

The Power of Perseverance

Submitted by Kara Nishimura - University of Hawai'i Sports Information

Ever since Traci Yoshikawa was six years old and the only girl on her Little League baseball team, she's worked hard to earn playing time and the respect of her teammates and coaches. With her University of Hawai'i playing career recently completed, the second baseman took some time to reflect upon her time on the diamond, her growth as a person and player, and the Rainbow Wahine's amazing run to the Women's College World Series this past spring that ended with her being voted to the 2010 WCWS all-tournament team.

To understand Yoshikawa's perseverance, you have to trace her path back to the beginning, when she started her playing career at six years old on a Little League coach-pitch team. "My parents always taught me the importance of a strong work ethic and I have always strived to get a little better every day," says Yoshikawa. "When I was small, I didn't want to be treated differently just because I was a girl. Being with and playing with boys, I had to basically be like one of them—I had to play to their level or above. All of my coaches treated me like one of the guys. I just had to suck it up and push through it." She succeeded throughout her Little League career, making various all-star teams and even advancing twice to the Cal Ripken World Series during her 11 and 12-year old seasons.

After eighth grade, Yoshikawa began playing softball as things started to get a little tougher in baseball. At that age, baseball teams start playing on bigger fields, which in turn leads to farther throws, bigger barrel bats, not to mention that the boys are growing bigger and stronger. Yoshikawa remembers, "While I started to make the transition from baseball to softball, I had a hard time adjusting physically. Between the longer throws in



A Little Leaguer at age 11

baseball and throwing the bigger softball, I stretched out all of the ligaments in my throwing arm, so I went through a rough time that included a lot of physical therapy."

As a freshman at Moanalua High School in Honolulu, she played both softball and baseball. But by the end of that year, she decided to just focus on softball, knowing that would be where her future would be since it was the only route that led to playing in college.

Yoshikawa started all four years in the infield for the Moanalua softball team and



The team greeting Yoshikawa at the plate after the home run in a 3-2 win over Missouri



Yoshikawa hitting the game-winning home run in the top of the sixth at the Women's College World Series against Missouri

was recruited by Hawai'i head coach Bob Coolen to become a Rainbow Wahine. But making the adjustment to playing Division I softball was hard.

"It was tough," says Yoshikawa. "In high school, you're the dominant player who starts every game. But when you get to DI, everyone is the same quality and battling for playing time. I was nervous because I didn't know what to expect coming in, but I was looking forward to the challenge."

"As a freshman," Yoshikawa continues, "I had to learn Coach Bob's system and adjust to life as a DI collegiate student-athlete." Off the field, Yoshikawa has also excelled, earning numerous student-athlete awards. For Hawai'i, where every road trip is at least one five-plus-hour plane ride away from its opponent, Yoshikawa learned early on that "time management was key. Academics come first because you can't play without getting good grades and getting good grades has always been important to me. Our Nagatani Academic Center really helped me—being able to use their tutoring services, especially with my major (kinesiology)—was very helpful."

On the field, Yoshikawa was primarily used as a pinch runner her first couple of seasons with a few appearances in the infield on defense. During that time, she learned how the team operated and got accustomed to the nuances of DI softball all the while gaining confidence as she waited for her turn on the field. "It was a difficult time, but you have to go through it. I might have gone a little slower than some—but in my senior year, everything worked out well."

This past season, Yoshikawa started 65 games—the most of her career—primarily at second base. "I attribute my success (this past season) to just hard work, day in and day out. Coming in during the summer and putting the time in the weight room, taking cuts in the batting cages and fielding grounders. I was prepared for this season better than any other before." She continues, "Being prepared in the fall was important because that's what coach looks for and bases his initial decisions on for the spring."

The team's 2010 season started with a challenging non-conference schedule which featured 12 teams that made this past year's NCAA tourney. Hawai'i finished its non-conference schedule with a 22-11 record, but the team really started to roll once the Western Athletic Conference season began. UH won its first 18-straight conference games and finished as the WAC regular season champions with a 19-1 record. Winning tends to bring a team together, although success on the field wasn't the main ingredient with this past year's team. This squad was special because of one thing—chemistry. "We were a really close team—the closest since I've been at UH. When we did have some kind of problem, once we stepped on the field, we didn't worry about it. We



The sure-handed Yoshikawa fielding a grounder

were just one team—not just individuals. There was no drama. There were no issues amongst us. We just focused on one game at a time. That's how we succeeded."

After capturing the WAC regular season crown, the Rainbow Wahine entered the conference tourney as the top seed. Hawai'i had never won the WAC Tournament before, but they broke that streak convincingly as they went 3-1, outscoring their opponents, 49-16 en route to their first WAC tournament title and the automatic bid into the NCAA tourney. The 'Bows earned a 16th seed and were sent off to the Stanford Regional.

