

## ALL-AREA SOFTBALL

# Cavaliers' catalyst

Alexis Brown's pitching dominance and selfless attitude propelled JF to an unlikely deep playoff run

BY BEN CATES  
For The News & Advance

Before the softball season began, the squad at Jefferson Forest chose the word "One" as its motto, representing its hopes for athletic togetherness on the field.

But after a dismal regular season and a fifth-place finish in the Seminole District standings, it appeared that word had been merely a catchphrase.

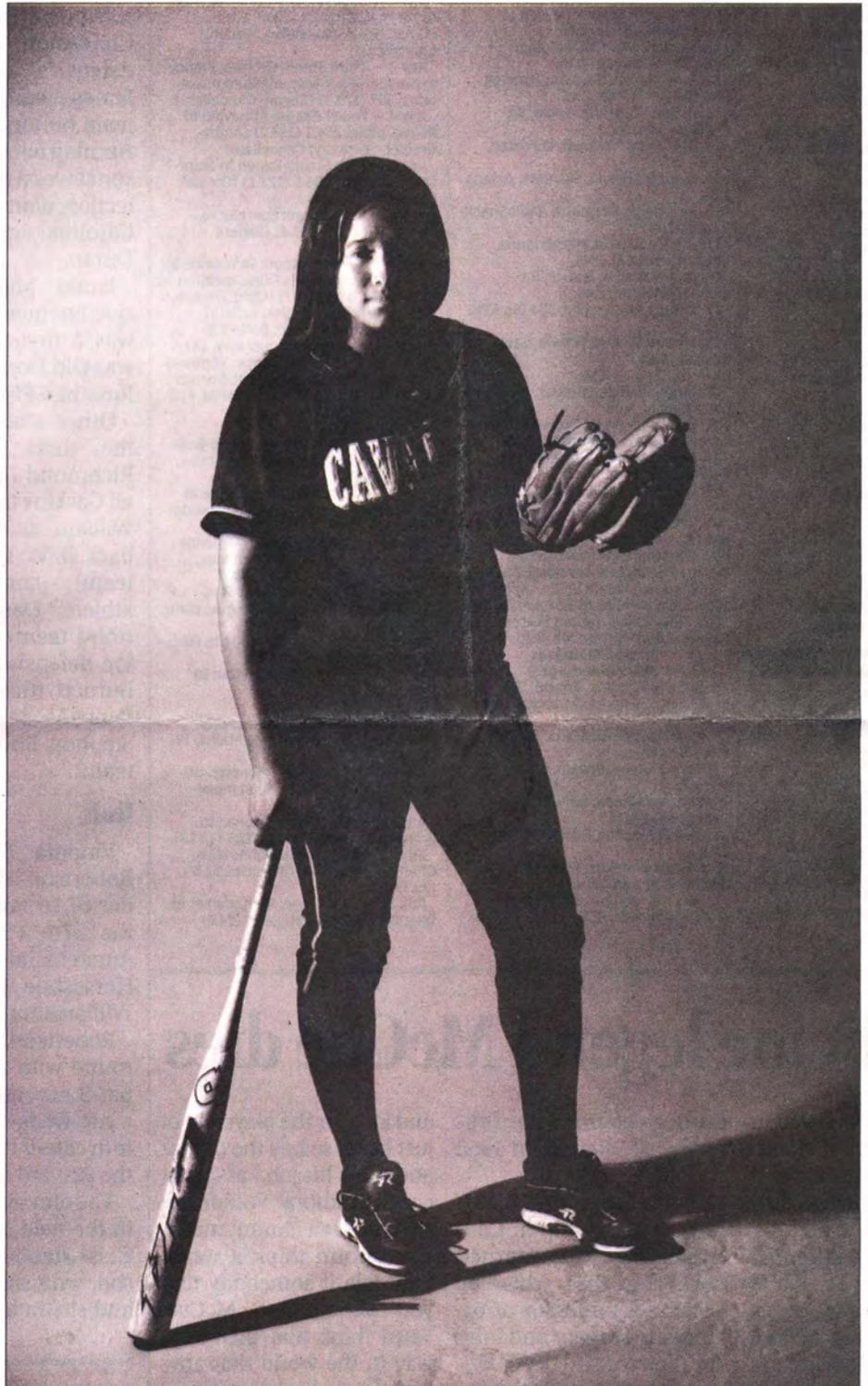
And perhaps it would have remained that way if not for junior hurler Alexis Brown, who bought into coach Joanna Hardin's vision of unity with selfless abandon.

