

Robin Thompson is in A League of Her Own

Editorial by Kristin Scharkey

Robin Thompson grew up on the baseball fields of Detroit, Michigan.

Starting with t-ball and followed by little league, Thompson learned to throw, hit and catch, living and breathing the game that has been played by boys and men for ages.

And yes, Thompson is a girl.

This kind of feat is one that not many young women have dared to attempt. It's a challenge that requires the gumption of the Dottie Hinson's of the world, a competitor who believes she can. To hold your own in the world of baseball calls for a woman to perform in spite of heckling opponents, parental opposition and constant questioning.

But for Robin Thompson, 'I can't' was never in her vocabulary.

Determination kept Thompson in a league of her own throughout nine years of baseball. Motivation earned her a softball scholarship and a stellar four-year career both on and off the field at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. And it was her work ethic that most recently landed her a professional fast pitch contract with the National Professional Fastpitch's (NPF) Chicago Bandits.

Baby Baller

Born in Detroit on February 19, 1989, Thompson was the second of four children. She quickly became charismatic and outgoing; a kid that simply "loved to have fun," according to her mother Dana Thompson. She had a passion for roller coasters that often landed the family at nearby amusement parks for summer vacation and a knack for cheer-leading that won her several trophies throughout her elementary school years.

With an older brother who played basketball, Robin developed a love for sports early on. Though Mercedes was five years older, she always tagged along and gave him a run for his money. On summer nights, it wasn't unusual for the two to be found on their backyard basketball court, playing round after round of '21.'

"I was always messing around with him and wanting to be like him when I was younger," recalled Robin. "He was so fast, so athletic, so strong; I wanted to do everything the same. People say that I'm athletic, and I think it's because of him, because of trying to keep up with him."

Thompson followed in her brother's footsteps for a time, playing basketball throughout elementary school and junior high. Her real passion, however, lay in the game of baseball, which began when she was just five-years-old. The kindergartener had come home from school with a sudden revelation: one of her classmates had worn his t-ball uniform to school and his dad coached the team; she wanted to join. Though hesitant at first, Dana met with head coach Michael Mack and became convinced that his team was one Robin could be a part of. And for the next nine years, she was.

Little League Dreams

For the majority of her career on the Detroit Rockies baseball team, Robin was the only female player in a league dominated by boys. Opponents took one look at her short stature and feminine physique and immediately made assumptions about the starting shortstop. Throughout her baseball career, she was underestimated and underrated.

"Being a girl, a lot of the guys thought she couldn't play," said Mack. "She would get out there and smack triples-- sometimes a home run--

and once she got on, she was guaranteed to steal almost every base."

Robin was competing against boys who were twice her size and a whole lot stronger, but it didn't matter. She had raw athletic talent, lightning fast speed and a meticulous work ethic that allowed her to excel past the majority of her peers. She took to the game naturally, and her skill set became quite advanced.

"The older she got, the more we started to run into issues with her playing hardball. She was a lot better than most of the boys that were playing at the time and they wanted to always verify how old she was. They thought that because of her skill level that she had to be older. They tried to bar her from playing in one league because they tried to say that because she was a girl she shouldn't be allowed to play on the boys' team," recalled Dana.

But Robin wouldn't quit. In fact, the pressure fueled her.

When she was 12, one third basemen felt it was his duty to heckle the young shortstop during a tournament game in Ohio. Insults flew from his mouth from the start of the game and esca-



lated during her first at-bat. After the boy's pitcher threw the first pitch of her at-bat behind Thompson's head, Mack took a timeout to refocus and clear her mind. Three pitches later, Thompson cracked a single which was quickly followed by a loud, "She's not going any further than that," from third.

"I gave her the steal sign and she stole every base, from first all the way to home, and made that guy and the rest of the team look like fools," reminisced Mack. "All it took was someone to tick her off and that was it. When she got her game face on, it was over."

A strong and determined single mother, Dana was the team's scorekeeper and made it a priority to travel with her daughter all over the Midwest to play ball with the Rockies. Mack coached the team for all nine years that Robin was a member, watching her develop from a five-year-old child into a fourteen-year-old young woman. With the start of high school, however, came the end of baseball for Robin, and the 5-foot shortstop couldn't imagine a life apart from the diamond. The only option, it seemed to Dana, was for her daughter to pick up a softball.

From Baseball to Beach Ball

The thought of playing softball was foreign, almost undesirable to Robin. "I played baseball and that was my life and I loved it. I never thought I would play softball," she recalled. But Dana knew her daughter's future couldn't be in baseball. For Robin to play ball in college meant making a transition. So the summer before her freshman year, Robin joined the Detroit RBI's, a 14U travel ball team and began to learn the ins and outs of the game of softball.

