

'95 Otters attained perfection

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Pattie Candon gives her softball team a talk during their winning game over Fair Haven Union High School in 2018.
File photo by Robert Layman

The 1995 Otter Valley softball team started the season with a perfect game and ended it with a perfect record.

It was Apryle Pickering firing that perfect game on April 1 against Burr and Burton in Manchester.

Most no-hitters or perfect games require a saving defensive play and this one was no different. Burr and Burton played its games in the vicinity of where its turf field is now and the right fielder always battled a notorious sun.

A high fly ball had OV right fielder Charlene Bonsignore yelling, "I can't see it."

Center fielder Meaghan Brown made a mad dash to help Bonsignore out and caught the ball on the run.

"Meaghan was so fast and her first step was so fast," said Pattie Candon, the OV coach that season.

That was one of three perfect games that Pickering threw over her career at Otter Valley.

Nearly all teams that go unbeaten have some close calls. One of Otter Valley's was a 1-0 victory over Mill River in which Pickering out dueled Sarah Marzalek-Kelly. Each team had two hits.

Mount Anthony came to Brandon late that season and both teams were unbeaten.

"It was a championship atmosphere," Candon said.

Becky Palmer, who is related to current Otter Valley athletic director Steven Keith, was pitching for MAU that day.

The Otters scored five runs in the first on the way to a 7-1 victory.

The state championship game pitted the Otters against Randolph. The Galloping Ghosts were coached by Allen Stewart who relished putting pressure on the defense with his bunt-and-run game.

The Otters gave the Ghosts some of their own medicine when Brown got a two-strike bunt down to score a run. The Otters went on to a 2-0 victory, one of Candon's four state championships.

Pickering's four-year record for the Otters was 50-9. The victims of her other perfect games were Springfield in 1996 and Milton in 1997.

During the 1995 campaign, she struck out 74 against only nine walks.

The softball field at Otter Valley is named for Candon. She amassed a record of 347-236. Her 1995 team started a 26-game winning streak.

She is in multiple Halls of Fame including the Castleton University HOF, the Northeast Women's Hall of Fame and the Vermont Principals' Association Hall of Fame.

The 18-0 Otters batted .361 that year and were led by Lacey French at .455 and Brown at .433. Emily LaRock, an outstanding catcher, batted .404.

French went on to be the head coach for the Union College field hockey team for nine seasons. She had also been an All-American field hockey player at Skidmore College.

It wasn't just the hitting, though. Candon said this was a team that had the whole package — hitting, pitching and defense.

Some of that defense was provided by Jodie Rawson.

“She had a cannon. She could throw a strike to the plate from any outfield position,” Candon said.

Today she is Jodie Keith and the OV varsity field hockey coach.

Brown had an outstanding career in basketball and softball at Johnson State. She was inducted into Johnson’s Hall of Fame in 2005, only five years after graduating.

Candon is taking no credit for Brown’s two-strike bunt that plated a run against Randolph.

“I never told Meaghan Brown what to do at the plate or on the bases,” Candon said.

“We had a lot of good players who had played together for so long, We had a lot of fun playing softball,” Jodie Keith said.

“There was something about Ms. Candon that made you want to get better.

“The biggest thing is that we never realized that we were on a path to an undefeated season. We played every game to win and it just sort of happened.”

Amity Clifford was the other pitcher behind Pickering that year. Clifford went on to coach high school field hockey at Fair Haven and Otter Valley.

It might not be a coincidence that Keith, Clifford-Robichaud and French all wound up coaching field hockey.

That sport is also one of Candon’s passions and she is still active as a field hockey official.

Jodie Keith’s Otter Valley field hockey team will be reporting for that first formal practice on Aug. 19. The Otter Valley coach would love for her field hockey Otters to capture even a slice of the magic of that 1995 Otter Valley softball team that she played on.