

Ritter one of the best to wear a Michigan uniform

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If softball were football, Jennie Ritter would be Tom Harmon, a singular talent who may never come along again. All anyone would be talking about this week is whether she'd close out her University of Michigan career with a second national title.

If softball were basketball, Ritter would be Glen Rice, a Michigan native and one of the few athletes who has willed her team to a championship. If you think either statement hyperbole, at least consider the possibility they might even be understatements.

Michigan was already a football power when Harmon - who won the Heisman Trophy, but never a national title - came along. Rice didn't have to play the first half of the season on the road en route to the Final Four.

Softball is not football, of course, or even basketball, and Ritter will never have the fame or acclaim of either Harmon or Rice.

But now, with the All-America pitcher in the final two weeks of her career, is a good moment to pause and consider how amazing the last 16 or so months have been.

Ritter wasn't a national-level recruit out of Dexter High School, and at the beginning of 2005, she wasn't even the undisputed No. 1 pitcher for the Michigan softball team.

Four months later, she was the biggest reason why the Wolverines had become the first team east of the Mississippi River to win the Women's College World Series.

What happened?

That's the most interesting part, Michigan softball coach Carol Hutchins said Wednesday. Ritter simply demanded more of herself, and then every time she got it, demanded even more, until the results spoke for themselves.

"She and Lorilyn Wilson were battling back and forth for that one spot," Hutchins said. "It drove Wilson. She had a great first half of the season, and it fired Ritter up. Jennie just went to a whole other level.

"You learn a lot from your kids. Ritter has really taught me a lot about the power of belief. She doesn't make excuses. Her mental game is what went to the next level. All kids have that capability, very few actually make the decision and allow it to happen. She's just all heart out there. Sometimes, she wins because she won't lose."

Never was that more obvious than a year ago in the national title game against UCLA.

Pitching her seventh game in seven days, with the national title on the line, Ritter refused to break, even as the game went into extra innings. In the ninth inning, with the bases loaded and the game tied 1-1, she found a way to escape. The following inning, after Samantha Findlay's home run gave Michigan a 4-1 lead, she retired the side for the title.

This season the senior has been so good - 30-6 with a 0.64 earned run average - that a spot on the 2008 Olympic team is suddenly a real possibility.

And the moments just keep on coming.

Sunday, against Oklahoma, she struck out a school-record 19 to lift Michigan into the NCAA Tournament Super Regionals. She'll take the mound Saturday at Tennessee needing to beat the Volunteers twice to return to the WCWS.

No matter what happens from here, odds are there won't ever be another Jennie Ritter.

Hutchins isn't ready to concede that, though. She thinks the ultimate lesson in Ritter's success is that anyone who wants success badly enough can find it if they're willing to keep pushing themselves.

"But few choose to," Hutchins said. "I was really concerned she wasn't going to have what it took mentally, but watching her go through that process and develop into one of the premier mentally tough power pitchers has been a lesson to me.

"All kids start soft. They're soft-minded. (But) all kids have this capability, that's what she's taught me. Going through this process with Ritter has made me a better coach."

That, incidentally, is the winningest coach in Michigan sports history admitting Ritter has literally changed the way she approaches her job.

The run will end in the next two weeks, maybe against Tennessee, maybe at the World Series, maybe with Ritter at the bottom of a pile of Wolverines celebrating an even more unlikely national title repeat.

Whatever happens, take a moment to watch.

Don't overlook greatness just because it doesn't wear a helmet or play in the NCAA Tournament.

Don't miss out on one of the best to ever wear a Michigan uniform.

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