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ABAC Softball Coach Treasures Memories of National Championship

TIFTON—Retiring after 20 years of coaching women’s softball at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, Donna Campbell has saved up a treasure chest of memories. The gold nugget in that collection came in her very first year.

“Coming into an established program and winning the national championship has to be right up there,” Campbell said. “When I got the job I had never seen an ABAC team play before.”

“I had already decided to be the women’s assistant basketball coach at Georgia College,” Campbell said. “I love basketball almost as much as softball. Then I came down here and talked to Coach (Wayne) Cooper. He offered me the opportunity to teach and be the head coach.”

The rest of the story will go down in ABAC athletics history. The 1996 Fillies rolled up a 44-12 record and defeated Meridian (Miss.) Community College for the national championship. Campbell almost missed being on the bench for the national title game.

“On the final day, Meridian had to beat us twice because we were undefeated in the tournament,” Campbell said. “In the first game, I got thrown out because I argued the strike zone with the umpire. Coach Cooper and I watched the game from behind the concession stand at E.B. Hamilton Park.”

Meridian won the game. Campbell returned to the bench for the second game which resulted in an ABAC victory and the national championship. She only got tossed out of one more game in the next 19 years at ABAC.

“I thought I had made a huge mistake,” Campbell said. “Here I am getting thrown out, and we have a chance to win the championship. I fell in love with ABAC that first year. I was still playing competitively so I was just a kid coaching younger kids. We would practice for hours just because we wanted to.”
After winning the national title, Campbell led the ABAC conversion to fast-pitch softball in 1997. There was only one problem. She knew next to nothing about coaching fast-pitch.

“The internet was just getting started, so I actually typed in fast-pitch softball,” Campbell said with a laugh. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I did know we needed a pitcher so I recruited a couple from the Atlanta area.”

After packing the ABAC fall schedule with teams from Florida because those colleges were already well into the fast-pitch era, Campbell realized her existing mound staff was not going to be able to carry the load.

“I found a recruiting site on the internet and said I was looking for a fast-pitch pitcher to come to our college in January,” Campbell said. “Believe it or not, that’s how we connected with Jennifer McCarthy.”

On a December day in 1996 with the campus deserted until the winter quarter, McCarthy and her dad pulled up in the ABAC parking lot. Campbell coaxed the team’s catcher, Anna Schell, to leave her Fitzgerald home and see what the Canadian had to offer. Magic happened.

“Jennifer taught us the fast-pitch game,” Campbell said. “For the next two years, if her name was on the lineup card, ABAC was going to win. She struck out 12 or 14 batters a game.”

Campbell rates McCarthy and Jackie Moore from Columbus as the best pitchers ever to wear the green-and-gold. Moore won 42 games in two years and catapulted the Fillies to fifth and ninth place finishes in the national tournament.
ABAC dominated the league, winning five fast-pitch state championships in the next six years including three straight in 2000, 2001, and 2002. The Fillies had four top 16 finishes in the national tournament.

Campbell coached at The Westfield Schools in Perry for nine years before she came to ABAC. In 29 years, her teams recorded 753 wins and 494 losses. Her final team of Fillies won the regular season state title this year with a record of 26-12 and finished second in the state tournament. Now she steps away from the game.

“‘It’s a little scary but I’m content,’” Campbell said. ‘I will still be teaching health and wellness classes. And I will be ABAC softball’s biggest fan behind the scenes.’”

What will she miss the most?

“No question that I will miss the camaraderie with the players,” Campbell said as her eyes misted up. ‘There’s nothing like sitting around with your players just talking about life and ball.”

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