

## Palm Beach Atlantic Record-Breaker Ashley Jones Makes All-Star Showing on Field and in Classroom

Submitted by Michael Brown, Palm Beach Atlantic Athletics

**T**he late great coach John Wooden once stated that success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.

For Palm Beach Atlantic University softball pitcher Ashley Jones, her collegiate career was capped by a sensational senior season that featured an All-American performance in the circle and academic honors as Outstanding Graduate in Elementary Education.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of Jones' story as a four-year standout for the NCAA Division II Sailfish, however, is that it almost never was.

A former All-State pitcher from Jensen Beach High School in Florida, Jones had aspirations of playing the sport she loved in college. But at 5'5" and just over 100 pounds, she didn't exactly fit the prototype of a big-time college pitcher.

Jones sent letters and e-mails to college coaches throughout the

region hoping to be given a chance to continue playing the game and to receive a top-notch education. Only a few responded; even fewer had a potential opening on their pitching staff.

One school that had an opening - and a personal connection, as it turned out - was Palm Beach Atlantic University, whose softball coach was Jenny Gladding.

Gladding was a former high-school pitching standout from Jones' area who had gone on to pitch for Division I University of Arizona and later the University of Florida before taking over the coaching reigns of the Sailfish program.

"Growing up, she [Gladding] was my role model," Jones said. "I would always go and watch her play in high school, and I also took lessons from her dad, Dave Gladding.

"When Jenny contacted me about playing at PBA, I became very interested. I knew that it was not as successful as other schools, but her goal was to build a program that would become successful. I thought I could be a part of the program and help make a name for it during the four years I was there."

### Dream nearly ends before it begins

It seemed that Jones had found a great fit in Palm Beach Atlantic for both her athletic and academic aspirations. She decided to enroll at PBA as an elementary education major to pursue her dream of teaching.

All of that nearly changed a few weeks before Jones was set to make the hour drive south to West Palm Beach to enroll as a freshman.

"I was really excited about attending school when I received a phone call from Jenny about two weeks before school started," Jones said. "She told me that she was offered the assistant coach position at the University of Florida and that she was going to take it. I was absolutely thrilled for her but also was discouraged about what was going to happen to me. I almost decided on not going to PBA or playing softball at all."

After Gladding left to take the job at UF, Palm Beach Atlantic hired former Florida State University standout Kimmy (Carter) Bloemers as the team's next head coach. The decision would bring not only stability to the program but also a vision of a bright future for the Sailfish.

Convincing Jones to stick with PBA, Bloemers said, "When I first met Ashley, I knew she was someone special. Even though she had a smaller frame, you could see her leadership and competitive spirit right away when we started training."

By the end of Bloemers' first season, the Sailfish were up fourteen wins from the previous year, and Jones had emerged as the team's top pitcher with a team high of 31 appearances.

Bloemers knew she had found an ace in Jones, and she set about building a strong team to match the skills being displayed on the pitching mound.

### Pitching career takes off

Over the next two years, Jones led the Sailfish team to more than 30 wins in back-to-back seasons. By the 2010 season, Jones was part of a cohesive team that included four other seniors who had contributed to the development of the program. The Sailfish appeared primed to make their biggest splash yet on the regional and national scale.



Despite a rough start to the 2010 season - they lost three times by one run at the University of West Florida tournament in early February - the team rallied to deliver a historic stretch of softball for the young program. The Sailfish went on to win 27 of their next 30 games, due in large part to the right arm of their senior pitching ace.

Jones became the first student-athlete in the history of PBA athletics to be recognized with a National Player of the Week recognition by the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA). She was honored with their weekly award after tossing her second career no-hitter against Flagler College on February 26. Jones finished the week 3-0 with an impressive 34 strikeouts and no earned runs allowed in just over 20 innings of work.

### The balancing game

Being a student-athlete is oftentimes compared to having a full-time job because of the time commitments associated with practices, games, weightlifting and travel - all while attending classes and trying to develop some sort of life outside of academics and athletics.

Try telling Ashley Jones your schedule is full.

