



Mike Salsbury, The Chronicle

Centralia pitcher Ramona Lorton, left, and center fielder Lindsey Heck, right, swarm second baseman Amanda Palmore after she caught a line drive off the bat of W.F. West's Ashleigh Cox to end the District IV Class 2A Softball Tournament championship game Friday night at Fort Borst Park.

Tigers Rule District IV

Centralia Holds Off W.F. West for First District Crown in Nine Years

By Caleb Breakey

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"Come on, Ken," Centralia first baseman Kim Kerlee said. "Just do it."

Teammate Krista Church had to chime in, too: "Yeah, come on. Just cry."

What sounded like a dare from the elementary days had a lot of significance to it.

Centralia coach Ken Olson was on one knee in front of his players, his right hand clutching a neon softball, which was snuggled into the cup of a very prestigious piece of hardware -- the 2A District IV Softball championship trophy.

Olson raised his left hand and tugged at his shades.

"That's why I have the glasses on," he said.

In seven innings of slick defense, slugfest hitting and a whole lot of crimson and orange colors at Fort Borst Park Friday, Centralia defeated W.F. West 6-4 to take the district title for the first time in nine years.

Olson said he felt something come off his back after the Tigers recorded the final out in dramatic fashion. Only his players could tell you what it was, though.

They were the ones who yanked it off.

“It’s been a long time for me,” Olson said. “It doesn’t take great coaching if you’ve got good players, and we’ve got some dandy players over in that dugout.”

Dandy No. 1 has to be Tiger pitcher Ramona Lorton, who pitched all 21 innings and recorded 63 outs in the two-day tournament.

She allowed nine hits and four runs against the Bearcats, striking out two and walking five while trying to adjust to a small strike zone, which stayed consistent for W.F. West pitchers Lauryn Ticknor and Emily Sinclair as well.

Lorton said her main pitch -- the drop ball -- wasn’t catching any part of the plate, so she went to plan B: throw strikes and let the defense work.

“I threw more fastballs tonight than all season combined,” she said. “I usually stay away from the fastball. It’s like a go-to pitch for the end of the lineup -- just something to throw hard. So I told my teammates, ‘Guys, they’re going to get hits. You have to do this,’ and of course they said, ‘We’ve got your back.’”

No lie.

Both teams played solid defensively: Shortstop Lauren Liseth and catcher Jordan Scherer for the Tigers; second baseman Samm Dizer and RF Tia Bradley for the Bearcats, to name just a few.

But one play trumped all of the day’s ‘D’.

In the bottom of the seventh, with a runner on first and W.F. West’s Ashleigh Cox representing the tying run at the plate, Lorton fired an 0-1 pitch to Scherer. Cox smacked the ball on a line toward center field, evoking a few “Base hit!” yells from the crowd.

Centralia second baseman Amanda Palmore stepped to her right as soon as she heard the familiar dinging sound of the bat. She laid out as the liner dove for a patch of dirt.

Palmore snagged it just before it touched the ground for the final out, and that may have been considered easy compared to what she faced directly after the catch: Lorton jumped full speed into her arms, setting off the Tigers’ celebration.

Chants of “District Champs!” and stomps on the bleachers rang.

“I love the defense. I love how they can pick it up,” Lorton said. “That last inning (the Bearcats) should have had a hit, but Amanda tooooooally saved our butts there. They make just scrappy plays. I can count on them.”

Palmore's play marked the end of a frustrating day for the Bearcats, who hit well enough, defended well enough, and pitched well enough to win.

W.F. West simply didn't get a big hit with runners on base, stranding a total of 15 runners, including at least two in every inning except the seventh.

"You can't do that," W.F. West coach Mike Keen said. "The thing with Centralia is you have to get on them early and make them press a little bit so that they don't build momentum. But we didn't score, and they started hitting the ball and hitting the ball. Then you're back on your heels."

Every player in the Tigers' lineup except two recorded a hit, with third baseman Church and center fielder Lindsey Heck picking up three hits apiece.

Heck said she and the rest of the offense simply studied W.F. West pitchers Ticknor and Sinclair, held to their fundamentals at the plate, and focused.

"When I step out of the box, I think, block out everything around me, step into the box and think only about the pitcher and the ball," she said. "We just never give up and we never lose hope."

Bearcat shortstop Lindsay Schmitt led her team with a pair of singles and two RBIs. Sinclair rapped a couple of hard singles as well for the Cats.

Olson, who noted earlier this season how Twin Cities softball might not have ever been so evenly matched, said he believes Centralia and W.F. West are among the top three teams in the state. Maybe Keen heard, as the Bearcat skipper said he had a funny feeling the two teams would find themselves pitted against each other at the state tournament next week in Selah.

But that's down the road.

For now, Olson said, he and the Tigers are just loving the title of District Champs.

He might have to keep the glasses on for a while.