

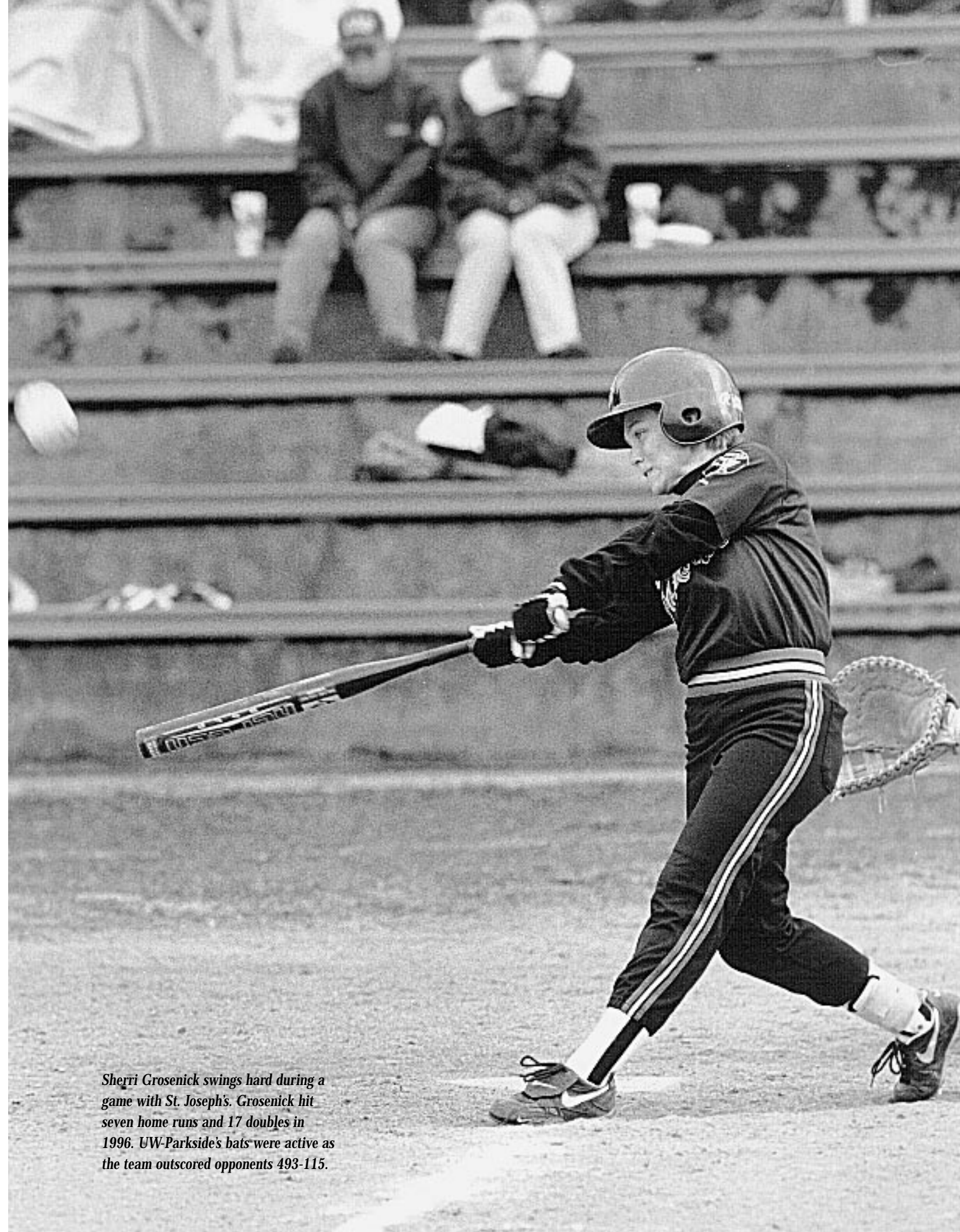
POWER PLAYS

**BIG BATS, DEFENSE AND AN NCAA WINS RECORD:
UW-PARKSIDE SOFTBALL IS THE TEAM TO BEAT**

“WE’RE GOING TO WIN A NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.” That is how Tory Acheson greeted his players when he took over as coach of the women’s softball program in 1992. Things were going to be different, he told them. Practices would be held six days a week, with Tuesdays off. Academics would come first, family second and softball third. They would play a demanding schedule. “They all thought I was whacked,” said Acheson, who lost most of his players before the start of that season. “From day one, this was my vision — we’re going to be the best Division II team in the country.” ▶

BY **Joseph Hanneman**

PHOTOS BY **Mike Gryniecicz**
AND **Charles S. Vallone**



Sherri Grosenick swings hard during a game with St. Joseph’s. Grosenick hit seven home runs and 17 doubles in 1996. UW-Parkside’s bats were active as the team outscored opponents 493-115.



