



Those Eyes: When the ump shouts "Play ball!" it's all business for Jennie Finch.

Softball's Leading Lady

A fierce warrior, a model, a mother-to-be, and the best pitcher on the planet, Jennie Finch has become her sport's icon — and a lightning rod for sales to the teenage girls who worship her.

The popularity women's fastpitch softball has achieved over the past decade is amazing, and the sport's importance to team sporting goods dealers is unassailable. Consider that there are 1,483 college women's fastpitch teams (including NCAA, NJCAA, NAIA and CAA). Combine that with over 343,000 high school players, and countless travel, club and rec players, and, according to SGMA data, there are currently over 3.2 million females participating in fastpitch softball in the United States. That ranks the sport fourth in terms of total participation according to the Women's Sports Foundation.

Many point to the magical summer of 1976 as the sport's turning point. That was when a group of heretofore unknown American women stole the hearts of a nation by capturing gold

at the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, and since then the popularity of fastpitch softball has grown by leaps and bounds. Suddenly, girls had a diamond of their own to play on. A game that was fast, athletic and skillful. A game that shared many similarities with our national pastime, but also had many differences that gave it its own personality.

And without question, the game's greatest ambassador today is a polite, unassuming 25-year-old young woman, a first-time mother-to-be named Jennie Finch.

Never mind that as a collegian at Arizona State, Finch, a 6-foot-1 right-handed fireballer, led the Wildcats to the 2001 College World Series championship, broke scores of NCAA records and earned Honda Award accolades twice (fastpitch softball's version of the Heisman Trophy). Never mind her

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIZUNO

gold medal at the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens.

You want a role model? As fierce a competitor as she is on the mound; as nasty as she may seem to opposing batters with a vicious 70 mph riseball over which she has total control; Jennie Finch has never cursed in her life. Not once.

"That's just one of those things that once you start, it would be very hard to stop. So I just never started," she says simply.

Life in the Fast Lane

What she did join at a very young age was the fast track toward athletic stardom. Born on September 3, 1980 in La Mirada, Calif. — a stone's throw from Dodger Stadium (her mother, Bev, was a self-described "baseball nut," and the Finches owned Dodger season tickets) — bleeding Dodger blue came natural to Jennie.

Jennie progressed through t-ball and youth leagues, and her father, Doug, built a batting cage and hired a pitching coach for the young prodigy. By the age of 12, Jennie led her 12U team, the California Cruisers, to the national championship. In 1995, her team copped the national 14U crown.

Success followed her to high school, where Jennie compiled a 50-12 record at La Mirada High, including six perfect games and 13 no-hitters, with a 0.15 ERA and 784 strikeouts.

Playing at an elite level at such a young age did not come without sacrifice. Unlike a "normal" teenage girl devoting most of her time to aimless pursuits, Jennie was singularly focused on becoming the best fastpitch softball player she could be.

"I remember when I was a little girl thinking, 'Why can't I just be *normal*?' I wanted to hang out at the mall looking for trouble, get into boys and everything else," she says. "Now, I think *thank goodness*.' I was surrounded by girls who were driven, and looking back, I'm grateful for the opportunities that I've had.

"The way society has become — with the Internet, video games and technology — you see a lot more kids staying indoors," observes Finch. "We need to find a way to make exercise fun again."

Her devotion to children — and children's health issues, in particular — has led her to team up with Gatorade on a program called "Get 60," which encourages youngsters to get at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day.

"You see the obesity problem, and it's scary," she says. "It's such a huge problem in the U.S. It starts young. Parents have to be active in getting their children involved with activities."

Being active, of course, has been the least of Jennie Finch's problems. She continued her amazing run through college, where she went 109-16, won an NCAA-record 60 consecutive games, and earned first-team All-American recognition three times.

In addition to her phenomenal athletic success, Jennie Finch is without question pleasing to the eye, particularly to the male of the species. Case in point: She was recently voted "hottest female athlete" by the young, male audience that frequents ESPN.com's Page 2, supplanting long-time sports hottie Anna Kournikova. And last year, she followed

Kournikova and preceded reigning tennis glamour queen Maria Sharapova as a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model.

The combination of athletic skill, beauty, brains, personality and social consciousness has opened doors for Finch that have never been opened before for a fastpitch softball player.

