

Softball's Sneak

By BOB WEINER

Great Danes' pitching ace
Andrea "Andee" Lindgren

Photos by Bob Ewell



Hush. Hush. The University at Albany softball team was keeping some big secrets from the rest of the America East Conference teams last spring. When the coaches gathered for their annual preseason meeting, they picked the Great Danes to finish sixth in the standings. No one expected UAlbany, in only its second year of league membership, to have even a remote chance to battle for the league title.

If they only knew what Head Coach Chris Cannata and her players knew, the America East coaches wouldn't have looked down their noses at the Great Danes. "I asked Coach Cannata early on why we were selected as the sixth seed, and she said we had one of the best teams in the conference," said UAlbany Athletic Director Lee McElroy. "We ended up being only one game away from the championship. We could have easily been in Fullerton [Calif.] for the College World Series, and yet everyone underestimated this team."

As it turned out, the Great Danes put together the best season in program history, compiling a

34-10 record, including a perfect 13-0 mark at home and a sparkling 17-4 record in the America East Conference. Albany stunned the rest of the conference and actually was one game away from winning the league title and an automatic berth in the NCAA tournament, before top-seeded Boston University rallied to beat the Great Danes in the conference tourney championship game.

What the rest of the league coaches didn't know was that Cannata's extremely young team was more gritty, and talented, than it looked. One of the main reasons was a California girl named Andrea "Andee" Lindgren, who gave up the West Coast lifestyle to become the Great Danes' pitching ace.

"This is not California," said the junior left-hander with a laugh. "I really wanted something different in my life. I had grown up in the Los Angeles area, and it was the same thing my whole life. I wanted a change. When I first came here, it was a rough beginning with the weather and the lifestyle differences. It was quite a change. Coming in from California, I thought I was going to struggle."

But the LaHabra, Calif., native did just the opposite. She posted a gaudy 20-6 record with a microscopic 1.18 earned run average. Lindgren, the America East Conference Pitcher of the Year, allowed only 119 hits in 172 innings. Even more remarkable was

Attack

the fact that she struck out a school-record 171 batters and walked just 40. "I just try to get people out. I don't care how," she said. "I never used to be a strikeout pitcher, but when I got to college, I started to learn the game. I got better and sharper with my control."

With Lindgren dominating on the mound and the Great Danes supporting her with solid defense, UAlbany only needed a few runs here and there to make the season a memorable one.



Maegan Larsen



Stacy Kowal

Maegan Larsen, a freshman infielder from Carteret, N.J., led the team with a .331 batting average and 24 RBI. Other top hitters included junior outfielder Liz Weiboldt (.297) from Port Jervis, Lindgren (.297), junior outfielder Jen Nolette (.291) from Columbia High School in East Greenbush, and catcher Stacy Kowal (.271) from Shelton, Conn., one of only two seniors on the team.

"Ranking us sixth was just a joke," said Lindgren. "They didn't know what we had. Our coach made it that way. It was the element of surprise. Now, people know how good we were. But we'll be even better next year."

Cannata, a former infielder for the Great Danes in the mid-1980s, has seen her program grow by leaps and bounds. She knew she had something special with this group, but she had no idea her team would come so close to the championship.

UAlbany's gritty, talented softball team compiled a historic 34-10 record, including a perfect 13-0 mark at home and a stunning 17-4 record in the America East Conference.

"We had a great recruiting class," she said. "I just knew that we had brought in so much talent that we had to improve. It was just a matter of how quickly we matured."

Cannata said the program didn't become a powerhouse overnight. "When I first came here, I was a player, and things were much different," she said. "Then, when I came back as the head coach, we were in our last year of Division III. When we moved

Go Great Danes



to Division II, we were already putting everything in the works for our move to Division I. It has always been a stepping stone to the next level ever since I've been here. We have always been playing catch-up. We have always been in transition. It has been a long process, and not an overnight success."

More than a month after the America East Conference tournament, Kowal, one of the team captains, was still feeling the disappointment of coming so close to Albany's first NCAA tournament berth in softball. "We had a great year, and we really came a long way," she said. "I was in Coach Cannata's first Division I recruiting class, and I never thought we would come this far, this quickly. I will miss all the girls, but I'll be watching them. I'm sure they will win the title next year."

"In my opinion, this has been a championship year for us all the way around," said McElroy. "We won titles in football, track and men's lacrosse. I also consider softball a championship year, because we were in the [conference] championship game. We have a very bright future with this program."

Bob Weiner, B.A.'83, is a sports writer for the Daily Gazette in Schenectady, N.Y.