

Taryne Mowatt, 10-year-old bloody fingerprints and a WCWS feat that might never be matched

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Former Arizona pitcher Taryne Mowatt reflects on her journey against Tennessee in the 2007 Women's College World Series. Mowatt was named best female athlete at the 2007 ESPYs for her memorable performance. Tune in to the 2017 ESPYs on July 12.

In theory, a softball game can last forever. In reality, as dusk fell around her on an Oklahoma night, Taryne Mowatt was pretty sure the jig was up.

It happened in the fifth inning of the second game of the best-of-three championship series between Arizona and Tennessee in the 2007 Women's College World Series. To arrive there, Mowatt had already pitched 47 innings for Arizona in 120 hours. As she stood in the circle during what was still a scoreless game, three Tennessee runners surrounded her on the bases. The team's three best hitters were due up. There were no outs. Waiting in the dugout to protect any lead the Lady Vols took was Monica Abbott, one of greatest pitchers in NCAA history.

Lose the game and the season was over. Give up a run and Arizona would probably lose the game.

"I remember," Mowatt said, "doubting myself."

That devil on her shoulder offered an escape. Mowatt knew that each of the first six times Arizona won a national title, it made it at least as far as the championship round the following season. The Wildcats had never finished worse than second as defending champ. Now, a year after they had won their seventh title, that streak was already safe. Second was assured. She hadn't failed.

To a tired mind and a weary body, it was a tempting rationalization.

"You got the team this far. You did that, you did what was expected. So whatever happens, happens," Mowatt recalled thinking as she stood in the circle. "And then I remember stopping myself in the middle of that sentence and saying, 'What are you talking about? You can get out of this. We're still going to win this.' I can remember having that conversation."



Balls, strikes, doubts and outs, Taryne Mowatt threw 1,035 pitches in seven days at the 2007 Women's College World Series.

It might seem an unusual degree of clarity to possess for words and thoughts now a decade old. Mowatt has an unusual memory, something close to photographic or eidetic. Bring up out of the blue a February game against Nevada during her senior season and she will, without a pause, describe almost down to the pitch sequence what transpired. Check it against the play-by-play record, and she's correct. Mention having spotted her in a restaurant with her family on a particular day in Oklahoma City and she'll tell you not just the name and what she ate but what she wore.

So she remembers the changeup she threw to Tennessee's Lindsay Schutlzler and the pool-cue spin on the ball as it came off the bat. Mowatt able to field the ground ball and get the force at home for the first out. She remembers jamming Tonya Callahan with a screwball that moved in on the right-handed hitter's hands, Arizona shortstop Kristie Fox able to track down the resulting bloop for the second out in short left field. She remembers the similar jam shot from Tiffany Huff that second baseman Chelsie Mesa tracked for the third out.

Any of the balls could have gotten away, so much empty space available on a softball field. None of them did.

Arizona survived the bottom of the fifth inning and five more innings after that. Mowatt stranded seven more Tennessee runners on base without giving up a run. Tennessee left 14 on base in total. After pinch runner Danielle Rodriguez slid home with an Arizona run in the top of the 10th inning, the Wildcats survived to play another day.

A day that brought their eighth championship and another shutout from Mowatt.

By the time it was over, she had thrown 1,035 pitches in seven days. She alone threw more pitches in those seven days than the combined total of every starting pitcher for the Chicago Cubs and Cleveland Indians in seven games of the 2016 World Series. She pitched five games to reach the championship round through the losers bracket. She pitched three more games to win the title.

The feat generated almost unprecedented interest at the time, the final game still the second-highest rated in Women's College World Series history, and led to Mowatt's winning an ESPY for Best Female Athlete, still the only softball player to do so. One of the most memorable performances in softball history seemed impossible in its own time. A decade later, as eight teams gather anew in Oklahoma City, a sport's evolution makes it only more unfathomable.

Others produced indelible moments: Samantha Findlay's home run against UCLA, Natasha Watley's slide against Texas. Some were more dominant from start to finish.

Mowatt simply refused to stop throwing a softball until the rules wouldn't let her. Which is why what she did lives forever in softball lore.



