

# Softball Champions

No.1 in the Nation and Eighth  
Straight State Title



THE NESHOPA DEMOCRAT

# Lady Rockets use success to build success

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY  
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When you look back at Neshoba Central's past eight fast-pitch softball seasons, it's not hard to argue that success breeds success.

The Lady Rockets won their eighth straight Mississippi High School Activities Association Fast-Pitch State Championship and the 10th in program history last month.

They swept Moss Point's East Central Hornets 7-3, 14-2 and finished as the No. 1 ranked team in the nation according to the USA Today poll with a 32-0 record.

Coach Zach Sanders has been in the Lady Rockets dugout from the beginning. He started as an assistant coach in 2013 under former coach Trea Embry and became the head coach this school year.

"It's something special, a testament to the girls we have had through the years," Sanders said. "They use year after year for motivation. One team is motivated by the last team. They want to continue what has been started. They want to be better.

"They don't want to be the team that breaks the streak. They are driven by that. You don't hear them talking about a lot of stuff. But the little stuff, when they are talking on the side, you hear them say things like that. They don't want to be the one and it drives them. They want to keep going and they are going to do what they need to do."

Here is a review of the last eight seasons of work by the Lady Rockets:

- 2021 – The Lady Rockets defeated East Central 7-3, 14-2; final record 32-0; ranked No. 1 in the nation. (Championship series played at the University of Southern Mississippi.)

- 2020 season canceled due to COVID-19 Pandemic.

- 2019 – The Lady Rockets defeated Wayne County, 4-3, 17-1; final record: 33-2, No. 1 in the nation. (Series was played at the University of Southern Mississippi.)

- 2018 – The Lady Rockets defeated Pearl River Central in two games, 3-0 and 6-1; final record 34-0. (Series played at Mississippi State)

- 2017 – The Lady Rockets defeated Picayune in two games, 3-0 and 6-2; final record: 30-3.

- 2016 – The Lady Rockets defeated West Harrison 2-0 and 6-0; final record 27-1.

- 2015 – The Lady Rockets defeated West Harrison 11-0 and 10-0; final record 31-1.

- 2014 – The Lady Rockets defeated Wayne County 10-0 and 14-1; final record 32-2.

- 2013 – The Lady Rockets defeated East Central 8-0 and 18-5; final record 31-6.

During this run, the Lady Rockets have



Photo by Robbie Robertson

Neshoba Central coach Zachary Sanders puts a championship medallion on one of his players after the Lady Rockets won the Class 5A championship series.

## Eight straight fast-pitch state titles

- 2021 – The Lady Rockets defeated East Central; final record 32-0.
- 2020 – Season canceled due to COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2019 – The Lady Rockets defeated Wayne County; final record 33-2.
- 2018 – The Lady Rockets defeated Pearl River Central; final record 34-0.
- 2017 – The Lady Rockets defeated Picayune; final record: 30-3.
- 2016 – The Lady Rockets defeated West Harrison; final record 27-1.
- 2015 – The Lady Rockets defeated West Harrison; final record 31-1.
- 2014 – The Lady Rockets defeated Wayne County; final record 32-2.
- 2013 – The Lady Rocket defeated East Central; final record 31-6.

not lost a game in the championship series. In eight seasons, their record stands at 250-15.

Also, consider the same program won eight straight championships in slow-pitch softball before the MHSAA discontinued the sport last year. In eight years, their record

was 248-26.

Combined, in eight years while playing around 30 games per season, the program has posted a 498-41 record.

"We stay focused," Sanders said. "As coaches, we spend a lot of time researching

and traveling and watching, getting on the phone and doing what we need to do to figure out how the next team will play us. Once we figure that out, we spend the time we have, to prepare for the next team.

"That's what we are able to do. We have good young pitchers who come too close to what we are going to face. We have pitchers on our team who we can get some at-bats on. We have girls who throw it hard.

"Practice is so important and we take it seriously getting ready. When you tell them what they are going to face, they get dialed in and prepared for what's coming up," Sanders said.

The Lady Rockets graduated six seniors: Elleigh Willis, AnnaLeigh Jones, Shante Beaulieu, Reese Page, Kylee Thompson and Jeyda Ben.

## Season in Review

# 32-0 Lady Rockets win 8th straight title

By **STEVE SWOGETINSKY**  
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The Neshoba Central Lady Rockets have won their eighth straight fast-pitch softball state championship.

Neshoba Central finished with a 32-0 record and were ranked No. 1 in the nation according to the USA Today national poll.

"We have a special group of young ladies who love the game," Coach Zach Sanders said. "We have played some close games and were able to come out with the win.

"We were fortunate enough three years ago to be No. 1 in the nation. Two years ago, we were No. 3 in the nation, and last year, the COVID-19 stopped the season. We have been able to continue on with our success. It is something great for the young ladies who are playing."

Here is a review of the Lady Rockets' season.

## Regular season

The Lady Rockets started their season in February with two victories over Newton County, 9-8 and 13-4. From there, they

picked up victories over Lake 13-4, Choctaw Central 22-2, South Panola 6-1 and East Central 9-2.