Jessie Johnson was named second team All-American at second base. Teammates say the Rangers' infield plays "like a vacuum cleaner."

"FOR US, BEING SUCCESSFUL IN SOFTBALL IS SOMETHING I EXPECT."

WENDY WOLFF, THE RANGERS' ALL-AMERICAN PITCHER, said there was some disbelief at the statement. "When you're less than a .500 team, it's hard to envision winning a national championship," Wolff said.

Acheson, the former Whitnall High School coach who applied for the job on a whim, said he truly believed his team could develop into an NCAA softball power. His statements began to take on serious credibility in 1996, as the Rangers spent most of the season ranked No. 1 in NCAA Division II and piled up the wins like no team ever before — 64 versus 6 losses and one tie.

And although the team stumbled in the national tournament, finishing seventh, it should be poised for a serious run at a national championship in 1997. The veteran team lost no players from the spring 1996 squad that won the Great Lakes Valley championship and set an NCAA wins record at 64.

"I'm really excited about it," Acheson said of the 1997 season. "They see this as their chance to make things right. It's very exciting to know they are all going to be back. We're positioned pretty well."

For Acheson, getting to the pinnacle of the softball world started with his recruiting contacts. All along he knew of the quality talent among Wisconsin's high school players. It's not unusual to find him in his office at 9:30 p.m., talking to recruits, or on the road scouting games.

"There's nobody who's too talented for us to recruit," Acheson said. "There's not a single player on our roster who couldn't be playing on a Division I team."

A 'dream season'

That work began showing visible dividends in 1995, when the team surprised the country by making the NCAA playoffs, winning the central region tournament and finishing fourth in the national championship tournament. ►

