

Dallas Escobedo

Editorial by Kyra Geithman

A lot of pressure comes with being the first freshman pitcher to win a Women's College World Series Championship since 1990. Expectations rise. The spotlight burns brighter. People recognize you in the craziest of places.

But when the cameras shut down, Dallas Escobedo is yet another student-athlete who works as hard as anyone else to get where she wants to be.

Many credit Escobedo with the national title. She did, after all, champion the Arizona State Sun Devils to their second NCAA title in school history and led the team through most of the season with a 37-3 record and a 1.51 ERA.

Escobedo, however, attributes a lot of her success to her teammates, who have consistently boosted her to a level of performance she had

never experienced before.

"Going to practice and being with this team is fun," says Escobedo. "Growing up, there would be days where I didn't want to pitch. But I love being at practice and at the field. Everybody wants to be there. It's like my second home."

A lot has changed since those other teams. Escobedo started playing club softball at eight years old, the youngest on the Scorpio team. But she had troubles finding her niche, starting as a left fielder and working her way up to pitching under the guidance of renowned pitching coach Bobby Sparks.

"I was really wild. Nobody wanted to give me a chance on the mound," says Escobedo. "So I played with other teams who would. Then when I got better, my club team gave me chances. And Bobby pretty much got me here. He taught me everything I know."

Dallas saw further success at St. Mary's Catholic High School in Phoenix, Arizona. In her freshman year, she led the team to their first-ever state title. The next two years proved difficult, but Escobedo made the state championship game her senior year, in which St. Mary's lost by two runs.

But over the course of the past year and a half, Escobedo has embraced her Sun Devil team as the future. The team embraced her as well: with eight seniors returning for their final season, they were ready for a change, having just missed the 2010 WCWS for the first time in head coach Clint Myers' career at Arizona State.

The last time Myers coached a team to the national title, the Sun Devils had senior pitcher Katie Burkhart behind the helm in 2008. In contrast to Dallas, Burkhart had four years to learn and grow as a pitcher, including a season where the team went 4-17 in Pac-10 play.

"Katie was also different personality-wise," says Myers. "And that year, we had to educate the entire team, and figure out how to get there. But with Dallas, we had those seniors who were freshmen during the (2008) season and they knew what it was going to take."

As the season wore on, Escobedo worked her way to the starting pitcher position, although she got off to a rocky start. The team opened conference play with a record of 4-3 that did not reflect their preseason success. Escobedo had to work through rough patches and truly grow into the starting slot.

"Dallas had to grow up faster and at a more accelerated pace," Myers says. "She had a lot of trials and tribulations, but she figured out how to handle it and handle what she was facing next. Any time you have a freshman, it's about growing. It's really about figuring out who you are and what you have to do."

Through the preseason tournaments and long road trips, the pressure of being a college freshman in such a prominent position started to take its toll on Escobedo. In turn, she learned to rely heavily on her team, especially on improving the winning record.

"It's great because they score runs for me," she says. "On other teams I've played with, if I let up one or two, we'd be in danger of losing the game. But with this team, I know if I give up five, we can win by six."

The closeness between the players on the field was certainly evident in the Women's College World Series. But Escobedo says that intimacy blooms off of the diamond as



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well and into everyday life.

"I really love seeing everyone else as much as possible," Escobedo says. "We just want to be together all the time. We do a lot of funny, weird things."

Just watching the team in the dugout during every game is enough evidence of how close-knit the players are. In situations where other teams might be subdued or upset, the Sun Devils kept smiling and joking with one another, helping ease the stress. Making those tough situations less tense and bonding together, according to Myers, is essential to their success.

"Chemistry was a large part of our success last year," Myers says. "We have a lot of that fantastic chemistry returning this year and the team has lots of fun."

Even though she is just coming off of her freshman season, Dallas is prepared. Not just for the work and the practice, either - she says she's prepared to have even more fun.

"I'm excited for this whole year," says Escobedo. "We

have a new look, new recruits and a lot to look forward to with everything."

Coach Myers has a positive outlook for the team as a whole. Another strong class of seniors is ready to lead through the season, but Myers admits there are some holes to fill.

"You lose seniors every year," says Myers. "We anticipate each year by the amount of experience we have. But we're already seeing an improvement with the players this year, especially the freshmen," said Myers. "Even in the short period of practice so far this fall, they've come a long way."

Myers is also optimistic where Escobedo is concerned. Training involving pitch development, involving location and control, is only one part to the extensive process expanding her potential.

"Dallas is a great athlete and a tremendous pitcher," said Myers. "Last year, she was effectively wild. But (pitching coach) Chuck D'Arcy is working with her on putting it all together. She still has a long way to go. She really can be on the same level as the other great softball pitchers.

"She is really a freshman who just won the College World Series. She knows the target is on her back and she knows what she has to do."