

## Phoenix Sports Feature: Nicole Pauly

Softball scores big with former professional

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Decisions, decisions.

New women's softball Graduate Assistant Coach Nicole Pauly was faced with many of them after graduating as a two-sport star from Palatine High School in northern Illinois.

While she loved basketball and softball equally, the 24-year-old could choose only one of her passions to take to the next level.

Pauly received multiple basketball scholarship offers from smaller Division III schools in the south, as well as the Air Force.

But with a staggering .460 career batting average and a list of accolades that is far too long to include, Pauly knew she had a better chance to succeed as a softball player.

"I thought I could take softball further than I could basketball," Pauly said. "The schools that were recruiting me for softball were bigger, and they were the type of schools I wanted to be at academically and socially."

She ended up narrowing her prospective college list down to Northwestern, Loyola and the University of Illinois-Champaign.

Pauly chose Northwestern, thanks in part to a feature Loyola simply couldn't offer.

"In the end, I wanted to go to a school with a football team," said Pauly, laughing. "I wanted to experience the fall with the tailgates and the school atmosphere geared towards football."

The next big decision was left in the hands of her coaches. With her original position at shortstop already taken, her coaches plugged her into the open spot at second base.

Standing at 5 foot 11 inches with explosive power at the plate, Pauly was far from the tiny, speedy slap hitter you expect to see at second base.

"My coaches would always joke that I was the biggest second baseman in the country," Pauly said. "With a softball lineup, the fast needs to come from somewhere, and it just so happened that my teammates that were slappers played the outfield. It just kind of worked out that way."

Pauly shattered the mold of the prototypical middle infielder by belting 53 homeruns and driving in 168 runs during her career. Both totals rank third in school history.

As Pauly was sending moon shots over the outfield walls, it was almost as if she was targeting a certain person in the bleachers.

“The majority of the homeruns I’ve hit, my dad was standing in the vicinity,” Pauly said. “My first college homerun, my dad actually caught it. That homerun I hit onto the roof [of McGaw Hall], it came down and hit my dad in the shoulder. It was kind of a running joke like ‘where’s Nick Pauly in the outfield, because Nicole’s going to hit a homerun to him.’”

Pauly started all 215 games Northwestern played in her four seasons, including Northwestern’s run to a third place finish in the 2008 Women’s College World Series.

Her work on the field earned her the title of one of the greatest players to ever don a Northwestern uniform.

“Honestly, I never thought that that would happen,” Pauly said. “I just worked my butt off... I was just focused on the team succeeding, and those individual awards were a bonus at the end.”

After graduating in 2010, Pauly signed with the Chicago Bandits of the National Pro Fastpitch League (NPF) after an open tryout. She signed as a free agent with the Akron Racers the following season and played there until 2012.

Outside the higher level of competition, Pauly also felt like there was a much different team dynamic at the professional level.

“College was way more team oriented,” Pauly said. “In the pros, it’s a little bit more individual. If you work hard and play well, you get your paycheck at the end of the day. In college, you’re playing for your school and your team.

Though Pauly enjoyed the college level more, she found success in the pros. She was named to the All-NPF Team in 2012, but she doesn’t intend on returning to the NPF in 2013.

Instead, she is focusing on her role as assistant coach of Loyola’s softball team, while she completes her Master’s Degree in school counseling.

In her first season as an assistant in 2011, Pauly was immediately put in a unique situation.

“After I graduated, that next year, I was coaching girls that I’ve played with and played against,” Pauly said. “I was only six months older than them. But I used my age as a way for them to get to know me. As they got to know me, they started to trust me.”

Pauly has been passing on something different to each player as a hitting coach, drawing on her own experience as well as what she’s learned from her professional teammates.

She has also been in charge of coaching the infield. Pauly admits that she is their hardest critic, but also their biggest cheerleader. This is especially true for Loyola's current second baseman Jessica Balzano.

"I'm the hardest on Jess," Pauly said. "She gets the brunt of the yelling in the infield, but it's not only because I think she can handle it, it's because I know that position."

As a former three-time All Big Ten Academic selection, Pauly also tries to teach the importance of success in the classroom.

"The student you are in the classroom is the student you're going to be on the field," Pauly said. "If you're confident and doing well in the classroom, it's a distraction you don't have to take to practice. It makes you a better softball player. For all the teaching that she does with the players, she is also learning from them.

"They've taught me more than they think," Pauly said. "Getting to work with them on a daily basis and seeing their faces, I've loved coming to work every day for the past three years."

This season, the Ramblers have gotten out to a shaky start despite being named the preseason number one seed in the Horizon League. Pauly thinks that the team's biggest opponent is Mother Nature.

"If this weather stops, we can get back on track!" Pauly said. "We can't get on our field because it's frozen. We can't get outside because it's too cold."

Instead, the Ramblers have been forced to utilize Gentile Arena and Mertz Field as temporary practice locations. While it's better than nothing, their practices can't fully replicate game action.

The team's schedule has also been decimated by the weather, causing six games to be postponed or canceled. Amidst it all, Pauly believes the team can turn their fortunes around during conference play.

"I don't think we've had one game where we've had everything work in our favor," Pauly said. "I think we can take the beginning of the season and really learn from it. We can kind of wash the board, because conference play starts a whole new season. If we can take those small successes and stay positive ... hopefully everything will click."