were all put in limbo. We had our doubts about Vance at the press conference that introduced him and after that we finished the season with sack lunches and no hotel rooms on a trip to Chicago. I went on an All-Star tour when the season ended and Dean Meminger was coaching us. Dean told me he was at the meeting when I was chosen as league MVP but there was no trophy, ceremony or anything (not even a certificate!) because of the league problems. Then a few weeks later I got a call from a reporter asking "How does it feel being co-MVP with Ann Meyers?" and I was shocked into silence.

The team had moved to Cedar Rapids our second season and my (ex) husband got a job in Des Moines so we moved back there not knowing if there would be a team or where. At the same time I was getting calls from a new league called the Ladies Professional Basketball Association. I was flown to California three times and a got contract offer.

<Meanwhile> we were getting conflicting reports from the Cornets. Bill Byrne, the WBL president, called me several times to make threats to try to stop me from leaving the WBL but I was already mad at him for how he handled the MVP award. He was the first person I called when I found out and he told me "It's the best thing to ever happen to you to share it with Annie". I later became friends with Bill and actually stayed at his house with him & his wife when I played for the Columbus Minks in 1984. But I got to the point in late July 1980 where I decided to just go to California. I heard later that there was no official announcement of the Cornets folding until September and they had a dispersal draft of the players. There was just nobody with the Cornets who knew anything for sure so of course we were all in limbo and I had another great option (or at least it seemed so at the time) so I took it and joined the Southern California Breeze of the LPBA.

**FWiL:**

The story of the LPBA has been almost completely lost to history. Can you talk about your brief adventure with the Southern California Breeze and the LPBA? Who ran the league and who recruited you to the Breeze?

**Kazmer:**

Yes it was definitely an adventure! Tony Mercurio was the General Manager of the Breeze and he was determined to get me in California. So he flew me out, I went to the beach, Disneyland, etc. for the first time in my life and it was a very attractive offer. He personally guaranteed my pay and helped me find a place to live. I never did know who was in charge of the league or meet anyone outside the Breeze organization, but Ken Cole from Australia was hired to coach us and he had a good coaching record. I tried to get my Cornets teammates to come too but only Joan Uhl & Tanya Crevier joined the Breeze. Doris Draving and Rhonda Penquite went to New Mexico in the LPBA. I went to a Laker press conference to talk about the new league and met Jerry Buss and Magic Johnson. I later had a brief stint working at the Forum to promote a Nancy Lieberman tour I was playing in and met Jerry West too.

It was a lot of fun, but not a high level of play. In our first (and only) five games I averaged just over 40 points. We went on one road trip to New Mexico and Phoenix and we piled in two cars for a 14-hour drive, stopping only for gas. I was in the car behind coach Ken Cole and we were trying to keep up with him as he drove over 90 miles an hour! The team was crammed in two cars and the one I was in belonged to a player and was a real clunker and it was scary going that fast. Amazing that we lived through it and didn't even get a speeding ticket probably because we left at night and drove all night long. We did have a lot of fun the short time we were together, but the league was never organized properly and most of the teams never played a game before it folded the end of 1980. Tony kept his word and made sure I was paid up to date.

In January 1981, I was inundated with calls from WBL teams and wrote down all the offers with the pros and cons. Without an agent, I had to choose the best team for me both professionally and financially and had a really hard decision being pulled in different directions with all kinds of promises being made. I was worried about taking care of my family as my husband wasn't working and my son was three years old.

The San Francisco Pioneers flew me in for a visit and it was a no-brainer seeing that they were a professional organization, they were bringing in Dean Meminger to coach, and bringing in several of my old Iowa Cornet teammates, like Doris Draving, Joan Uhl, Tanya Crevier and Sister Green. Not to mention it was the best salary of my career.

**FWiL:**

So you re-joined the WBL with the San Francisco Pioneers for the last half of the league's final season. With the Pioneers you played for a losing team for the first time, but you were also with a club that was considered pretty stable compared to the rest of the league. What are your memories of playing in San Francisco for Head Coach Dean Meminger and the owner Marshall Geller?

