



SOONER SOFTBALL CAPTURES TITLE

A young team, a **left-handed pitcher** and a determined coach add a diamond to OU Athletics' crown.

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Photos by Ty Russell/OU Athletics



Oklahoma ace Paige Parker cast a long shadow at the 2016 Women's College World Series, pitching the Sooners to five wins, including a 2-1 title-clinching decision over Auburn in the championship series finale.

The morning of June 7, the Oklahoma softball team was riding its school-record 31-game winning streak and was one victory away from claiming its third NCAA championship this millennium under coach Patty Gasso.

With the Sooners just 21 outs away from the crown, pitcher Paige Parker understandably was running on fumes, having thrown 958 postseason pitches to that point. Fresh off OU's 3-2 opening victory over Auburn in the best-of-3 championship series the night before, Gasso had a chat with her First Team All-American left-hander, her team and her staff.

"We were very calculated in what we wanted to do," says Gasso. "If we had to surrender this game, at least we'll have a shot the next night. But we won't have a shot at all if we keep throwing her out there with nothing left in her tank."

After a 7-11 loss to Auburn, a replenished Parker said her tank was at 90 percent for the title tilt. "Paige said, 'If I can get to 90 percent, I can beat anybody,'" Gasso reported.

And Parker did just that, posting a 2-1 victory over Auburn in the championship game on June 8 at the ASA Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City.

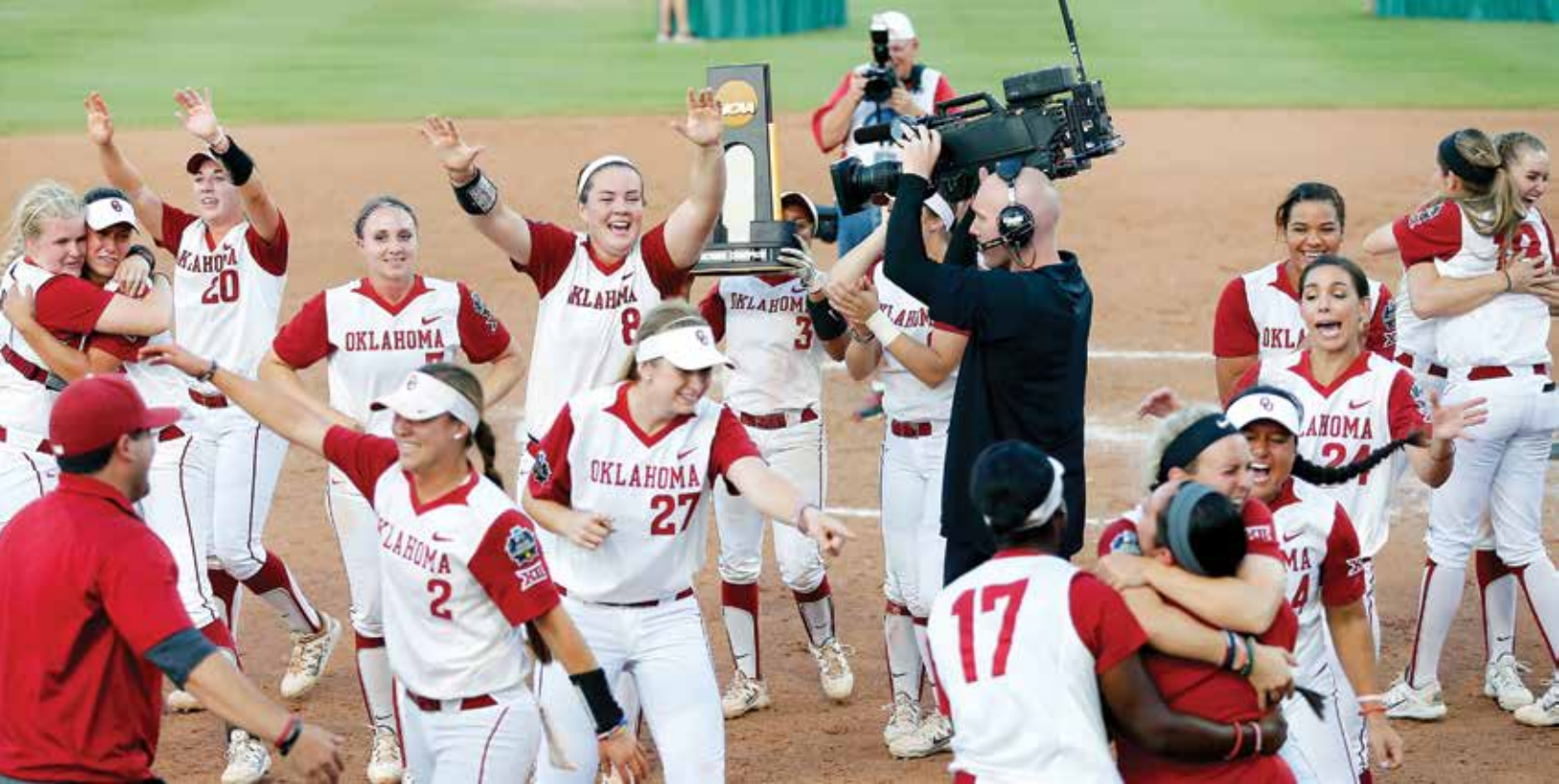
Parker's exhaustion could not prevent the Sooners from getting fitted for their third championship ring. Nor could back-to-back losses that began their season, nor could an 8-4 overall start, nor could having a roster overwhelmed with eight freshmen.

Gasso said one constant was key. "The defense was something spectacular," she explained. "You hear football coaches all the time say defense wins championships. Well in our sport, pitching wins championships. I truly felt our defense won us this championship. We were so solid. Never rattled. Never pushed. Never pressed. The defense was so solid and the offense just executed everything I asked. They always found a way." *continued*

Above Right - True freshman Shay Knighten got Oklahoma off to a positive start in its 2016 Women's College World Series opener, blasting a three-run home run in the bottom of the eighth inning to give the Sooners a thrilling 3-0 walk-off victory over Alabama.

Right - Senior Erin Miller celebrates after sliding home safely on a wild pitch to give Oklahoma a 6-3 lead over LSU in the fourth inning of a game the Sooners eventually won to earn a spot in the WCWS championship series. It was OU's 30th straight victory, eclipsing the previous school record of 29 straight wins set in 2005.





Top - Seconds after OU pitcher and World Series MVP Paige Parker coaxed a game-ending ground ball out of Auburn pinch-hitter Courtney Shea, the Sooners went into celebration mode in the aftermath of clinching their third national title in program history.

Above right - Oklahoma coach Patty Gasso, shown here with freshman star Shay Knighten, helped guide the Sooners to a two games to one championship series win over Auburn to claim their third national title. OU has reached the postseason in each of the last 23 seasons, including all 22 under Coach Gasso.

Left - OU centerfielder Nicole Pendley flashes the leather with a leaping fifth-inning catch that robbed Michigan's Savannah Jaquish of extra bases in a game the Sooners went on to win 7-3.

