

PIVOTAL PITCHES

By Kathleen Thames • Illustrations by Burton Durand

BELIEVE. EXECUTE. PITCH BY PITCH. For the Ragin' Cajuns, those words were a mantra and, ultimately, a verbal map that kept them on a path to the 2008 Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City in May. *La Louisiane* asked co-head coaches Stefni and Michael Lotief to identify six of the most significant pitches – by either UL Lafayette or its opponents – during its journey. Some of those pitches propelled the Ragin' Cajuns toward Oklahoma City, while others revealed why they deserved to be there. *La Louisiane* presents the coaches' choices in chronological order.



No. 1 Throughout the spring, the Women's National Team was tuning up for its appearance in the Olympic Games in Beijing in August. It toured the United States, competing against some of the best college softball teams in exhibition games.

UL Lafayette had the chance to play Team USA twice. The first match was in March during the Judi Garmin Classic in Fullerton, Calif. This game against softball's elite would show UL Lafayette's strengths and uncover any weaknesses.

The Cajuns were led by the "Killer Bs," a phenomenal trio of pitchers: Brittany Cuevas, Ashley Brignac and Donna Bourgeois. As a sophomore, Cuevas was the veteran. Bourgeois and Brignac were freshmen.

In 2007, Cuevas set records for freshmen Ragin' Cajun pitchers, with 31 wins and 303 strikeouts, and was named Sun Belt Conference Freshman of the Year.

On this spring day in California, UL Lafayette kept Team USA scoreless for the

first six innings. In the bottom of the seventh, Cuevas faced the legendary Lisa Fernandez.

"Lisa Fernandez is softball," Stefni Lotief said in an interview in September. "She is the icon that I think most people think of when they talk of dominance on the softball field."

Fernandez led the UCLA Bruins to two national championships. A four-time, first-team All-American pitcher, she was a member of the 1996, 2000 and 2004 USA teams that earned Olympic gold medals.

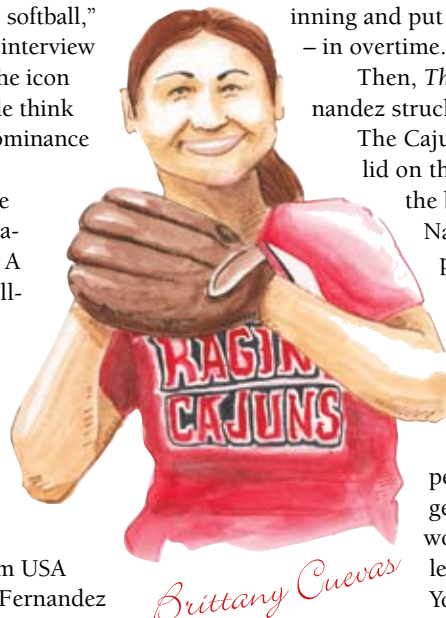
But Fernandez didn't intimidate Cuevas. With two Team USA members already out, Fernandez

stepped into the batter's box. After three pitches, the count was one ball and two strikes. One more strike would close the inning and put UL Lafayette at bat again – in overtime.

Then, *The Pitch* by Cuevas. Fernandez struck out.

The Cajuns managed to keep a lid on the eighth inning. But in the bottom of the ninth, the National Team's Jenny Topping got an RBI single that ended the game, 1-0.

Michael Lotief said Cuevas' third strike against Fernandez showed that she "was able to focus and compete pitch by pitch. She can get the best hitters in the world out. That's one of the lessons we try to teach. . . You must believe in yourself



and you have to play the game with a lot of confidence. If you do that, if you let your ability shine through, then you can defeat the best in the world.”

No. 2 AND No. 3 After winning the Sun Belt Conference Championship and the Sun Belt Conference Tournament, the Ragin’ Cajuns traveled to Baton Rouge for the NCAA Regionals in May. They won the first game, against East Carolina, 2-1.

Their reward was a matchup the next day with in-state rival LSU – on the Tiger’s turf.

Yvette Girouard, LSU’s head coach, started UL Lafayette’s softball program in 1980. Under her direction, it flourished and the Ragin’ Cajuns became nationally competitive.

In 1993, the Cajuns went to their first Women’s College World Series. They would return twice – in 1995 and 1996 – before Girouard accepted the LSU head coaching job in 2000. Stefni Lotief, a two-time All-American pitcher, played for UL Lafayette from 1987 to 1990. She replaced Girouard as the Ragin’ Cajuns head coach. Lotief’s husband, Michael, later joined the coaching staff, first as a volunteer and then full time.

