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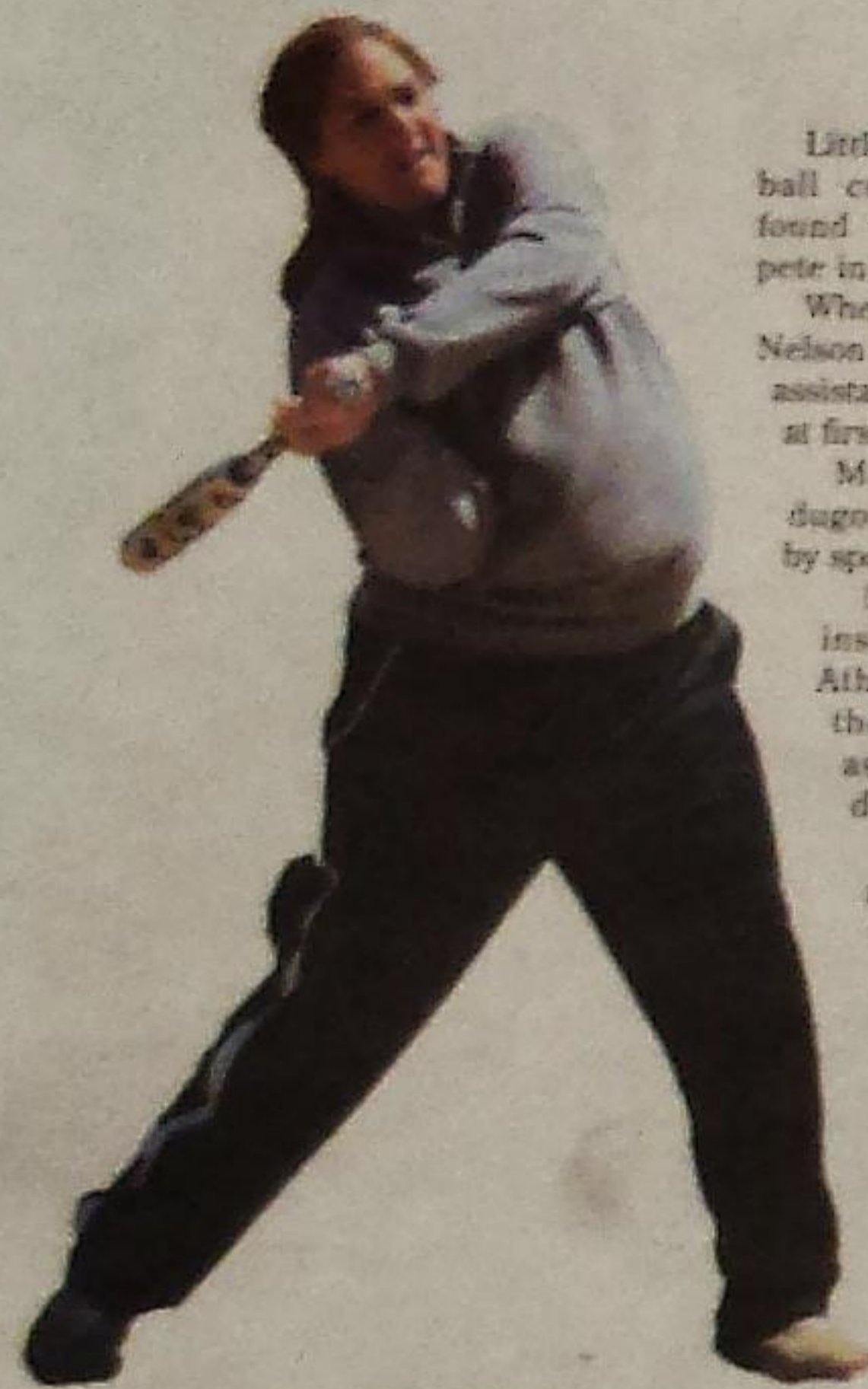
BATTER!

NIHA DATT, PHOTO EDITOR

Behind the scenes of the Rutgers softball team

Assistant coach brings intense demeanor

BY GREG JOHNSON
CORRESPONDENT



NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

Little traces of Rutgers assistant softball coach Ryan McMullen can be found when the Scarlet Knights compete in games.

When Rutgers bats, head coach Jay Nelson serves as third base coach while assistant coach Misty Beaver follows suit at first.

McMullen merely lurks in the dugout, her presence hardly felt by spectators.

But when the Knights practice inside the Louis Brown Athletic Center, the Bubble or the RU Softball Complex, the assistant coach's intense demeanor emerges.

