



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Battle Ground graduate Dana Schumacher splits pitching duties on the Clark College softball team with Castle Rock grad Sam Watkins.

More Than Moral Victories

Clark College softball team takes aim at playoffs

By PAUL DANZER
Columbian staff writer

When Beth Hesketh hit her first home run this season for the Clark College softball team, she hurried around the bases.

"I sprinted around the bases as fast as I could because I couldn't believe it," she said. "It felt like I barely hit the ball."

Someone explained to her when she got back to the dug-out that she didn't have to be in such a hurry.

But Hesketh and her teammates on the Clark College softball team aren't a patient bunch.

Though all of them are freshmen, these Penguins have made some noise this spring.

Sure, Clark sits at the bottom



Heritage graduate Beth Hesketh works at a day care center in the morning and hits home runs for Clark in the afternoons.

of its division with a 2-6 record entering home doubleheaders today and Saturday at Hudson's Bay High School. But with an overall mark of 18-16, this team has won more games in 2009 than the program won in its first three seasons combined.

That might sound like progress, and it is. But it is lost on the players.

"These kids don't care about last year," head coach Kasey Powers said. "This is their team, and they couldn't care less about our past."

Aware of it or not, with 12 games left, the Penguins have left that past in the dust. They are likely to reach their goal of winning at least 20 games.

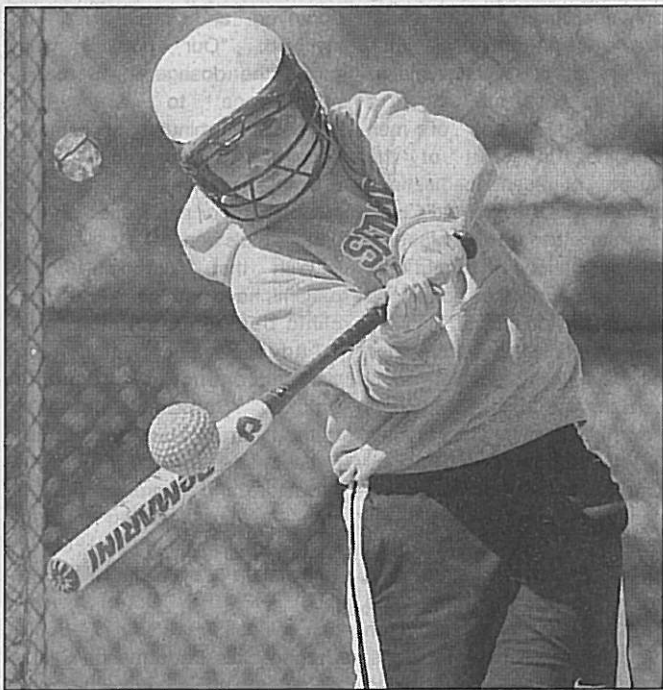
They also are chasing goals of finishing better than .500 for the season, and making the NWAACC playoffs. Win six more games, and they just might break through as one of the South Division's four NWAACC playoff entries.

That would be real progress.

After the Penguins finished 8-34 last spring, Powers told the freshman starters that they probably would be role players if they returned in 2009.

More than skills, the coach said he wanted players who were committed to their education and to their sport.

"I think the biggest thing we wanted is a mindset where their priorities are school,



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Sam Watkins is one of two Clark College softball players who are from Castle Rock.

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softball, and then other things," Powers said.

The coach has that this season. He said at least four of his players work full-time, but schedule their jobs around softball and school.

Hesketh, a Heritage graduate who works at Little Lights Learning Center day care, is one of those. Her workday begins at 6:30 a.m. There is softball in the afternoon, followed by online courses or homework in the evening.

In addition to hitting four home runs — the result of a new stance — Hesketh said an 8-2 win at Mt. Hood on April 14 was particularly satisfying because the Saints are an established program that also recruited her.

When Clark added softball in the spring of 2006, the expectation was that the program would

soon thrive given the high caliber of high school fastpitch in Southwest Washington.

But recruiting against successful nearby programs proved difficult. Lower Columbia in Longview has won nine of the last 10 NWAACC softball championships, and Mt. Hood and Clackamas have winning traditions.

Also, Powers noted that the Oregon community colleges are allowed to grant full tuition waivers for athletes, while Clark has \$15,000 per year for softball scholarships.

Six of the 12 players currently with the Penguins hail from Clark County. Clark also has two players from Castle Rock and two from Toutle Lake.

Pitcher Sam Watkins — who splits pitching duties with Battle Ground grad Dana Schumacher — is from Castle Rock. But Watkins has been coached by Dale Ogden and spent plenty of time at the Vancouver Girls Softball Association. She said she

is happy with the opportunity to play softball at Clark.

But she isn't satisfied with winning only half of the games.

"We all know we have so much potential," Watkins said. "But when it comes to game time, sometimes we don't play up to our potential and that's frustrating."

Powers is glad his young team isn't satisfied despite the vast improvement in the program's results. But the coach is proud that this team has already scored more runs and has more hits than any previous Clark squad.

And, no matter how the final 12 games go, the positives from this season provide promise for real success sooner than later.

It can't come quickly enough for Hesketh.

"I do not think we've played at our potential," Hesketh said. "Our record doesn't show how good we could be.

"We have a lot of freshmen and we're new to this. We need to get the nervousness out of the way."

Did you know?

■ The Clark College softball team is 18-16 overall, 2-6 in NWAACC South.

■ **Upcoming games:** 3 and 6 p.m. today against Clackamas and Saturday against Mt. Hood. Both doubleheaders at Hudson's Bay High School.

■ **At stake:** Clark (2-6) needs to finish in the top four of the South Division to make the NWAACC tournament. With 12 games left, a 6-6 record might be good enough.

■ **Batting leaders:** Valerie Noble .418 batting average; Stormi Gren Dahl .364, 24 RBI, 12 doubles; Lacey Franklin .351, 25 RBI.

■ **Pitching:** Dana Schumacher 8 wins, 3.23 ERA, 27 games, 67 strikeouts, 115 innings pitched; Sam Watkins 9 wins, 4.08 ERA 23 games, 67 strikeouts, 90 innings pitched.