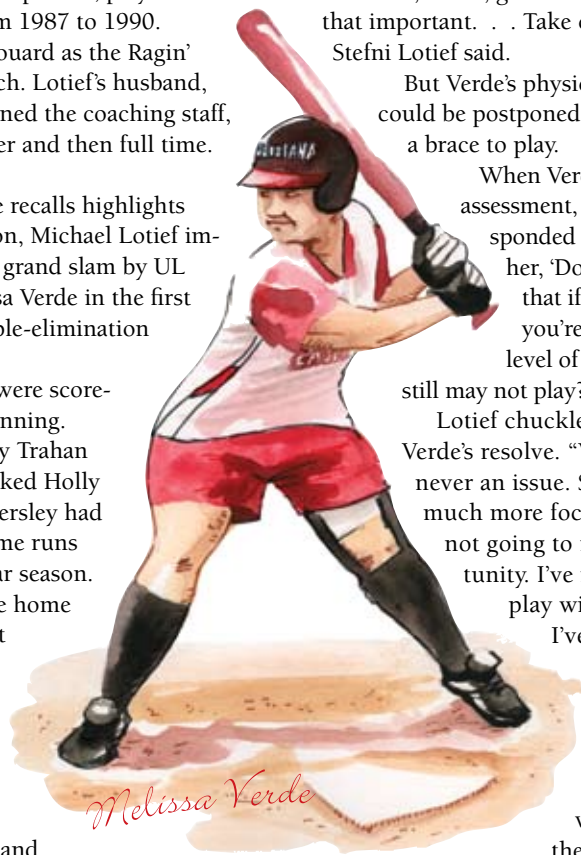
GAME 1 When he recalls highlights of the 2008 season, Michael Lotief immediately cites a grand slam by UL Lafayette’s Melissa Verde in the first game of the double-elimination Regionals.

Both teams were scoreless in the third inning. LSU pitcher Cody Trahan intentionally walked Holly Tankersley. Tankersley had racked up 19 home runs during the regular season. Better to send the home run queen to first base than risk having her knock the ball out of the park.

Walking Tankersley brought Verde up to bat.

Trahan delivered *The Pitch*.

In a magical moment, Verde hit the third grand slam of her career. It put the Cajuns ahead, 4-0.



Without that grand slam, Michael Lotief said, UL Lafayette probably would not have advanced to the Super Regionals in Houston. Verde’s hit gave the Ragin’ Cajuns an edge – momentum – that they needed to win. Final score: UL Lafayette 9, LSU 4.

But Verde’s grand slam off Trahan’s pitch was significant for another reason: It showed how badly she wanted to win.

“She was in significant pain,” Michael Lotief noted.

Verde, the Cajuns third baseman, had torn her left anterior cruciate ligament in March, during an exhibition game with the USA Team. The ACL provides rotational stability to the knee. A torn ACL is often excruciating and usually ends a player’s season because it requires surgical repair or intensive, long-term rehabilitation.

When Verde was injured, Stefni and Michael Lotief urged her to have surgery. “We said, ‘Look, get it fixed. Softball is not that important. . . . Take care of yourself,’” Stefni Lotief said.

But Verde’s physician said surgery could be postponed if she would wear a brace to play.

When Verde relayed that assessment, Stefni Lotief responded candidly. “I asked her, ‘Do you understand that if you brace up and you’re not at a certain level of performance, you still may not play?’”

Lotief chuckled, recalling Verde’s resolve. “Well, that was never an issue. She was even that much more focused. . . . She was not going to miss one opportunity. I’ve never had a kid play with that injury.

I’ve never seen any kid play with it before.”

The UL Lafayette coaches worked with Verde during the regular season to find ways to adapt to the damaged ligament.

And, when the Ragin’ Cajuns needed a big play to continue their march to Oklahoma City, Verde came through.

GAME 2 The game between UL Lafayette and LSU the next day has a back story, too.

From childhood, Ragin’ Cajun senior Vanessa Soto had dreamed of competing in the Women’s College World Series. She played first and second base for LSU for three years. But LSU couldn’t get past the NCAA Super Regionals when Soto was a sophomore and a junior.



Vanessa Soto After Girouard released Soto from her scholarship in May

2007, she transferred to UL Lafayette for her final year of eligibility. The Ragin’ Cajuns welcomed her and she quickly became a valued member of the team. She was named Sun Belt Conference Newcomer of the Year and earned a place on the First Team All-Sun Belt Conference.

Michael Lotief watched Soto mature during the season. “She learned from her mistakes. And the beautiful thing about it all was that she would take some of those experiences and share them with some of the younger players on our team,” he said.

Now, for the second time in the NCAA Regionals, Soto’s former teammates were her opponents.

By the seventh inning, the game was almost over. UL Lafayette was ahead, 6 to 3.