"Jennie is the ideal client, an agent's dream come true," proclaims her agent, Gregg Clifton, vice president of team sports and general counsel for Gaylord Sports Management. Among Clifton's other clients are major league baseball stars David "Boomer" Wells, Tom Glavine, Kris Benson, David Delucci and B.J. Surhoff. What separates Finch from most of her peers, says Clifton, is her ability to perform as seamlessly off the field and in front of the camera as she does on the mound.

"She's a star athlete, a model citizen, a role model and a model rolled into one," explains Clifton. "Jennie is an advocate for women's and kids' causes, and an incredibly effective corporate spokesperson."

Think Pink

Perhaps her most important corporate gig right now is as a Mizuno's liaison to fastpitch softball — a relationship that has just been renewed. With her own line of fielder's gloves, bats, cleats, batting gloves and bags, Finch's mere image can be an extremely effective merchandising tool for team dealers doing business in the fastpitch softball marketplace.

"Mizuno's Jennie Finch products are hot right now," observes Karen Clarke, manager for The Sports Center, a Kilmarknock, Va.-based team dealer that has been serving the high school and travel market since 1990. "The kids are really going after anything Jennie Finch this year — the new bats, batting gloves — especially anything in pink."

Jennie concurs that pink is in.

"Pink and black," she says. "But especially pink."

While she is generally recognized as the best fastpitch softball pitcher on the planet, her skills on the mound often over-



Jennie's agent calls her "a dream come true."

PHOTO COURTESY OF LONDON FINCH/FINCH PHOTOGRAPHY

shadow her prowess at the plate. Often forgotten is that she hit .301 as a collegian, and pounded out 50 home runs. Last year she produced similar numbers at the plate for the Chicago Bandits, the regular season champs in the fledgling National Pro Fastpitch League (.309 in 81 at-bats, 6 HRs, 22 RBI).

The fact that Jennie can, indeed, hit is not lost on Mizuno, however, which sells a few bats using her famous moniker.

“Jennie Finch is known for being the best pitcher in the history of fastpitch softball, but what sometimes gets overlooked is what an outstanding hitter she is,” says Dick Grapenthin, vice president and general manager, Mizuno USA Inc.’s Diamond Division. “The association of Jennie Finch’s name is a huge benefit to any team dealer that currently carries, or is considering carrying, fastpitch equipment.”

Indeed, Finch says the reason she chose Mizuno in the first place is because the company agreed not to treat her like just another pretty face.

“Mizuno asked for my input, and they listened to it,” she says. “They were going to put the time and effort into women-exclusive apparel and equipment.”

Jennie recalls that as a young girl, she was forced to use and try to modify boys’ equipment and apparel to conform to a girl’s dimensions.

“I wore men’s cleats and used baseball gloves,” she says. “When I was little, I had to use smaller sizes of men’s batting gloves. Now they’re made for a woman’s hand. It’s just neat to see a company that steps up like Mizuno has in supporting women’s athletics.”

Finch points to several areas that Mizuno has listened to and acted upon her recommendations.

“Oh, gosh, anything from the power lock on the glove to make it tighter around the wrist because females have small-

er wrists,” she says. “Then they’ve studied the female anatomy and built cleats to conform to a woman’s foot. Little things like that make a *huge* difference.”

Mizuno, meanwhile, couldn’t be happier with the relationship.

“She has provided Mizuno with invaluable information and feedback in creating our new Techfire Fastpitch bat, as well as her Finch Signature Series Bat,” says Grapenthin. “Jennie is the most recognized athlete in fastpitch softball, and is an outstanding role model to players of all ages because her excellence transcends softball.”

Traditional Approach

Even though she’s chronologically a member of “Generation Next”—the skateboarding, dirt-bike-riding crowd that brought us such alternative athletic pursuits as half-pipe competition, mogul skiing and snowboardcross, and introduced the world to the Flying Tomato at the recent Winter Olympics in Turin—Finch is far more traditional in her approach to her own sport.

And speaking of the Olympics, while Jennie will lead the U.S. charge into the 2008 games in Beijing, softball and baseball have been eliminated from the roster of medal sports by the International Olympics for the 2012 Games in London. Baseball was hurt by its unwillingness to suspend play mid-season to allow its best players to compete on the world stage—instead creating a preseason World Baseball Classic, which was about to launch as this issue went to press. Then, there is the image hit suffered by the sport from the steroid scandal of the 1990s.

