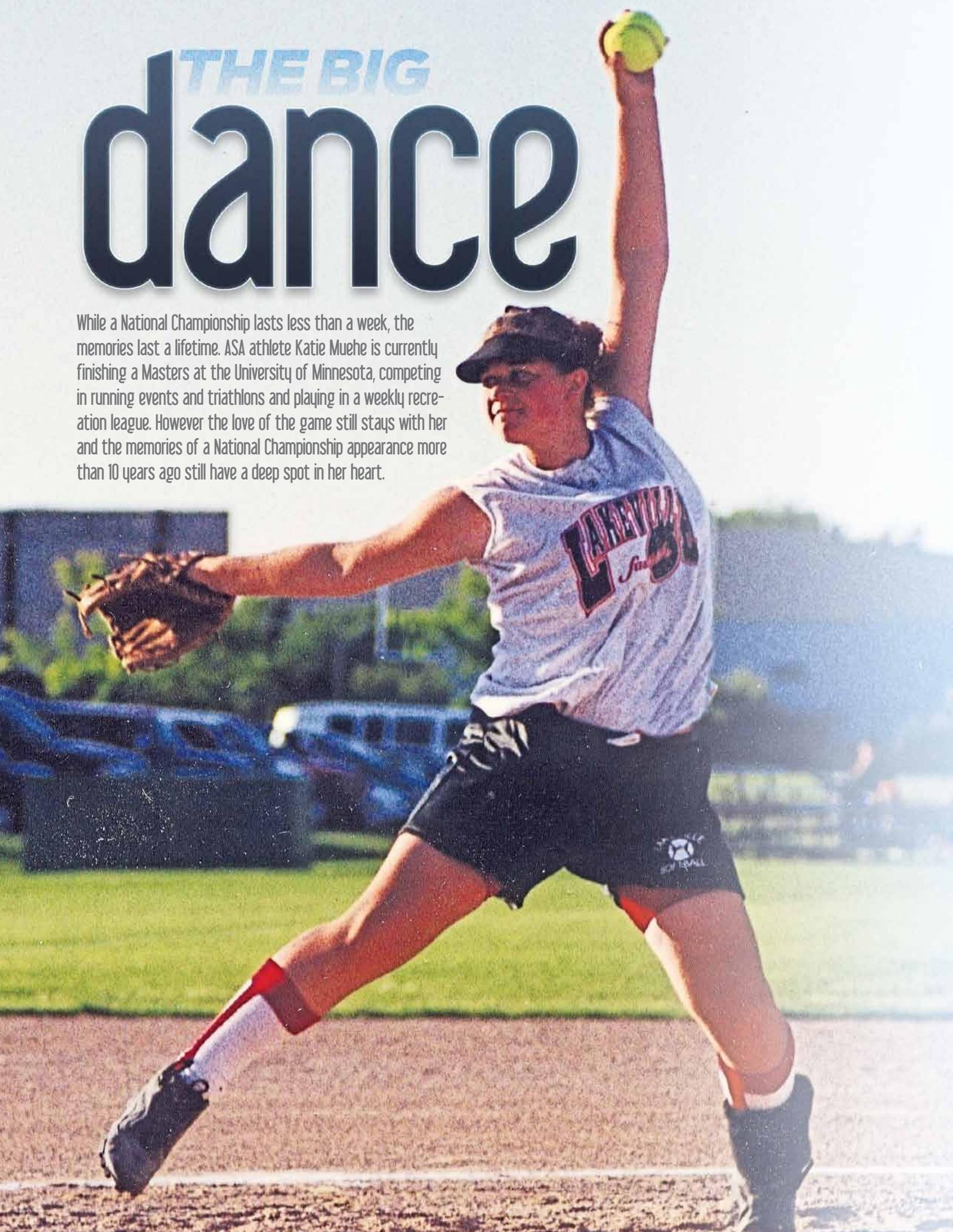


THE BIG dance

While a National Championship lasts less than a week, the memories last a lifetime. ASA athlete Katie Muehe is currently finishing a Masters at the University of Minnesota, competing in running events and triathlons and playing in a weekly recreation league. However the love of the game still stays with her and the memories of a National Championship appearance more than 10 years ago still have a deep spot in her heart.



