



Nothing soft about it

JMU plays first varsity softball season

Before the JMU softball team's first varsity season began this year, coach Katie Flynn posted a visual motivator on her office wall. A little yellow Post-it note listed the 2001 first-season records for Appalachian State (13-36), East Tennessee State (14-35) and Virginia Tech (16-32).

"At first I thought if we could win 16 games we'd have a pretty good first season," admits Flynn, "but this team wanted to set loftier goals. We wanted a .500 season and we wanted to surprise people."

Two for two.

Flynn led the Dukes to a better than .500 overall record (25-24) in their first season in the sun. Of the six varsity softball teams in the CAA, JMU was the only first-year program. The team went 4-2 in regular CAA play, taking third place in the tournament and finishing 5-9 in CAA action including playoffs.

All this was accomplished with 12 freshmen and two sophomores. "A goal of a .500 season was lofty, but we were confident because we had strong pitching," says Flynn.

Freshmen pitchers Nikki Dunn and Leah Conley both earned CAA second team All-Conference honors, and Dunn went on to earn All-Tournament honors. JMU pitching was ranked second in the conference.

The 12-year veteran program at Hofstra took first in the CAA, but "we played them competitively," says Flynn. "We got amazing compliments from folks who couldn't believe we were a first-year team. We beat U.Va. at U.Va., and they were ranked 30th in the country. ... This season we kept it simple. With that many freshmen, you're going to get mistakes. We worked hard and laughed a lot. The team played well above its experience level. The last two weeks of the season, we played our best competitively, and the older players rose to the occasion."

Ending the season with 12 healthy players and returning 13 of 14 players are testaments to the team's work ethic and Flynn's coaching. "We've recruited six new freshmen with speed and power to give our offense a punch," she says. "A lot of our games were close, and when the offense gets stronger we'll win even more games for our pitchers."

Flynn gives a lot of credit to assistant pitching coach Cheryl Denny, who graduated from Elon College and assisted Flynn for three years at UNC-Greensboro. "You can't win 25 games in your first season without good pitching. Cheryl's done a fantastic job."

Flynn came to JMU after coaching the UNC-Greensboro team to an overall record of 37-29 from 1998 to 2000. Flynn's second assistant coach is Janine Kline ('01), a member of JMU's 2000 club softball team.

Flynn's first coaching experience came at Colgate University (1994-97), where she graduated in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in history and was a catcher for the 1986 to 1990 seasons. In her final season as coach at Colgate, her team placed second in the Patriot League Tournament. She has also served as an assistant coach at Florida Stetson University and Ohio State University.

"It's great to see that from the president on down we have a strong support system to build a wonderful softball program here. Jeff Bourne, [director of athletics]. and Brad Babcock, [athletics administration], have been incredibly supportive. Our facility is as nice as anybody's, and the strength and conditioning staff have a well-structured lifting program for the players. When you do things first class, it shows. In terms of recruiting, we've enjoyed it. JMU is a gold mine. When kids see this place and talk with professors, they want to come. Of the eight recruits who visited this year, seven signed to play."

Next year, Flynn wants to shake up the scheduling and make the challenges even stronger by adding teams like Virginia Tech and the University of Maryland.

For now, there's nothing soft about better than .500 and third in the conference for a team of mostly walk-ons, averaging 5-feet, 6-inches. "We're kind of proud to be munchkins," says Flynn. "We're made in the likeness of Madison. I couldn't be more pleased with the work ethic or building this program. I love my job."

Story by Michelle Hite ('88)

Photo by Cathy Kushner ('87)