

2010 SOFTBALL MVPs

Class 3A Nicole Johnson, Bear River, senior

For three years, Nicole Johnson played in the shadows of her teammates, quietly filling in where needed. With so much talent around her, it was difficult to earn her day in the sun.

Not that she was ever looking for the spotlight in the first place.

"I just wanted to do whatever it took to help my team," she said.

But during the 3A tournament, Johnson was a force impossible to ignore. During Bear River's 9-7 semifinal win over Grantsville, Johnson was subbed in for pitcher Josi Summers with the tying run at the plate in the fourth inning. Johnson quickly struck her out and, over the next three innings Johnson struck out five more batters to end the Cowboys' threat.

Over the final weeks of the season, Johnson racked up an 18-game hitting streak, including a timely double and RBI in the fourth inning of the state championship game.

Simply put, Johnson did a little of everything, all of it crucial, en route to the Bears' third consecutive Class 3A state title.

"It was easy to let her take over because I know she's always got my back," said fellow pitcher and first-team all-state selection Josi Summers.

"There's no question she was a huge part of our success," coach Calvin Bingham said. "She's an excellent ball player but an even better human being. There isn't a day that goes by that she doesn't thank her coaches for helping her along. But for us, it's been a privilege to coach her."



Bear River's Nicole Johnson had an 18-game hitting streak during the Bears' title run.

JIM URQUHART | The Salt Lake Tribune

Class 5A Tori Almond, Bingham, senior



JIM URQUHART | The Salt Lake Tribune

In her time at Bingham, pitcher Tori Almond led the Miners to the playoffs every year and to three straight state titles.

Her dominance has been undeniable. From the day BYU-bound Tori Almond stepped onto the field as a sophomore, she made a name for herself as one of the best pitchers the state ever has seen.

In her senior season, Almond threw two perfect games and averaged 14.67 strikeouts per game. By season's end, she had fanned 339 batters to break the state single-season strikeout record.

But for Almond, it was never enough.

"Every year, she just got better," coach Mikki Jackson said. "She was frustrated when she wasn't perfect and worked even harder to make sure those moments didn't come around too often. That's something anyone would want to emulate."

A year before Almond joined Bingham's ranks, the Miners did not reach the

state tournament. In Almond's first year in the circle, Bingham finished in fourth place. Following the Miners' near-flawless run to a state title in 2008, Almond led Bingham to a historic state title run through the losers' bracket. Again this season, she led the Miners back from a disappointing tournament loss, at one point pitching 20 consecutive hitless innings to lead Bingham to its third consecutive state title.

"She just took another step up during the tourney," Jackson said.

At the plate, she had 18 RBIs and a .474 batting average in the state tournament.

"When you think about what she's brought to the team, especially considering the team didn't even qualify for state the year before she arrived, it just demonstrates how instrumental she was in our success," Jackson said.

Class 4A Mattie Snow, Tooele, senior

Over the final month of the season, Mattie Snow could feel the nagging ache radiate from the hairline crack in her right index finger every time she stepped into the pitching circle. With each passing pitch, the pain would intensify.

And heading into the state tournament, she knew that she'd have to endure the pain through at least 28 innings if the Buffaloes hoped to make it back to the 4A title game.

"It always hurt, but we kept it on the down low," Snow said. "As a pitcher, I had to be a leader out there. Every pitcher has to be a leader."

Along with an incredible tolerance for pain came an uncanny ability to strike out batters in the most critical situations. And no play illustrated that composure more than Snow's final-inning performance during Tooele's semifinal game against Lehi. Backed by the experience of a series of extra-inning games in the 2009 state tournament, Snow held off two consecutive tying runs at the plate to escape with the 4-3 victory.

"I was nervous at first, but then I just thought, 'wait, I've been here before,'" Snow said. "I think those times helped me to handle the pressure better this year."



Mattie Snow pitched Tooele to a state title with a broken finger on her pitching hand.

JIM URQUHART | The Salt Lake Tribune

Class 2A Shelby Dalton, Grand, junior

Over the past four years, Grand softball pitcher Shelby Dalton was the beacon of confidence among the Red Devils' ranks. Led by her steady, even-tempered composure in the pitching circle, the Red Devils quickly transformed themselves from a playoff afterthought to a consistent state title threat.

But during the state-title game, Dalton finally let her emotions get the best of her. Not that it was a bad thing.

With her team in the midst of a tense, 10-inning battle against South Summit, Dalton rallied the troops in the dugout, calling for her teammates to do everything they could to pull off an extra run. Every time she fanned a batter, she'd pump her fist or hop in celebration in the pitching circle, knowing each strike brought the Red Devils one step closer to the state title that had eluded them for 10 years.

"She's an even player. She doesn't get nervous, she just does what she needs to do," coach Stephanie Cluff said. "But it was fun for me to see her get excited like that."

When Cluff called for the game-winning trick play, Dalton kept her cool and executed the play to perfection to lead the Red Devils to the 3-2 victory over South Summit.

But her composure and



JIM URQUHART | The Salt Lake Tribune

Shelby Dalton led Grand to the 2A state title, pitching a no-hitter along the way.

well-timed pep talks were only a small part of the equation.

Early in the season, Cluff recruited teammate Lillian Jones to fill in behind the plate because, frankly, she was the only player on the team able to catch Dalton's pitch. During the state tournament, Dalton pitched a no-hitter and

struck out at least 10 batters each game to help the Red Devils endure two consecutive international tiebreaker matchups.

"Every bit of her play in the state tournament just came from sheer determination," Cluff said.

—Jennifer Gustavson

COACH OF THE YEAR

Grand's Cluff injects fun into winning team

Coach guides alma mater to first state title in 10 years.

By JENNIFER GUSTAVSON
Special to The Tribune

According to Grand softball coach Stephanie Cluff, the Red Devils always have had the depth and talent to take home a state title. But in recent years,

she noticed something was missing.

"They just didn't seem to be on the same page," said Cluff, who was a member of Grand's 2000 state championship team.

So, when Cluff took the reins at her alma mater in 2008, her primary goal was to reintroduce some fun into the daily grind of practice, travel and games. Her thought was that if the Red Devils could

bond off the field, practice no longer would be a tedious, monotonous chore. And hopefully, the results would follow.

"She made it fun again," pitcher Shelby Dalton said. "Practices were more productive. She always was positive with her criticism. It was the little things that really made a difference."

It's those little, but crucial, pieces of guidance and support

that led the Red Devils back to their first state title in 10 years that makes her *The Tribune's* 2010 softball coach of the year.

"I wanted to coach where I played high school ball and be the type of coach that inspired and taught more about life than the sport," Cluff said. "And for us, the main component of that was working together. We probably focused on team-building activities even

more than we practiced."

Still, Cluff, who nearly was full-term pregnant at the time of the tournament, made sure the team had a few tricks up its sleeve to use in the most crucial points of the season. From the first day of practice, she introduced a fake-out play she had learned while playing at Dixie State and led the Red Devils through its minute details daily.

"We knew what to do in every situation, but were so nervous she was going to go into labor and leave us," Dalton said. "She just makes the team."

But Cluff taught the Red Devils well. And when the time was right, all it took was a word to set the much-practiced trick play into action. It only took a few seconds of flawless execution for it to secure the state title.