Ashley Brignac was in the pitcher’s circle. With two Tigers already out, Rachel Mitchell, an All-SEC outfielder, was at bat.

Then, *The Pitch* by Brignac.

Mitchell sent a grounder in the direction of first base. “The ball went toward Gabby (Ragin’ Cajun first baseman Gabrielle Bridges), ricocheted and went straight to Vanessa. Vanessa gets the ball up and throws it to Gabby to record the last out,” Michael Lotief recounted. Soto inched closer to fulfilling her dream of competing in the World Series.

“It was apropos that Vanessa had the



SUPER STATS

6TH

The Ragin' Cajuns' national rank after the Women's College World Series.

2ND AND 3RD

Co-head coaches Stefni and Michael Lotief's preseason ranking on the NCAA Division 1 list of "Winningest Active Coaches," based on percentage of victories.

327

Number of strikeouts by freshman pitcher Ashley Brignac in the 2008 season. Previous record of strikeouts by a freshman – 303 – was set in 2007 by teammate Brittany Cuevas.

1

Number of Ragin' Cajuns named to the 2008 WCWS All-Tournament Team. Holly Tankersley earned that honor. She hit two home runs in the Series.

399

Number of runs scored by Ragin' Cajuns in 2008.

117

Number of runs scored by UL Lafayette opponents in 2008.

64,072

Total attendance at Ragin' Cajuns softball games in 2008.

5

Number of times UL Lafayette has competed in the Women's College World Series: 1993, 1995, 1996, 2003, 2008.

8

Players who were named Fastpitch Coaches Association All-America Scholar-Athletes for the 2007-08 season: Ashley Brignac, Brooke Brodhead, Kelly Cormier, Meagan Godwin, Christi Orgeron, Shari Sigur, Vanessa Soto and Courtney Trahan.

last putout. It was like the softball gods wanted it to be that way," Michael Lotief said. "They were shining upon her."

No. 4 After defeating LSU twice to win the NCAA Regional competition, the Ragin' Cajuns headed to Houston for the NCAA Super Regionals. There, they would go up against the University of Houston, coached by Kyla Hall Holas, a Ragin' Cajun pitching ace from 1991 to 1994. She was the first three-time All-American in the Cajun softball program's history.

Senior Angel Shamblin, who had just been named Conference USA's Pitcher of the Year – for the third straight year – led Houston's Cougars.

By the fifth inning of the first game, the Cajuns were trailing.

"The Cougars had gone up, 4 to 1," Michael Lotief said. "In the next inning, Lana Bowers, our catcher, hit a three-run home run and put us right back in the series."

The Cajuns went on to win, 6-4. They lost the second game the next day, when Houston collected six runs to UL Lafayette's three.

But a 4-0 victory over the Cougars in the third contest sent the Ragin' Cajuns to the World Series for the fifth time. It would be Stefni and Michael Lotief's second appearance there as UL Lafayette coaches.

No. 5 AND 6 The Ragin' Cajuns faced a formidable gatekeeper at the Women's College World Series. In the Series' first game, they were pitted against the University of Florida Gators, the No. 1 team in the nation.

The Gators were making their first-ever appearance in Oklahoma City.

Behind the arm of All-American Stacey Nelson, the Florida team had compiled a 67-4 record. During the entire 2008 season, only one batter was able to turn one of Nelson's pitches into a home run.

The nationally televised World Series



Holly Tankersley

game was tied, 2 to 2, at the top of the eighth inning when Holly Tankersley stepped up to bat for the Ragin' Cajuns. She was Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year and a member of the National Fastpitch Coaches Association's All-America first team. A senior, she had already racked up 21 home runs, 72 RBIs and a .452 batting average.

Then, *The Pitch* by Nelson.

It takes roughly two seconds for a softball to travel from the hand of a master pitcher, like Nelson, to home plate. A batter has under four-tenths of one second – less time than it takes the human eye to blink – to react.

But Tankersley didn't blink. Instead, "I took my chances, closed my eyes and swung," she later told reporters.

