

SPORTS WEEK

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For Lady Rams' Hargett, the best is yet to come



BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE
FOR THE CHRONICLE

Here's a chilling thought for CIAA softball teams. Mercedes Hargett is just beginning to scratch the surface of her potential in her second season at Winston-Salem State University (WSSU).

As a freshman a year ago, Hargett turned heads with scintillating performance as a starting pitcher who made the CIAA All-Tournament team. She posted a 14-8 record with 123 strikeouts (second in the conference in both categories). When Hargett wasn't pitching, she put in time as a catcher and played both corner positions in the infield.

This spring, she's putting up all-star-caliber numbers at the plate. At the start of this week, the sophomore from Havelock had a .366 batting average to go with a team-high 6 home runs and 21 RBIs.

Entering the final days of the regular season, Hargett the pitcher was 7-10 with a 4.38 ERA. Those are surprising numbers considering how she routinely handcuffs hitters. In 23 appearances, Hargett had 109 strikeouts, tops in the CIAA by a wide margin.

The win-loss numbers are somewhat misleading. Non-conference opponents have tagged Hargett for 23 home runs, but that's not the only factor to consider.

The Lady Rams haven't provided enough run support, and in too many instances, fielding errors have contributed heavily to losses in tightly-contested games. Against CIAA competition, though, it's a different story. Hargett was 3-1 with a 2.33 ERA and she's allowed only one home run all season.

"Over the years, we've developed a tradition of producing outstanding pitchers," said Coach LaTaya Hilliard-Gray of WSSU. "Mercedes will be part of that tradition. I have no doubts that she'll break some records by the time she's finished here. Yes, she has velocity, but what sets her apart is ball movement."

Hargett's repertoire consists of six pitches (fast ball, screw ball, curve, drop-pitch, riser and change-up). One advantage she has over opposing batters is her ability to accurately throw to different locations around the plate while throwing at varying speeds.

The most significant area of improvement for Hargett this season is at the plate. As a rookie, she struggled and stumbled through a season-long batting slump. Given her level of offensive production in 2015, it's hard to imagine that she hit .182 a season ago.

"There's always room to grow," said Hargett. "There's always some aspect of the game for me to work on and improve on. Right now, I'd say that my progress is decent."

Hargett's disappointments as a rookie hitter fueled her desire to improve dramatically. Last summer, she went back to the basics and eventually recaptured the form that helped her earn post-season accolades during her prep career.

When Hargett returned for her second season, Gray sensed that she would make good on her promise to come back a better hitter than when she left. This season, she's third in the batting order and has a team-leading slugging percentage of

See Hargett on B2

Mercedes Hargett leads the Lady Rams in home runs (6) and RBIs (21).
Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Rams' Roberts making the most of a second chance

BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE
FOR THE CHRONICLE

When outfielder Des Roberts arrived at Winston-Salem State at the start of the new year, he had no idea of what to expect in his new situation. Unforeseen circumstances had forced him to transfer from UNC Charlotte (UNCC), where he had established himself as a reliable starter.

Four months have passed since then, and it's clear that Roberts and the Rams have benefited from their union. The addition of Roberts to the lineup has produced handsome dividends for a WSSU team looking to repeat as CIAA champs and make a return to the NCAA playoffs next month.

Roberts, a redshirt senior who bats left and throws left, is hitting .311 with 28 RBIs and a team-high 12 doubles. It hasn't taken Roberts long to become a fixture in the top portion of the Rams batting order.

At times he hits in the lead-off spot. At other times he bats second or third in the lineup. As an outfielder, he's been close to flawless (no errors in the 41 games he's played in this season).

"Des came in and got acclimated to the team right away," said Coach Ken Ritsche of WSSU.

"He's very consistent and that's what we need from him. Not only is he a constant threat to get on base, but he drives in runs when those opportunities present themselves."

Roberts has produced at a relatively high level in spite of an ongoing wrist injury. Last fall, he had a bone removed from his right hand, but never went through a full recovery period. As a result, he's had to deal with ongoing pain and discomfort, which affected his swing earlier this season.

By mid-March, he had learned how to cope with pain where it would no longer hamper his ability to hit for average. During a 10-game stretch, he hit .433 with eight RBIs and upped his batting average by 65 points to .370.

"It all comes down to pain tolerance," said Roberts, who played two seasons at Garden City Community College (Kansas) before going to UNC Charlotte. "I had to learn how to get past the pain and play through it. My batting numbers would be better if it wasn't for the injury. But I'm hitting over .300, so I can't complain."

This final college season for Roberts almost never happened. Last November, he was accused



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

See Roberts on B2

Des Roberts' 12 doubles is a team high for the Rams.

Reagan High 400 sprinter is on a mission

BY CRAIG T. GREENLEE
FOR THE CHRONICLE

This could be the year when Chace Washington-Saunders finally gets answers to all of his "what if" questions. Over the past year, Reagan's top 400-meter sprinter has had his moments of glory. On the flip side, he's had his share of down times.

"I've gone through some humbling experiences," said Washington-Saunders, who's being recruited by Hampton University and N.C. A&T. "With the injuries I've had, I'm no longer boastful about my ability. This year I've run the fastest I've ever run and I feel like I can go faster. My confidence is high, but not to the point where it keeps me from staying humble."

Last spring, Washington-Saunders had the look of a legitimate state championship contender in his specialty. He was clearly among the top eight high school quarter-milers in North Carolina. But Washington-Saunders' vision for winning a title was crushed when he pulled a hamstring coming down the stretch of the 400 at the regional championships.

Washington-Saunders was hobbled, but still ran 49.1 seconds to finish fourth, which was good enough to qualify for the state. Pulled hamstrings do not heal in a week and it became painfully obvious in the biggest meet of the year. He clocked 51.43 for a 14th-place finish.

That's when the questions began to repeatedly bombard his thinking. What would have been the outcome if he had a healthy hamstring?

See Sprinter on B2



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Chace Washington-Saunders is No. 2 in NC Runners Class 4-A state rankings for the boys' 400-meter sprint.

WSSU's Aja Grant Selected As All-CIAA in Tennis

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

HAMPTON, VA — The Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) in conjunction with its Tennis Coaches Association has announced their selections for the 2015 Women's Tennis All-CIAA Team, Rookie of the Year and Player of the Year, and WSSU's Aja Grant has earned a spot on the All-CIAA Team.

Aja Grant (Fr, 5-2, Winston-Salem, N.C. / Reagan High), is 8-4 on the season in single competition, 7-4 in the CIAA. She is 8-2 in her last 10 contests. She has gone 7-5 in doubles on the season. She is the daughter of Vicki and Tim Grant.

Chowan University's Natalaya Kamenschchikova is Player of the Year for the second straight year. Johnson C. Smith's Kayla Roman is this year's Rookie of the Year.

A two-time player of the week, Kamenschchikova finished the regular season with an overall singles record of 18-5 from the #1 position. She went 12-1 in conference competition.

Roman's CIAA singles record was 6-0 from the #6 position.



Grant



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