"We went into the regional confident because it actually felt like just another tournament since we had already played and defeated two of the teams (UC Davis and Stanford) earlier in the season. The only team we didn't know anything about was Texas Tech. We weren't awestruck. Instead, we just took it one game at a time and before you knew it, we had won the regional."

But as the 16th seed, that meant that Hawai'i would have to travel from Stanford, Calif. all the way to Tuscaloosa, Ala. to take on the No. 1 seed, Alabama. The Southeastern

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Conference champs were riding a 27-game win-streak and had what most would consider a major home field advantage. “We knew what we were up against, but we also knew that if we stayed together we’d be okay. We had a good defense, good hitting, good pitching—we just had to put everything together.”

The first game of the three-game series was postponed due to lightning and rain, so the two teams squared off in a rescheduled doubleheader the following day instead. UH played out of character in the first game, falling to Alabama, 8-0 in five innings. “I think we were all really anxious that first game after getting rained out the night before. We had too many nerves and played a little ‘big-eyed’.” The Rainbow Wahine, however, bounced right back in the second game, showing the nation exactly how they broke the NCAA single-season home run record by launching three round-trippers and holding off a hard-charging Crimson Tide team for an 8-7 win. The UH win snapped Alabama’s nation-leading 28 game win-streak and proved that Hawai’i could hang with the best in the nation. In the game, Yoshikawa hit a solo home run and scored what proved to be the winning run in the bottom of the sixth. “That win,” explains Yoshikawa, “gave us our confidence and swagger back a little and the next day we knew that beating Alabama was possible. It didn’t matter that we were at Tuscaloosa (in front of record setting crowds). When they were clapping for their pitcher, we believed that they were clapping for us to hit the ball. I think we used their fans as our motivation and they actually helped us. We turned it around, we didn’t use it as a negative. We used it as a positive.”

The Rainbow Wahine opened the Super Regional championship game with a bang on Jenna Rodriguez’s three-run home run in the bottom of the first to take an early 3-0 lead. But in the middle innings, ‘Bama fought back, chipping away at their deficit, and in the top of the sixth, UA leapfrogged over UH to claim a 4-3 lead. But in the bottom of the seventh, with a national audience watching on ESPN and the capacity Crimson Tide crowd on its feet, UH was down to its last out with a runner on first base. That’s when Rodriguez came through in the clutch with the biggest hit in program history. She drove the first pitch deep to left, over the red fence just inside the foul pole stunning the Tuscaloosa faithful into silence and sending Hawai’i and its elated fans to its first ever

appearance in the Women’s College World Series with a heart-stopping, 5-4 win.

“Going to the WCWS was a once in a lifetime experience for me,” said Yoshikawa. “From the ESPN video shoots, the stadium, the HUGE crowds, and all of our fans coming to support us—it was awesome!” Yoshikawa exclaims, “Just being on the field—it was what we’ve watched on television in years past from home. We did all kinds of things that I had never done before—like being interviewed at the press conference after the first game. When I first walked in, I was like ‘Whoa!’ I had never been in one, and to have my first experience in a post-game press conference in front of a large room filled with reporters and cameras was amazing.” It was then that it hit her, “We’re actually at the highest level for college softball.”

Hawai’i won its first ever WCWS game against Missouri on Yoshikawa’s two-run home run that lifted UH to a 3-2 win over the Tigers in the top of the seventh inning. The Rainbow Wahine then fell to eventual WCWS finalists Arizona and UCLA to be eliminated with a 1-2 record. Yoshikawa did, however, end her playing career with a bang. She hit what ended up being the



The 2010 seniors: (from left) Tasha Pagdilao, Katie Grimes, Kanani Pu’u-Warren, Traci Yoshikawa, Amanda Tauali’i

final home run of the Wahine’s record-breaking season with a solo shot against Arizona. That put an exclamation point to an amazing and unforgettable senior season.

The 2010 Rainbow Wahine team set many records on its march to the WCWS—including shattering the NCAA single-season home run record with 158 and setting new school records for runs scored, hits, RBI, etc.—but Yoshikawa may not remember all of the stats, but instead will mostly remember and cherish just how special this team was. “It wasn’t our winning, but our team in general. We were a close, tight-knit squad and without our team becoming ‘one’ we would never have accomplished so much. It was special. The hard work and perseverance to come through in tough situations showed in our play on the field. We all put a lot of hours in—even when we had the day off, we (the team) came into the cages to work out on our own because we believed that a day off was going to hurt us.

Even though this season was special because of all that we accomplished, I don’t think I would have appreciated it as much if I had not gone through paying my dues during my first 3 years as a Wahine. Finally getting a chance to play and contribute as a senior meant so much knowing that all the hard work did pay off. Hopefully we were able to put Hawai’i softball on the national map and clear the path for future teams.”