ATTENDING ASA NATIONALS- THE BIG DANCE

On a miserably hot and dusty Sunday in Saint Paul, about ten years ago, my 12U team spent all day clawing our way up through the loser's bracket at the Regional tournament, facing some of the toughest teams in Minnesota and South Dakota for a chance to grab on to one of the two berths to the ASA National tournament in Fresno, California. I was thirteen years old, pitching on a community team of talented ball players who have all grown up to be successful young women. We headed into a championship series, needing to beat the opposing team twice to comply with double-elimination tournament standards. And we did. And I don't know that anyone except those 12 youthful hearts on the field really thought we were going to pull it out.

All the excitement of our hard-fought victory was tempered by the discussion that maybe we wouldn't go to Nationals. Not because we weren't qualified ball players or hadn't earned that spot, but because maybe some people "didn't want to." As a young adult, I now better understand some of the arguments against going to Nationals; it could be expensive, taking a week away from home is disruptive, and you might get there and not win a single game. But at that point in my life, I had never worked harder for something or wanted something as badly as I wanted to go to ASA Nationals. I can remember as clear as any memory sitting with my teammates on a grassy hill that day, sunburned faces and stinky feet, anxiously waiting for our parents' decision. Our season was about to end or get a whole lot cooler.

Three weeks later we were a gaggle of smiles, braided hair, and girl magazines on a flight to California, thanks to a group of parents who respected what we wanted and knew that this was going to be an amazing experience. There are so many things I could write about; I can remember almost everything about the week we spent out there. I had a sinking suspicion that our team wasn't going to be real place contenders out there- facing

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elite club teams and athletes who played a lot more during longer seasons than our Minnesota weather allows, but opening ceremonies and the events that played out on this national stage made me so proud as a young athlete and like I was part of this very talented community of young women.

We had some big wins and some big losses at ASA Nationals. We played 5 games and won 2 of them (one in pool play and one in a bracket). We played a winning night game under the brightest lights and cheered so loud we all lost our voices. We had a loss so brutal we were run-ruled by the third inning and as we struggled to just get out of the last inning the entire outfield and half the infield players were in tears.

On about the third day we were out there, our car was broken into in the parking lot of our hotel and my glove, jersey, cleats, and pins were stolen. I was heartbroken. As a lefty, it is exceedingly difficult to find a glove to borrow or a nice one to buy in Fresno. But a maintenance volunteer let me borrow his left-handed glove (which to this day may be the most beautiful and softest glove I have ever played a game in) and a girl from the Eagan 12U team (the only other MN team out there) let me borrow her shoes until I could find new ones. But what I really had been most distraught about was all those pins I had collected during opening ceremonies and the early days from teams around the country that were totally lost. While I was playing the rest of our games, siblings of my teammates went out and collected pins and when other players heard what had happened, they were more than willing to help me rebuild

my collection.

Pins may sound kind of trivial to a lot of adults, and sometimes when I just think back about them now, they are just trinkets, but as I sort through and pack up my stuff as I embark on my first "real job" and getting my first "real place," I hold on to that book of pins and know I could never part with them. And I still have a framed photo of that team after our big win under the lights, cheering for the camera. I have lost touch with most of those girls, save the occasional facebook update, but on that night those were the best friends I could have ever had.

I wasn't a bad ball-player and I went on to teams that placed at state and regionals and went to some of the other 'National' tournaments, which were really just larger regional tournaments. Did we typically place better in those tournaments? Absolutely. But for some reason, sharing 33rd place with 16 teams around the country in Fresno still means more and is more memorable than the 2nds and 3rds, I took in Iowa and Wisconsin tournaments. It's undoubtedly about more than winning and losing at ASA Nationals.

I never again played for a team that qualified for the ASA Nationals and thus am doubly grateful for the parents and coaches that chose to support us that year. It was our first and last chance at an experience of a lifetime. And even though we ended up on the bottom half of average, you couldn't have convinced a single one of us that we weren't great or didn't deserve to be out there.

Some years later I went on to coach 12U fast pitch and my experience at ASA Nationals absolutely influenced how I viewed winning and losing when I was attempting to impart good sportsmanship and pride in a game well played (even if lost) on my girls. I have since traded my jersey for a button up and the field for a cubicle, although the years on those dusty fields never really leave you.

Katie Muehe