Written by steve ostermann
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Grafton outfielder, Port catcher among the best in talent-laden conference

In a softball league filled with outstanding players, earning a top spot in postseason honors is a tough task.

Two local juniors — Grafton's Lauren Lennon and Port Washington's Mikayla Hilton — both passed the test with flying colors this season by receiving All-North Shore Conference first-team accolades.

Lennon was chosen as one of the league's top three outfielders in the coaches voting, and Hilton was named the top catcher.

Lennon earned first-team recognition for the second straight year for her strong all-around play. She had the league's eighth-best batting average at .463 and led the NSC with 21 steals.

She had a .732 slugging average, scored 18 runs and drove in 10 runs.

"Our plan was to get Lauren on base and have her score, and she did that most of the time," said Grafton coach Ken Hunt, whose team tied for third place in the conference with an 8-6 record.

"She actually struggled early in the season, for the first four or five games, but then came on strong the rest of the way."

Hilton was one of the conference's top hitters and led Port in virtually every offensive category. She hit .468, sixth-best in league play, and had a .872 slugging average with four homers, five doubles and 19 RBI.

Hilton, who received honorable mention in all-league voting last year, developed into one of the Pirates' most reliable players.

"The last two years, Mikayla has gotten better and better," said Port coach Steve Schmit, whose squad was fifth with a 6-8 league mark.

"Hopefully, she will be even better next season and be another key player for us again."

Three Grafton players were named to the all-conference second team: pitcher Amanda Hunt and infielders Sheena Croatt and Amber Tanski.

Hunt, a sophomore, posted a 4-5 record with a 3.33 earned-run average. She struck out 63 batters in 65 innings and had nine complete games.

Hunt, who received honorable mention last season, was also Grafton's leading hitter. She batted .469, fourth-best in the conference, and had a .612 slugging average, drove in 14 runs and stole nine bases.

"Amanda had a very good season, and she's still young," coach Hunt said of his daughter.

Croatt and Tanski, both seniors, gave Grafton two of the conference's steadiest infielders.

Croatt batted .302, had 13 RBI and tied for second in the league with 13 steals. As a first baseman, her 109 putouts were the second-most in the conference.

"She was really solid around the bag," coach Hunt said.

Tanski, an All-NSC first-team pick last year, had another excellent season at shortstop. She hit .400 and shared second in the conference with 13 steals.

"Amber did well despite missing most of the second half of the season with an injury," her coach said.

Receiving honorable mention were four Grafton players, pitcher Emmy Kabitzke, catcher Sarah Fischer, infielder Taylor Thiede and utility player Kate Lennon; and three Port players, pitcher Ali Bichler, infielder Stephanie Volesky and utility player Jill VandeBoom.

Kabitzke, a sophomore, had a 4-1 record in limited duty. In 31 innings, she struck out 20 and had a 2.26 ERA. She also batted .266 with nine RBI.

Fischer, a junior, hit .353 with 10 RBI and nine steals. A workhorse behind the plate, she caught every inning this season, her coach said.

Thiede, a junior second baseman, batted .333 and scored 14 runs. A reliable defensive player, she had 22 assists.

Lennon, a junior, hit .276 and had eight steals while playing a variety of infield and outfield positions.

Bichler, a senior, was an all-league second-team selection last year but was slowed this season by a back injury. She had a 6-4 record and 2.14 ERA in 59 innings, striking out 27.

Bichler also excelled at the plate and batted .474, third best in the conference.

Volesky, a junior, was one of the area's best defensive first baseman. She had 71 putouts and no errors in conference game. She hit .178, scored 10 runs and had five RBI.

VandeBoom, a senior, batted .242 with eight runs and five steals as an outfielder, catcher and pitcher. She scored eight runs.

Champion Germantown (14-0) and runner-up Homestead (12-2) dominated the all-conference voting.

Germantown had four first-team picks, including pitcher Lauren Renard, who shared Player of the Year honors with Homestead pitcher Rachel Behnken.

Behnken was one of Homestead's three first-team selections.

Image Information: GRAFTON OUTFIELDER Lauren Lennon (left) and Port Washington catcher Mikayla Hilton (right) received All-North Shore Conference first-team honors in a recent vote of coaches. Photos by Sam Arendt