

## Devoted to softball

### Love of the game motivates Michigan star Ritter

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Jennie Ritter collapsed from the dizziness and wept.

Ritter had never thrown a pitch for the University of Michigan softball team, and at that moment she wasn't sure she ever would.

"It was scary because my first thought was: 'Oh my gosh. I'm going to be like this forever,' " she said. "It was a good realization that if I ever get (my ability) back, I'm going to do something with it."

Oosterbaan Fieldhouse was the setting. Tracking the Michigan freshman's progress back from a bout with vertigo was the goal. Ritter developed the balance disorder in October of 2002. By the holiday break in December, when she ventured into Oosterbaan to throw with her father, John, she hoped it was nearing an end.

It wasn't.

That day, she fell to the turf after a few pitches. She still couldn't walk in a straight line. At the mall with her mother and sister, she had to hold onto her mother's arm so she wouldn't drift away. She had an infection in the back of her brain that led to nerve damage. It was similar, doctor's told her, to the feeling someone gets when he or she is inebriated. She woke up every morning with a headache, and she lost at least 20 pounds.

Ritter, a Dexter High School graduate, knew in seventh grade she wanted to play softball for Michigan. She wasn't ready to quit before she threw her first pitch.

She still loved the game.

"I didn't want to give it up," said the current senior, who will lead the host Wolverines against Youngstown State in an NCAA Regional opener at 7 tonight. "Regardless of whether I was doing well before that, I was not ready to give it up. It really made me want to work harder and get back."

Ritter worked through rehabilitation exercises three times a day for weeks to get other nerves surrounding the nerve to compensate, since it was beyond repair. Just in time for the freshman season, Ritter made it back.

### **Just like Griffin**

Back, however, was not going to be good enough if her career was going to turn into what it has.

Although she had possessed a rocket of a right arm since beginning to play softball as an 11-year-old, Ritter needed to be more like Sara Griffin, a three-time first team All-American for the Wolverines in the 1990s. Ritter always had idolized Griffin - she still has a picture of Griffin in her room. Griffin holds Michigan's all-time wins record and is tied with Ritter for all-time shutouts.

Griffin was mean, and Ritter wasn't going to be like Griffin until she, too, learned to be mean. During a fall game (before vertigo) against Syracuse her freshman year, Ritter gave up a grand slam in the first inning and another run in the second before being pulled. "That was the worst performance I have ever had in my life," Ritter said. "I thought, 'Wow, I really need a lot of work.' "

She said she finally developed an edge at the beginning of her junior season. That was evident in watching last year's first-team All-America campaign and victorious shutdown performance at the Women's College World Series.

That attitude has guided Ritter to a Michigan record 1,134 strikeouts - more than 200 ahead of Marissa Young's No. 2 mark. Griffin is third at 602, and Ritter could more than double that mark if Michigan plays deep enough into the postseason.

"What made Griffin great is what makes Ritter great," Michigan coach Carol Hutchins said. "They're competitive. 'I have the ball. You don't get to win.' You want a kid who wants the ball and wants to beat you. I like her when she gets a little mad at the batter. When the batter steps out or tries to play a mind game with her. Then I know the batter's toast."

### **Tough at an early age**

While Ritter may look menacing and fiery between the lines, she is a somewhat innocent, endearing young woman who will stop any conversation to sign an autograph or take a picture with a young fan.

Ritter's middle school softball coach Jami Bronson, now a principal at Mill Creek Middle School, said even if Ritter had never done great things in softball, she'd still look to her as a role model for the current students.

The contrast between the on-the-field focused superstar and the off-the-field bashful engineering major became obvious when she was 14. One day while playing for a team in the prestigious Compuware program, she was throwing 60 mph - atypical for a girl that age - and one batter didn't get out of the way.

She ducked and turned her face away, but it wasn't enough. Ritter's pitch fractured the batter's cheekbone. The girl dropped to the dirt. The police department was called. The fire department, too. An ambulance followed. Not knowing that early teenage pitchers don't always have the control and command of a Big Ten Pitcher of the Year, opposing parents didn't let Ritter hear the end of it.

"You did that on purpose," they screamed. "Take that evil girl out of the game," they yelled.

There she was. All alone in the pitching circle while the batter was taken away, and all she could do was concentrate on the next hitter.

Strike three ended the next at-bat.

Ritter kept it together the rest of the game, but when it was over she broke down and cried. She found the batter and made sure she would be OK. Ritter couldn't believe anyone would think she'd do something like that on purpose. She understood her talent, and she would never abuse it.

"That kind of summarizes my personality," Ritter said. "After the game I'd feel terrible, but during the game I just say: 'Well I have to be tough. Whether I did that or not, she got in the way.' "

### **Love and hate**

Pat Brower believed in Ritter the one time she didn't believe in herself.

The highly respected pitching coach saw her pitch as a 13-year-old. He saw a fluid motion and great intensity, and he just happened to be talking to her father, John.

"Hey, why don't you let me talk to her," Brower asked him.

The timing turned out to be perfect. That summer was the one time Ritter did not love the game.

She played for a travel team that was more interested in developing hometown talent than giving a future high school rival a chance to play. Ritter was the best pitcher on the team, but after striking out 18 in the first game of the season, she didn't pitch again until the last game.

Ritter wanted to quit. Brower may have saved her career.

Under Brower, Ritter developed what he described as an impeccable form that even college greats like Texas' Cat Osterman and Arizona's Alicia Hollowell don't have. It allows Ritter to throw a large number of pitches in one day without hurting her arm.

Ritter made the Compuware team the next summer and played for an 18-under Gold Fast-pitch team the summer after that. At the Gold Nationals, Ritter was one of two 15-year-old pitchers in the field. The other was Osterman, an Olympic gold medalist and two-time collegiate player of the year.

She loved the game again just like her father always taught her, and that is what was most important.

"It's one thing that I've always taken to heart," she said. "I could quit or I could learn to love it. When you love the game, you play better."

### **Memories and the future**

She walks toward the left-field fence along the foul line at the old Dexter High School field. Last week's rain has turned the outfield into an unplayable mess.

"I remember this," she starts. "The field still drains in the same place."

Ritter has a lot of memories of this field. Painting the dugouts Dreadnaught brown and yellow, raking the infield, pulling weeds.

That left-field fence is where her friends hung all the 'K' signs. Her teachers always hung out behind the centerfield fence. The right-field bleachers are long gone now that a new high school has been built.

She remembers the time her team earned a rare victory over Tecumseh. She struck out most of the Indians that day, and the opposing coach grew furious at his players. Another time the Dexter coach didn't say a thing and just let the girls coach themselves to teach them a thing or two about leadership.

Ritter hopes to use her leadership to do big things. Her ideal plan involves playing softball for as long as she can, winning an Olympic gold medal and eventually opening up a warehouse for softball players in the Midwest. She'll teach them to trust themselves, to pitch with an edge and to work hard every day until they have accomplished all their goals.

Maybe she'll settle in Dexter. Maybe somewhere else. Wherever it is, she wants to give girls a chance to succeed like she has without sacrificing high character. Most of all, she wants to teach them to love the game, because that's why she plays.

And why - 31/2 years ago - she knew she had to get up off that turf at Oosterbaan Fieldhouse and move forward.

Nothing was going to keep her down.

"Love the game for the pure joy of accomplishment," she wrote in her senior speech to the team and fans. "Love the game for everything it can teach you about yourself. Love the game so much you will pass on your love of the game to another athlete who has seen your dedication, your work, your challenges, your triumphs ... and then that athlete will, because of you, love the game."

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