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Back — and better than ever

Newington softball team beats Southington for the first time in school history, rallying from 6-0 deficit

Battling through driving rain and thrashing wind to overcome the loss of a key player, erase a 6-0 deficit, and avenge fifteen years of frustration against their archrival, Newington's varsity softball players did more Monday than merely prove that they can overcome adversity.

They did something utterly unprecedented. They made history.

They beat Southington.

Junior second baseman Taylor Bengtson hit a three-run homer in the bottom of the sixth to break a 6-6 tie, lifting the Indians to a 9-6 win over the Knights — Newington's first victory

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Above: Taylor Bengtson smashes the game-winner, a three-run home run in the bottom of the sixth. Left: Coach McKernan celebrates as Bengtson trots home. Right: Pitcher Lindsay Windish and All-State infielder Jenn Castelhano share a high-five.



State rank:

#3

“You could possibly go through the year undefeated.”

—Head Coach Anne McKernan

Record:

9-0

Newington beats Southington

Softball team rallies to beat Knights for first time ever

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ever against its archrival. With the win, the Indians improved their overall record to a yet unblemished 9-0 — the best start in school history, according to *The Hartford Courant*.

As if all that weren't enough, the new coaches' poll released Tuesday morning bumped the Indians up from #9 to #3 in the state — and that voting took place before the Southington game was even played.

All in all, it was quite a day for Newington softball.

"You won the game," head coach Anne McKernan said as she hugged Bengtson immediately after the Indians wrapped up their win Monday. "Congratulations."

"I didn't even know where it went," Bengtson stated when asked about her powerful, towering home run shot. "I just ran."

Bengtson's game-winner came just one inning after the Indians batted around in a six-run fifth which brought them back into a game that had looked all but over when Southington opened up a 6-0 lead in the top of the fifth.

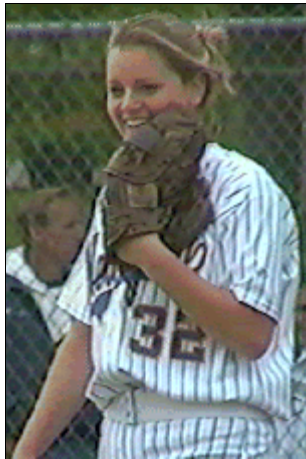
"If you can keep the confidence going when the archrival you've never beaten has just taken a 6-0 lead, and you can still come back, and you can still say, 'Screw it, we're going to hit. We're going to hit and we're going to hit and we're going to hit' ... what *else* are you capable of?" McKernan asked her team after the game.

All-State third baseman and senior co-captain Jenn Castelhana had a few ideas on that topic: "I think this team is capable of doing anything, as long as we come to practice every day, work hard, stay focused, keep our ultimate goal in mind." And what is that ultimate goal? "To be playing on June 12, in the state championship game," Castelhana said. "It's a very good possibility."

McKernan agreed.

"We're still going to play it game-by-game, but we possibly could be capable of going through our season undefeated," stated the head coach. "You are capable — you've just put yourself in the position to win the league. You could possibly go through your league season undefeated; you could possibly go through the year undefeated."

"I've said right from the start of the season, I think that this team should shoot for the top, and that's a chance to win the state championship," said assistant coach Steve



Above: Indians pitcher Lindsay Windish smiles after one of her two first-inning strikeouts.

Markie. "There's no doubt about it. ... As long as we stay focused every game, I think we can win every game."

Newington has eleven games left to play in its regular season, eight of them in the conference — including a return engagement with the Blue Knights at Southington on May 21. But regardless of what happens for the rest of the season, Monday's game was a real milestone for NHS softball.

Until yesterday, McKernan had coached twelve years at Newington without ever beating Southington even once, despite playing the Knights at least twice every year. And the Southington jinx extended even further than that, reaching all the way to the formation of the CCC South in 1984. Fifteen years of annual rivalry — and never once a Newington win. Until yesterday.

"So," McKernan told her team after the game, "you have a lot to be proud of."

Asked whether the Indians had needed to prove to themselves that they could beat the Knights, McKernan stated, "I think, as long as they played their best game, they knew they'd be okay. But to tell you the truth, having *so* many defeats and no wins against this team — yeah, it makes a difference in our hearts, anyway... We really needed this."