**Kazmer:**

The Pioneers were already struggling when I got there in mid-January 1981 and it took a couple weeks of more changes before the team finally came together. It was a bit discouraging because I was used to winning! I wasn't getting the ball much so they brought in a few more players including my former Cornet teammates. Dean had won the previous league championship with the New York Stars by having a strong balanced team with balanced scoring. He wanted me to spend less energy on offense, take less shots, and develop a more all around game. I bought in and was trying to do just that. He would run lines with us telling us we had to keep up with him (not easy) and we also had to learn to take charges from him (to toughen up). I also did a lot of individual work with him before & after practices. We would play horse & the shoot offs would often go on for awhile. He was tough on us and had high expectations and I really liked that and wanted to be a better player.

I had only been in the league a few weeks when they announced the 3rd WBL All-Star game would be played in Albuquerque. Norm Ellenberger, who had put the New Mexico team together for the LPBA, wanted a franchise in the WBL and convinced WBL officials to give him a shot at hosting the All-Star Game to test the market. From what I heard, Norm insisted that I be added to the All-Star roster because I had played against him in the LPBA and the local market knew who I was. I was thrilled to get to go after coming in almost mid-season, but it was awkward being the 13th player out of two 12-player teams. Nancy Leiberman & Carol Blazejowski were on my team and both had good games.

After being the last player put into the game, I scored & was fouled for three points. Then in the third quarter I hit seven long range shots in a row and the crowd was into it. Our West team won and I was the leading scorer with 29 points, but Nancy got the MVP award. Disappointing, but it was a major boost for me earning the respect from my peers and overcoming the circumstances of being selected. Plus, after seeing the game, Dean Meminger pulled me aside and told me he was wrong and from then on I had the green light to shoot & score at will.

It was while I was at this game that I got the news that my former teammate Connie Kunzmann was missing. I had been really upset that she didn't go with me to California because we had been good friends and often roommates the first two years with the Cornets. But she had wanted to stay close to home. It was shocking and sad to find out the details of her murder because our Cornet team had been really close and we spent a lot of time together.

After the All Star break, I averaged over 33 points a game and we went on a winning streak down the stretch of our last games, including a big win over eventual league champions, the Nebraska Wranglers. I ended up second in league scoring averages behind the Blaze <Carol Blazejowski> and made All-Pro.

A fun and talented Pioneers teammate, Cardie Hicks, was known for her incredible vertical jump and at like 5'10" had dunked a few times in practice. She got a break away in the All Star game and went for it, but it hit the back of the rim and bounced out, but she was THERE! We had a lot of fun on the road, once spending five days in New Orleans at the start of Mardi Gras. When Dean thought we were partying too much, he made practices twice a day while we waited for our game. (less costly than flying back & forth to SF and a hell of a lot more fun!) It was a long ways from my conservative days with the Iowa Cornets!

Marshall Geller had put together one of the most professional front office organizations in the league and it was enjoyable being there. Part of my contract included a condo to live in with my family and some of the team moved into the same complex, so we car pooled to practices across the Golden Gate Bridge every day. They did a pretty good job with promotion & marketing and set up the photo shoot where I was holding a replica machine gun. We were so fortunate to be one of the few teams who finished the third season without financial difficulties.

### **FWiL:**

Can you describe your experience with Bill Byrne's WABA in 1984? This turned out to be your second experience playing for a women's league that failed to complete the season. How the did conditions for the players (housing, travel, pay) in the WABA compare to the WBL?

**Kazmer:**

My experience playing in the WABA was difficult in every way possible, without the fun we had in the WBL.

Having the WBL fold while I was at the top of my game was devastating, and because of legal custody issues with my son, I had to turn down all offers to play pro in Europe. I had a fantastic summer in 1984 having been selected to a USA All-Star team to do an exhibition tour with the U.S. Women's Olympic team, which won the gold medal. A couple of our games were double headers with the men's Olympic team who played NBA All-Stars. One game in Indianapolis was billed as the World's Largest Indoor Basketball Game with 67,500 in attendance. Following that I was flown to Boston to shoot a commercial for Spalding with Larry Bird while wearing a WABA logo uniform.

But Bill Byrne was having difficulty getting owners to put up the money for all the teams, and I had no clue which team I was going to play for by September. He would not let that stop him and believed that if he got the league started, people would believe and the money would fall into place. I wanted to have another chance so badly that I didn't care much if it was unstable. I was on Bill's side to make it work somehow. He eventually called to tell me that I should go to Columbus, Ohio and play for the Minks so I left my son with my mom and went immediately.

