

DO YOU HAVE? THE WANT?



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ESSAY BY STEF DANIEL SPECIAL TO BALLS AND STRIKES ONLINE MAGAZINE

And then, there was a 14-year-old girl. Shunned from making her middle school's softball team because she didn't have the 'right' last name, and too poor to take some upscale pitching lessons at one of the many sports centers scattered across her hometown. So for years, it has been just her and her daddy, using a pitching rubber he put in the yard for her to practice on. Her pitching. Him catching. Bucket after bucket of balls.

Of course, there have been all those moments that the girl would come rushing in the house with tears in her eyes, frustrated because her pitches were picking birds out of the sky rather than crossing anywhere near the plate. Swearing she was "never going to pitch again!" (Insert sound of glove being thrown against the wall) Her dad following closely behind, sweat on his brow - telling her she had to keep trying, to keep practicing.

But instead of using his "daddy" voice, he used his "coaching" voice - which was strong and stern, supportive albeit tough - because he too saw the greatness inside her, even before SHE realized it was there.

He would tell her after she had a particularly rough practice, "You cannot coach want — I cannot make you want it. You have to want it!"

She had been drudging away in recreation ball leagues since she was 10, like a diamond in the brick dust, armed with little more than a dream, just waiting to be found. Her dream, to stand in the pitching circle, with the ability to throw strikes across the plate with the likeness of Jennie Finch. Just she and the batter, proving to herself, to the world and to her daddy that she could do it! And now, too old for rec ball - she found herself on her first travel team, premiering as a starting pitcher on a Copper plus team.



She had taped plenty of college softball games, plenty of USA Softball duels on the diamond, always uber impressed with the tenacity of the girls she watched. She would watch a game and



then go back outside to hack it out with the pitching rubber.

When daddy wasn't home to catch her, she threw balls at "Bob," the pretend catcher designed to help her behind the plate. Some days, it was good she was throwing to Bob, because he never offered advice, or talked back to her. Never told her "to find it" or "to just breathe". Yet, she also deeply missed the sharp snapping sound the ball made when it hit her father's leather glove, echoing through the pasture behind her house.

Snap!

"Good pitch!"

And she would turn right around, take a deep breath, and throw another.

Her story, is no different from the millions of other girls with a dream, who spend countless hours in the batting cages, pitching off a piece of cursed rubber, throwing down from home plate to second base, or catching 100 fly balls in a shady, wet outfield grass.

She is no different from the girls frustrated with a hitting slump, who cannot seem to put the bat on the ball for weeks, or even months at a time. Or for those who are standing with sore-cleated feet in the brick dust while a coach pounds hundreds of ground balls in their direction. The only thing that sets her apart and that perhaps sets talent apart in a sea of millions of girls who play softball, who dream of collegiate appearances or USA Softball opportunities is want.

If you watch a softball game, no matter how intense the competition – the girls who want it shine. They want the ball in right field. They want to hit one to the fence, or lay down the perfect bunt. They want to come back from a 3-0 count and strike a girl out. They want to run, want to slide, and want to do better each and every time they cross the foul lines onto the field. It is the one simple thing, which cannot be coached or taught. It has to come from within.

Want doesn't come from talents and tools, from expensive coaches or composite bats. It doesn't come from being on a travel or school team and it certainly doesn't come from parental pressure, tough coaches, or practice.

Want comes from within.

When a girl has the "want", everything else she needs to be a fierce success story will find its way to her. Don't believe it; just ask any of the girls that play with the Amateur Softball Association (ASA) of America/USA Softball.

Want is what sets apart the best from the average – the hobby players from the competitors.

Want is what the game of softball is made up of. It is what provoked a 53 pound nine year after making an error to turn an unassisted triple play, and then hit a walk-off home run as a matter of redemption. Want is what made this girl-next-door 14-year-old hit the Copper plus division-pitching circle for the first time and strike out the first nine batters she faced. With each pitch that she heard the sharp snap and the umpire yell "Strike!" she would take a breath, find "the want" and throw another. Not only did she have the want, but she also realized that she was only as good as her next pitch, her next play, her next at bat. Something else her daddy taught her to help her keep "the want" alive.

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