**INSIDE** Brown — the News & Advance All-Area softball player of the year — proved to be the catalyst that propelled Jefferson Forest from the depths of mediocrity and into a confident team that would make an improbable late-season charge into the state tournament.

» The entire All-Area softball team. **D3** Brown (13-11, 1.01 ERA) was one of several mainstay pitchers in the talent-laden Seminole with ERAs that hovered around 1.00. Hardin said that Brown's success was due in part to her ability to focus on the team's well-being rather than her own.

"From out-to-out and pitch-to-pitch, Alexis truly and genuinely doesn't care about statistics, wins, or her personal record," Hardin said. "She wants the team to win. She doesn't care about her personal accolades and that's so rare in a high school athlete, much less a pitcher."

Despite Brown's dominance, the Cavaliers (14-13) were characterized by errors that cost them several close games. They struggled early and then started April by losing three games in one week, all by two runs or less.



JILL NANCE/THE NEWS & ADVANCE

Jefferson Forest pitcher Alexis Brown carried a 13-11 record and 1.01 ERA this past season. Brown, a rising senior, credits her riseball for her success. "When it's really on, it's not flat at all. It starts out right at the strike zone and then comes in chest level, so it makes it look like a strike."

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# Brown

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"They were really tight games," Hardin said. "We just couldn't get over the hump and it left us a sour taste going into our spring break. That was the lowest of the low."

But Brown kept plugging away, despite the fact that her record wasn't indicative of her performances.

She recorded 14 strikeouts in a 1-0 shutout of Franklin County on March 26, the game in which she said she was at her best.

On May 29, she tossed a 1-hit shutout against Rockbridge County in the Region III quarterfinals, facing the minimum through four innings before giving up an infield single in the fifth. She struck out seven and walked two in a 1-0 win. To say she was in the zone would be an

understatement: Brown wasn't even aware she was throwing a no-hitter until she walked back to the dugout after the fifth.

"I don't really let the outside things affect my performance," she said. "I just go out there and go with the flow."

After the loss to Rustburg, the Cavaliers suddenly reeled off five postseason wins in a row, and knocked off the Red Devils in the district championship. Brown followed her one-hit outing by giving up two runs as JF beat top-seeded Fort Defiance in eight innings in the Region III semifinals.

"We all just kind of came together once the tournament started," Brown said. "In the regular season, the games we had been losing had been by like one run, or we had one error or gave up one extra hit. Finally, we all pulled together and that continued in regions and states."

Hardin said that Brown (5-2, 0.86 ERA in the postseason) elevated her game after making it her goal to pitch JF past the Region III quarterfinals.

In JF's seven postseason games, Brown had 62 strikeouts in 49 innings, and finished with 223 strikeouts on the year.

She credits her dominance as a strikeout pitcher to her riseball.

"When it's really on, it's not flat at all," Brown said of her trademark pitch. "It starts out right at the strike zone and then comes in chest level, so it makes it look like a strike. Then at the last second it's up."

Hardin was so struck by Brown's mechanics this year — and the sharp movement on her pitches — that she was a little leery to warm up the Seminole District pitcher of the year before a game.

"Alexis has this really crazy spin on the ball," Hardin said. "I actu-

ally won't go warm her up before a game because I don't want to get hit in the face. The ball just moves all over the place."

Her consistent play wasn't limited to the circle, either. After struggling at the plate last season, Brown hit .333 this year in the No. 8 slot, with 23 hits and 13 RBIs.

But she'd rather be in the circle, navigating her way through a nail-biter.

"In the circle, there's no other pitcher I'd rather have in the seventh inning with a 1-0 lead," Hardin said. "She is clutch."

Hardin looks for even better things from Brown next spring.

"Everybody needs to watch out, because she is goal-driven and determined to go farther in every way," she said. "She's going to work harder and put everything into her senior year because I know she doesn't want to leave with any regrets on the field."