During the team's outdoor game-simulated scrimmages, McMullen is seen squatting behind shortstop, crossing her arms and routinely shouting constructive criticism.

"Got to work to keep the ball in front of you, [Emma] Woo. It went right between your legs," McMullen yelled at one point Sunday to the junior catcher. "You're giving bases away."

McMullen is especially hard on Rutgers' catchers,

likely because she played the position at Oklahoma State from 2000-2003 and professionally from 2004-2006 in the National Pro Fastpitch league.

Before joining Rutgers last season, she coached for four years at Hofstra, currently the No. 31 team nationally and a program that last year fell one round shy of the College Softball World Series.

McMullen wants to see the Knights make a similar push — one not possible without enforcing flawless fundamentals.

"I'm not going to let one thing go by. I'm not going to let anything slide," McMullen said. "I want them to constantly press every practice."

In order for the program to get to the next level, she urges the Knights to become more instinctive and collectively vocal.

Junior first baseman Alexis Durando said McMullen's assertive coaching style meshes well with the more soft-spoken approaches of Nelson and Beaver.

"I think that we have a cool balance between all three of our coaches just in their personalities," Durando said. "[McMullen] always pushes us, and that's something you really love as a player just because she could be your best friend, but in the same way she'll kick your butt around a little just because she wants you to do the right things, and she always

wants what's best for you." And Rutgers does not take the dynamic for granted.

"It's definitely something we need, because there are some coaches that won't give you that," said sophomore outfielder Jackie Bates. "She's kind of a tough love."

McMullen's competitive nature also stems from a decorated family legacy. Her brother currently plays in the Miami Marlins' minor league system, and her father played men's fastpitch softball.

But Nelson insists she is not the only coach on the staff that is taxing on the Knights.

"She comes from a long line of ballplayers and they know how to play the game right," Nelson said. "It's good to have her giving the constructive criticisms. ... They're getting reinforcements from all of us, not just from one person. When everybody's on the same page, it works."

And developing a cohesive club is precisely McMullen's goal.

She has made clear the underlying theory behind her demanding attitude on the practice field.

"I'm just trying to make them better ballplayers every single day," McMullen said. "I think it's our job as coaches. This is their last four years to play softball, and I want them to be done after these four years and feel like they're the best softball player that they can possibly become."

Knights pitchers rest arms in middle of marathon year

BY GREG JOHNSON
CORRESPONDENT

While their teammates took the field and simulated live game situations this past weekend, the Rutgers softball team's three pitchers were — at first glance — nowhere in sight.

Typically, sophomore left-hander Alyssa Landrith and freshman righthander Dresden Maddox and senior righthander Abbey Houston throw to the Scarlet Knights hitters during practice, but these are not typical times.

With nearly 300 combined innings of work, head coach Jay Nelson opted to rest the arms of Rutgers' three pitchers in practice during the team's first weekend off since late February. In their place came assistant coaches Misty Beaver and Mark Lawrence.

Deeper rationale lies in the fact the Knights tossed 10 games in 10 days in early March, down in

Florida and often play several series per week.

But in attempting to ensure health and longevity at a crucial time, Nelson took a risk that the jury will likely remain out on through the stretch run of the season.

"They've been going since mid-January nonstop. Monday is their [usual] day off," Nelson said. "I felt like they were a little bit arm weary. It's a gamble, because they're not working on their pitches."

The pitchers did not simply sit and watch action on the bench, though.

After fielding some grounders and fly balls in the first 30 minutes of practice, Landrith, Maddox and Houston went for a long jog around the RU Softball Complex.

They then worked behind the dugout on wrist, abs and leg exercises. Beaver, who works primarily with the pitchers, explained the philosophy.

"Just to keep everything in shape and up to par because they need that endurance to continue in their legs, but their arms need the rest," Beaver said. "If they just rested their legs and were at practice and participating, encouraging and fielding ... their legs wouldn't be in shape when they came back [to game action]."

If anyone within the program truly knows about the tendencies of pitchers over the course of a season, it is Beaver, a former standout on the mound at Seton Hall.

And the Knights pitchers are more than happy to take her advice.

"There are only three of us on the pitching staff," Landrith said. "We've thrown a lot of games and we're working really hard, so it was definitely nice to get a little weekend of a break so that we can come back 100 percent this week and for the rest of the season."

Having tossed 154 innings alone, Landrith is on pace to sur-



Alyssa Landrith, Dresden Maddox and Abbey Houston have tossed nearly 300 innings this season. NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

pass the 202-and-two-thirds innings she hurled last season.