As a student teacher her senior year, Jones' day typically started at 5:30 a.m. After a 30-minute drive to Lighthouse Elementary School in Jupiter, Fla., she would spend 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. in a classroom of second-graders. She would then leave straight to practice or to a game. From there, things might slow down enough for her to head to the weight room for team conditioning or possibly have dinner with teammates.

On game days, Jones wouldn't find her head hitting the pillow until around midnight, especially if the team had a double-header on the road. Once the alarm clock hit 5:30 the next morning, it was time for her to do it all over again.

Success in this scenario demanded not only hard work from Jones but the cooperation and flexibility of her supervising teacher and coach.

"My coach supported me from day one during that time," Jones said.

"She allowed me to come to practice late; miss some days of practice; drive myself to games; and even made sure that we had more weekend games so that it wouldn't interfere with my teaching. My cooperating teacher also encouraged and supported me and my passion for softball. She understood that I had a second job as a softball pitcher, and she allowed me to leave a day early and even miss two days so I could go to a tournament."

Having been an education major herself during college, Coach Bloemers knew going into the season that she would have to make some sacrifices to ensure that her star pitcher would be able to find success in both realms: teaching and softball.

"Student teaching is not easy. This is the training ground for learning all the essentials that will make you a great teacher and prepare you for your own classroom," Bloemers said. "Because I knew of Ashley's dedication to the team and how hard she would work, we made the arrangement possible. She is a rare case, but as a coach I'm willing to work with any student-athlete if I feel she can lead the team and not fall behind her teammates."

### A history-making season

With the regular season winding down and the thought of making the NCAA regional tournament for the first time in school history becoming more of a reality, the Sailfish were approaching uncharted waters.

With Jones leading the way, the PBA softball team proved down the stretch that they were a team worthy of their ranking. They received their first-ever NCAA postseason bid to travel to Valdosta State University in Valdosta, Ga., to participate in the South Region tournament.

Named the No. 3 seed out of four teams at the VSU regional, the Sailfish first shocked the No. 2-seeded University of West Florida in the opening game with an extra-innings victory. Jones one-hit the Argonauts while striking out nine batters in a 3-1 Sailfish win. UWF had narrowly defeated Jones twice at their early season tournament.

Up next came the No. 1 seed and host VSU Lady Blazers, who also held the No. 2 national ranking. Jones once again drew rave reviews from the fans of both teams as she essentially shut down the potent VSU lineup with a 3-2 victory to put PBA in the regional championship



game later in the weekend.

Although the Sailfish would come up short for the Regional championship, the buzz around Valdosta turned into multiple questions about who that Palm Beach Atlantic pitcher was.

After tossing an amazing 30 innings in 90-degree heat throughout the weekend tournament, Jones allowed only six earned runs and amassed 33 strikeouts. As she exited the field for the final time, she received a standing ovation from the appreciative crowd.

Coach Bloemers said, "Ashley made a name for herself and this program with her amazing performances during her four-year career. She leaves a lasting legacy about what hard work and determination can lead to."

During her four-year career at PBA, Jones broke nearly every school record associated with pitching. This included 73 wins, 95 complete games, 979 strikeouts and 799 innings pitched. She became the first player in program history to be named a Daktronics All-American.

While the statistics will live on and the great performances will certainly be remembered, for Jones the student-athlete experience has meant much more.

"The lifelong friendships developed with the girls on my team are the greatest thing I take away from my time at PBA," Jones said. "When you are part of a team, that team becomes your family. I will never forget how we were able to help put our program on the map."

With Jones' playing career now complete and her degree in hand, Sailfish fans can hardly wait to hear what is next in the life of arguably the greatest female athlete ever to don the Blue and White.

"I do have aspirations to coach one day," Jones admitted. "I don't think I can ever give up being a part of softball. It will always be a passion of mine."

Coach Wooden coined his famous "Pyramid of Success" many years ago with the apex of the pyramid suggesting that "competitive greatness" is the ultimate key to an exceptional athlete.

Palm Beach Atlantic's Ashley Jones is certainly at that apex. And she wouldn't have it any other way.