

Butler Eagle

Pitch perfect

Pioneers' softball program flourishing

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JEFFERSON TWP — The recruiting pitch from **Butler County Community College** softball coach Roni Mall was a simple one.

“They are very nice T-shirts,” Mall said, laughing. “And you should see the hoodies I'm designing for you.”

The 14 members of the Pioneers softball team are certainly not playing for the swag. They are a collection of standout high school players who, for whatever reason, chose to not attend a four-year college and play softball there.

Instead, they come from Grove City and Karns City. From Seneca Valley and Redbank Valley. From Moniteau, Seneca Valley, Butler, Ford City and Franklin.

Most had to be persuaded to play by Mall and other members of the team. Just two years ago, the program was on the brink of folding.

But this year, players from vastly different backgrounds are meshing together.

And it's working.

The Pioneers have won eight straight games and carry a 9-3 record into the WPCC Division III Championships this weekend.

Five of those wins have come in seventh-inning rallies.

“These kids fight to the last pitch,” Mall said.

“We've just come together as a team,” said Knoch graduate Hayle Fox. “The way we came together and worked with our strengths and weaknesses, it's been good.”

For Mars graduate Kasey Jones, BC3 rekindled her desire to play softball.

After being a standout player for the Planets, Jones took nearly two years off before she was intrigued by the prospect of playing for the Pioneers.

She attended a meeting, heard Mall's passion for the program and was hooked.

“I'm just happy to be playing again,” Jones said. “It's so much fun. I'm having a blast.”

The season started in a dubious fashion for the Pioneers, however.

Just before the opening doubleheader, the team discovered its only pitcher, Knoch graduate Codi

Reed, was ineligible because of a mix-up with her credit load.
She was one credit shy.

“When we found out about Codi,” said Fox, who was a teammate with Reed at Knoch, “it broke my heart.”

That left the Pioneers scrambling for anyone who could pitch.

Karns City graduate Saydie Moore raised her hand.

Moore had played just about everywhere on the diamond for the Gremlins and for her summer travel team. The only position she had never played was pitcher.

“When I got the phone call about Codi, I was in shock,” Moore said. “I was moved around a lot and played every position there is to be played except pitcher, so, I said, 'OK, I'll try it.'”

Moore was thrown into the fire and struggled in a season-opening doubleheader.

“It was so cold,” Moore said. “And I just couldn't pitch. I just got tired. I was really sore.”

But she worked with Reed to get command of her fastball and develop other pitches.

Now, Moore has become quite serviceable in the circle.

“What that kid has done is nothing short of amazing,” Mall said.

Moore sings a song in her head — “T-Shirt” by Thomas Rhett — to stay in rhythm with her mechanics.

“Whatever works,” she said.

Grove City graduate Belle Chiodo, who pitched for the Eagles, also joined the team to give BC3 two arms to lean on.

“I talked Belle into it,” Moore said. “She had no real desire to play.”

That's a common theme. Many of the players had their arms twisted to join.

Last year, Mall would go to bed at night counting in her head the number of players she would have at the field the next day.

Often, it was only nine.

The same fate almost befell the Pioneers this year.

“At first we weren't going to have enough girls,” Moore said. “We were pushing nine, 10 girls. Then everyone found someone. 'You need to play. We need you.'”

Fox was set to go to Indiana (Pa.) University and not play softball until Mall got a hold of her and convinced her to play.

“Roni has a way with that,” Fox said.

Mall promised Fox her customary spot in center field and her uniform number of choice — 12 — to seal the deal.

Moniteau graduate Alycia Brehm, who had never played softball before, was also talked into playing to add depth.

To help make sure as many players could make games as possible, the Pioneers' athletic department scheduled as many games on the weekends as it could.

The team also has juggled practice times at their home field at Laura Doerr Park to accommodate players.

“They do the best they can to get to every practice that they can,” Mall said. “A lot of these girls have jobs and are in the nursing program. They don't have a lot of time.”

Most, though, plan on returning next year.

Reed, who has been a de facto coach this season, will be back in uniform in 2017. As will her sister, Jessi, who is a senior pitcher at Knoch this year.

The Pioneers still have designs on a 2016 WPCC title this weekend.

And making sure the program is never in jeopardy again.

“Hearing the record that we have, it is very intriguing to see the heads pop up that weren't there before at BC3,” Reed said. “People who want to play ball and are seeing we are gaining that edge on our competition. We're finding these good players coming out of the woodwork. That's fantastic.”