COACH'S PROFILE

Short Term Status Doesn't Keep Staudenmaier From Focusing on Team Harmony at Walla Walla

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Walla Walla Community College softball coach Mike Staudenmaier understands the importance of playing well in the postseason. A lengthy baseball playing career taught him any season will have its ups and downs. The bottom line is being prepared and being at one's best when it comes to time to play for the championship.

"When you have players for two years, you really want them to play and learn the game," Staudenmaier said. "We try to win the league title every year but have only done it once. That doesn't really bother me, because the goal is to play in the postseason."

Perhaps the biggest challenge with a freshmen-laden team is gathering experience. Players are being asked to take on leadership roles, helping forge the identity of a new team. This challenge is multiplied by being asked to take college classes for the first time. For Staudenmaier and his staff, full practice was the key, as the tossing of a new team slowly took shape.

"In the fall, we saw the process begin a little bit," Staudenmaier said. "Not only did we have five sophomores, but one of those was a transfer. We talked a lot in our individual meetings about the leadership process and managing ownership of a team. Fortunately, we had a couple of players step up and emerge as vocal leaders. It is exciting when you see that from freshmen as well, because you know you have them for another year."

Since the players are in the junior college environment, for only two years, there is an added emphasis to hit the ground running. For most players, the goal is to eventually sign a scholarship offer with a four-year college. The Walla Walla administration takes on the daunting task of helping these players adjust to their new level, while getting ready for the next level.

"We have a lot of things in our favor," Staudenmaier said. "We bring in great kids who want to transfer to a four-year college. We have facilities. For example, we just added $500,000 worth of lights for the baseball and softball fields. The administration takes a lot of pride in our athletic programs. We have a good hitting facility as you will find on this level."

While buildings and ballparks may be nice, it is still essential for players to feel like they belong.

"Really, we always have a close-knit group. They hang out together on the field. They hang out together in the offices. They take classes together. They go out together. That is with all the sports on campus too. There is no jealousy. Volleyball players, basketball players, softball players…whatever is going on, it is usually happening as a group. I think that harmony is very important."

"Players can relax and focus on going to school and getting better as softball players."

College is also about learning through adversity. The Walla Walla team faced a big challenge this past season when left fielder Kayla Hutchison suffered a serious injury during an October basketball practice. A collision caused Hutchison to suffer brain trauma, a third-degree concussion and a severe case of amnesia.

While the 2008 calendar year closed out, Hutchison had to be taught how to walk, talk, write and eat all over again. For the most part, her memory was all but gone. Through the love and support of family, teammates and staff, Hutchison continues to make progress every day.

"It is a difficult time," Staudenmaier said. "But it is also a time for growth. I think the team has really grown as a result of this. They have learned to be more supportive of each other."

The Walla Walla community, the Idaho native was able to make a quick and full recovery.

Hutchison was cleared to return to the court in January. She wound up being an integral force down the stretch as the basketball squad qualified for the state tournament.

"Basically, she had the memory and motor skills of a 5- or 6-year-old," Staudenmaier said. "The first softball practice of the year, we told her to go to left field. She didn't know which outfield spot that was. Obviously, her health was the No. 1 concern."

"We were able to get her acclimated to the game again. She started out as a pinch runner. Then, we were able to get her some at-bats and play her in the field. By the time we made the national tournament, she was batting in the four spot and playing left field for us."

Once again, it was another case where adversity helped make a team and a campus grow stronger. Staudenmaier believes if you let players take ownership of a team, they will take more pride and satisfaction out of the team's success.

"For me personally, I have coached a lot of baseball," Staudenmaier said. "I feel like it is important to let the kids think the game. We challenge our kids to think the game and to become the game. Sometimes, I am not as doing that much. However, I think it is important for kids to figure things out for themselves.

"A lot of pitches, a pitcher will be pitching and she is looking over her shoulder. She knows she has to get this batter or that batter. We don't do that. We try to let the catchers call their own games. We let pitchers work on adversity and tight spots. You find players who are more fun and satisfaction when they are able to accomplish the task in front of them on their own."

The philosophy has worked. Beginning his 13th season as head softball coach at Walla Walla, the former baseball standout at Whitworth University has guided the Warriors to four straight appearances in the NWCAC tournament. This past season's second-place finish was the best in school history.

Fortunately for the Warriors, essentially the starting lineup returns and the 2010 season might just be the best one yet.