The Knights' ace has shown vulnerability in the past when used too frequently in succession, making durability a legitimate concern for her.

"We've given our arms a rest, but we've definitely made sure that we keep our legs in the shape that they've been in," Landrith said. "I think it's really

important that we kept our endurance up and our stamina, so that we're still in pitching shape when we come back to pick up a ball and throw."

Still, Nelson has disrupted a norm his workhorses have grown accustomed to all season.

The pitchers may be healthy, but how effective they ultimately will be in the final few weeks of the season remains uncertain.

Bragg reflects on lost year

"Initially, I really struggled with the fact that my injury caused my career here to come to an end. But after talking to the coaches and my teammates ... I realized that there are a lot of other ways that I can help."

ASHLEY BRAGG
Senior Shortstop



Senior shortstop Ashley Bragg is out for the season with left shoulder tears. Despite no longer playing on the field, she contributes to wins by mentoring the Knights. NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

BY GREG JOHNSON
CORRESPONDENT

Before the season began Feb. 15, shortstop Ashley Bragg emphasized she wanted her senior campaign to be something special.

In each of her first three seasons, the Rutgers softball team was knocked out in the first round of the Big East Tournament. Bragg said Feb. 6 the Scarlet Knights' sole focus was making a deep postseason run and becoming a legitimate threat for the conference championship.

Her personal involvement came to an abrupt halt during Rutgers' Spring Break trip in Florida, when Bragg slid hard into second base and jammed her left shoulder. She tried to play through pain, persevering her way through the team's first five home games March 27-30 and April 3's doubleheader against Hofstra.

But it proved counterproductive, as the shortstop batted just 3-for-14 in that span. Head coach Jay Nelson said the injury made her more passive at the plate.

"It's tough for her to swing the bat. When she makes contact, it's fine. But when she swings and misses, it hurts," Nelson said. "That in the back of your mind puts that tendency there to take pitches that you maybe should hit."

Nelson removed Bragg midway through the second game April 6 against Georgetown and ruled her day-to-day. She would return April 10 against Villanova but only took two

at bats before leaving indefinitely after once again re aggravating her shoulder pain.

Further examinations revealed Bragg had left shoulder tears, and a Big East title dream was suddenly snatched from her.

"That's a devastating injury for a senior," Nelson said. "You go through three years of playing hard, and halfway through your senior year, you're injured where you can't come back."

And so the Middletown, Del., native can only sit and watch from the dugout these days, cheering on her teammates.

But Bragg said she has channeled her frustration into a positive energy after missing only one game in her first three seasons.

"Initially, I really struggled with the fact that my injury caused my career here to come to an end," Bragg said. "But after talking to the coaches and my teammates ... I realized that there are a lot of other ways that I can help."

It started with mentoring her replacement at shortstop — freshman Melanie Slowinski.

Bragg said she frequently goes over small details with Slowinski to help boost her confidence.

"I think the biggest thing that I'm able to help her with is positioning herself on the field," Bragg said. "Teaching her the pitches, where to set up — that's going to give her the ability to make a lot more plays than she may be able to make otherwise."

Slowinski was thrust into a tough

situation, which forced her to develop and learn on the fly in the prime of Big East competition. But she thinks she is adjusting well to real game situations.

"Going out there, I was really nervous because I haven't been playing that often," Slowinski said. "In practice, I'm always practicing, but in a game, it's different. Having [Bragg] there to still help me means the world to me. It's nice to have that, because not everyone has someone that can help you along the way."

Slowinski is not the only Knight that Bragg can assist.

The senior also runs front toss hitting stations in practice, and being able to study the game more as an observer on the bench has given Bragg another critical perspective.

"Anything I can do with any of my teammates — if I'm noticing their behavior or anything that they could do better," Bragg said. "I think I've gained a lot of experience over the last couple years here, and I'm able to see some things that maybe other people don't."

A shoulder injury may have physically taken Bragg off the field, but her preseason aspirations have not wavered.

"Whether I'm out there at shortstop or not, I'm still a member of this team and a contributor on this team," Bragg said. "We still want to win Big East. We still want to do something different and make a mark on this program that others haven't been able to do in the past."

RU simulates game situations

BY GREG JOHNSON
CORRESPONDENT

Strict, demanding and taxing all describe the scene of the Rutgers softball team's practices these days.

Out are times of casually scooping groundballs and shagging popups, and in is a regime hardly different from a series or tournament game.

The Scarlet Knights briefly spent about half an hour warming up with stretching and fielding repetitions Sunday before practice ensued for an hour and a half.

At this stage of Rutgers' season, it is about simulating the trials that lie ahead.

