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Recognition finally comes to Parkland's 1975 champions

Keith Groller

They were the area's forgotten champions.

They felt unrecognized for so many years, both locally and across the state.

But when Parkland's 1975 state championship softball team took some well-deserved bows during a pregame ceremony on May 10 before a regular season game between Emmaus and the current Trojans, they could finally feel the appreciation of having paved the way for the success that has followed on area softball diamonds over the past 31 years.

"This is overwhelming; this night means so much to me you can't imagine," said Donna (Spence) Katcher, the '75 team's catcher and the lady who delivered the two-out single on May 30, 1975, that drove in the run to beat Coatesville 4-3, making Parkland the state's first state softball champion.

"This was the starting point. Softball, at that point, was just a little girl's sport. We really weren't recognized, not even after we won it. Things have changed a great deal, and for the better."

Katcher, who has lived her entire adult life in the area, has seen Parkland win two more state titles in 1995 and 1998, and has watched teams like Allen ('90), Northampton ('96), Emmaus (2000), Northwestern ('85), and Northern Lehigh ('88 and '96) experience the same thrills that she did in her high school career.

She sees the passion the girls have for the sport at a young age.

"Back in my day, I didn't start playing softball until I was in sixth grade," she said. "Now you have kids out to play T-ball at five years old. The growth of it has been amazing. Back in my era, I played for the Patriot Queens after high school and you had Class A ball and Class AA.

"Now, you have 10-and-under, 12-and-under, 14-and-under and it just keeps on going and going and going. The opportunities that are there for these kids just amazes me. It's very different."

Katcher has also seen the growth of Parkland High School. Before the ceremony, the team members toured the new high school and saw the state-of-the-art gymnasium.

Even viewing the softball complex with its big scoreboard, decorated fences, pressbox and lights was an eye-opener for the 1975 players.

"Our field was in the corner of the football practice field," remembered the Rev. Marica Thomas, the team's coach. "We had a portable backstop they would move in for the games and two little wooden benches. Fans brought their lawn chairs. It wasn't until I was finished coaching that they got a dirt infield. We had to go a half-hour away to practice for the state finals on another field."

Thomas, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in Kiel, Wisc., hadn't been back at Parkland since 1978. She was astounded by all she saw around her.

She remembered that when softball began at Parkland in 1973, the team won just once.

"The next year we had a winning record, I think 11-7," Thomas said. "Then in that third year, we won the District 11 title and won states. And, remember not only were we the first softball state champion in Pennsylvania, but we were also the first team to win a state title at Parkland. So, we really set things in motion."

And seeing everybody together again set the memory banks in motion.

"We were always a team that came on strong late," Thomas said. "Coatesville had a pitcher who was fresh because we had a week off before the game because it was delayed by rain. So, she was really tough."

But Parkland was mentally tougher.

"We were down 3-1 going into the bottom of the seventh, but I pumped up the girls," Thomas said. "I said, 'This is no different than what we've done all season. ... They're the ones who should be nervous, not us.' And, the girls responded."

Even though LaRue Moser, Parkland's first batter of the inning, was thrown out trying to stretch a double into a triple, the Trojans didn't deflate.

"That hit seemed to spur them on," Thomas said. "Joanne Geiger was next and she was so nervous, but she singled to get a new rally started. We started to hit well, and it was a good offensive team. They knew they could do it. They were ready to be state champs. It was a team that wouldn't quit."

And last week, they celebrated as a team once again.

"I can't believe 31 years have gone by," said Sheri (Christman) Kelly, the winning pitcher that day. "It was a great group of girls and I'm just glad we're finally being recognized for what we did."

"We didn't have to go through as many steps as they do nowadays, but it was still a state championship. That's what my medal says."

And the good news is that the PIAA will place Parkland's 1975 team in its official record book, beginning this year.

Records from the '75 tournament were evidently washed away when the PIAA's offices were flooded years ago.

But nothing could wash out the emotion the ladies felt last week when their names were announced over the P.A. system and they heard applause.

"Girls sports, in general, still have a way to go yet," Kelly said. "They are still behind the boys in many ways, but they're making great strides and going in the right direction. And, we'd like to think we helped to get things started around here."

MEAGAN'S MASTERY

Meagan Hennessy will graduate as the best pitcher in Moravian College history and owning every mark in the school record book.

But John Byrne, the Greyhounds' head coach, says her true value could never be measured in sheer numbers.

"She's the fiercest competitor with the heart of a lion," Byrne said. "She didn't want to take the uniform off for the last time. She's one of those special kids who come along once in a coach's career. People ask how we'll replace her, and the answer is that you can't. You'll put somebody else out there, but a player like her can never really be replaced. No one will ever wear that No. 2 again."

Hennessy, the Commonwealth Conference's four-time pitcher of the year, finished her career with a 92-24 record and with some of the best numbers in NCAA Division III history.

The Freehold, N.J. native ranked second in shutouts with 53, fourth in complete games with 105, fifth in strikeouts with 876, sixth in innings pitched with 8192/3, sixth in wins, 10th in starts with 114, and 14th in ERA at 0.91.

"We've had some very good pitchers here in my 13 years," Byrne said. "But Meagan kicked the bar up to new heights. She was one of the top three or four pitchers in the country and she earned a national reputation. All of the best coaches in the nation knew who she was. That's the best compliment you can get."

Byrne said Hennessy displayed courage at the NCAAs in Salisbury, Md., last weekend.

"She has some kind of hip strain and could barely walk out to the circle," Byrne said. "She was pitching on guts. She fought through the pain to pitch us into final round after we lost the first game and beat No. 1 seed, Methodist. It was a great way for her to go out."

A FEW GOOD MEN

The Patriots Park family lost two good people recently with the passing of Danny Felegy and George Trexler, both members of the popular Pates' old-timers teams.

Felegy had a special place in my heart as one of the goodwill ambassadors of the park, the kind of guy who always had a smile and a kind word for me. He was a major reason why Pates always felt like a warm and friendly place, even on those raw, early-spring days when you wonder why no one ever thought of making softball an indoor sport.

Danny was always hustling, always working, even at the Christmas barn gift shop at Lights in the Parkway.

Trexler is the brother of Pates Park and Jordan A.C. legend Eugene "Mooney" Trexler.

Both men will be missed.

DON'T WAIT FOR WEIL

Seniors who want to participate in the Carole Weil High School All-Star Classic on June 7 still have time to sign up for the event. Players can sign up by filling out a form on the Carole Weil Web site (www.caroleweil.homestead.com) or call Ed Stinner at 610-395-3555.

HAWKS ON THE AIR

Lehigh's NCAA Regional opener in Amherst, Mass., against No. 13 Texas A&M at 2:30 p.m. today can be heard on 91.3 FM WLVR as well as online at lehighsports.com powered by Yahoo! Sports.

WISECRACKS AT THE BELL

Lots of Patriots old-timers will likely be on hand from 2-4 p.m. Sunday for a reception at downtown Allentown's Liberty Bell Museum when the Allentown Patriots Exhibit opens. The event is open to the public and the exhibit will continue through much of the summer.

TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

A playoff game for the Mountain Valley Conference's second-half title will be held at noon today between Pleasant Valley and East Stroudsburg South. If PV wins, it's the MVC champ. If South wins, another game will be needed to decide the title.

keith.groller@mcall.com

610-820-6740

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