

# ILLINI SOFTBALL

TRULY A FAMILY AFFAIR UNDER SULLIVAN



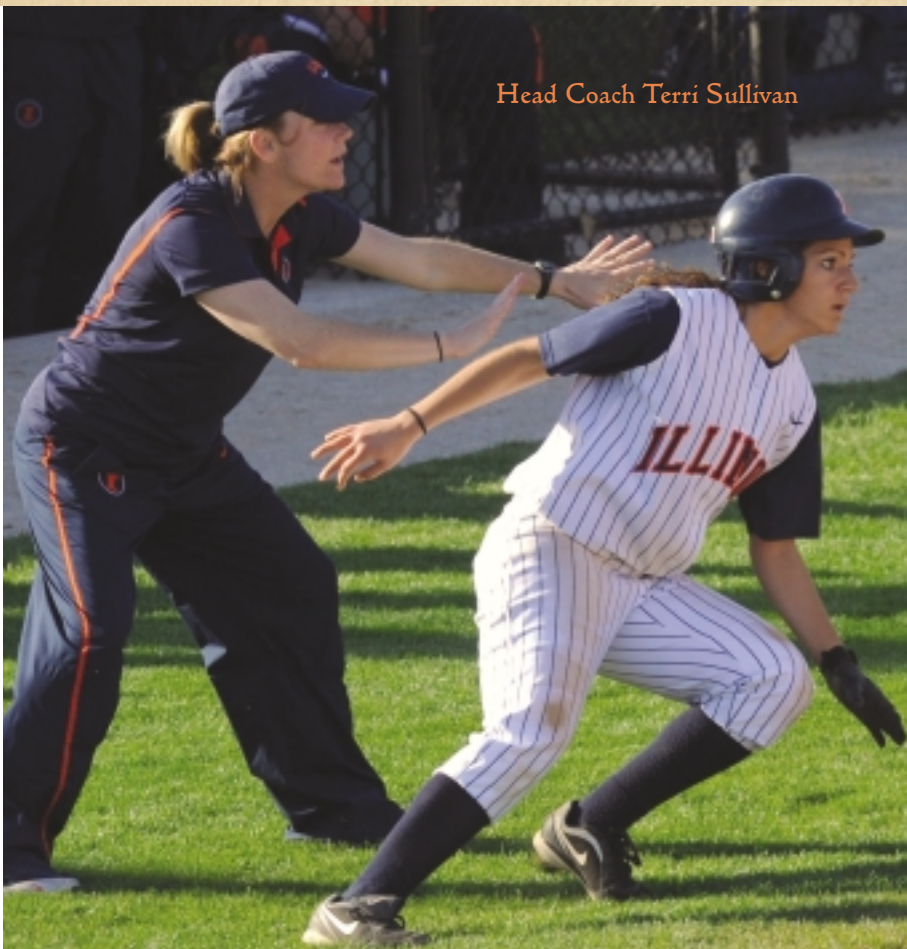
By Bill Ballew

## Terri Sullivan has never shied away from a challenge.

That fact has been proven time and again, regardless of whether she was pitching at Loyola, coaching and recruiting at Illinois-Chicago, or mentoring and developing student-athletes as the head coach at the University of Illinois.

