

Tradition Never Graduates:

A Chronicle of Ladycat Softball Success



Team Photo, 2010 Team; Bottom Left to Right: Bailey Williams, Shelby McCulloch, Lacy Freeze, Jenny Hart; Top Left to Right: Coach Jennifer Stewart, Kaleb Everitt, Allison Moore, Kristin Dowden, Ashley Busby, Coach Val Weldon, Courtney Barron, Devan Bishop, Lauren Brode, Kacy Freeze, Shauna McClure, Shelby Ruderman, Amber Cherry, Coach Casie Everitt, Cadie Weaver, Rachel Moore, Belle Phelps, Coach Twynia Atkins, Manager Missy Boyd

Courtesy of Splendor High School; Written by Keli Carnline; Photos by Vance Valentine, Photo-Captures

For years, the small, East Texas town of Splendor was simply a fleeting image to drivers along the Highway 59 corridor between Livingston and Houston – that is, until Coach Valerie Weldon took over the high school's softball program in 1997. Thanks to her dedication to the program and that of the community, the name of this tiny, AAA school is nationally recognized in the softball world.

RECOGNITION THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

Since her flagship year in the high school's program, Weldon has been guiding players to achieve goals never before set in the program's history, and the accolades keep coming in. Most recently, the 2010 season's team earned the prestigious honor of being named the number one team on the NFCA's Top Ten Academic Teams list in 2010 thus proving the dedication of these young athletes both on and off of the softball diamond. In fact, several members of the team were juggling athletic responsibilities while concurrently obtaining their associate's degrees. This marks the program's fourth appearance on this national list; the Ladycats won this top award, also, in 2007 and placed third on the list in both 2008 and 2009.

These accolades exemplify the program's intensity both on the field and in the classroom. Splendor's superintendent, Dr. Thomas Price, recognizes the efforts of these young ladies in stating that he is "proud of what the girls do on the field [but even more so] of what they do in the classroom."



Coaches photo: Jennifer Stewart (Assistant); Casie Everitt (Assistant); Val Weldon (Head Coach); Twynia Atkins (Assistant)

This same dedication filters down through players alike – players who recognize that Weldon's purpose reaches far beyond the diamond. One player, in regards to Weldon's philosophy, states, "She always told us to take care of our business in the classroom – no exceptions and no excuses." Current teacher, Alejandro Cardenas, describes these players. "The Ladycats are one of the most prestigious groups on campus. Coach Val Weldon forges the character in her students and instills in them the values and discipline to attain success in any endeavor they embark upon."

But this honor is certainly not the first for this strong program. Teams throughout Weldon's thirteen years with Splendor have been recognized for their efforts. Since 1997, the Ladycats have procured the title of district champions each year with eleven of these seasons going undefeated in district play.

Consistently a contender in the playoff race, the Ladycat team

has gone at least two rounds deep each season to the regional quarter final game. In addition, the teams of 2001, 2002, 2006, and 2010 earned the title of regional semi-final champs.

This program has made a name for itself in Austin as well - making three state tournament appearances since its inception. Perhaps one of the most memorable and prestigious awards was that of state champions earned by the 2002 season's Ladycat team.

It is safe to say that this program isn't going anywhere soon, and that fans can expect to see much more from them in the future.

PRESTIGE AND RECOGNITION OF COACH VALERIE WELDON

It is certain that without steadfast leadership, these young women could not have reached these impressive heights in their high school careers.

Weldon certainly has the respect of her fellow coaches throughout the state. In ten of her thirteen years at Splendora, Weldon has been named the District 23-AAA Coach of the Year. The



year 2002 brought with it many accolades, as well as a state title for Weldon including the Texas Girls Coaches Association Coach of the Year award and a nomination for the NFCA Staff of the Year for High Schools in the U.S.A.

In recognition of her efforts off of the field, Weldon was awarded with the title of Fox Sports Network "Coach Who Makes a Difference" in Texas award. Her devotion to both the skills and the lives and welfare of her players certainly has not gone unnoticed.

