

The Winning Ways of

Wayne State

Editorial courtesy of Karl Henkel



Photo by Mark Hicks

On what turned out to be the eve of Wayne State softball's final game of the 2010 season, the tenor of the team was anything but serious.

Coming off an opening-game defeat to Hawaii Pacific in the team's College World Series opener, WSU coach Gary Bryce opted for a game of Danish rounders instead of the typical routine.

"I thought that rather go out there and do the normal stuff, we'd try to loosen the kids up and have some fun," said Bryce, who along with assistant coaches Pat Kent and Sarah Berry, won NFCA Midwest Region Coaching Staff of the Year. "We'd been practicing a long time to get there (the College

World Series), to get on them (the team) and get after them after a loss was the wrong thing to do."

Fun was a word Bryce and Co. experienced plenty throughout the season after the team won a record 52 games, nine more than Bryce's previous single-season high.

However, their season ended the next day against Metropolitan State College of Denver, but it didn't put a damper on Wayne State's second NCAA Elite Eight appearance (2003 was the other).

"Gary would tell us how great it was when they went last time," shortstop Jaci Banton said. "Now having went, knowing exactly what that is and having experienced it with great friends ... it was just a very memorable experience."

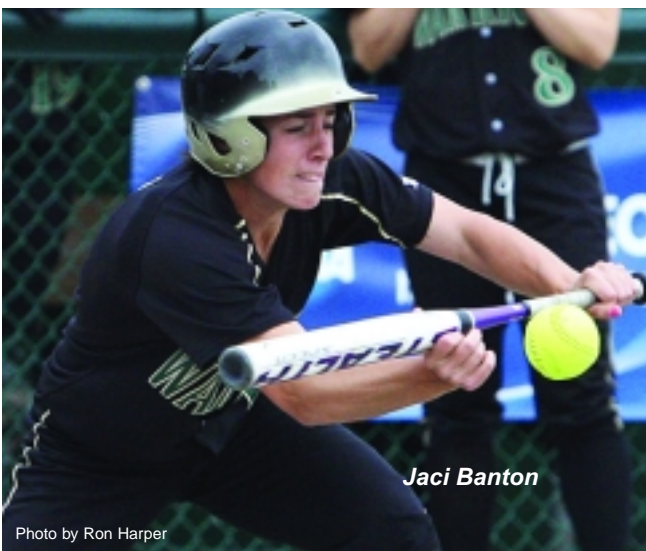
Banton is one of four players, along with pitchers Casey Hanes and Nicole Abel, and left fielder Stephanie LeClair, whose eligibility expired following the CWS appearance, and all four were key contributors to the team's success.

As Banton put it, Hanes was the rock of the team, posting a miniscule, NCAA-leading (for all three divisions) 0.58 ERA and struck out 366



Coach Gary Bryce

Photo by Mark Hicks



Jaci Banton

Photo by Ron Harper

opposing hitters, both team records.

"The thing that Casey had going for her is she wanted the ball, she was very focused, and wanted to succeed," Bryce said. "She's someone that wanted the ball when the pressure was on.

"I think when you have a pitcher like that, the kids

really feel they're going to win."

More often than not, the "kids," as Bryce refers to his players, had the right feeling: Wayne State won 42 of Hanes' 50 decisions, and 19 via shutout. Hanes, who transferred from Lenoir-Rhyne following the 2007 season and tied Wayne State's career record for victories by a pitcher (72), also threw two no-hitters.

When Hanes, an NFCA and Daktronics First Team All-American, wasn't on the mound, it was Abel who stepped up and sported a 7-2 record. LeClair and Banton each started all 65 games and hit .330 and .322, respectively.

What really brought the team together, however, was the influx of the team's up-and-coming talent. Of the 13 players returning next year, only one will be a senior, which means the success should bleed over for years to come.

It was the contributions from sophomores Alison Allen (.402 average, Second Team Daktronics All-American and Third Team NFCA All-American) and Becca Ryan (.355), and junior Rachel Spaccatelli (.312 and a team-high .662 slugging percentage), which rounded the team out.

And it was 13 individual single-season records that came out of statistics like those, seven alone from Hanes. But Wayne State wasn't an all-star loaded bunch; in fact, Banton said they played for everyone but themselves, something they were reminded of whenever they looked at the red plastic bat they had all signed during a team meeting.

"We each wrote on it who we were playing for," Banton said, "why we were here, what our goals were."

Banton said early on the team had an

inkling of the success it was capable of.

"We started to figure out early that we could compete with some of the better teams," she said. "As we went on, our confidence grew more and more and kind of accumulated."

Wayne State lost three games at home all season. All three of its NCAA Regional tournament victories (that it hosted) were shutouts and the Warriors avenged an early-season doubleheader sweep at Ashland by sweeping the best-of-three Midwest Super Regional (that WSU also hosted)... The Warriors had a pair of nine game winning streaks. They also won nine of their last 10 games leading up to the CWS and concluded the season ranked seventh in the NFCA Coaches Poll, their highest finish ever.

"The teams were pretty equal in the NCAA finals," Bryce said. "Maybe if we played them (the games) again there would be a different winner."

"It's going to rank in the top three," Bryce said, citing the 1983 season (his second as softball coach) and the 2003 season, when Wayne State appeared in its first College World Series as the other instances of his favorite trifecta. "Those three rank pretty even across the board."

After 29 seasons at WSU, Bryce, who needs 23 victories to reach 1,000 for his career, thinks his team has a chance to add to his list of memorable moments. That is, if they have some fun.

"You have to play with some fun, otherwise it gets to be too stressful."



Nicole Abel

Photo by Mark Hicks



Casey Hanes

Photo by Ron Harper



Stephanie LeClair

Photo by Mark Hicks