

Through a special bond with her coach and a tireless work ethic, Desarie Knipfer became...

# Queen of K's



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Desarie Knipfer started her career on the mound at Scotts Valley Middle School under the tutelage of coach Wayne Richards.

## Spectacular senior season one of county's greatest

*Editor's note: This is the eighth in a series of profiles on the Top 10 athletes in Santa Cruz County history, as voted by Sentinel readers.*

By **DAVID KIEFER**  
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*Book*

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Santa Cruz County Sentinel's

ALL  
CENTURY  
Team

DESARIE KNIPFER

IT WAS AN incredible achievement, the greatest singular feat in Santa Cruz County high-school sports history.

In 1994, Soquel High softball pitcher Desarie Knipfer struck out a national-record 518 batters in a single season, more than Michele Granger or Lisa Fernandez or any of the sport's all-time greats ever did.

Knipfer struck out at least 10 in all 34 games, and had eight consecutive 15-plus strikeout performances.

She hurled nine consecutive shutouts and, during one eight-game stretch, fired five no-hitters.

Her final line looked like this: A 28-6 record, 0.20 earned-run average, 518 strikeouts and 28 walks in 245 $\frac{1}{3}$  innings. And she led Soquel to its first league title and to the Central Coast Section semifinals.

The feat was a credit to not only her, but her per-

sonal coach, Wayne Richards, who transformed a young pitcher who only three years earlier often sat in the car after games in tears.

"Quite a few times we'd get run-ruled and there were situations when I couldn't throw strikes to save my life," she said. "I'd be on the mound, on the verge of tears, and looking down to where I wanted to dig a big hole and crawl inside."

On those painful drives home, Knipfer asked herself, "Is this worth it?"

And her father, Don, driving in silence, wondered how much heartache his daughter should bear.

She was an inexperienced freshman who wanted to play shortstop, and was placed into a hopeless situa-

tion on a 4-16 team.

Knipfer now believes those games were the turning point in her life.

"I could go two routes," she said. "Should I just quit and let it go, or show that I belong? Wayne said, 'You could give up, but what would you prove?'"

Perhaps more than her strikeout record, or her success in college and as a pro, Knipfer's legacy is in keeping the memory of Richards alive.

Richards was in his late 60s when he taught freshman Knipfer how to pitch. And though he was regarded as a pitching guru, he never had more of an effect on a young pitcher's life than he did on Knipfer's.

She became a second- and third-team All-America in her final two years at Cal Poly and was a two-time Big West Conference pitcher of the year.

Last summer, Knipfer threw only the second perfect game in the history of the three-year-old Women's Pro Softball League, and was second in the league in strikeouts (147 in 190 innings) and third in ERA (1.66), while going 15-11 for the Georgia Pride.

Knipfer, 23, now lives in San Diego with her

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# Knipfer

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boyfriend, Michael French, and will return to the WPSL this spring to play for the Orlando (Fla.) Wahoos. She also is considering making a run at the 2004

## Career Highlights

- Set national high school record with 518 strikeouts in one season
- Two-time All-America at Cal Poly
- Has thrown perfect games in high school, college and the pros

Olympic team.

"I'm still loving softball as much as ever," she said. "When I pitch my best, I don't think there's anybody I can't beat."

The tough part for Knipfer, however, is continuing to pitch without Richards.

"It was a big shock for me," she said of his death last year. "It didn't hit me until I hung up the phone. I had lost a friend and a mentor, a huge inspiration in my life."

"I had anger inside. I still needed him. Besides being my friend, I wasn't the pitcher I wanted to be without him."

Her father had sought Richards, because if Desarie was going to pitch on the varsity team, she was going to need help.

"I'd say, 'Wayne, maybe I'm not good,'" Knipfer said. "But he saw something in me that a lot of people didn't see."

The improvement was gradual, but it worked because of a mutual trust.

"There were times when I didn't

want to practice," she said. "But I knew in the long run that with every lesson I was one step closer to where I wanted to be."

By her junior year, Knipfer was beginning to put it all together. She was using different pitches and, "for the first time, I was in control," she said.

She struck out 201 in 151 innings while going 10-13 with a 1.76 ERA on an 11-17 team.

By her senior year, in which she allowed only one earned run during a 19-game stretch, Knipfer was unhittable.