"The most important thing for us at this point in time is game situations," said assistant coach Ryan McMullen. "There are not a whole lot of fundamental things that we need to go over. These girls do those every day."

Little more than a few conference games separate the Knights from the Big East Tournament in May, and they deem staying in a crisp rhythm as essential down the stretch.

Since this past weekend was Rutgers' first dormant one in two months, intrasquad scrimmages were really the only choice.

"It's not a coach's dream to have a bye week in the middle of a season," McMullen said. "You kind of want your hitters to continue to have at bats up against pitchers. You want your fielders to stay in that same mentality, so we're just trying to simulate that as much as we possibly can."

About the only thing Rutgers cannot replicate is actual competition from other schools.

Pitching is live and unpredictable. Hitting, fielding and baserunning situations are

realistic, and scores and counts are recorded.

Head coach Jay Nelson gives signs over at third base to keep the fielders guessing of what is coming next.

"We want to react faster than the other team," Nelson said. "And the only way they get that is in live [play], seeing the ball come off the bat and reacting."

Despite Rutgers' pitchers getting a weekend to rest their arms, assistant coaches Misty Beaver and Mark Lawrence were far from soft tossing.

They want the hitters to feel relaxed and receive sufficient reps, but both sides understand that making it easy does them no good.

"You always want to challenge a batter," Beaver said. "The pitching that they're going to be seeing the next few weeks — they need to have the movement on the ball, and they need to have a challenge at the plate so they're prepared for what's coming at them."

What made the weekend unique is practicing on its own field, which is something Rutgers has not had much luxury of all season because of weather and a busy game schedule.

Nelson said the team had not done any simulated game situations since mid-March on the road in Florida.

The Knights have done plenty repetitions and throwing to bases in the Louis Brown Athletic Center, but being able to actually get out on its own playing field offers a different dynamic.

"It's also good for us just to work on our communication and little things," said junior first baseman Alexis Durando. "Obviously it's not crazy intense as a game, but it's a way that we can get the reps in as much of a live situation as possible."



Rutgers focused Sunday on situational hitting and fielding in a game-simulated scrimmage. At this point in the year, lack of fundamentals is not tolerated. NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

PHASES OF PRACTICE



STRETCHING – 12:00-12:10

The Knights loosen up their bodies and stretch out their legs to prepare for the endurance necessary in the live game-simulated scrimmage that awaits. They focus on calisthenics across the outfield grass.

NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR



FIELDING – 12:10-12:30

Infielders, outfielders and pitchers warm up on defense by fielding fly balls and collecting grounders. Head coach Jay Nelson and assistant coaches hit rapid-fire repetitions for the Knights.

NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR



NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR



NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

SCRIMMAGE – 12:30-1:00

Rutgers plays an intrasquad scrimmage simulating live game situations. Assistant coaches pitch, Nelson gives signs at third base, and scoring is recorded. The Knights focused Sunday on baserunning, bunting and communication in the field.

NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR



NISHA DATTA, PHOTO EDITOR

COOL DOWN – 1:00-1:10

Players and coaches huddle together and review key points from the day's scrimmage. A weekend off from games has afforded them time to reflect and prepare for the stretch run of the season.

GRAPHIC BY ALEXA WYBRANIEC, DESIGN EDITOR

2013 RU SOFTBALL MAJOR MOMENTS

Saturday
March 23

3-2



Rutgers splits the doubleheader against USF to capture season's first Big East win

Wednesday
March 27

5-0



7-0

Rutgers sweeps the doubleheader against Hartford in first home series of the season

Friday
March 29

10-2



Saturday
March 30

6-0

Rutgers bounces back after losing the first game of the series to win the last two

Wednesday
April 3

1-0 (8)



Rutgers battles in extras to earn hard fought victory against No. 31 Hofstra

Saturday
April 6

7-4



Sunday
April 7

3-1

Rutgers rallies to win last two games of the series against the Hoyas

GRAPHIC BY BEN RICCIARDI



TEAMWORK Players come together to work quickly and efficiently in fetching softballs for their hitting, fielding and baserunning repetitions in practice. NISHA DATT, PHOTO EDITOR



FOCUSED The Knights treat Sunday's scrimmage no differently than any other games throughout their grueling season. The Big East Tournament looms in less than a month, and Rutgers wants to stay crisp and peak in the climax of their campaign. NISHA DATT, PHOTO EDITOR



WRAP-UP Head coach Jay Nelson rallies the Knights together as the team discusses takeaways from a taxing day of practice before the last few weeks of the season. NISHA DATT, PHOTO EDITOR

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