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At home at bat

April 01, 2009 | Eric Brown

Midway through the 2008 softball season, Liberty first baseman Beth Bennett walked over to coach Paul Wetmore and said, “You know, I don’t really want to graduate. I’m not ready to grow up.”

“I thought that was so cool,” Wetmore recalled.

The idea of a player like Bennett sticking around after graduation would intrigue any coach. Last season, she led the Lady Flames with a .328 batting average, 60 total hits, a .989 fielding percentage and a .409 on-base percentage. Now in her senior year, the co-captain is accepting God’s will with open arms.

“Being here at Liberty, I’ve realized that my calling is to be in the Christian camp ministry, she said. “It’s funny because I thought I was never going to be able to let go of softball.”

Since childhood, Bennett has immersed herself in the sport, playing softball practically year-round. While competing on a travel team in high school, Bennett’s coach recommended her to Wetmore. After seeing her in action, Wetmore offered the Powhatan, Va., native a spot on Liberty’s roster, where she has started every game of her collegiate career.

Following her freshman season, a teammate convinced Bennett to work at a Christian summer camp in Maryland. Blessed by the experience, she returns to the campground each summer and also plans to enroll in a yearlong internship with another Maryland-based ministry.

Bennett's passion for ministry became even stronger as she travelled to East Asia this past winter. She and senior pitcher Sarah Ellis journeyed overseas with Liberty University's Light Ministries, a department that offers short-term mission trips. During their stay, Bennett and Ellis interacted with children in orphanages and kindergartens, overcoming the language barrier as they shared Christ's love.

"We would get together with some of the other believers over there and not be able to speak the language," Bennett said. "It was like a glimpse of heaven because we were all worshipping the same Lord even though we didn't know each other's languages. That was so amazing to me."

Regarded by her coach as a clutch player, Bennett is known for making big plays in big games. At the 2007 Tar Heel Invitational in Chapel Hill, N.C., she sent a three-run shot sailing over left field, helping the Lady Flames capture third place with a 7-3 victory over Rutgers.

Bennett found the left field fence again in the Big South Championship semi-finals against Radford last season. With a 1-0 advantage over the Highlanders, the first baseman sealed the contest with a solo homer, advancing her team to the championship finals.

"Last year, she was one of our best hitters," Ellis said. "Her intensity and hard work really is contagious."

At the Seahawk Classic in 2006, Wetmore recalls a moment where Bennett's intensity shone through under extremely cold conditions. In a tightly contested matchup against host UNC Wilmington, the infielder made a diving catch near the Lady Flames dugout. As her teeth clenched together on the play, Wetmore feared Bennett would need the aid of a good dentist after the game.

"She never even shook," Wetmore said. "She just got up, threw the ball back and went back to play. That's the kind of player she is."

In her final season, Bennett hopes her team can capture its first Big South title since 2002, an achievement the senior believes would symbolize years of dedication. With an assembly of talented young players, the Lady Flames possess great potential.

"Just to go to the [Women's College World Series] in my senior year would be an awesome blessing," she said.

Regardless of what happens this spring, the veteran leader understands God is in control. Before arriving at Liberty, Bennett identified herself primarily as a softball player. These days, she views herself as an athlete on God's team, seeking His will, one play at a time.