

May 21, 2012

[N-W, Grand Island softball teams host sectional games](#)

By Brandon Schlager Niagara Gazette

When Grand Island softball coach Jackie Morris learned of the Vikings' first postseason opponent, she immediately reached for her cell phone and dialed a familiar number.

Longtime friend Julie Murphy, coach of Williamsville South's softball squad, was on the receiving end of the call, which followed a coin flip confirming the Billies would face off against the fourth-seeded Vikings in today's Section VI Class A-1 quarterfinal game.

Their friendship extends back to the playing days of the two young coaches when the pair suited up for teams coached by Murphy's father, local softball icon Gerry Gentner, the former longtime coach of the Billies.

"We joked all week, 'What if it's us?,'" Morris said. "When she answered she said, 'We're playing you!' We both said Gerry must've been with us on the coin toss."

Gentner died in January at the age of 67 following a four-plus year battle with abdominal cancer. His death sent shock waves throughout the entire Western New York softball community as his caring demeanor and infectious optimism affected hundreds of area coaches and players.

The loss of Gentner especially affected members of the Williamsville South team, who would be forced to play on without the face of its program. Led by Murphy, who spent multiple seasons coaching under her father before taking over as head coach this year, the young, inexperienced Billies fought through adversity all season.

But Morris and her team took Gentner's death to heart, too.

All season long, the Vikings donned purple shirts during practice with Gentner's motto "Just show up!" emblazoned in green print. Like everyone else who once heard Gentner utter his trademark phrase, Morris has made it her way of life, emphasizing the simple yet important message with each of her players.

"While playing for (Gentner), he always wanted me to do better for myself and for my team," Morris said. "His style of coaching is something I try to mimic with my girls. The game he taught is the game I try to teach to my girls. It's my opportunity to pay it forward."

The Vikings did more than just show up this season. Despite a young roster comprised of only one senior, the upstart Grand Island team persevered against a tough Niagara

Frontier League schedule, finishing with a surprising 7-7 record to earn the No. 4 seed in Class A-I — the highest placement for the program in years.

Morris, in her second year as varsity coach, attributed the team's unexpected success to a resilient group of juniors and the emergence of several underclassmen, adding that each Viking will have to play to their strengths to defeat a tough South team.

"We've had some great surprises from our freshman and sophomores and our juniors have come through at the plate all season," she said. "If one junior is having a bad day at the plate, another one steps up and goes 4 for 4."

Today's 4:45 p.m. matchup will be the Billies' first postseason action since Gentner's passing and is sure to be an emotional contest for both teams. Both Grand Island and Williamsville South feature inexperienced lineups. While the Billies rely on offensive production, the Vikings will turn to their young pitching to stifle a talented group of hitters.

"They can hit 1 through 6 in their lineup," Morris said.

For the Vikings, it means an opportunity to prove themselves against one of Western New York's top programs of recent years.

"I've said it all season: The team that has the least to lose is the toughest to beat," Morris said. "We both have a lot riding on the outcome. They went through the same growing pains we did. But we're peaking at the right time and it should be a fun game."

The NFL also features several other softball teams ready to open their postseason today.

The Class A-2 No. 4 seed Lewiston-Porter travels to East Aurora while fifth-seeded Niagara-Wheatfield hosts North Tonawanda in the Class AA matchup.

The Lancers hope to redeem themselves with a strong postseason run after a disappointing 7-12 regular season finish. Coach Nina Calarco said the team is glad to finally have an opportunity to play against a team more comparable to the school's smaller size than most other NFL teams they face during the season.

"It's refreshing to draw someone more our size," she said. "Anyone we play in the NFL is a bigger school, so I think we have a good chance to be more competitive with East Aurora."

Calarco said the key for the Lancers will be to continue their strong season-long success at the plate.

"We had three girls who hit over .400," she said. "The top of our lineup is kind of our reputation. People all season have been saying, 'Man, look out for their first four,' so our

offense is definitely going to be the key. We're just going to go out there, play our best, and hopefully the result will be in our favor."

The Niagara-Wheatfield squad will be hoping to duplicate last year's Section VI championship run that ended in the state semifinals. Melanie Proefrock, co-coach of the Falcons, said this year hasn't been much different than last for the team.

Led by Caitlin Attfield, seven starters from last year's run are back for more. Proefrock said the Falcons are more experienced than ever and prepared to make another deep run.

"It's not really any different," she said. "What makes us most confident is that we didn't win the NFL title this year, but we didn't last year, either. We have as good a chance to win as anyone, especially if we play to the level we're capable of. The sky's the limit."