

What a turnaround: Lady Crusaders capture section crown, go from 3-15 to perfect 25-0

Ray Aspuria The Times-Standard

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EUREKA -- Their smiles were from ear-to-ear and truly genuine.

The perfect season was theirs and so was the title.

Standing in front of the home dugout with championship banner in hand and medals around their neck, the St. Bernard's High softball screamed and clapped with glee on Saturday.

Fueled by Ashley Stodder's five RBIs and a solid defensive effort, the Lady Crusaders defeated Humboldt-Del Norte Conference rival Ferndale 6-2 to capture the North Coast Section Division VI Championship, their first NCS crown in 15 years.

"It's a really good feeling to beat Ferndale," Stodder said. "They are our league rival."

And, as the exclamation point to the victory, St. Bernard's finished 25-0. This after a 3-15 season the year before.

"It's really uplifting to know the program turned it around this year," Stodder said. "It's really great to be part of it."

Faced with a team they had previously beaten four times during the regular season, St. Bernard's came out smoking hot.

Pitcher Haylie Chase (who struck out 13) fanned the Wildcats' first three batters in the initial inning and then, the Crusader offense went to work.

Two ground outs with a single sandwiched in between, St. Bernard's loaded the bases for Stodder.

The freshman brought down the hammer.

Blasting Ferndale pitcher Becca Robison's offering to the gap in center field, Stodder cleared the bases and gave St. Bernard's a 3-0 lead.

"Well, (coach) Alan (Borges) always says 'When first pitch is there, swing at it,'" Stodder said. "It was there so I swung.

"Our game plan in the first inning was to get on top and we did exactly that."

Unable to get any more runs on the board, the St. Bernard's defense went back to work and no additional runs were scored until the Crusaders' half of the third inning.

That's where Stodder collected RBI No. 4.

Chase led off the inning with a deep shot into center field and Stodder brought her home with a high arching single. Her stay on the base paths was short as the Wildcat defense couldn't handle a ball hit by Jamie Gillespie, and it was 5-0 St. Bernard's.

The Crusaders were definitely rolling, but Ferndale wasn't about to lay down as their bats got going in the fourth inning.

Finally able to grasp Chase's timing, Robison led off with a single. Jodi Grinsell followed up with a shot that ricocheted off the glove of St. Bernard's Tanya Reed in center field, bringing home Robison.

"We had trouble adjusting in the first three innings," Ferndale head coach Justin Griffith said. "Our timing was just off, but we were able to adjust."

A strikeout later, Ferndale's Kelly Chambers ripped a shot down the right-field line which brought in Grinsell and ignited both the Wildcats and the Ferndale faithful.

Brianne Miller and McKenzie Burgess entered the hitting fray and suddenly the bases were loaded with one out.

But Ferndale was unable to capitalize.

A ground out and a pop up ended their hopes of bringing in more runners.

Both defenses stymied the other's offense until the bottom of the fifth inning.

Before she got up to bat, Borges beckoned Sarah Ringler to get on base. She got on base all right.

Leading off with a triple, Ringler put herself in prime scoring position.

And guess who brought her in?

Stodder collected her fifth RBI with a sac-fly, 6-2 St. Bernard's.

Chase and the defense slammed the door on the Wildcats from that point on.

Despite the defeat, Griffith was pleased with the 2009 season and paid compliments to the Crusaders.

"It's a great way to end the season," Griffith said. "We played well and we fought until the end."

"St. Bernard's earned this game. They've accomplished a lot this season and congratulations to them."

Chase returned the kudos.

"St. Bernard's and Ferndale have a rivalry going and it's a big honor for the team to beat them for the championship," she said. "We're not going to be like 'Ha ha, in your face.' We're going to have class."

For Borges, the title and perfection is a culmination of the team's hard work and unshakable bond.

"Awesome," he said. "The best part is when they're on bases, sometimes I don't even have to coach them. It's a pretty good luxury."

"These kids have played together a lot, they back each other up."

While the season is over for both teams, the future is bright.

Both boast rosters loaded with underclassmen adding more intrigue to the rivalry.

"The teams are fairly young so it's a matchup you may see for three or four more years," Griffith said.