1996 Softball at a Glance

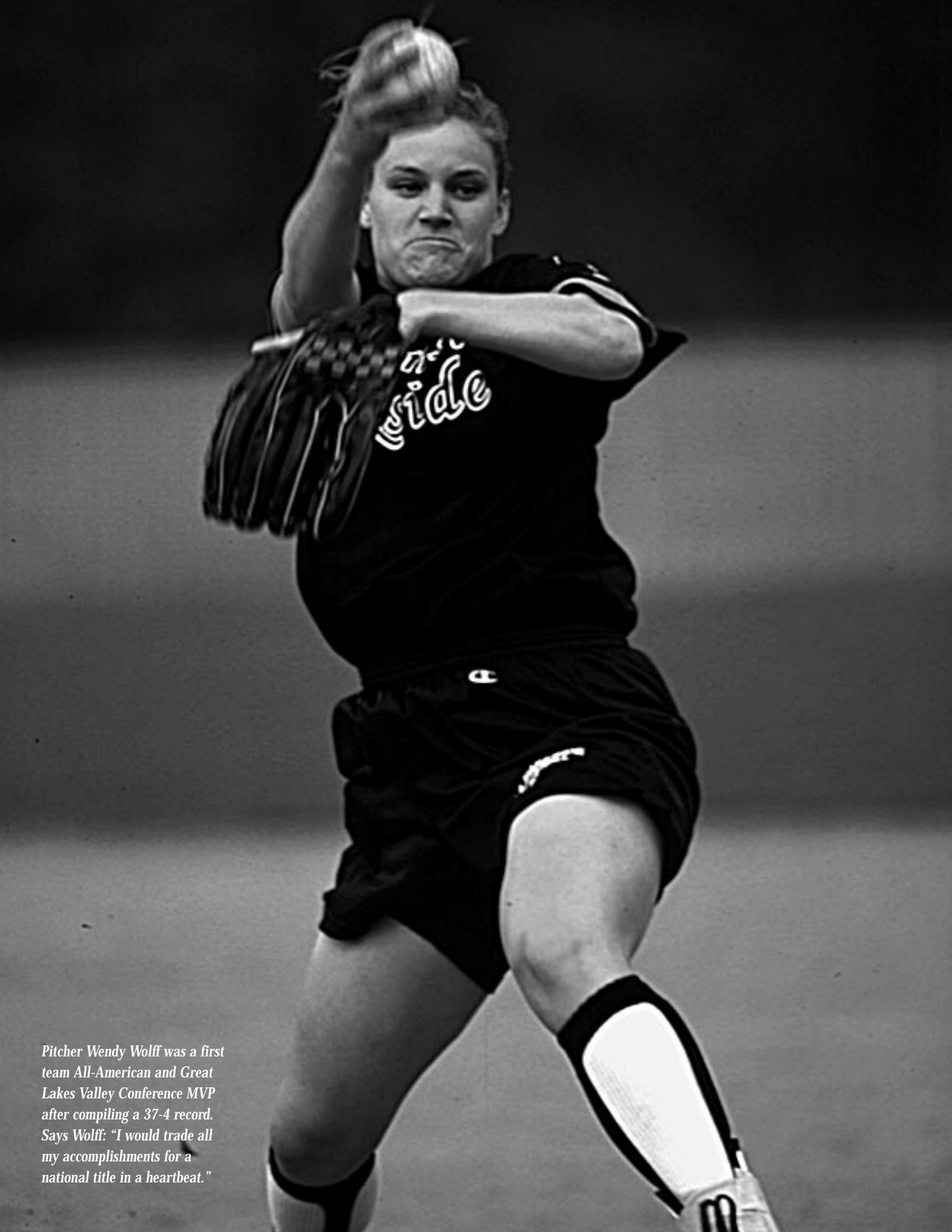
Overall Record	64-6-1
Conference Record	22-3
NCAA Wins Record	64
Score vs. Opponents	493-115

NCAA All-Americans

- Wendy Wolff (pitcher), 1st Team
- Jackie Aiken (3rd base), 1st Team
- Billi Kapla (desig. player), 1st Team
- Jessie Johnson (2nd base), 2nd Team
- Bobbi Kapla (catcher), 3rd Team

Other Highlights

- GLVC Tournament Championship
- GLVC Regular Season Title
- Conference MVP, Wendy Wolff
- Conference & Region Coach of the Year, Tory Acheson



Pitcher Wendy Wolff was a first team All-American and Great Lakes Valley Conference MVP after compiling a 37-4 record. Says Wolff: "I would trade all my accomplishments for a national title in a heartbeat."

With many key players returning for the spring 1996 season, Acheson was hopeful he'd field a strong team. But even he admits the season was even more than he expected.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought we'd end up winning 64 games and setting a national record," he said. "The regular season was a dream season. I'd venture to say we'll never be able to amass a regular season like that again."

The team won 20 games against ranked teams and played among the toughest schedules in the country. When the NCAA poll was released after 20 games, the Rangers had risen to No. 1, where they stayed the rest of the regular season.

"No one tried to look at it," said Jackie Aiken, who had an All-American season at third base after being All-American at catcher in 1995. "You still have to go out there and perform, whether you're number one or number 20."

Two conference titles

After winning the regular season Great Lakes Valley Conference title with a 22-3 record, the team lost the second game of the conference championship

tournament. After being relegated to the loser's bracket in the double-elimination tournament, the Rangers won four straight games to make it to the championship, which they won 5-0 to capture the tournament title.

"We wanted to establish ourselves right away as one of the high-quality teams in the conference," Acheson said. "Winning the regular season title and the conference tournament, both in the first year in the conference is something the kids are real proud of."

From there, the Rangers captured the NCAA Great Lakes Regional tournament in Detroit and headed for a showdown at the championship in Kansas.

Unfortunately, the conditions were even less friendly than the opposition. The long-ball team showed little productivity in the windy conditions in Emporia, losing two games in a row and finishing seventh.

