
PROLOGUE

The latest bullies on the block are the indomitable women of the diamond

Some weeks after the marching band ceases its drills on the practice field just outside my office window, another sound from slightly farther east begins to fill the late afternoon void. A modest but faithful crowd can be heard turning up the volume from the snazzy new women's softball field on Jenkins Avenue. Next year, I believe I will walk over and join that crowd—along with other Sooner sports fans who suddenly have discovered OU's newest national championship team.

Head Coach Patty Gasso hasn't been keeping her team's success a secret over her six years at OU; she just wasn't attracting much attention. Oh, there was a time, as other Sooner sports were "under performing," when campus wags joked that OU always had been a women's softball school. To Gasso, the remark is no joke; when it comes to promoting women's fastpitch softball, she is deadly serious.

Each of Gasso's six teams has made the NCAA regionals, three of them claiming the Big 12 regular season titles. But the big one—the Women's College World Series, annually played just up the road at the Don E. Porter Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City—had eluded the Sooners.

Until this year.

With an impressive 62-8 regular season record, OU entered the eight-team tournament seeded a respectable third behind Washington and Arizona. But even with the home-crowd advantage and the country's best record, this was a young team—only one senior—from a school with no appearances in a WCWS tournament that had crowned a West Coast champion 17 times in its 19-year history. (Texas A&M won in 1986 and 1987.)

It didn't matter. The Sooners

stepped up and calmly mowed down California, Southern Mississippi, Arizona and UCLA in that order.

Heroes abounded. Sophomore pitcher Jennifer Stewart's four victories brought her season record to 34-6 and earned tournament MVP honors; she gave up only two runs in 23 innings and threw 14 straight scoreless innings. Junior first baseman Lisa Carey, whose well-placed home runs provided the margin for victory on two successive days against Arizona and UCLA, joined Stewart on the All-Tournament Team with freshman standout shortstop Kelli Braitsch.

An "iron woman" award should have gone to second baseman LaKisha Washington, who took a pitch to the face in the championship game, breaking her nose and eventually requiring six stitches. After 10 minutes on the ground, a patched-up Washington

changed her bloody shirt, returned to the game and promptly stole second.

OU women's basketball coach Sherri Coale remarked to a *Daily Oklahoman* writer that she would like to recruit Washington. "She's so tough," Coale said, "I don't even care if she can shoot."

There were many memorable moments. Stewart was pitching so well that captain and sole senior Lana Moran, who started the first game against California, never returned to the lineup. Exercising her team leadership from the bench, Moran had no complaints. A week later the Sooner pitcher, who finished the season 26-2 with a 1.26 ERA and a 3.88 GPA, capped an honor-filled career by repeating on the GTE Academic All-America team, this time as Team Member of the Year.

Gasso reaped a few honors herself. *The Dallas Morning News* and Dallas All Sports Association named her the Big 12 Female Coach of the Year. Named conference coach of the year in 1996, 1999 and 2000, she has a 303-101 record at OU (.750). She has coached six All-Americans, four of them on the 2000 national championship team—Stewart, Carey, Ashli Barrett and Erin Evans. Gasso, assistant coaches Melyssa Panzer and Tim Walton and graduate assistant Jennifer Jaime also were named National Coaching Staff of the Year by the National Fastpitch Coaches Association.

The WCWS always draws a big crowd of visiting fans and lovers of the game. But OU's four games simply overwhelmed sun-drenched Hall of Fame Stadium, a total 27,119 spectators packing its 2,046 permanent seats, temporary bleachers and surrounding berms. More than a few undoubtedly were seeing college fastpitch for the first time. Gasso's gang treated them to quite a show.

—CJB



Head Coach Patty Gasso