"Wayne never stressed speed," she said. "I was never known as a hard thrower. But what made a huge difference was having a riseball."

Richards put her through an 11-day program from a pitching coach he knew in New Zealand. She started throwing a riseball from a close distance and each day tried again from further away.

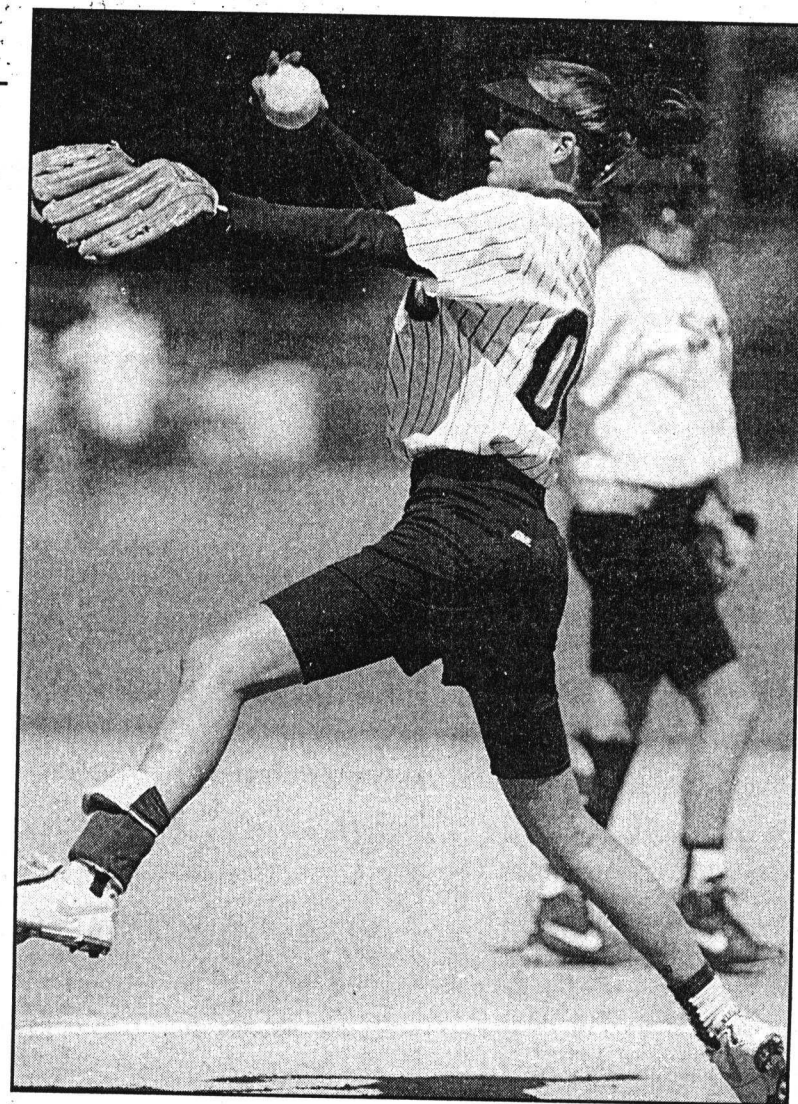
By the end, she could make the ball explode 15 inches upward as it reached the plate.

"Once I learned the spin, I had something most pitchers didn't have," she said. "I could get anyone with a rise and curve combination."

At Cal Poly, Knipfer knew she couldn't get away with the same things. Her riseball was most effective at the high-school pitching distance of 40 feet, not at college's 43. But she compensated by working on her drop and learning to throw a screwball, just to give the opponent something else to think about.

Knipfer continued to rely on Richards, by seeking his help whenever she came home. It was refreshing, and a chance to drop some bad habits she'd picked up on her own.

But now she can't rely on him



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file photo

Desarie Knipfer recorded a 28-6 record with a national record 518 strikeouts in her senior season at Soquel High.

anymore and, faced with that fact for the first time, she's felt lost.

Knipfer faltered early last season in the WPSL. It was hard to follow another coach's advice if it went against what Richards taught. And when she needed help, she felt as if she had

nowhere to turn.

"Halfway through the season, I wrote his initials on the top of my cleat," Knipfer said. "I could look down if I was struggling."

"It was a little thing, but maybe it relaxed me. He wasn't there physically, but I knew he was still there for me."