But softball? What possible reason could the IOC have for eliminating softball from the Olympics? Was it guilt by association? Or was it because since 1996, the United States has been virtually unbeatable in softball?

“Your guess is as good as mine,” says Finch, who, for the first time, has a hint of frustration in her voice. “There is no legitimate reason. It’s so disappointing and heartbreaking that someone could do that to our sport.”

An anti-American backlash, perhaps?

“I don’t know if that’s it,” she says. “Look at some Asian countries. Softball is their best opportunity for a medal. I mean, think about it. You hear all this talk about equal opportunity, then they go and do this to a women-only sport.”

Which makes the success of the budding National Pro Fastpitch League, for which Finch plays with the regular-season champion Chicago Bandits, that much more important—so elite female fastpitch softball athletes will have a viable venue to showcase their talent after their college careers have ended. And, perchance, to make a reasonable living at it.

“We just have to keep moving forward, continue building the college game and giving kids that dream of playing in college,” says Finch. “And hopefully we can build a strong pro league. Everything else will fall into place.”

Besides, says Jennie, don’t give up on that Olympic dream just yet.

“I wouldn’t,” she says. “I’ve heard that a softball stadium is

being proposed in London and that softball might be under consideration for an exhibitions sport. There is a future for the sport.”

Old School

Finch routinely warms up for 27 minutes before each game—not 26 and not 28, a life-long superstition worthy of any locker room. A fierce warrior, just one look into her eyes will tell you she is all business between the lines. Far from being concerned with turning the diamond into some sort of fashionista runway, she is much more like The Babe than *the babe*.

“I guess I’m a little old school,” she admits. “I wouldn’t play in [racer-back jerseys], that’s for sure. I just mentioned that to the U.S. Team.”

Her affinity for a traditional look is nothing new.

“When I was a kid, there was no way that my little 12-year-old body was going to get put into one of those,” she continues. “That’s also why I didn’t go out for volleyball—because I wouldn’t wear Spandex shorts.

“I guess it’s just the sign of the times. It’s another generation, and I’m just getting old.”

Yeah, right.

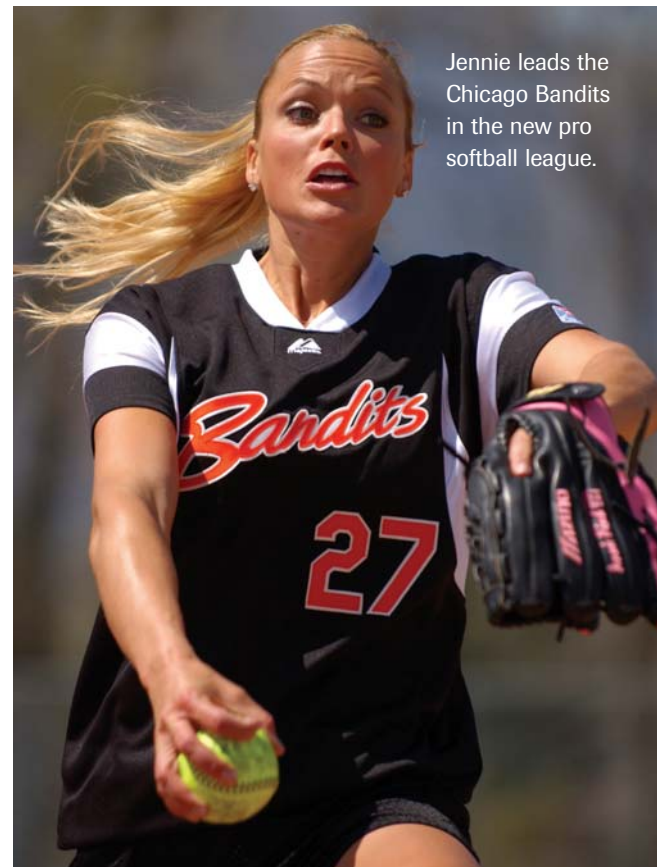
According to the USA Softball website, if Jennie had her druthers, she would be a major league baseball player. While that might seem like a stretch, she can, with all due respect to The Boss, sure “blow that speedball by; make you look like a fool, boy.” Just ask the likes of Alex Rodriguez, Mike Piazza, Richie Sexson, Brian Giles and Paul LoDuca, all of whom have been struck out at one time or another by Ms. Finch. LoDuca, the newly acquired New York Mets’ catcher, is a great contact hitter who strikes out about as often as it snows in Tucson, where Jennie resides with hubby Casey Daigle, a minor league pitcher in the Arizona Diamondbacks’ organization. The couple are expecting their first child in April. (It’s a boy, in case you’re interested, and the couple has already chosen his name: Ace Shane Daigle.)

