

## Salem News

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### THE WRIGHT STUFF

#### 'Slide of the Year' helps Endicott reach NCAA tourney

On Softball Mike Grenier

BEVERLY — Blowouts always look impressive on paper and can make a team feel invincible. There's nothing wrong with that.

However, easy victories can sometimes mask a team's deficiencies. Mistakes can be overlooked and forgotten when you're just obliterating opponents.

The truer mark of a champion is the ability to execute the little things perfectly at the most crucial time. Endicott College senior center fielder Ashley Wright did precisely that here Saturday with what should become known in Gulls softball history as the Slide of the Year because it provided the impetus for a 7-2 victory over Western New England College that put this remarkable team in the Division 3 NCAA tourney for the ninth straight year.

Yes, there were many factors that propelled Endicott (35-6), which scored 29 runs in its previous two games, past the combative Golden Bears (27-17) in the Commonwealth Coast Conference final. Senior right-hander Jenna Bortolotti, the winningest pitcher ever (63 victories and counting) at Endicott, held her third straight conference tourney opponent to two runs. Designated player Nicole Devlin ripped the go-ahead single when it was tied in the bottom of the sixth, and sophomore third baseman Jocelyn Russo, who has both an aesthetically pleasing and potent swing, blasted a two-run homer that put it out of reach at 7-2.

But none of it might have been possible for Endicott without Wright's Slide of the Year.

Western New England had wiped out a 2-0 deficit and made it 2-2 going into the bottom of the sixth. Endicott had two outs and nobody on when Wright, who hit a team-high .750 in the three-game tourney, drew a two-out walk. She stole second on a close play, putting her in scoring position. Devlin then roped a single to left, and the throw from the outfield beat Wright home. However, Wright, who also played basketball at Endicott, made a very athletic play in eluding the catcher, then reached in the dirt to barely tag home to give the Gulls a 3-2 lead. Endicott quickly tacked on four more runs, and Bortolotti shut down Western New England in the seventh to wrap it up.

"Slide of the Year? I was actually very nervous," said Wright, who is in the running to become an Academic All-American later this spring. "The catcher was blocking the plate, and I knew the ball was coming, so I had to slide around her. I really think I got in there safely because I never felt a tag."

Wright's teammates and head coach Mark Veilleux had the utmost confidence that she would make something happen.

"Ashley's slide was awesome," said Bortolotti, who scattered seven hits, struck out one and walked no one. "It couldn't have worked out any better. She just went right around the catcher. Then (Devlin) and Jocelyn (Russo) got big hits. Those plays just shut down the other team. That's what you have to do."

Veilleux felt that Wright executed a perfect play that eventually triggered Western New England's collapse.

"With two outs, we're always going to send the runner home — we're looking for two bases there," Veilleux said. "We had our best runner on second base, and Ashley made a beautiful hook slide around the catcher. I think when that happened, it deflated them a little bit.

"I'll tell you, it never gets old," Veilleux said of qualifying for the NCAA tourney nine straight times. "There's pressure on these kids. The players — especially the seniors — don't want to be known as the group that leaves here without winning the conference title (and advancing to the NCAAs). In a game like this, our kids are cool as a cucumber and I think pressure starts to affect the other team. As soon as we started putting pressure on them, they had trouble dealing with it."

Endicott started applying the heat early in the game, getting a two-run single from catcher Krista Fales in the second inning. To its credit, Western New England, which had already won a 10 a.m. game Saturday for the right to play Endicott, bounced back with a run in the fourth and another in the sixth to make it 2-2. But Wright's alert and intelligent base running and Endicott's subsequent offensive explosion in the sixth carried the Gulls to the next level of postseason play.

"You can never take any game lightly," said Bortolotti, who was named the CCC's Pitcher of the Year earlier in the week. "You can never assume you're going to win. You have to get the job done. When it was (2-2), I told myself, 'Keep working. Keep working. Don't let them get any more runs.'

"We have an unbelievable team," Bortolotti said. "It's been special playing with these girls for four years. It was different this season with so many new players. I'm not shocked, but it was a little bit of a surprise. It's been beyond wonderful."

Wright was feeling tremendous pride about the team's accomplishments.

"It was very meaningful to win today and to win four championships in four years," Wright said. "It's the most significant time in my life."

The Slide of the Year will live on, too. It's now a part of the Gulls illustrious softball history.

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It was a move that couldn't go unnoticed. Just minutes after whipping Anna Maria, 11-0, in the CCC tourney, the Endicott baseball team — and a very quick golden retriever — ran over to the softball diamond and cheered on the softball team from the left field stands.

"When we saw them, it immediately pumped us up," Bortolotti said. "It meant a lot to us."

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Endicott, which should find out its first-round NCAA tourney opponent today, had an outrageous team batting average of .494 in the three-game conference tourney. The leaders: Ashley Wright, .750; Mattie Brett, .556; Alexandra Moise, .556, Jocelyn Russo, .545; Jesse Bilafer, .500; and Krista Fales, .500.

"I don't know who we're going to get (in the NCAAs)," Veilleux said. "At some point it could be Coast Guard, which has a pitcher who's thrown 50 shutouts, and she's only a junior. We're looking forward to the challenge. We can hit with anybody, and this team plays great defense."

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## Related Photos

- Endicott senior center fielder Ashley Wright had a hit and keyed the championship victory with a nifty slide for the go-ahead run in the bottom of the sixth. Courtesy photos



- Jocelyn Russo, a sophomore third baseman, provided a two-run homer during Endicott's five-run sixth inning that gave the hosts a 7-2 lead.



- Endicott senior pitcher Jenna Bortolotti scattered seven hits for the win and is 17-4 with a 1.59 ERA heading into the NCAA tourney.



- The Endicott softball team poses with The Commonwealth Coast Conference championship banner and trophy after defeating Western New England College, 7-2, on Saturday. The Gulls locked up their ninth straight trip to the Division 3 NCAA Tournament with the win.

