

# Woelk: Johnson`s Belles legacy will live on

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Football season will be a little different next fall on the Colorado campus.

For the first time in 40 years, Martha Johnson won't be riding herd on CU's coaches, athletes and administrators.

Johnson died last week at the age of 88. A CU football season ticket holder for roughly half a century, she knew more about Buff football than most (and, I can personally attest, she wasn't reluctant to share that knowledge and an opinion to go with it).

But Johnson left a bigger Buff-print than "just" 50 years of season tickets. Years from now, the bet here is that Johnson's contribution to CU sports will still be going strong.

Some history: In 1970, Martha's husband, Ray, used to come home from weekly Buff Club meetings and tell Martha everything he'd heard from the guest speaker, usually a CU coach.

Martha, already a die-hard Buff fan, decided she wanted to hear that information first-hand. She also thought she might want to offer up a few questions of her own.

But when she asked about the possibility, she was ... ahem ... rebuffed. The Buff Club, she was told, was a guys-only group. No women allowed.

Oops. Wrong answer.

This was 1970. This was an era when Gloria Steinem was informing America's women that they didn't have to sit quietly when told "no."

So Martha didn't sit quietly and wait for her husband to come home with Buff news. Instead, Martha called a few of her friends and they started their own club. They met at a local bowling alley to talk CU sports. And those women each called a few more friends. And word spread ... And before anyone realized it, Martha's original "Ladies Quarterback Club" became the Buffalo Belles. Soon thereafter, CU's coaches were making regular visits to their meetings. The women were then going home with stories for their husbands.

And history was made. What is generally regarded as the longest-standing women's booster group in the nation is still going strong today, with a membership in the hundreds. They now meet weekly during the fall in the UMC Ballroom, they still hear from coaches and players from all different sports every week, and they are now a major contributor to CU's scholarship fund.

All because somebody told Martha "no."

Martha seldom if ever missed a Belles meeting. And right down to the end, she kept a close eye on its leadership.

"When I took over as president, she had some advice for me," said current Belles president Debra Odom. "She said, 'You are going to be a fine president -- and don't wear short skirts.'"

That was Martha Johnson.

"She was so proud of what we have done," Odom said. "She very much cared about the student athlete, and I think that's what we are about. We really care about the kids."

That will be Martha Johnson's legacy. It's one worth noting.

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