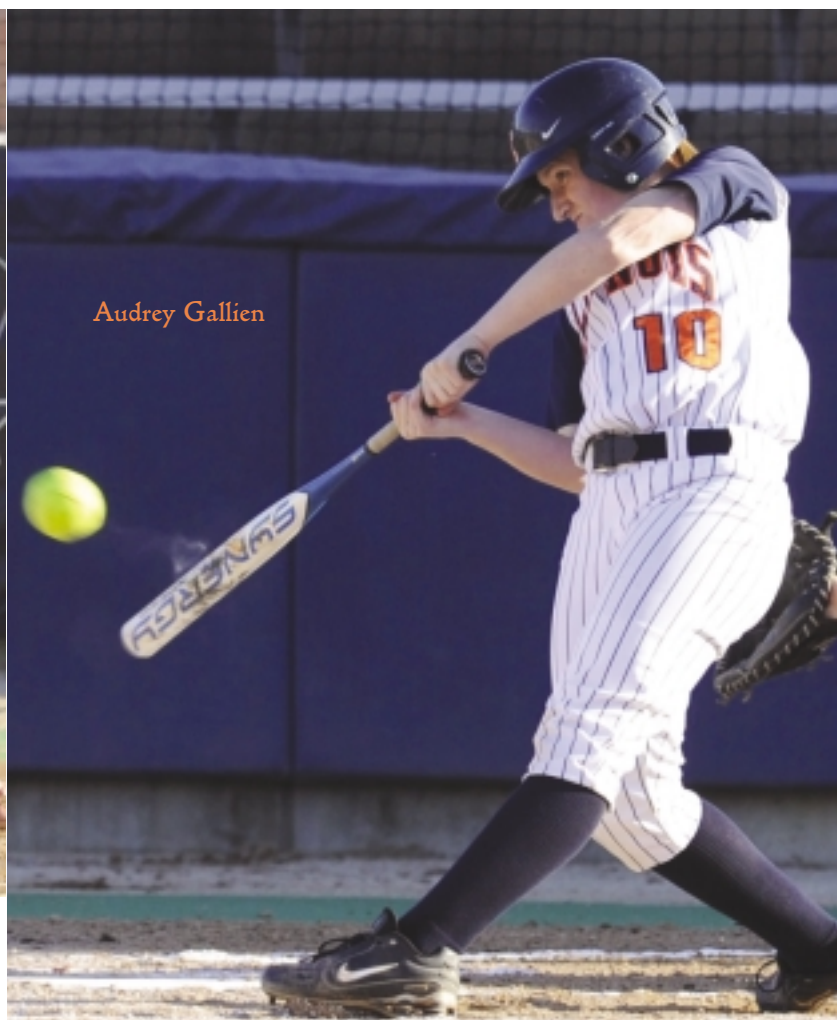
Yet for all of her success over the past two decades, few things prepared Sullivan for the hurdle she cleared during the 2010 campaign. Sullivan and her husband, Shawn Wax, the university's senior associate athletic director for resource development, became the parents of Lacy in March. Yes, the birth of her daughter occurred in the middle of a slate in which Sullivan had put together perhaps her most competitive and well-balanced roster in eleven years in Champaign. But while some women—both in the coaching ranks and the working world—may have been overwhelmed with the challenges she was facing, the ever-organized and energetic Sullivan emerged from the situation with a beautiful baby and a team that had its most successful season in

Head Coach Terri Sullivan





Danielle Zymkowitz



Audrey Gallien

program history.

"It was actually a lot of fun," Sullivan said. "She traveled well throughout the conference part of our schedule and everyone associated with the team had a lot of fun with her. She brought even more enthusiasm to the program, and I loved it just like I love being a coach."

The Illini finished the slate with an overall record of 45-8 and were ranked as high as 17th in the nation by the NFCA. The Orange and Blue qualified for the NCAA Tournament and proceeded to defeat DePaul, 4-2 and 9-1, to earn the sixth and seventh post-season victories in program annals. Individually, Hope Howell, Meredith Hackett and Danielle Zymkowitz were first-team All-Big Ten honorees, with Hackett also garnering Louisville Slugger/NFCA first-team All-American accolades and Howell receiving CoSIDA Academic All-District recognition.

"Last season was a lot of fun," said Zymkowitz, who led the Big Ten with 74 hits. "Coach Sullivan had her baby during the season and Coach (Katie) O'Connell and Coach (Donna) DiBiase took the reins coaching the bases at third and first. It seemed like everybody was having fun and just being themselves because we didn't want to disappoint Coach Sullivan. We seemed to be more relaxed when we played, which helped us become even closer as a team. Everyone worked really hard to do as well as we could."

