

BC3's Nikki Houk led NJCAA with .627 batting average

Success at plate tops among players on 350 teams in three softball divisions

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(Butler, PA) The shortest and fastest player on the Butler County Community College Pioneer Softball team, a former Little League baseball all-star who for eight years was the only girl on her squads' rosters, led the National Junior College Athletic Association with a .627 batting average, according to final 2017 statistics.

Nikki Houk's batting average was higher than that of any other player on the 350 squads in Divisions I and II – and in Division III of the NJCAA, in which BC3 competes.

The NJCAA is represented in all states except Alaska, California, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Vermont.

To be considered, a player must have had a minimum of 2.5 plate appearances per game and played in 75 percent of her team's games.

Andrea Sotelo, of Yavapai College, Prescott Valley, Ariz., led Division I with a .567 batting average; and Elizabeth Gary, of Lake Region State College, Devils Lake, N.D., led Division II at .580.

Houk, a 5-foot-2 freshman outfielder and 2016 graduate of New Castle Area High School, batted leadoff in 23 of BC3's final 25 games this season. She also stole 26 bases without being caught.

"She is the fastest on the team," said BC3 Coach Roni Mall, whose team finished 20-5 and won its first NJCAA Division III Region XX championship by sweeping Anne Arundel, of Arnold, Md., in a best-of-three series in late April. "She is probably the fastest in our division. Hands down."

On-base percentage also tops in all three divisions

BC3 suffered season-ending 9-3 and 11-1 losses on May 6 to Suffolk County Community College, of Long Island, N.Y., in the best-of-three NJCAA District H Tournament in Brentwood, N.Y. Suffolk County went on finish No. 2 nationally in Division III and BC3, No. 16.



Nikki Houk, a freshman outfielder for the Butler County Community College softball team, is shown in New Castle on April 19, 2017. Houk led all three divisions of the National Junior College Athletic Association with a .627 batting average in 2017.

Among Houk's 52 hits in 83 at-bats were 14 doubles, six triples and six fence-clearing home runs, which included two grand slams in the third inning of a 19-8 victory over the Community College of Beaver County on April 17.

"After she hit the two grand slams in the same inning, that definitely separated her from the rest of the pack (in the NJCAA)", Mall said.

Added BC3 left fielder Saydie Moore, No. 2 in BC3's batting order in 18 games: "I had never even heard of anyone doing that before."

Houk also led all three divisions with an on-base percentage of .677.

"She sets the pace," Mall said. "When your leadoff batter is getting on consistently, that sets the pace for the next batter to get up and have the confidence that we are going to do well against the team."

Seven other BC3 players hit at least .400. Catcher Alexis Vogan had a .541 average; shortstop Noel Pfabe, .500; outfielder Hayle Fox, .475; Moore, .439; pitcher Jessi Reed, .426; first baseman Kristen Karcher, .413; and third baseman Codi Reed, .403.

Freshman "has more of a baseball swing"

Houk said her stance at the plate and her upper-cut swing reflect her years of playing Little League baseball in New Castle.

"When I get up to the plate, my feet are shoulder-width apart," she said. "I just rest the bat on my shoulder. I am calm."

Added Moore: "She just stands differently than other softball players."

When the pitcher begins her windup, "I bring the bat up to my shoulder and keep my eye on the ball," Houk said. "I put all my weight on my back foot. I'm lunging, almost, where your power is."

She then steps toward the fluorescent green ball traveling 45 to 60 mph from 43 feet away and raises her left foot about 3 inches off the ground.

Baseball hurlers throw overhand from a mound, their pitches coming from high to low, Mall said. Softball hurlers throw underhand without a mound, the pitches coming from low to high.

"And you are swinging more level," Mall said. "But Nikki kind of swings up a little bit more. She has more of a baseball swing."

Opposing coach: Houk is “phenomenal player”

If the pitch were high, “she clubbed it,” Mall said. If it were low, “She golfed it.” Inside or outside? “She would step into it or step out of it. She was very good at reacting correctly. There was no getting around her.”

Kristin Heinrich, first-year coach at CCBC, said she knows an amazing hitter when she sees one. Houk is one of them.

“She is a phenomenal player,” Heinrich said. “Being a great hitter is about having great coordination, great hand-eye coordination, and good judgment as to where the ball is going to be pitched.”

Houk accounted for 94 of BC3’s 277 runs, scoring 51 and knocking in 43.

“Watching her at the plate, she was a tough one to pitch around,” said BC3 right-handed hurler Jessi Reed, who was 13-0 with 11 complete games, two saves and a 1.32 earned-run average in 74 innings. “She was hitting everything. “She was hitting everything. High, low, inside, outside. She was hitting whatever her bat touched. She had so much power in her swing. You had to intentionally walk her.”

“I was always the only girl”

Houk was walked 10 times and struck out three times. She had one five-hit game, one four-hit game, nine three-hit games and five two-hit games. She was hitless in only one game, 0-for-4 in BC3’s 15-0 victory over Garrett College, McHenry, Md., on April 22.

The right-handed batter who played Little League baseball from age 5 to 13 – “I was always the only girl,” Houk said – is a talented competitor, Mall said.

“When you see a kid like that, regardless of what team you are on, it’s just fun to watch someone who is a natural,” Mall said. “Any kid who puts the ball over the fence, it is fun to watch. When you see talent like that, no matter who they are playing for, it makes a huge difference.”

Butler Community College, El Dorado, Kan., captured the NJCAA Division I title with an 11-7 victory over Salt Lake Community College, Taylorsville, Utah., on May 20.

Louisiana State University Eunice claimed the NJCAA Division II crown with an 8-7 win over Jones County Junior College, Ellisville, Miss., on May 20.

Rock Valley, Ill., won the Division III championship by beating Suffolk County 20-0 on May 20.