

VOLUSIA SPORTS

Hatters build new field, perfect start at home

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DeLAND — It's picture-perfect. With a crushed red rock infield and clean white lattice trim on green dugouts, the Stetson Softball Field popped up seemingly overnight as a bright new addition tucked into the south-east corner of campus.

But the first team to play in the ballpark, the Hatters of 2003, know their field of dreams didn't come easy. This wasn't a home they simply carted boxes into after signing mortgage papers. They had to pound nails and paint boards before they could play ball. That, they say, is the reason they are a perfect 18-0 at home.

"There's a piece of all of us in this field," said ace pitcher Blake Hoorelbeke. "We don't lose at home."

Ten years from now, when Hoorelbeke and her teammates get together for a class reunion, they may struggle to recollect the details of last week's bottom-of-the-seventh rally to beat Campbell 2-1, or this afternoon's games against visiting Mercer. But they'll look at the lush Bermuda grass outfield and remember getting their fingernails and knees dirty pulling weeds out of a vacant lot.

"They've got a lot of sweat out here," said Coach Frank Griffin. "That certainly helps."

Every college team spends hours practicing on its home diamond. But the Hatters have home-field familiarity few can match.

"We are professional weed-pickers and hammerers now," senior Alison Parker said as she proudly scanned the field. "We know every inch of this field, how



the ball bounces, how the sun shines off the bleachers, the feel of the warning track, everything, because we built it."

Griffin has built a team that can play solid softball anywhere. The Hatters are 25-5 overall and 5-1 in Atlantic Sun Conference play going into today's league doubleheader against Mercer (22-14, 3-1), which begins at 1 p.m. The Hatters' all-time record at the Sperling Sports Complex, a City of DeLand facility that was their previous home, was 221-142 from 1988 through the 2002 season.

But Stetson has been even better at its new home, even though its winning streak on the field almost never got off the ground. In a historic opener, Feb. 26, the Hatters swept Oakland by scores of 4-3 and 2-1, but had to score in

the bottom of the seventh inning in both ends of that doubleheader to avoid extra innings.

Stetson also had to rally in a 2-1 win over Yale, scored in the bottom of the eighth to beat Miami of Ohio 2-1, came from two runs down to top Cornell 4-2, beat both Liberty and Wisconsin-Green Bay 1-0 on runs in the bottom of the seventh, and then did it again last Saturday against Campbell. The Hatters used a squeeze bunt by senior Emily Harris to tie that game 1-1 and a double by freshman star Melissa Wiggins to bring home Sheryllynn Wilder for the victory.

Clearing of the new facility began almost a year ago, April 29, 2002. Griffin's ballpark blueprints date back a lot longer than that. He knew he wanted an on-campus field when he took the Hat-

ters' head coaching position in 1997.

He and his assistant coaches, Vanessa Glasscock and Tracy Rippenhoff, turned into contractors. Players chipped in to drive nails, paint poles to hold the backstop netting, and glue the small vertical signs that read "Stetson" and "Hatters" and adorn the spectator side of the backstop.

"I think it says a lot about women's athletics and how far it's come that this could be accomplished," Griffin said. "There's no judge that made us build this field."

And no student tuition funds borrowed. Instead, Griffin tapped friends for construction services and materials. Funding came from over 600 donors, totaling over \$500,000 to date.

"I had people stopping in the



PHOTOS BY BARBARA V. PEREZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Strong season. Eighteen of Stetson's 25 softball victories are at the team's new field, which the players helped to build. 'Somehow, we pulled it off,' Coach Frank Griffin said. 'It was sunup to sundown.' At left are Stetson's (from left) Holly Burris, Griffin, Carrie Cruitt and Alison Parker. Stetson takes an 18-0 home record into today's Atlantic Sun Conference doubleheader against Mercer. The Hatters are 5-1 in the conference.

street out here in their cars to write me a check," Griffin said. "It thrills me to know how many gracious people there are that think so much of athletics and education."

Nobody dared promise recruits a new field would be ready. A month before practice opened, there still were no bullpens or irrigation system.

"I heard about it, but I thought it was something for the future, not this year," said Carrie Cruitt, a freshman shortstop from Edgewater High.

"This was a bonus. A big bonus," said Shawna Wiggs, another freshman recruit from Lakeland.

"Somehow, we pulled it off," Griffin said. "It was sunup to sundown."

The paybacks for those long

days have meant wins, and an advantageous schedule. Stetson will play 30 of its 50 regular-season games at home this year, saving travel time and expenses because it has a facility that can draw northern schools to DeLand for games. Griffin wants to raise more money for more amenities, including permanent restroom facilities and lighting suitable for televised night games.

But in the light of day alone, the field is a beautiful thing for the players who helped built it.

"You can ride a bike from your dorm to take batting practice," said Wiggins. "This is our field."

Stetson has four more home dates scheduled after today's games, including a key doubleheader Sunday against conference leader Troy State (26-14, 4-0), also beginning at 1 p.m.