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## Sports



Although the 2009 season only recently ended, Hopewell High School softball player Kelly Braman has gotten an early start preparing for next year.

The Hopewell High School softball season ended more than a week ago, but one can still hear the crack of Kelly Braman's bat in the Titans' batting cage. Each time Braman makes contact, it tests the integrity of the ball's threading.

The junior catcher, however, has little sympathy for softballs that dare come her way. That's because Braman's mind is occupied analyzing each swing, searching for a flaw like a jeweler studying a diamond.

Braman certainly is her own worst critic. "I just hate screwing up," said Braman. "I want to be perfect on the field. I work on little things that are a big deal to me – like hitting." As critical as she is, even Braman couldn't complain much about her performance this past spring. Her meticulous approach produced quite a season at the plate. MECA 7 conference coaches honored Braman by naming her Player of the Year after she led the Titans with a .525 batting average, 22 RBIs and 27 runs scored.

She's also a good defensive catcher – a position, along with a pitcher, that can make the biggest impact on a softball game. She had the most stolen bases on the team (nine), even though she batted third in the lineup, a position that's expected to drive in runs, not create havoc on the base paths. "She's got the whole package," said Hopewell coach David Webster. "She has speed, power and a great arm. She has a quick bat and is the fastest runner on the team. You don't see that from catchers much these days."

Braman's offensive output is even more impressive considering her opportunities to accumulate those statistics were limited. Opposing coaches often instructed their pitchers to throw around Braman in key situations this season. Recognizing their strategy to neutralize her impact on the game, Braman was forced to switch gears. She was a picky hitter, waiting for just the right pitch before deciding to swing. That mind-set comes from being a catcher, where she's seen too many hitters swing at a pitch they can't handle. As a perfectionist, Braman was waiting for the ideal pitch. But when opponents, tired of being burned by Braman's white-hot bat, stopped serving up fat pitches, she had adjustments. Instead of patience, the Titan coaching staff encouraged Braman to show more aggressiveness at the plate. This season, she increased her strike zone and cleared her mind. Instead of trying to out-think opponents, she aimed to become an instinctive, free-swinging hitter. "She (was) much more relaxed at the plate this season," said Webster. "She used to think about 100 different things in the batter's box. She was thinking too much, and this isn't rocket science. We simplified her approach and she took off this season."

This MVP's not OCD Braman has always had high expectations for herself. No task is too mundane for her approach to life. A good example is the way she takes notes in class. She prefers to write with a pencil because her notes must look perfect. When forced to use a pen, she uses Wite-Out to correct any blemishes or even rewrites the notes taken after class.

"I don't write in pen because I need to have an eraser," said Braman. "I can't just scratch something out. I'll rewrite my notes if they don't look good. "But it's not an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder type thing; I still have a messy room sometimes. The difference is, I just make sure I schedule time to clean it. My parents have never told me to clean my room (because I take care of it.)"

One of her best friends on the team, first baseman Stephanie Spain, said Braman's perfectionism carries over to more than just taking notes and cleaning her room. Braman agrees with Spain that she's obsessed with the condition of her hair; one strand on Braman's head can't be out of place, especially when a camera is near. Spain also marvels at Braman's duality. Braman's personality away from the softball field is far from obsessive. While striving for perfection at certain tasks, Braman still is a laid-back and, at times, silly teenager. "She's very funny, outgoing and blunt," said Spain. "She tells you how it is, but she has a good sense of humor about doing it." But unlike typical teenagers, Braman isn't one to cave to peer pressure. She values her friends' opinions but doesn't like to be forced to do things that don't interest her. After a strikeout or an error – which doesn't happen often – she doesn't want her teammates to tell her everything will be OK. If she messes up, she wants to know why and how – not that things will magically get better. "I don't like getting counseled, and I don't like sweet talk," said Braman. "I'm a direct person, so tell me if I screw up. That's why I like 'Coach Web.' He tells you how it is." Still work to be done The Hopewell softball season ended with a 2-1 loss to perennial powerhouse North Davidson on May 22, but Braman isn't slowing down. She continues to fine-tune her swing with the help of Spain and Webster after school.

The Hopewell coach serves up batting practice to prepare both Titans for this summer's State Games of North Carolina, which will be held June 19-28 in Charlotte. Both Spain and Braman were selected to play for the NC Region 6 underclassmen all-star team, the rewards for their terrific seasons. It's safe to say, Braman has earned more than her share of postseason acknowledgments. Even Braman's worst critic – herself – can't look down on this past season. While she isn't comfortable praising herself, preferring to hide behind sarcasm and wit, her self-evaluation spoke volumes. "I do think I had a good season," said Braman. "I focused on not striking out and hitting the ball, and I think I did that. I knew I had to step up and get hits for this team." Braman's self-evaluation, however, might be a little understated. The league's MVP accomplished so much more than just making contact with the ball. Just ask the softball coaches in the MECA 7.



Kelly Braman had plenty of reasons to smile this season: She was named the MECA 7 4A conference's Most Valuable Player and helped the Hopewell softball team advance in the state playoffs.

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