"When you're hitting a ball that's the size of baseball and then you switch over and have to start hitting a ball that looks like a beach ball coming at you, it's pretty easy I think. Or at least, she made it look really easy," chuckled Dana.

Robin quickly took to the game like she had to baseball. She made adjustments on her timing at the plate and learned to track a ball spinning up and in, as well as down and out. She became accustomed to the shorter bases and learned how to steal a base without leading off. The transition went smoothly and that year she made Martin Luther King Jr. High School's varsity softball team as a freshman.

"Robin had been playing hard ball with the boys for quite a few years, so she came to high school with mega skills," stated Martin Luther King Jr. head softball coach Debra Olesky. "Because her skill level was so high, [as our shortstop] we had her covering third base with a runner on second, and we had her covering all throw downs to second. She even took care of some outfield work for our left fielder! The girl could move."

Robin was selfless and respected by her peers, always one to play with injuries and never complain. Teammates "gravitated toward her, and she brought other players up to her level," said Olesky. Robin performed in the classroom as well, knowing full well that her mother would be disappointed if she brought home a 'B.' She made the transition into high school academia flawlessly, earning superb grades and a membership into the National Honor Society.

Taking It To The Next Level

As Robin progressed on the softball field, Dana sought avenues for her daughter to experience a higher level of play. She had heard about a highly regarded travel ball team based in Detroit, so when Robin's high school team faced off against the head coach's daughter, Dana made the most of the situation. She introduced herself to Mark Bate, the 14U Michigan Batbuster's head coach, and asked if he would take a look at Robin. Bate's daughter was, in fact, pitching for the opposing team so he considered the game a trial run.

After striking out in her first at-bat, Robin made the most of her second plate appearance and launched a home run. Bate extended her an invitation to tryout immediately after the game and she was signed onto the team that weekend. Bate, however, wondered if she'd be able to adjust to the higher caliber of pitching that his team experienced at the 14U travel ball level. But after Robin's first game with the Batbusters, all his doubts were silenced.

"It was a 1-1 game and we had a runner on second. Robin ripped eight balls foul; she was so quick with her wrists," remembered Bate. "I told her to straighten it out and sure enough, she did. She cracked a home run to win the game."

Firmly establishing herself as the Batbuster's number four hitter, Robin stayed with the team for the next three years, traveling all over the country with her mother to play in qualifier and exposure tournaments. Like she had in baseball, Robin worked diligently to improve her game, going so far as to work on her swing in her hotel room between games if she felt she was having an off day.

"She had this quiet, professional demeanor about her when we first got her as a teenager, and she was a great teammate. She was never a problem in any way, just a coach's dream. She was one of those players that was always going to work hard and always be there," said Bate.

The higher level of play she experienced as a member of the Batbusters improved her game immensely. Her junior year at King High School, she hit .638 with 9 home runs, 19 steals, and just 1 strikeout. She began to be heavily recruited by Division I programs that summer.

Together, she and Bate wrote dozens of emails to college coaches. In particular, she had an interest in Northwestern University, but a lack of response led her to believe it was not a viable option. Unbeknownst to Thompson, however, Bate continued to email Northwestern Head Coach Kate Drohan every three days.

"Mark emailed me and would rave about her athleticism, her speed, her skill set over and over. We got so many emails but his stood out because of his glowing remarks about her. When he finally emailed me about her vertical jump, I thought, "This is worth a trip out to Detroit," said Drohan.

And that it was. The summer before Robin's senior year, Drohan headed to Michigan with her twin sister and associate head coach Caryl Drohan to watch the right-handed hitting shortstop's practice; what they saw left them wanting to see Robin play on a more consistent basis.

"On the way back to Chicago, Caryl and I looked at each other and knew immediately that we wanted to get this kid in purple and wanted to work with her," said



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Kate.

She would be a great fit for their program, they thought, a perfect addition to the team. Robin was already strongly considering Syracuse and Michigan State but after an official visit to Northwestern's campus in October 2006, she committed the following month. She fell in love with the campus, the girls, and the coaching staff; immediately sensing that Evanston could be a "home away from home."

A Year to Remember

Robin graduated in 2007 as the salutatorian of King High School, ranked in the top one percent of her class. She had been named to the All-City and All-District teams for softball and was also an All-City selection during her three years on the volleyball team. Having been committed to Northwestern for over half a year, she was ready to leave home and step into the next chapter in her life, to experience new places and new people. But as she set foot on campus to move into her dorm room and the time finally came to tell her family goodbye, everything changed.

"I was such a cry baby. Kate probably thought I would not come back after Christmas vacation. I just wanted to be home, I missed my mom and my sisters. I wanted them to be where I was and that was really hard for me," recalled Thompson.