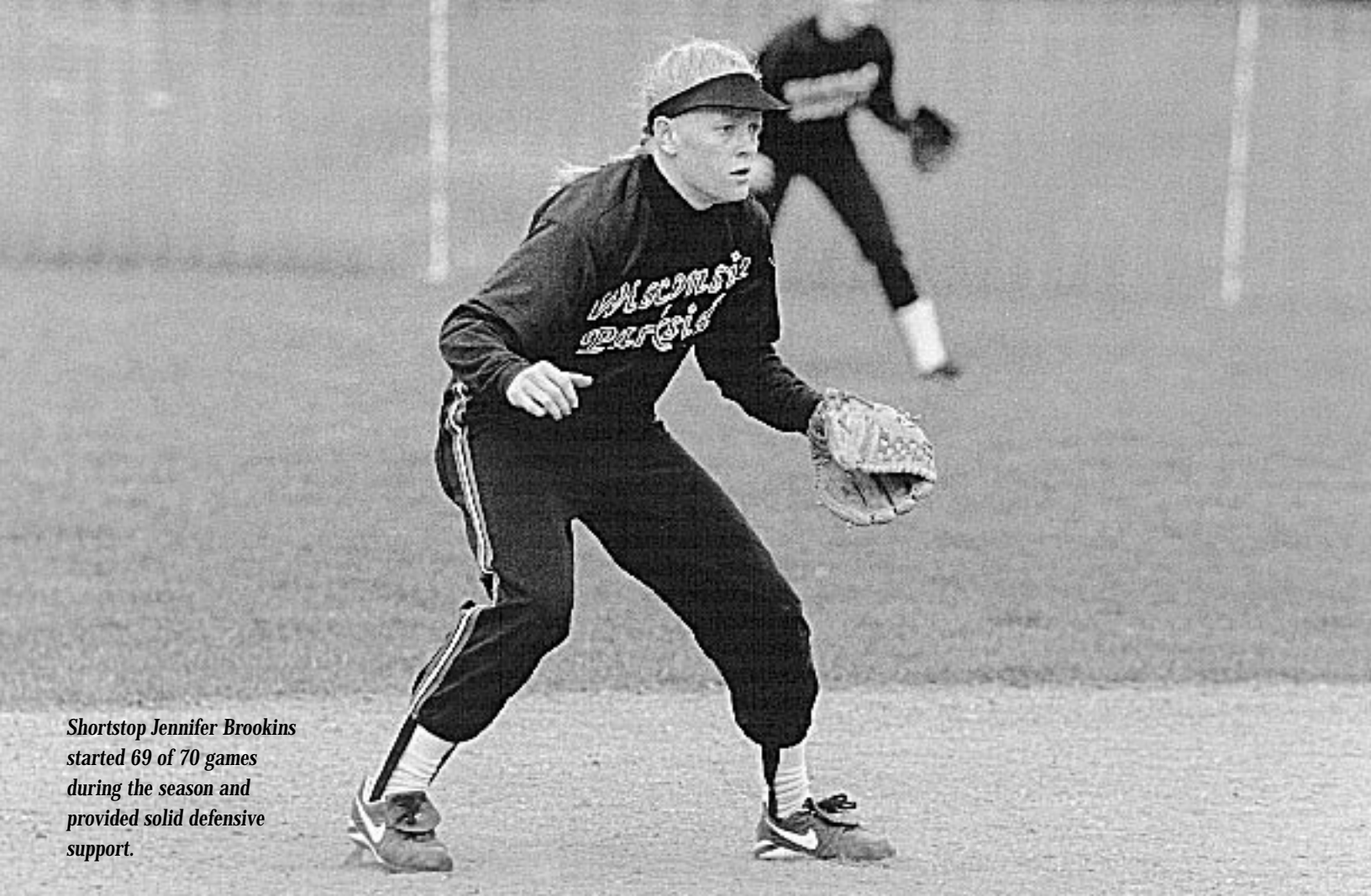
It was a bitter pill for a team widely expected to take home the big prize.

"We didn't get the hits we needed," Aiken said. "I don't want to blame it on the weather. You've got to learn to adjust. When you lose two games by one run, you couldn't have played all that bad." ►



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Catcher Bobbi Jo Kapla was named third team All-American in her second season. "She makes all our pitchers better," Coach Tory Acheson says. "She has a tremendous feel for what's going on."