In many ways, Lacy serves as the second birth Sullivan has given the world. The Illini softball program represents her first, which is something she always seemed destined to do. After all, she grew up in a sports-dominated home where her dad, Gene, was the athletic director at DePaul, assistant basketball coach at Notre Dame, and head basketball coach at Loyola.

Terri followed in those same footsteps by playing softball at Loyola and earning a pair of team MVP awards while pitching her way into the program's record books. After graduating from Loyola in 1992 with a B.A. in communications, she earned her master's degree in sports management at the University of

Illinois at Chicago while beginning her coaching career. An assistant softball coach from 1993-96, Sullivan was promoted to associate head coach in 1997. The Flames were a top 25 team throughout her seven seasons with the program, and tied an NCAA record with 67 victories in 1999.

Illinois-Chicago was able to achieve such success in part because of the tremendous amount of talent found nearby on the high school level. While the Prairie State was a hotbed for softball, the University of Illinois did not field a team through the 1999 campaign, making it the lone member of the Big Ten Conference without a softball program. Looking to correct that flaw in its athletic program, university officials searched for the right person to lead the charge and found her in Chicago.

"I loved the challenge of building a program from the ground up," Sullivan said. "I had a lot of energy and enthusiasm, and it represented the opportunity to compete in a conference with a very rich softball tradition. I had a lot of respect for the people at the university and I knew that the school's reputation as a great academic institution would allow us the chance to recruit all over the country."

Given the choice of starting the program in either 2000 or 2001, Sullivan chose the former by welcoming more than 90 players to an open tryout and molding a unit that managed to win 13 of its 30 games in its inaugural campaign. She and DiBiase then hit the road on the recruiting trail, using her plentiful contacts throughout Illinois, California and the rest of the country to field the Illini's first scholarship team in 2001. With 18 freshmen on the roster, Illinois posted its first victories against ranked teams—Florida State and Iowa—while registering an overall record of 49-23.

In 2004, one year after making their first NCAA Tournament appearance, the Illini graduated their first senior class while reaching the Sweet 16 and going 45-21-1 overall. After hovering near the

# TEAM SPOTLIGHT

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break-even mark over the next four years despite having one of the nation's most potent offenses, thanks in part to the long-ball hitting of shortstop Angelena Mexicano and third baseman Shanna Diller, the Illini returned to the NCAA Tournament in 2009 as well as last season to remain a factor in one of the nation's most competitive conferences.

Through all of the highs and lows the game has to offer, one of the few constants is Sullivan's passion and enthusiasm for the university, her program and her players. Her infectious and encouraging personality makes every task seem possible, particularly to members of her team.

"Even when it's snowing or pouring rain outside and we're having to practice inside, Coach Sullivan always reminds us that it's great to be an Illini," Zymkowitz said. "Even after having the baby, she has as much energy as anyone I've seen. It's her program and she knows how she wants it to be run. She gets everybody pumped up with her enthusiasm and has so much passion for everything associated with this program.

"But what also makes this a special place is that all of us enjoy being around everyone else on the team. We all really care about one another, and we appreciate the opportunity to play Big Ten softball. With all the things to do and the great academics, it's a great school to be a part of and to be a part of something that is so much greater than yourself."

Sullivan admits that recruiting is one of the favorite aspects of her job,

and her non-stop approach has allowed her to recruit players from coast to coast. For example, for the 2010 season, the Illini roster consisted of eight players from the Prairie State, seven from California, three from Georgia, two from Texas and one from Florida. All of the out-of-state players decided to travel north despite hailing from warm-weather locales with established softball programs. Their reasons for a change of scenery vary, yet they all revolve around the atmosphere Sullivan and her staff offer at one of the country's leading universities.