It wasn't easy for Newington. Although pitcher Lindsay Windish registered six strikeouts in the first three innings — striking out the side in the third — she surrendered a home run to Stacey Shreder on the first pitch of the second inning, giving Southington a 1-0 lead. Windish held the Knights to that one run through four, but the Indians' offense managed just two hits in those first four innings.

A tight, one-run game turned into a scoring fest when the wheels suddenly came off the Indians' defense in the fifth, giving the Knights a chance to expand their lead.

First came a base hit through second baseman Taylor Bengtson's legs.

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Above: Taylor Bengtson reacts after her throwing error helped extend Southington's inning. She would later redeem herself with the game-winning

Indians come back after trailing 6-0

Newington softball earns first-ever win over Southington

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That was followed by a bloop pop single which landed between Newington players in the back of the infield, putting runners on first and second with nobody out. A sacrifice bunt moved the runners to second and third with one out, and a wild pitch gave the Knights a 2-0 edge.

Another bloop hit split the Indians' defense again and brought

home another run for a 3-0 Southington lead.

But when the Southington batter who had blooped the RBI single turned baserunner and tried to steal second, she was tagged out for the second out of the inning, and a routine grounder to Bengtson — who had earlier gotten the Indians out of a second-inning jam with a fine defensive play leading to a double-play — should have ended the inning. But the Newington second baseman committed a surprising throwing error, leaving the door open for the Knights. Southington capitalized with a single and a home run, and suddenly, they led 6-0.

Asked later about the defensive errors, McKernan said, "that's not a play we usually mess up." Pointing out that All-Conference shortstop Aimee Viens was missing due to illness, the coach added, "We usually don't make that mistake, and it could have been the different personnel out there."

Despite suddenly falling substantially behind, the Indians never lost confidence, according to Bengtson. "Everyone was up," she said. "Everyone knew we could pull through and win. Everyone had confidence in each other."

That confidence would prove justified, as Newington launched a comeback almost immediately upon coming to the plate. Lisa Rivard started things off with a pop fly down the third-base line which stayed just fair and just out of the left fielder's range, resulting in a double. Windish drove Rivard home with an RBI double, putting Newington on the board at 6-1. Defensive errors by the Knights and heads-up Indians baserunning allowed Newington to plate its second, third, and fourth runs, and suddenly it was a ballgame again.

Ashley Skehan, the Indians' #2 hitter in the starting lineup, tripled home the team's fifth run in a surprising



Above left: In one of several examples of good base-running in the Indians' sixth, Stephanie Toohey hustles home, sliding in to bring Newington within 6-4. Above right: Indians players react as Taylor Bengtson rounds the bases after her homer.

display of power hitting. Skehan then scored the game-tying run from third even as Jessica Fortuna hit into a double play for the first two outs of the inning. When the inning ended, every Newington batter had come to the plate once, and six of them had crossed home plate. The score was 6-6.

"We're not done yet," reserve outfielder Idalina Estanislau

chanted as she ran toward left field to help Sandy Ramos warm up for the sixth inning.

The top of the sixth didn't last long. The first Southington batter quickly grounded out to second base. The next batter grounded to shortstop on the first pitch of her at-bat, and the third batter flew out to center field, again on the first pitch. 1-2-3, and Newington was up again.

After recording one out in the top of the sixth, Southington pitcher Megan Blaszczyk allowed the next two Newington batters to reach base. The Knights chose to make a pitching change, bringing in Wendy Urso. It was a fateful decision.

Urso got Stephanie Toohey to pop up for the second out of the inning, but then Bengtson stepped to the plate — and the rest is history.

"I was expecting her to pitch me outside. She used to pitch me outside," Bengtson said when asked about the 1-0 pitch from Urso which she took deep. "So I was surprised when it came right down the middle."

"She's a fine hitter, and she made a statement, I think, with that shot," McKernan said of Bengtson. "That was sweet."

The Indians retired the Knights in the seventh without much trouble, allowing one batter to reach base on a single but then ending the game on a double play by nailing that runner on her way to third base.

"It's over!" a fan yelled as the celebration erupted moments after the final tag was applied.

According to Castelhana, the comeback "says a lot about our team. It shows our character: we're not going to give up. ... This team is a very good hitting team. As long as we stay confident and keep our heads in the game and know we can hit, we can do anything."