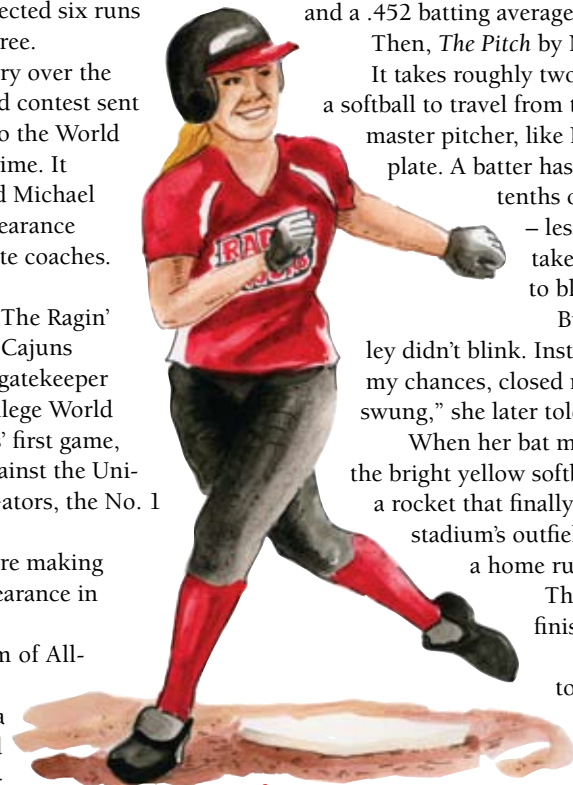
When her bat made contact, the bright yellow softball turned into a rocket that finally landed in the stadium's outfield bleachers for a home run.

The Cajuns weren't finished.

At the bottom of the eighth, UL Lafayette pitcher Ashley Brignac and Florida catcher

Tiffany DeFelice became locked in a battle of skill and grit.

The count was three balls and one strike.



Lana Bowers

WORLD CLASS FANS

Co-head coach Stefni Lotief sometimes gets emotional when she describes what happened after the Ragin' Cajuns played their final game at the 2008 Women's College World Series.

UL Lafayette had lost to the University of Alabama, 3 to 1. Due to a 97-minute rain delay, the game had not ended until a little past midnight. The Ragin' Cajuns lingered on the field after the stadium emptied. By the time they were ready to leave, custodians were picking up trash in the bleachers.

UL Lafayette's chartered bus was parked in a secluded area that enables teams to enter and leave the field quickly.

"We got on the bus, headed to our hotel," Lotief recalled in an interview with *La Louisiane*. "When we turned the corner, there must have been 300 or 400 people waiting! It was about 2 o'clock in the morning and they were still waiting for those girls to come out of the stadium. I've never seen anything like that. It was unbelievable!"

"They weren't going home until they told the girls 'Thanks' and congratulated them. They were yelling 'Ragin' Cajuns!' I still get teary-eyed," she said, wiping her eyes. "This university is such a special place. This community is such a special place. . ."

"People ask me, 'How can you get these incredible recruits? How do you get girls to come to this program?' And I just tell them,



"If I can get them here, to a game on campus, I know I have a shot because they can feel the atmosphere here. They see the energy at game time. They get to meet our girls and get to see what it's like on the field."

Lotief summarized the relationship between the Ragin' Cajuns and their fans this way: "Our girls absolutely adore our fans and the fans love them."

Co-head coach Michael Lotief noted that UL Lafayette fans outnumbered LSU fans, two to one, in the NCAA Regionals in Baton Rouge, La. At the NCAA Super Regionals in Houston, Ragin' Cajun fans outnumbered Cougar supporters, three to one.

"Our fans are the best in the world," he said. "They continue to give to the program and they believe in these kids and in their dreams. The program belongs to the fans and this community. Not just last year, but for the past 25 years." ■

Then Brignac threw *The Pitch*. DeFelice took a swing. Foul ball.

And so began a remarkable pas de deux between pitcher and batter. Sixteen more pitches. Sixteen more foul balls. On Brignac's 21st consecutive pitch, DeFelice finally delivered the ball to center field. Ragin' Cajun Karli Hubbard



made the catch to send DeFelice back to the dugout.

Brignac threw a total of 187 pitches in her first World Series game. After the final inning, an ESPN field reporter interviewed her on air. The reporter asked what was going through Brignac's mind at one point in the game when Florida had loaded the bases.

"Just our motto, 'Pitch by pitch.' The next pitch. Win that one. There are going to be people on base but you have to fight and know the defense is behind you. So it's just pitch by pitch," the freshman Ragin' Cajun replied.

EPILOGUE It doesn't get much better than defeating the No. 1 team in the nation in the first game of the Women's College World Series.

The next day, UL Lafayette lost its first game of the double-elimination series. Texas A&M eked out an RBI single at the top of the seventh inning to win, 1-0.

The Ragin' Cajuns had one more chance to grab a victory that would keep them in the Series. They went up against the University of Alabama. The Crimson Tide was ahead, 3 to 1, when Mother Nature interfered. The game was suspended for 97 minutes due to lightning. A little past midnight, the game ended. The score was still 3 to 1. The Ragin' Cajuns' season was over.

But just six key pitches illustrated why the team deserved its final ranking: sixth in the nation. ■