"I wanted to try something different because I had been in California my whole life," Zymkowitz said. "I had never really seen fall or experienced snow. When I came here on my recruiting trip, I saw the great family atmosphere that I wanted to be a part of. Everyone made me feel so welcome. Once I was here, the decision wasn't very difficult to make."

Considered to be the most enthusiastic Illinois player, Zymkowitz fit the profile of what Sullivan and her staff search for when on the recruiting trail. The head coach requires every member of the team to adhere to three basic principles, all of which are centered on their attitude.

"Players win championships, not coaches, and it's very hard to win consistently at any level because you're always having to find new additions to your program," Sullivan said. "There are three things we require of all our players. We ask them to compete hard, to be accountable and responsible, and to have a positive attitude. Those three things lead to

Hope Howell



Meredith Hackett



other aspects, such as the intangibles of the game and being coachable, dedicated, enthusiastic and unselfish. I believe those traits will help the growth of the student-athlete in all phases of her life. Fun also has to play a big part in it. I always tell my players to work hard but have fun. And that's something I really try to instill in our players."

Zymkowitz not only fit in immediately, her decision never looked better than in 2010 when the Illini won 45 games and posted a 16-2 record in the Big Ten. Hackett, Howell and Zymkowitz hit higher than .400, while newcomer Pepper Gay went 16-1 with a 1.46 ERA to complement senior Monica Perry, who posted a 25-7 record in the circle with a 2.27 ERA.

The outlook for the 2011 campaign is also promising since the Illini lost only Howell and Perry among the starters. The current sophomore class of Gay, Stephanie Cuevas, Jackie Guy and Erin Bradarich gives Illinois a solid core of young players, while the veterans, including seniors Ashley Conrad, Audrey Gallien, Hollie Pinchback and Zymkowitz, are poised to post their best seasons in Champaign.

"I really like the makeup of this year's team," Sullivan said. "I love youth, and it's always a great situation when you can have a core group come in together and grow together. There's also nothing like experience, and this year I believe we will once again have outstanding leadership. But the big thing with this year's team is the fact that they get it. They understand how their hard work allows them to grow and become a better team. I believe we're up for the challenges the season will bring and our goal is to win it all. We certainly have a lot of work to do, but we also realize what we discovered last year is that we have to be playing our best when the postseason comes around in order to achieve our goals."

The goal of peaking in April and May was foremost in the minds of the many players who remained in Champaign over the summer in order to improve their conditioning while honing their skills on the dia-

mond. The dedication started at the top, with the Illini rising seniors setting great examples that have trickled down throughout the roster and created impressive depth this fall during practice and games.

"We had players stay around campus over the summer to work with Coach (Ryan) Marker, our strength and conditioning coach, in order to make this season our best one yet," Zymkowitz said. "The four seniors really want to leave our mark on the program by winning the Big Ten and reaching the World Series. That would be really special to get for Coach Sullivan and everyone else who works so hard here. We're hoping that by working hard over the summer and this fall that when we reach the Regionals next spring, this time we'll come through. We're all getting after it really hard after coming back very well prepared."

Regardless of how the upcoming campaign unfolds, Sullivan will continue to approach her job as well as her personal life with as much vim and vigor as three or four people. Because of her organized passion for both, she is able to dovetail the most important aspects of her life like tongue-in-groove paneling, with Sullivan stating numerous times how lucky she feels Lacy is to have 21 girls serve as role models from all different walks of life while enhancing the family atmosphere the head coach has worked so hard to instill throughout the past decade.

"I always stress to my players that when they decide on a career or what they want to do, find something that you're passionate about," Sullivan said. "If you do that, life kind of takes care of itself. I'm fortunate to be able to go out to the field everyday and do something that I love to do. We can't call it work, even though we work extremely hard, and that's because of the players and the staff and everyone else we have who's associated with our program. They all make my job very enjoyable and make me a very lucky coach."



Ashley Conrad