

# SOUTHPAW DYNAMO

Editorial by Ron Mentus, RLM Athletics; Photos by Ray Shaw

**A**t 5 feet tall and 115 pounds, Kayla Berardi's stature isn't an imposing figure in the pitcher's circle. But once the southpaw winds up and hurls a softball, opposing batters might feel they're trying to hit a marble with a toothpick. She's a diminutive dynamo.

Berardi recently completed her senior year at Brookfield High School in Connecticut, where she led the second-ranked Lady Bobcats to a 22-3 record and a berth in the semi-finals of the Class L state tournament. Though the Bobcats were ousted, Berardi completed a phenomenal season in which she hurled three no-hitters plus a perfect game in the South-West Conference quarter-finals.

At 18, the dark-haired lefty proved that huge dividends sometimes are contained in small packages. Witness her 21-3 record with a miniscule 0.69 ERA and 12 shutouts. Then toss in 223 whiffs in 162 innings with opposing batters hitting a meager .116 against her pitching repertoire. Impressive by any stretch of the imagination.

But for Kayla, who heads to Stevens Institute of Technology (New Jersey) this fall, she's merely playing a game which she has enjoyed since she began pitching at eight or nine years of age. The formidable stats attached to her accomplishments are only numbers; they're not what define this determined young lady. And she credits her teammates for propelling her into the spotlight.

"Our team has definitely gotten it together and we've gotten stronger as a group," Kayla commented. "I've increased my pitches and worked on pitches that weren't working the year before."

Why has she been so successful? Batters have been befuddled by her variety of pitches, from fastball, to changeup, to drop, to a curve or riser; yet she diverted attention away from her considerable skills.

"Our team works on hitting; if we're doing something wrong, we'll fix it the next day. We just build up on (improving) every game and every day. I just stay focused and play the way I know how to play."

All, of course, under the watchful eyes of eight-year varsity head coach Frank Bonacci, who's coached her for the past four years. He claims the young lefty has the potential to further advance in her softball career, but noted she chose Stevens Tech because of the educational value.

"She's doing it the right way," Bonacci stated. "She's a determined young lady; she's probably one of the top two or three girls (I've coached) as far as going after what she wants and practicing at it. She's got the drive to succeed at her

craft."

One of Berardi's remarkable traits, even during the heat of competition, is her unruffled demeanor. If she's experiencing a rough inning, or having problems with her pitches, opponents would be hard-pressed to detect any dents in her emotional armor.

"When you see her (pitching), you can't tell if she gave up a home run or struck someone out," said her father, Brian Berardi. "She really understands the game; it's more than just one pitch or one hit. To her, a game is only one game of many games. Everybody wants to win, but she understands, if you lose, it's just a loss."

Susan Berardi, Kayla's mother, says "I knew she was going to be a good athlete, just by the way she played. I'm so proud of her; she worked so hard to get where she is.

"She really does like to pitch.

She's been successful because of her teammates; they're a team. She knows it has to be all of them; they all do their part to win games. (Sometimes) she gets upset with herself, so she tries to figure out what's wrong. But she knows you can't win all the time."

Always wearing sunglasses, Kayla takes each pitch, each inning, and each game at her usual even-stride pace. She'll paw at the dirt with her foot to smooth a landing spot, takes her place, whirls into her windup and delivers a well-aimed pitch. After a batter is retired, she'll wave a finger or two in the air, signifying the number of outs to her teammates.



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Her philosophy is simple: throw to the target the catcher sets. When things don't go her way, she has a pragmatic solution: "I just step back and take a deep breath. I try not to let it get to me, because if I get flustered, I'll get messed up."

Even during playoff or tournament games, with all of the drama and tension surrounding the "win or out" one-loss format, Kayla's moderate temperament rules the day.

"I don't do anything different," she says. "I try to keep everything the same and stay focused; it's just another opponent."

Coach Bonacci has seen his diminutive southpaw improve each year she has been on the varsity.

"She's not a very big girl, but her velocity has increased," he stated. "But the biggest thing is her control. If we tell her to throw it inside, she throws inside; tell her outside, she throws it outside." The stats show her impeccable control: only 22 bases on balls allowed in 162 innings, or one walk issued every 7.36 innings.

Bonacci credited her with being instrumental in the team's advance to the state semi-finals, and has set a good example

to the younger players.

"She's a pleasure to coach and a tireless worker. We came up one game short, but I'm hoping that (the experience) will help our younger players to reach that same point (next year).

"She has that persona where you don't know (if anything) bothers her or not. (She) being a senior, I'm glad it doesn't come out, so that the younger girls will see that. She's very even-keeled. (If someone) makes an error, she picks them up. She doesn't belittle her teammates on the field or in the dugout."

Yet for Kayla, the attention riveted on her senior year wasn't as important as playing a game she loves with teammates, who supported each other from the first game to the last. After all, she insists, it's still a game.

So what are the diminutive dynamo's goals as she prepares for her freshman season at Stevens Tech?

"Hopefully, I'll be starting and then keep going from there," she said modestly. "I'll just try to stay focused on the game and take it pitch by pitch."

So Coach Bonacci bids farewell to his star southpaw. But if he jogs his memory bank just a bit, he'll hear a familiar sound: "Strike three!"

Music to any coach's ears.

It's a tune Kayla Berardi hopes to play often in the years ahead.