The team had already been practicing a week or two and were staying on an old army base outside of Columbus. From the first day I arrived, there was some animosity that I couldn't put a finger on, except that I was supposed to be the "team's star" but neither the coach or players acted very happy to have me there. In my opinion I was all but ignored by the coach and was having a tough time adjusting to a fairly hostile environment which included staying in a dorm room on the base that had no amenities plus I had no transportation. The weather had turned to freezing and we were walking about a mile to the cafeteria and to the gym, but the kicker was they would not turn on the heat in the dormitories for a couple weeks and I was letting the hot water in my shower run to warm up my room. When some of the girls began to get sick an owner's wife took pity on us and moved us into a hotel in Columbus which was a huge improvement.

We were being bussed to practice from the hotel and after a couple weeks they started offering contracts to players. This consisted of the head coach bringing us one by one into his hotel room and writing a figure on a piece of paper. I was offered about the same as I made my first year with Iowa so I promptly thanked the coach for ending my misery in Columbus and told him I was leaving. He said that's all he could offer which I know was quite a bit less than other players on my own team and FAR below what I heard other name players were making on other teams.



I flew back to California and came down with the flu for a couple of weeks during which time the team was losing and needed a scorer. Bill Byrne promised me the money I needed AND that I could stay at his place for free. So I caved in and flew to Dallas to meet the team and play again. I don't think the coach ever put me in the starting line up and it was a struggle to even get a pass from teammates but I did have a few good games with the team. I also convinced a former Cornet teammate, Doris Draving, to come join the team and we did have some fun together, but the players only got one paycheck which happened to be on my birthday, Nov. 13th. I only played in nine games, got a broken nose and a dislocated shoulder and when I dislocated it the second time, I decided enough was enough and went home to try to heal and rehab a bit. I filed a workman's comp claim with my injury and received ALL my salary. My Minks teammates were not so lucky and they struggled financially to get through that first & only season. The WABA had started with such promise and I had such high hopes to resurrect my pro basketball career, but it was just not to be.

After that Bill Byrne would call me from time to time to say he was getting another league going and wanted me to help. I never turned him down and actually met with a few potential owners including the owner of the Seattle Supersonics in the late 80's, though nothing solid came from it. Bill NEVER gave up either! In 1986 I was working Sporting Goods shows and working booths at NCAA women's Final Four tournaments when I was approached to help the NWBA get off the ground. This time I wanted to be more involved in management to help get it going rather than as a player at the mercy of an unstable league, and held a couple of press conferences at my own expense to help the league, but they never got financing to get off the ground.

**FWiL:**

Your Cornets uniform is displayed at the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. What would you like today's WNBA players and fans to know about the WBL and the players of your generation?

**Kazmer:**

I think fans and women's pro basketball players of today should know about the history of women's pro basketball in the United States that started with the Women's Basketball League (WBL). As the first player signed to a contract for the first team, the Iowa Cornets, in the first league, I experienced all the struggles of being a pioneer in a new sport in the U.S., the struggle for acceptance from a doubting public & press, the struggle for respect for females in what was considered a men's sport, and the struggle for recognition that should have been better than it was.

All of us played for the love of the game, some of us were lucky enough to make a living at it, but more often than not it was a total financial struggle as well. It was not unusual for us pioneers to be caught in a situation that you had to decide if you were going to play even without pay. By walking out after not being paid, it pretty much guaranteed failure, and I know most of my teammates and myself were much more determined to contribute to the success of a women's pro basketball league, not to the failure - so we chose to play. The WBL owners spent roughly 12 million dollars from 1978-1981, and I believe everyone involved did their best to make it work sometimes at the risk of their own financial ruin. I personally did every marketing & promotion appearance asked of me both in and off season to generate more interest & awareness in the league.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough because the timing wasn't right for us to make it, but what is important is that we BELIEVED IN THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S PRO BASKETBALL IN THE UNITED STATES and it became a reality with the WNBA! I was personally involved in about five attempts to get a league going and all these early efforts and sacrifices paved the way for what players enjoy today. I also think it is important that the WNBA recognize the records that were set in the previous leagues because we deserve that respect and recognition.

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