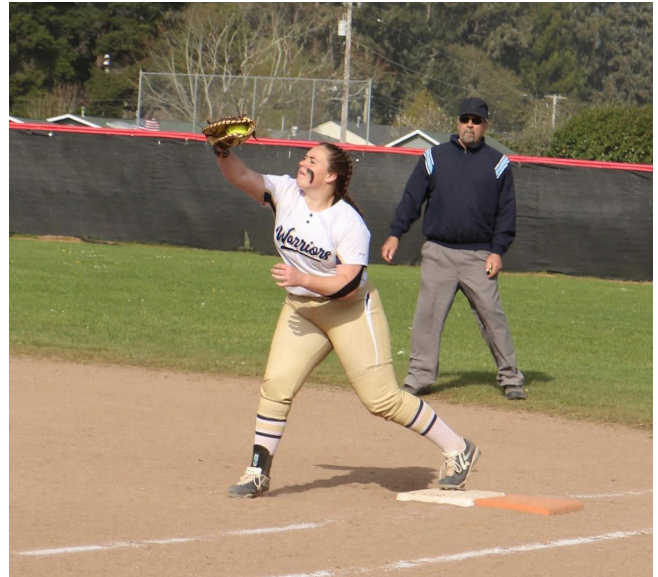


Warriors win third straight conference crown in softball

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You can officially call it a dynasty.

The Del Norte Warriors are Big 5 champions in softball for the third straight year, and they have won the crown outright each time.

They recently went into the final day of the regular season having already clinched at least a co-championship, but the Warriors delivered in style in their final game at Eureka, winning 10-0 in five innings to leave no doubt as to who was the best team in conference this season.

And they achieved it with a stellar senior class.

This group of players lost just five times in 36 conference games over the past three seasons, including an 11-1 record in this year's Big 5.

Eight of this year's Big 5 victories were achieved by at least nine runs.

Even more impressive, this year's team found a way to win several games in which they trailed and always seemed to rise to the occasion when it mattered the most.

Asked what impressed him the most about this group of players, head coach Aaron Healy said "It always comes back to fight in them."

"They don't quit. My team doesn't quit," he added. "They find a way."

That was particularly noticeable in a pair of wins over Fortuna, a team that pushed them all the way in the race for the title.

The final matchup between the top two conference contenders on April 30 went right down to the wire, with senior shortstop Khloe Smith scoring the winning run in the bottom of the seventh for a walk-off 9-8 victory.

"She's having a phenomenal year," Healy said of Smith, whom he believes is the best shortstop in the H-DNL. "She's batting over .420 and playing shortstop like she knows how to do it. She's the smoothest shortstop I've seen in a long time."

Smith is one of several seniors who played a pivotal role in the race for this year's conference championship, a group that also includes catcher Carlee Harper, one of the most dangerous base runners in the entire H-DNL.

Third baseman Tsinte Steinruck, second baseman Audrey Phillips and pitcher Shay Nolan each also have impressed since day one, as have junior centerfielder Bliss Blackburn and freshman first baseman Addi Whitford.

"This team never ceases to surprise me," Healy said. "I'm still trying to figure out how good they are."

The championship-clinching showdown at Eureka was more a celebration than anything after the Warriors took a six-run lead in the first inning to all but end the game as a contest against a Eureka team that was winless this season.

Steinruck would add a second-inning home run and she finished the game 2-for-2, while Smith was 2-for-3 with a double.

Nolan, as usual, got the win in the circle, as the Warriors stretched their winning streak to 10 straight and closed out the regular season with a record of 20-2.

With the final game well in hand early, Healy gave several of his back-ups some playing time, including seniors Presli Durham and Neela Travis and junior Bailey Fox, all of whom impressed in the victory.

"We got the subs going and some kids that don't normally get playing time got playing time," the coach said. "We had some patient at-bats."