Arizona fans were skeptical at the start of the 2007 season that Taryne Mowatt could lead the Wildcats to a repeat national championship.

The sheer difficulty of what she accomplished made it immediately unlikely anyone would exceed or even duplicate it. The intervening decade suggests it is increasingly unlikely anyone will even try. Mowatt pitched 370 innings in 2007, but she wasn't alone. Among the World Series field that year, Abbott pitched 358 1/3 innings, Arizona State's Katie Burkhart 323, Washington's Danielle Lawrie 278 and Northwestern's Eileen Canney 276.

Only two pitchers enter the World Series this year having pitched even 200 innings. Only Washington's Taran Alvelo could realistically match even Canney's innings of a decade ago, let alone close in on Mowatt or Abbott.

A year ago, Oklahoma's Paige Parker was rightly celebrated for her perseverance in a title run. She started and completed all five games the Sooners won in Oklahoma City. She nonetheless totaled barely half as many innings as Mowatt's record 60. The sport has changed in short order.

With vast swaths of the country playing more softball than ever, there are more pitchers from whom to choose. USA Softball Player of the Year finalists Kelly Barnhill and Megan Good are from Georgia and Virginia, respectively. Oregon goes to the World Series with pitchers from Indiana, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Coaching has improved, and bat technology along with it, meaning pitchers face better and better hitters and deeper and deeper lineups. Scouting has changed as much as anything, with so much video now available to break down opposing pitchers.

All of which is why the only thing proliferating more rapidly than new stadiums these days are quality pitching staffs.

"You used to be able to ride one person," Alabama coach Patrick Murphy said during the SEC tournament in Knoxville, noting Abbott's workload in that city. "I did the same thing with Jackie Traina in 2012. It was the most I ever pitched a kid. I think nowadays, it's next to impossible. ..."

"I've seen a lot of it the last two or three years, where it's almost a pitch-by-committee sort of things, almost like Major League Baseball or college baseball. We'll have four pitchers on our roster next year for the first time in a long time."

Arizona began the 2007 season with, effectively, one pitcher on its roster, a 5-foot-6 righty from California who grew up taking pitching lessons from Doug Finch -- often working out next to his high school daughter before Jennie Finch found fame with the Wildcats. It wasn't supposed to be a one-pitcher team, mind you, but after Alicia Hollowell graduated and took with her many of the program's pitching records, and a top recruit was ruled academically ineligible and eventually dropped, it became that. Recruited primarily as a position player and pitching that season with a shoulder injury, Sarah Akamine helped where she could, but Mowatt started 53 of Arizona's 65 games. She completed 50 of them.

The first weekend of the season, the newly installed ace pitched six times and lost twice. They were close, low-scoring losses against Florida and Texas A&M. But two losses in a week is a lot at Arizona. She felt deflated on the bus ride home from the tournament in Tempe, Arizona. The talk in town that week didn't help her confidence. It was pitch at Arizona is to be compared to Hollowell and Finch, to Debby Day, Nancy Evans and Susie Parra. It is an unforgiving standard.

"Maybe I can't be the ace of this staff, what everybody wants me to be," Mowatt recalled thinking. "There were a lot of articles, and I never should have read them, but they were saying, 'She's not going to lead this team back to the World Series. It's going to be a rough season.'"

It wasn't. Easily forgotten because of the uphill climb out of the losers bracket in Oklahoma City, Arizona was the Pac-12 champion and No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA tournament. Mowatt got plenty of help from a lineup that included future Olympian Caitlin Lowe, among others, but she struck out 522 batters with a 1.46 ERA in all those innings.

Yet after her focus wandered in a couple of starts in the final weekend of the regular season, when she anticipated some innings off with the conference title already clinched, coach Mike Candrea lit into her in front of the team. He needed her attention entering the postseason. And Mowatt was always a different person to read. She didn't have Hollowell's stoic poker face or intimidating frame. She didn't have Cat Osterman's glare or Lawrie's glower. She looked like the archetype blonde, easygoing Californian.

"When you talk to her, she's a little bit loose," Candrea said. "She's got a great sense of humor, likes to laugh. And sometimes that was me maybe misinterpreting that personality and not really realizing the fierce competitor that she was. That might have been a part of me showing a little bit of frustration, maybe doubting that."

