

Heart and soul

Lady Badgers turn to senior Stacey Dickens for leadership as they prepare for area round of playoffs

By CLAY WHITTINGTON
Staff Writer

Chris Gaffney refused to use the word. He did not want to tarnish the meaning. So, for years, the Lady Badgers' head softball coach avoided using the term like it was tainted with the plague. He was reserving it for someone

special. He was reserving it for Stacey Dickens.

To him, she is the "definition of heart." "If you watch ESPN, you see [players thump their chests] and people will say, 'Oh, you've got to have heart,' or 'This player has heart,'" Gaffney said. "I think it's lost its significance because it's overused. 'I've never used it because I've

saved using the term 'heart' to describe Stacey."

Ironically, Dickens -- the team's lone senior -- suffered her share of heartache before becoming the heartbeat of the Lady Badgers. Injuries continuously impede her career.

She opened her senior season nicked up after damaging her ACL during select ball. As a junior, Dickens sought the counseling of numerous doctors and chiropractors while battling through a painful back injury that limited her mobility. The condition has yet to be diagnosed.

The most daunting injury, however, came before her first varsity game as a freshman when Dickens took a softball to the face while working on fielding skills. The impact broke her nose and began a trend of recurring headaches that haunt her still.

But Dickens refuses to succumb to the adversity.

"I've always gone by [the phrase] 'whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger,'" she said. "I think it has made me stronger."

The headaches occur almost daily and can be more powerful than any medicine. While the pain sometimes reduces her workload during practices, nothing is capable of reducing Dickens' importance to the team.

She is the only remaining link between today's Lady Badgers and the last team to reach the postseason. Lampasas won its opener against Waxahachie in 2006, but lost in the area round against Ennis.

Dickens -- a freshman at the time -- was the baby chick among a group of upperclassmen who took her under their wings.

Now, she has a different role. "They call me their mother hen," Dickens said of her teammates. "It meant a lot to me that they [made

me] a part of them [during my freshman year], and now it really feels awesome to be a leader."

Outside of the senior, the Lady Badgers team consists of three freshmen and seven sophomores.

But the relative immaturity of the squad ceases to slow it down.

Lampasas ranks as the 11th best Class 4A team in the state and already has an impressive playoff victory under its belt.

Last Friday, the Lady Badgers (24-5, 9-1 District 25-4A during regular season) defeated Austin Travis 11-1 in five innings. Dickens recorded a pair of RBIs in the run-rule victory.

Tonight, Lampasas looks to take another step toward the state tournament when it begins a three-game series against San Antonio Burbank (19-14 regular season) at home. Game one is set for 7 p.m.

Game two is in San Antonio at the Spring Sports Complex Saturday at 4 p.m., with game three to follow at 7 p.m., if necessary.

The Lady Bulldogs defeated Alamo Heights in a three-game series last weekend to advance.

With every game increasing in importance, there is no doubt Gaffney will continue to rely heavily on his sole senior to serve as an on-field extension of himself.

"I know that I can always turn to her, and I'll be honest with her," the coach said. "I'll say, 'Hey, I'm



Every round of the playoffs potentially could be Dickens' last time in a Lady Badger uniform -- the uniform she sacrifices for daily.

In addition to the chronic aches and pains of playing softball, Dickens has relinquished her position on more than one occasion due to her versatility. Prior to this season, she made the switch from shortstop to left field.

"You can't ask for more than that. You can't ask for someone to be more unselfish than that," Gaffney said. "I've always respected that about her because I know it couldn't have been easy."

When Dickens' last game concludes, she hopes to be in Austin with a state championship trophy in hand. Even if her career does not end in

concerned about our mental approach to this,' or 'I'm concerned about how the younger ones are reacting to this situation. Show them how to do it; show them how we do things.'"

And she does. But it will not last much longer.

fairytale fashion, she plans to use every remaining opportunity to give everything she has.

"I think about [the end of my career] sometimes," Dickens said. "But I just play my heart out."

Not surprising, considering she is the definition of the word.



PHOTOS BY RICHARD AKRIDGE

Above: Stacey Dickens makes a catch in left field at Marble Falls earlier this season. Right: Dickens takes in the atmosphere of the Lady Badgers' home playoff game against Austin Travis last Friday.

Off to the races

Seven Lampasas High School athletes will compete in the Region IV-4A track meet today at Alamo Stadium in San Antonio. Qualifiers include Aaron Reyna (long jump), Brode DuBose (shot put), Kooper Liverman (110-meter hurdles and 300 hurdles), Kelby Jones (pole vault), Andrea White (shot put and discus), Lauren Barlow (discus) and Jessica Sterling (pole vault). Field events begin at 9 a.m. with running preliminaries starting at 4 p.m. Running finals get under way at 2 p.m. Saturday afternoon. Right: Liverman clears the first hurdle in the 110 hurdles at the regional qualifiers meet in Fredericksburg on April 24.



PHOTO BY RICHARD AKRIDGE

FRIDAY'S SCHEDULE OF EVENTS FOR LHS

Pole Vault - 9 a.m. (girls), 11:30 a.m. (boys)
Shot Put - 9 a.m. (girls), 11:30 a.m. (boys)
Long Jump - 9 a.m. (boys)
Discus - 11:30 a.m. (girls)
110 Hurdles - 5:05 p.m.
300 Hurdles - 6:45 p.m.

Send-off

The Lady Badgers will take a celebratory lap around the town square prior to departing for San Antonio Saturday. The team will leave from LHS at 11 a.m., travel north on Key Avenue and circle the town square before heading south on U.S. Highway 281. Fans are encouraged to line the streets.

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