SUCCESSFUL WOMEN HAILING FROM THE LADYCAT PROGRAM

The talent possessed by these young ladies has also not gone unnoticed. Their skills are showcased far past their June graduation dates.

Over the last thirteen years, the Splendora program has produced thirty-six all-state nominated players with seven of the young ladies playing



Kacy & Lacy Freeze

in the annual "East versus West" high school softball all-star game held in July.

Furthermore, twenty-six athletes went on to play at the collegiate level. Thirteen of these ladies played or are currently playing Division I softball while six players advanced to Division II teams and two young ladies to Division III teams. In addition, five players went on to play at the junior college level.

Of these thirteen years, nine of the girls received full scholarships covering their secondary education expenses in entirety. This has certainly been a blessing to the parents of these young ladies as recognition of their dedication to their support as well as the elimination of a large financial burden.

In addition, the program has produced many successful women in several of walks of life including, mothers, teachers, certified public accountants, lawyers, nurses, game wardens, school psychologists, hospital administrators, and, those that give the ultimate sacrifice, members of our nation's armed forces.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT

Splendora Ladycat tradition and pride runs deep in the families of this community. With a population of just over three thousand, we are still small enough to remain family. Spectators and lifelong residents follow the team across towns and states to enjoy watching the Ladycats play. The support of the fans and the community members has been an integral part of the program in Splendora.

At every home game, the speakers blare with "The Voice of the Ladycats," Splendora High School graduate and prominent community member, Gary Gardner. In regards to the team, Gardner remarks, "It has been a pleasure to witness their successes on and off the field...the sheer dedication... These young ladies represent the future of our community and our great nation."



Bailey Williams

Tradition Never Graduates:

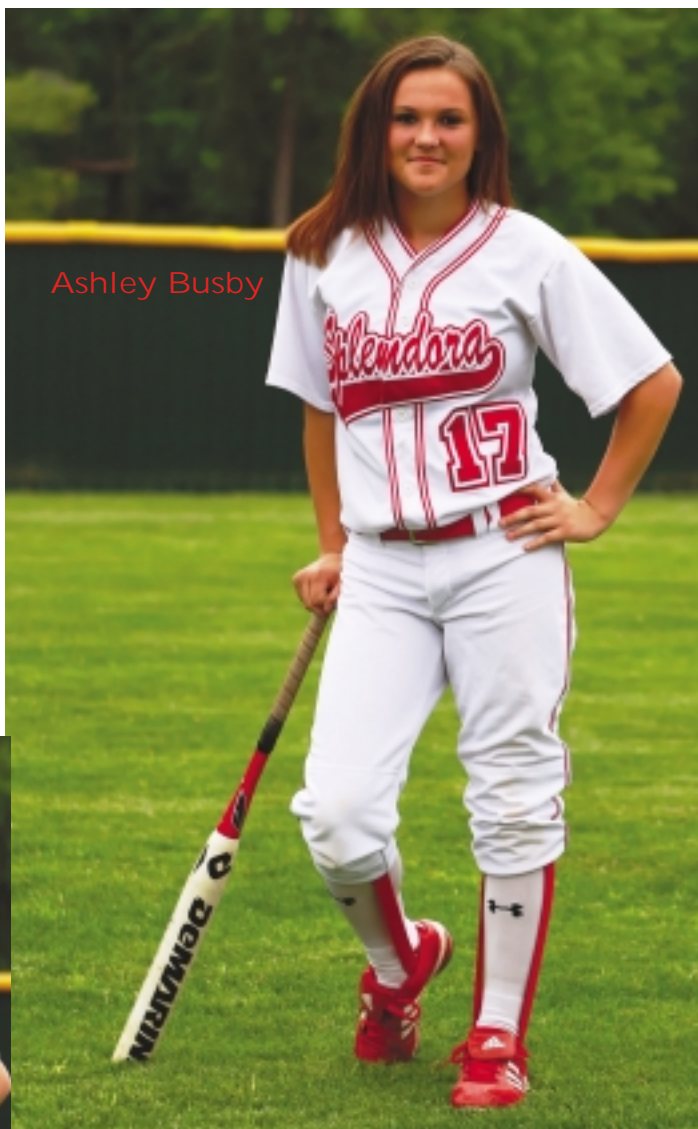
A Chronicle of Ladycat Softball Success

Over the years, Weldon has had the opportunity to coach several members of the same families – sisters and cousins of those that came before them. The program seems to be one to come back to. As the Girls' Athletic Coordinator for the high school, Weldon has two former players working for her as coaches presently – one of whom, Casie Everitt, is an assistant coach in the softball program. Casie made varsity as a freshman on the 2002 State Championship team. She continued her high school career as varsity catcher and went on to play at Sam Houston State University where she

obtained many honors. It says something for Weldon and for the program when three of her former players has come back to coach alongside of her. One of these coaches was quoted as saying, "Coach Weldon taught me so much about the game of softball but

most importantly she taught me so much about myself and the person I wanted to be. Coaching with her at home is an honor. I am and always will be proud to be a Splendoria Ladycat!"

Furthermore, Weldon's other assistant coach, Twynia Atkins is a graduate from Splendoria High School. She and Weldon have been



Ashley Busby



Rachel Moore

coaching softball together for the past thirteen years. Atkins expressed great joy in seeing these young ladies enter as freshman and graduate as mature, confident young women ready to begin a new phase of their lives.

When speaking to the parents of past and present players that have had several daughters go through the Ladycat program, the theme of their comments was consistent throughout – one of pride and of gratitude. One parent commented on the "dedication and leadership" skills acquired by her three girls that played for Weldon. Yet another, also with three young ladies that played for Weldon, emphasized the abundance of "real-life experience" taken from the diamond and applied in the outside world.

The unwavering support from the community is undoubtedly one of the driving forces behind this strong program. James and Dorothy Boucher, life-long community members and avid follower of the Ladycats proclaimed, "It is not only easy but enjoyable following [the success of these young ladies] on and off [of] the field [and to witness] the pride and intensity that it takes to consistently win." These words ring with truth in reference to the school's well-built and honed softball program.



Jenny Hart

LADYCAT SOFTBALL – THE TRADITION CONTINUES

It is quite obvious that these young ladies (as well as those that came before them) are dedicated to their success as players and students alike. Although not always an easy road, each team has different adversities to overcome from illness, to injury, to personal struggles. The softball field is a place of refuge where everything can be left behind. These players exhibit true pride and dedication to themselves, each other, their community, and the game. A quote from a previous player sums it up. "Splendor has a tradition of working hard, playing hard, and leaving everything on the field." The honor of being a nationally acclaimed team from the NCFA is definitely considered most prestigious by each and every member of the program and the community.

Weldon and the members of her program are anxious to see what this season will bring for the Ladycats. Current Splendor High School principal Rick Kershner is proud to be a part of the ongoing tradition. He stated, "the commitment and dedication of these kids is obvious due to their many successes. If every student possessed these skills they too would easily obtain great success." It is certain that these young ladies – true to form - will continue to strive for "bigger and better" throughout the rest of the school year.

With the valuable lessons that are taught in this program comes a skill set that the young ladies will carry with them down whatever path they may choose. The ideals of a strong work ethic as well as an innate drive to succeed only further the notion that tradition – a winning tradition – never does, in fact, graduate.



TATERGRIP

**YOUR BAT...
YOUR DESIGN...**



The Revolutionary
**Custom
Performance
Bat Grip**

You Install in Seconds...

- Design Your Own Custom Grips Online
- The only limit is your imagination
- Solid Color Grips also available
- Fits both metal and wood bats
- Legal for use in all levels of play



**"The first time
I used a Tater Grip
I got a hit."**

Adrian Gonzalez
All Star First Baseman
Adrian Gonzalez

1.800.757.7453
www.tatergrip.com