

NEW YORK STATE SOFTBALL CHAMPIONS

1992 - CLASS A



When it comes to the truly great teams, there are rarely any overnight sensations. It takes years to develop talent, hone instincts, build personal character and team chemistry. Health, luck, and timing play roles in a successful season, too. When all of these factors come together, sports fans--even the casual ones--must take notice. Individual records may come and go, but to be the first team in a school's history to win at the highest level is an indelible achievement. The Columbia varsity girls softball team did just that--it made its mark.

Coached by Helene Piel (Class of 1981) and her assistant, Barbara (Finke) Sauter (Class of 1985), the 1992 Columbia varsity girls softball team went **24-4** overall, a school record for wins for any team in school history. Previous seasons had been very successful for the program, yes, but increasingly bittersweet when the post-season ended. In 1985 and 1986, the varsity team had won Class A titles; the 1987, 1989 and 1990 teams were Class A runner-ups, and the 1988 and 1991 teams had been New York State semi-finalists. Individual players had received accolades, but the *ultimate goal*, a state title, remained elusive. The heart of the team and its coaches, however, never wavered; all they knew was there was work to do.

1992 was the year when all the elements of winning came together. Eighteen players, who included senior tri-captains Christine Nalley (New York State Player of the Year), Michele Bottachiari (2nd Team All-State), and Athena Geracitano (4th Team All-State), went **14-1** in the league. During the Sectionals, the Lady Blue Devils outscored their opponents 24-4, capped by an 8-0 win in the finals over rival Shenendehowa. Cicero-North Syracuse, in the opening round of the Regionals, fell to Columbia 16-1. Then, the post-season got interesting.

On June 13, 1992, John Jay delivered some stingy pitching, allowing only three hits, but Columbia would prevail in the morning semi-final game, 2-0, behind a two-hitter by Nalley. With the title game scheduled later that day, one can only imagine the mindset of the Lady Blue Devils, who had been close before to winning it all. One thing was for certain: it would take a team effort to win it all.

With five seniors playing in their last game, the fight to win the title game against Chenango Valley was certain to be intense. In 2017, Coach Barbara (Finke) Sauter recalled that this team of young women had displayed "character, talent and coachability" all year, and never more so was this case than when the game, a 1-1 stalemate, went into extra innings. Team defense, determination, and timely hitting were the motifs of the game. In the top of the eighth, sophomore centerfielder Julie Frezon (who had tied the game with a triple in the third) tracked down a ball that had been hit over right fielder Carey Leahey's head, and hit junior shortstop Maureen Klee with a relay throw. Klee made an impressive catch, wheeled around and threw a strike to sophomore Deb Luby, who tagged the runner out at third. In the bottom of the ninth, Klee hit a one-out triple to right. Back to back bunts by sophomore Kate Carnevale and freshman Nancy Nicsevic loaded the bases for Nalley. After falling behind in the count 0-2, Nalley had to jump the next pitch, which nearly hit her in the foot. On the next pitch, Nalley was locked in and lined a single to right centerfield to drive in the game-winning run. Moments after the thrilling win, Coach Piel summed it up best: "I'm proud of every one of these girls. It is a very special group."

The following Monday, the Town of East Greenbush held a victory parade for the championship team. The players and coaches also got to meet Governor Mario Cuomo, who spoke with each player about her part in the team's accomplishment, presented Coach Piel with a Certificate of Merit, and posed for pictures with the team in the Red Room at the State Capitol.

This June marks the 25th anniversary of the most successful softball team in school history, and *the first team in any sport in school history to win a state title*. Tonight, the Hall of Fame welcomes the first team in school history to its esteemed ranks. May the memories of your historic season and bonds of friendship never fade.