Shortstop Jennifer Brookins started 69 of 70 games during the season and provided solid defensive support.

“EVERYONE KNOWS COMING IN WHAT OUR GOAL IS. ...THIS IS OUR YEAR.”

It was a tough season ender for Wolff, who finished a stellar 37-4 with 317 strikeouts. “Anything besides winning would have been disappointing,” she said. “We know we’re the best team in the nation. We decided if we’d won it, we wouldn’t have learned as much.”

Adding up the numbers

While the year ended in disappointment, it’s hard to ignore the statistics. The Rangers outscored their opponents 493-115. Aiken led the team with a .484 batting average, 16 home runs, 17 doubles, two triples and 86 runs batted in. Wolff pitched two perfect games and 15 shutouts. As a team, the Rangers shut out 26 opponents. They led the nation in many offensive categories.

Billi and Bobbi Jo Kapla, identical twins from Ashwaubenon High School, made a major impact in their second year. Bobbi Jo Kapla was named third team All-American after hitting .328 with 15 doubles and two triples. Billi Jo Kapla pitched her way to a 17-1 record and hit at a .367 clip with 17 doubles and 11 home runs. Billi blasted crucial home runs in both the GLVC title game and NCAA regional that helped propel the team to the national tournament.

“It’s a hard-working, talented group of kids,” Acheson said.

Winners in the classroom

The team also ranks high in academic talent. In 1996, the team finished fifth in NCAA Division II with an average grade point of 3.145 on a 4-point scale. The group is consistently ranked in the top 10 for academics.

Acheson says his athletes provide the “best of both worlds.”

On the van rides to and from games, Acheson said the older students help younger ones with class work. “They spend all their time helping each other,” he said.

While the coach quickly points to his players for the success of the program, his players give much of the credit to the coach.

“He’s so committed to making this a better program every year,” said Wolff, who played for Acheson at Whitnall High School. “It’s almost amazing to me where he can find the time. He’ll do whatever it takes.”

Aiken agreed.

“Coach is 125 percent devoted,” she said. “He has one goal and we will accomplish that goal. ... I think that’s what makes the difference — he believes.”

A new stadium

Probably the best example of the dedication is Acheson’s drive to build a new \$170,000 softball stadium. For years, the Rangers played in nearby Petrifying Springs Park, which doesn’t even have fencing and light poles sit dangerously close to the foul line. Lack of a home stadium kept the team from hosting tournament play in 1996.

The coach has hustled up free or discounted items for the complex. Case Corp. donated time and equipment over the summer to grade the field with heavy equipment. Sod was donated by another vendor. Acheson could be seen on the construction site day after day. The first of two fields will be ready for opening day in April 1997.



Infielder Nicky Durnin helps sod the field in the stadium.

Acheson is eager to end the days when the team had to erect portable outfield fences at Petrifying Springs just so the home runs would count. He eagerly anticipates hosting the GLVC championship.

“It was an embarrassment to have the No. 1 team in the country and be unable to host our own regional tournament,” he said. “It’s time for us to have a real facility.”

The current crop of talent has plenty of softball tradition from which to draw inspiration. The University has long been considered a quality program in college softball.

From 1981 to 1990, the Rangers went to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) championships eight times, finishing as high as fourth. Linda Draft, associate athletic director who coached softball from 1977 to 1991, gives Acheson credit for building on her teams’ successes.

“Tory deserves every piece of success he’s had because he works so hard,” Draft said. “When he came in, he had a tradition. He got them to another level.”

High hopes for 1997

How will the team fare in 1997? The conference MVP pitcher returns. The team will look to Aiken for power hitting, Billi Kapla for clutch hits and aggressive defense from Aiken at third and Jessie Johnson at second. In fact, the entire roster is back.

The team finished 19-2 in its short fall 1996 season, including a double-header sweep of the Division I University of Wisconsin.

“It’s more evidence to the quality of our program,” Acheson said of the wins over Wisconsin. “We’ve been telling people for a while we think we have the strongest program in Wisconsin.”

Aiken said the team is focused on getting back to the NCAA championship tournament. And winning it.

“It’s our last year. It’s our senior year,” she said. “This is our year. We’ve got to do it. We’ve got to do it.” ■



Getting the new stadium built and the field sodded was just another good team effort.