She hit a turning point over Christmas vacation, however, and came back to campus with renewed energy and determination. That year, Northwestern won the Big Ten title and the Big Ten Tournament Championship. Nicknamed "RT" by her teammates, Robin led the team with 22 stolen bases and was a second-team All-Big Ten selection as a freshman.

"We came back [after the break] and I just felt like this was where I wanted to be. There would be no second guessing it, I was ready to go. And man, freshman year, that whole season was crazy. It was the best softball I've ever played in my life," said Robin.

Baseball to Softball, Righty to Lefty

The summer after her freshman year, RT got a call from coach Caryl Drohan. "I've got a surprise for you," she told Thompson, "We've hired Lauren Lappin as our new volunteer assistant coach, and she's going to teach you to slap from the left side." In an attempt to better utilize her speed, Robin agreed to learn to hit from the other side of the plate as a college sophomore. She was willing to do whatever the team needed and hit off a tee left-handed that entire summer, rep after rep, to prepare for yet another major conversion in her athletic career.

"Right off the bat, presented with this challenge of turning to the left side when she'd never even swung the bat left handed, she just accepted the challenge and took it head on with a really positive attitude. I think that's what enabled her to make the transition," said Lappin.

After putting in hours of extra work and thousands of cuts with the former Olympian Lappin by her side, Robin emerged as a full-blown lefty slapper her sophomore year, raising her average by over fifty points and ranked 24th in the nation in runs per game (0.96).

"I just kept working, kept working, Lauren Lappin worked crazy hours with me, telling me everything I needed to know, showing me other softball players who had been doing that all of their lives... after I became vulnerable and accepted it and became comfortable with it, I feel like I took off," said RT.

The Next Chapter

Robin completed her career at Northwestern with an impressive senior season. A nominee for NCAA Woman of the Year, she batted .368 with 32 runs scored and 19 steals, and was an All-Big Ten selection for the second time in her career. More importantly, in June she became the first person in her family to graduate college.

"You see athletes that are successful because of talent or hard work, but she combined the two and absolutely deserved all the success she experienced this past year, and all four years," Lappin said.

RT was also impressive in the classroom throughout her college career, graduating as a three-time Academic All-Big Ten selection. She capped her senior year earning Capital One Academic All-America honors, a prestigious award given to student-athletes that excel both in the classroom and outperform their competition on the field. A firm opponent of procrastination, Robin credits the good habits instilled by her mother as those that drove her towards continued academic success in college.

"Nothing is too hard for Robin Thompson, nothing takes too much work for Robin. She is not afraid to work and I think that to me shows that she will be successful in anything she does in life," said Kate.

Although the first three months of being away from her family were tough, Dana and Robin's two younger sisters Mi'Shaun and Mishe'leigh attended every game they could during her college career. Despite being away from her family, when asked about her experience at Northwestern, Thompson could do nothing but rave, describing her college experience as "the best thing that has ever happened to her."

"Northwestern Softball taught me to accept and celebrate everybody. No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter what you do in life, you're going to be celebrated. It's taught me to celebrate different people-- because people from Northwestern Softball come from different walks of life-- whether that's rich, poor, straight, gay, black, white," said Thompson. "Northwestern is a special place and will always hold a special



place in my heart.”

With a degree in human development and psychological services, Thompson hopes to pursue a career in law enforcement. However that will happen only after she has played the game she fell in love with in high school for as long as she possibly can. In May, Thompson earned a contract with the Chicago Bandits and became the sixth Wildcat to play in the NPF. When she called back home to tell her mother that she had made it, all she could hear on the other line were screams of joy.

“This is her getting to have the dream that I told her was out there. She just gave it her all and every day I think, “Wow, she’s doing everything that I had ever hoped for her,” said Dana.

Robin Thompson believed that every one of her dreams were within her reach. And throughout her life, she has worked diligently to make those dreams a reality. Still, some have even surprised the athlete herself.

“I had no idea that I would have gone on to play professionally; this is a dream. I’m so excited that I get to do it and have fun. I never thought I’d go from being five-years-old playing t-ball with a group of boys to now playing professional softball with the most amazing women who are still in the sport,” said Thompson.

So to the parents who said she shouldn’t be allowed to play baseball, to the fans that wanted her barred from the league, Thompson proved that she belonged.

To those who thought the transition to softball would be too difficult, those who believed the switch to the left side as a college sophomore would be nearly impossible, Thompson saw the changes as opportunities and ran with them.

To the naysayers who said she couldn’t, RT said simply, “I haven’t learned how to yet.”

To the boy on the baseball diamond in Ohio who said she wouldn’t go any further, just look how far she’s gone.

And only time will tell how much further Robin Thompson is going to go.



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