"There's no way in hell I should have ever doubted that."



Taryne Mowatt says she and her "best friends" still cherish the memories of their unlikely run in Oklahoma City.

It takes a bit of courage to throw the pitch with which Mowatt is most associated. A changeup approaches the plate at batting-practice speed. It relies on the element of surprise. As for the rise ball with which Mowatt dominated high school hitters (and plenty of college hitters)? She could tell them that was coming, and they still couldn't hit it. The changeup is a pitch for the fearless. It was also a hint about Mowatt's competitiveness for a different reason.

Time and again during those seven days in Oklahoma City, often with one, two or even three runners on base, Mowatt glided the changeup past hitters. You thought she couldn't possibly throw another one. Then she did. Part of it was fatigue. She couldn't throw her hard stuff as hard as she had at the start of the week. Part of it was that the tape she wore on the fingers of her pitching hand took away her feel for the curveball. She pitched so much that season, and put so much spin on the ball, that she couldn't keep her fingers from bleeding, the skin worn away to the point that umpires took balls out of play because of bloody fingerprints.

Through it all, there were no discussions, no thoughts of pulling her. There was no Plan B.

"He didn't really ask how I was feeling because he didn't give me the option of letting myself feel tired," Mowatt said of Candrea. "He knew the second he let me feel tired, as a 20-year-old college kid, you play into that. You think you should be tired. He didn't give me that option."

Which isn't to say he wasn't asking the same question as everyone else, wondering when it would be one pitch too many.

"Probably every day," Candrea said. "You just didn't know [if she would last]. You're rolling the dice, and that was your best opportunity and your best chance, so you throw her out there."

Mowatt's busiest day during the World Series was semifinal Sunday, when Arizona had to beat Washington, and Lawrie, twice to advance. After a complete game the night before against DePaul, she was back in the circle a few minutes after noon. That game won, the team returned to its hotel to rest before the second game against the Huskies in the evening. Tired of drinking only water, Mowatt snuck out of her room, desperate for a Diet Coke from the vending machine.

A member of the staff spotted her as she sprinted back to her room. They let it go. It was hard to begrudge her the caffeine.

Now the pitching coach at Mississippi, Mowatt is one of the profession's rising stars, that nearly flawless memory put to good use helping pitchers probe weaknesses in opposing batters. A few players asked her this year for the DVD of the championship series, but with each passing year, fewer and fewer remember watching it at the time. Even Kaitlin Lee, the similarly diminutive Ole Miss pitcher whose star rise in the SEC tournament when she showed a Mowatt-like workload isn't wholly extinct, sounded that week like someone who knew her coach had done something significant a decade ago but was a little hazy on the details.

Time does that, moves on in ways out of our control. But for a week in Oklahoma City, time yielded to Taryne Mowatt. It waited to resume when she couldn't throw another pitch.

Or when there weren't any more pitches to throw.

"It's cool to look back, knowing that I'll always be a part of that history," Mowatt said. "And I'll always be a part of that with my best friends. We still talk about it to this day. It's something that nobody can ever take away. In 50 years, my best friends and I are still going to have that moment together and that win."

"It's just cool for this sport that it came at a time when the sport was really growing."

Growing and changing in ways that mean we are unlikely to see another week like it.

Then again, we were never likely to see another week like it.

Graham Hays covers college sports for espnW, including softball and soccer. Hays began with ESPN in 1999.

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WCWS: Day 1 schedule

The Women's College World Series opens Thursday with all eight teams in action. A champion will be crowned either June 6 or 7. Here are the opening-day matchups.

Game 1: (9) Texas A&M vs. (1) Florida, noon (ESPN/WatchESPN)

Game 2: (13) LSU vs. (5) UCLA, 2:30 p.m. (ESPN/WatchESPN)

Game 3: (6) Washington vs. (3) Oregon, 7 p.m. (ESPN2/WatchESPN)

Game 4: (15) Baylor vs. (10) Oklahoma, 9:30 p.m. (ESPN2/Watch ESPN)

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AP Photo/Chris Carlson
Peyton Manning handed off the 2007 ESPY to Taryne Mowatt for Best Female Athlete.