Jennie has already committed to play for the Chicago Bandits this summer. To many, a viable professional fastpitch softball league is at best a long shot. Soccer tried, and failed, to create a professional vehicle for its female athletes after riding a wave of World Cup and Olympic popularity. Basketball has the WNBA, but even that league’s most ardent supporters will admit that it couldn’t exist without the NBA’s backing.

Major League Baseball has agreed to help promote the new league, but for the most part, the league will succeed or fail based on its athletes. And Jennie Finch, her sport’s crown jewel, is certainly up to the challenge.

Vive la Différence!

According to Ms. Finch, pro softball will inevitably catch on with the American spectators for two reasons: While it offers many similarities to baseball, in other ways it is a totally different sport in terms of speed and pace. Plus, female athletes in general are far more accessible to the fans than their male counterparts.



Jennie leads the Chicago Bandits in the new pro softball league.

“I can’t say enough great things about my experience with the pro league last year,” she says, already donning her Goodwill Ambassador visor. “The fans feel like they’re a part of the game. In women’s sports, you have that approachability. After every game we were signing autographs. You should have seen all the little kids lined up.”

And they didn’t even charge for their signatures.

“Right,” she says with an infectious giggle. “It was such an awesome experience. I think we’re picking the right markets and starting out small. It’s a great game, and I think people have learned to appreciate it, not so much compared to baseball, but to appreciate the differences—the speed and quickness of the game. I think it all started with the ’96 Olympics, seeing those women wearing gold with USA on their chests.

“That was the turning point,” she continues. “That interest carried into college programs in general, and then seeing the College World Series on ESPN every year. That exposure has really helped our sport.”

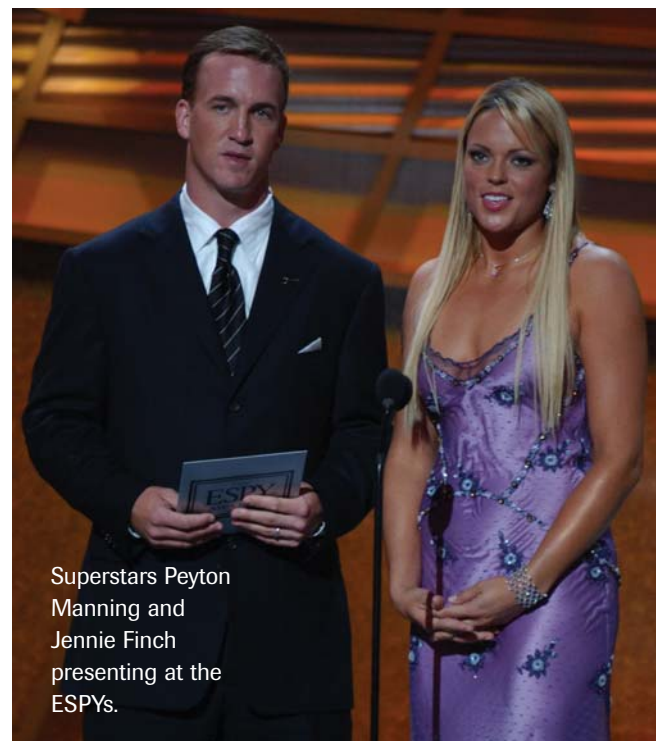
While optimistic about the future of pro fastpitch softball, Finch readily admits that the stakes are quite high.

“Hopefully, we’ll continue to grow,” she says. “Especially considering what just happened with the 2012 Olympics, we really need to have this pro league to keep our sport growing in the future.

“I hate losing. I mean, I love winning, but losing is a much more intense feeling. When I lose, I take it very personally.”

Smart money will never go against Jennie.

—Debbie Thurman contributed to this story.



Superstars Peyton Manning and Jennie Finch presenting at the ESPYs.

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