

Magnificent

Once her team's worst hitter, Sanders blasts her way to the top of college softball

By Charlie Bier Photography by Doug Dugas

Louisiana Ragin' Cajuns shortstop DJ Sanders is the best hitter in college softball. Pretty impressive considering she was once the worst hitter on her team.

As a freshman, Sanders' fielding skill earned her a starting spot. Her .290 batting average, though, ranked last among starters.

Those days are long gone for DJ, which is short for Doni Jenee.

After her junior season in 2017, the 21-year-old was one of 10 finalists for this year's USA Collegiate Softball Player of the Year Award, the sport's most prestigious honor. That award went to Kelly Barnhill, an extraordinary pitcher at the University of Florida. The Florida Gators competed in the Women's College World Series championship game this year.

Sanders was also one of four finalists for the annual Honda Sport Award given to the top female athlete in each of 12 NCAA sports. That award went to Barnhill, too. Previous Honda Sport Award recipients include basketball superstars Maya Moore and Candace Parker, track and field's Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and soccer standout Mia Hamm.

Earlier this year, Sanders was also named first-team All-American and Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year.

Her accolades and lofty company rest on the strength of masterful hitting that produced "video game numbers" as Ragin' Cajuns baseball player Steven Sensley told a newspaper reporter last season when asked about her performance at the plate.

National media took notice, too. In April, *Excele Sports*, a website that covers women's athletics, published an article titled "How DJ Sanders went from unknown recruit to college softball's best hitter."

By the close of the 2017 season, the slugger had cemented that status. She led the nation in several major statistical categories – home runs (29), runs batted in (82), and slugging percentage (1.013). She had at least one hit in 42 of 55 games, and belted six grand slams, tying an NCAA record she shares with former Ragin' Cajun Christi Orgeron.

How phenomenal was Sanders? Consider this eye-popping

stat: four of her six grand slams came over a seven-day, five-game stretch. In the lone game she failed to register a grand slam during that span, Sanders hit a two-run homer. The Ragin' Cajuns won all five games by a whopping total of 55-10.

True to her nature, the modest, affable Sanders attributed much of her success to her teammates, a lineup that propelled the Ragin' Cajuns to a 47-8 record, and the team's 19th straight postseason appearance.

Outfielder Aleah Craighton joined Sanders as a first-team All-American. It marks the seventh season in a row the Ragin' Cajuns have landed more than one player on the All-America team.

Ragin' Cajuns dominated the Sun Belt All-Conference Team, too. Six players landed on the first team. No other school in the 10-team conference had more than two players among the 15 first-teamers.

Sanders also credited mentoring she's received as a Ragin' Cajun as a key factor in her hitting prowess. "I don't think things would have turned out the way they have for me had I gone to any other school. I needed a whole makeover and that's what I got here," she explained.

Former head coach Michael Lotief and assistant coaches, for instance, helped her adjust her batting stance and instructed her how to use her legs to generate more power. "When I first got to UL Lafayette, I was all arms and shoulders," she recalled in an interview with *La Louisiane*.

Lotief described Sanders as an amazing athlete with "incredible hand-eye coordination" and the ability to "take every experience, positive or negative, and turn it into a learning experience."

Sanders will own up to one trait that has aided her development: how she responds to failure.

"What helped me most is my freshman year. I feel like if I had done OK, I would have been just a little bit better my sophomore year, and a little bit better than that my junior year. But because it was so bad, I didn't want to be there again. It made me focus."





BRAD KEMP

These days, her hitting strategy is simple.

“The way I work at the plate is expecting a pitcher to throw what I couldn’t hit the previous at bat. Usually the pitch I hit is the one I swung at and missed the last time up. So, it might take me two swings, but that’s why you get three strikes,” she said.

Despite her achievements, Sanders often gets so anxious when she steps into the batter’s box that her teeth literally chatter. “I may end up doing really well, but I’m still very nervous. I’m not sure why. It’s different in the field. I never feel pressure out there.”

A defensive wizard, Sanders was nevertheless so lightly recruited coming out of New Hope High School in Columbus, Mississippi, that she considered playing college basketball. UL Lafayette was the only major school that offered her a shot on the diamond.

One visit to Lamson Park for a Ragin’ Cajuns softball game convinced her that she belonged at the University.

“I said to myself, ‘Oh, my gosh. This is where I need to be.’ I think that the atmosphere, the fans, the game itself, is what really sold me. This is home.”

Sanders’ decision paid off for player and school.

She takes much of the attention in stride. She isn’t fond of talking about her accomplishments or, for that matter, even reading about them. Months after the *Excellence* article touted her as college softball’s best hitter, Sanders had yet to read it.

Sanders’ competitive streak runs in the family.

DJ’s older sister, DeShuni, was a two-year starter as an outfielder at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. She played at that university for two seasons, in 2011-12 as a junior and in 2012-13 as a senior. DeShuni transferred to the school from East Mississippi Community College, where she played for two seasons.

When the siblings talk shop and the conversation turns to who

the better player is, neither will concede. The sisters have reached an understanding: they are each the best – at their respective positions and at their different hitting styles.

DJ is a power hitter; DeShuni is a slapper, or a hitter who moves toward the ball, as it is traveling to the plate, to “slap” it into a hole in the defense and get a head start to first base.

“The only thing we agree on is that I’m better at what I do, and she’s better at what she does,” DJ said. “She will not admit to this day that I’m a better softball player.”

Athletic ability is in the genes of the Sanders sisters, including Kennedy, the middle sister, who was a track and field standout in high school.

Dad Donnie, a multi-sport high school star, ran track at Mississippi College in Clinton, Mississippi. Mom Renee competed in the same sport at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi.

More than heredity, however, accounts for Sanders’ love of softball. As a toddler, she would hound her dad to play pitch and catch after watching DeShuni’s Little League games.

“Ever since I can remember, it’s been a part of our lives. It was the norm, to play softball,” she said.

So, what does Sanders do for an encore as a senior in 2018? How does she think her senior season will unfold? She isn’t sure, except on one count: she isn’t feeling much pressure.

“I won’t say I’ve accomplished my goals, but I’ve already done a lot of what I expected of myself,” she said modestly.

A lot, but not quite everything.

“One of my biggest goals, my greatest wish for my senior season, is obviously a goal I share with my teammates, something that just about every college softball player dreams of – winning a national championship.”

2017

Batting average .388

Home runs 29

Grand slams 6

An NCAA record, tied with former Ragin’ Cajun Christi Orgeron

Runs batted in 82

Fielding percentage .955

Honda Award for Softball Nominee

Top 10 Finalist for USA Softball Player of the Year

Louisiana Sports Writers Association Hitter of the Year

All-Louisiana First Team

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