

# A most unlikely

Down and almost out, the women of the Sooner softball team dug deep and came up winners.

Again.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN  
PHOTOS BY TY RUSSELL

**True champions** know the road to a national title can be a long and bumpy one, especially when they have been there before. In May, the University of Oklahoma's talented, but struggling, defending national champion softball team was an out away from elimination and a return trip to the Women's College World Series.

Perhaps it was the unrelenting expectation that they would easily roll into Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City and capture back-to-back titles, repeating their feat as national champions in 2017. Seeded a disappointing 10th for the NCAA Regionals after a 17-1 run in conference play, the Sooners were stunned by North Dakota State in the opening game of that series, losing 3-2.

As a freshman, infielder Caleigh Clifton enjoyed the ride to the national championship in 2016. A year later, she says, the team was feeling the pressure to do it again. And it showed.

"We had nothing to lose when we won the title last year," she says. "This year, each of us felt the pressure to repeat. I think we were struggling because we put so much pressure on ourselves to win. It was not that much fun, and softball is fun. In the end, though, that experience helped us grow because we figured it out as a team and came together."

As team captain, shortstop Kelsey Arnold took it upon herself to rally her teammates as far back as February. Their initial outing of 2017 as defending national champions did not go as planned. They lost to Auburn in the Puerto Vallarta College Challenge.

"We were playing in Mexico and we were not achieving what our coaches wanted from us," Arnold recalls. "They were not happy and we were not happy. I knew something had to change."  
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The Sooner softball team hoists the NCAA trophy after beating number-one seed Florida in the finals at the USA Softball Hall of Fame stadium in Oklahoma City. The Sooners reached the Women's College World Series for the 11th time in program history and sixth time in the last seven years and have won back-to-back national championships — three in five years.



# Championship



The Tulsa junior began reaching out to her teammates. One-on-one. They had dinners together, ice cream outings and impromptu chats throughout the season. Arnold read books on leadership and visited with veteran athletes about fulfilling her role as the team leader.

Head Coach Patty Gasso credits Arnold with being the glue that held the team together.

“In all my years here, I have not seen another athlete learn from the best in this business on how to be a good leader like Kelsey did this year,” Gasso says. “When she was voted team captain she had a hard time with that because she is hard working but humble. Kelsey took herself out of her comfort zone and did what good leaders must do, which is develop relationships with everyone on the team. She is a huge reason why this all came together like it did.”

The hall of fame coach says she believes the team’s biggest hurdle to overcome this year was the “whole repeat thing.

“Everyone was talking about it, but really, how do you trump what we did last year? The answer is, you can’t. It is impossible. The team got caught up in results and numbers, and the season did not go well for some time. I think that is why this championship is so appreciated. I am in awe of how these guys did this because we were a mess and could not figure it out.”

Two months after their triumph, Gasso remains in a state of suspended disbelief that the Sooners indeed are repeat champions.

“As soon as that last game was over, Coach [Melyssa] Lombardi and I looked at each other, laughing and crying at the same time, and it was exactly that feeling of, ‘Did that really just happen? Did we really just do this?’” Gasso laughs. “I think spe-



If she has learned anything during her time at Oklahoma, Gasso says, it’s to trust others around her and to focus less on the results and more on balancing her many roles.



Left-handed pitcher Paige Lowary, who finished the night with two shut-out innings, celebrates with catcher Lea Wodach after putting away Florida 5-4 in the final game of the Women’s College World Series in Oklahoma City.



In the top of the 17th inning of Game 1 of the Women's College World Series, Shay Knighten sent a three-run home run into the history books to give the Sooners a 7-4 lead over the Florida Gators. The game, which went 5 hours and 28 minutes, is a record for a WCWS finals game.

cifically because of the season that we were having up to that point."

The title-winning performance was less than 24 hours after the longest game in WCWS history, when inning after inning, the Sooners played well into the night. For 17 innings, 10 more than a regulation game, the team held off the Florida Gators to win 7-5 in the first of the three-game series.

"I honestly don't remember what was going through my mind," Gasso says of that June 5th marathon. "It is so constantly intense. I remember looking up at the scoreboard and seeing that the innings didn't fit on the board anymore, and not really recognizing the inning that we were in, or that the game was going on so long."

The only goal for the coaching staff, recently named National Staff of the Year, was to keep the team mentally focused, hungry and aggressive.

"No one was focused on what inning it was, or what happened before or was going to come up later," Gasso explains. "It is not like that at all because if you do that, you have lost."

"Truly, you are just living in the moment to stay in the game and this team did a fabulous job doing exactly that. Then our mentality changed to, 'Let's finish this,' the following night."



With the celebration over and the trophy placed on a shelf, Gasso has a few moments in between summer camps and the ever-present recruiting to reflect on her 23 years at the helm of the Sooner program. OU occupies the same rarified air as just two other powerhouse softball schools, UCLA and Arizona, in winning more than two national titles. Under Gasso, the Sooners also won the NCAA championship in 2000 and 2013.

If she has learned anything during her time at Oklahoma, she says, it's to trust others around her and to focus less on the results and more on balancing her many roles. Not only does she continue to aspire to be the best coach she can be to her team, Gasso has made peace with her earlier struggles as a young working mother and is proud to be mom of two adult sons, both in the family business, so to speak.

JT is an assistant coach and steady lieutenant on the sidelines. Younger son DJ will be a fifth-year senior with plans to finish up his collegiate baseball career at the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond after playing at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill.

Gasso also became a grandmother when Joseph Champ Gasso was born to son JT and wife Andrea – a volunteer Sooner softball coach – shortly after the 2016 championship. She is looking forward to the family being in the stands for DJ after four years of dueling sports schedules.

"I am excited about getting to see DJ play college games, and that he can see us play as well," she says.

Her family and coaching life, it seems, has finally come full circle.

"Until about 15 years ago, I was constantly trying to do everything, almost to a micromanaging level, and I wondered why I had assistants if I am not going to use and trust them," she says. "On one side, I have Melyssa Lombardi, who has been with me since I got here and knows me like a book, and on the other side is my son. If you can't trust your son, who can you trust?"

Conceding that the two still have their mother-son moments, the head coach admits she is wowed when she looks over and sees JT in the dugout.

"JT is a great coach and I am very proud," Gasso says. "I must have done something right for him to want to be a part of this game."

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