The Lady Rockets then played in two tournaments on the weekend of March 19. In the Enterprise tournament, they defeated Southeast Lauderdale 7-1 and Northwest Rankin 6-4 in eight innings. Then in the Clarkdale Spring Fling, they defeated Hancock 13-1 and St. Benedict 14-4.

The Lady Rockets scored two runs in the eighth and held on to defeat Northwest Rankin 6-4. Elleigh Willis was the winning pitcher. She went all eight innings and struck out three.

The Lady Rockets outlit the Lady Rangers 10-9. Kyle Thompson hit a double and a single and knocked in two runs. Tenly Grisham hit a triple and a single. She scored one run and knocked in another. Charmayne Morris had two hits, scored one run and knocked in another. Hama'ya Fielder had one double. She scored a run and knocked in another.

See **LADY ROCKETS**, page 4



The Neshoba Central Lady Rockets have won the 2021 Mississippi High School Activities Association Class 5A state fast-pitch softball championship with a sweep of East Central. They won game one 7-3 and game two 14-2.



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# Lady Rockets

Continued from page 3

The Lady Rockets outthit Southeast Lauderdale 9-2 to take the 7-1 win.

Lanayah Henry was the winning pitcher. She had six strikeouts in five innings.

Grisham had two hits and knocked in two runs. Mauhree Jones had three hits. Morris had one hit and knocked in two runs. Thompson had two hits and scored two runs.

Neshoba Central outthit Hancock 17-4 in a 13-1 win. Mauhree Jones was the winning pitcher. Henry slugged four doubles, scored one run and knocked in two more. Thompson hit a double and a single. She scored two runs and knocked in two more. Grisham had two hits and scored one run. Morris had two hits, scored two runs and knocked in another. Elleigh Willis had three hits, scored two runs and knocked in three more.

Neshoba Central pounded out 14 hits as they defeated St. Benedict of Tennessee 14-4. Willis was the winning pitcher. She had five strike outs. She had three hits and knocked in another run.

At this point, they stood at 10-0.

Neshoba Central improved to 13-0 April 1 with 10-0 and 14-2 victories over Enterprise. They also beat Southeast Lauderdale 16-1.

Tenly Grisham went 4-for-4 at the plate to



Photo by Robbie Robertson

Neshoba Central's Charmayne Morris slides in safely at second base against East Central on in the state championship.

lead the Lady Rockets past Southeast Lauderdale. Elleigh Willis was the winning pitcher. Willis helped her cause at the plate as she hit a double and two singles. She scored a run and knocked in four more.

Grisham hit a double and three singles. She scored four runs and knocked two runs

in. Lanayah Henry hit a double and two singles. She knocked in a run. Charmayne Morris had one hit, scored four runs and knocked in another.

Willis pitched six strike outs as she led the Lady Rockets to a shutout win over Enterprise. The Lady Rockets had a 9-2 hitting

edge. Henry hit a double and a single. She scored a run and knocked in three more.

Morris hit a triple, scored two runs and knocked in another. Grisham hit a double and scored a run. Kylie Posey hit a double and scored a run.

Jones had two hits, scored two runs and knocked in two more. Kylie Thompson had one hit, scored one run and knocked in two more.

The week of April 6 was a big one for the Lady Rockets. They entered the week as the No. 1 team in the nation according to the USA Today Super 25 poll. They then picked up five victories and improved to 18-0. Neshoba Central defeated Cleveland Central 16-0. They then defeated Lake 6-0, Morton 10-0, Wayne County 8-3 and Union 8-2.

Against Cleveland Central, Layanna Henry hit two doubles, scored two runs and knocked in two more. Grisham hit a double and a single. She scored two runs and knocked in two more. Mauhree Jones had two hits, scored two runs and knocked in two more. Charmayne Morris had one hit, scored two runs and knocked in another.

Against Lake, Willis was the winning pitcher. She hit a double. Grisham hit a double and a single. She scored three runs and knocked in another. Morris hit a double and a single and knocked in two runs. Kylie Posey hit a double and a single. She scored two runs

See **LADY ROCKETS**, page 5

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# Lady Rockets

Continued from page 4



Neshoba Central's Sa'Nya Jackson slides in safely at second base in the title game.

and scored two runs.

In the second game, Kylee Thompson had one hit, scored two runs and knocked in two more. Charmayne Morris had two hits and scored a run. AnnaLeigh Jones hit a double and knocked in two runs. Shante Beaulieu hit a double.

## Playoffs

Neshoba Central drew a first round bye in the playoffs. They then defeated Center Hill 12-1, 10-0 and Grenada 13-0, 6-1, to advance to the North State championship series.

The Lady Rockets then defeated Saltillo 12-2 and 17-3 to advance to the finals.

In the first game, the Lady Rockets out-hit Saltillo 15-3. Elleigh Willis was the winning pitcher. She had five strike outs. Willis

scored a run and knocked in another. Kylee Thompson had one hit and scored two runs.

That put Neshoba Central in the championship finals where the Lady Rockets swept East Central 7-3, 14-2.

In the first game, the Lady Rockets never trailed and took a four-run win over the Lady Hornets.

Neshoba had nine hits in the contest as Willis was 3-for-4 with two RBIs. Grisham was 2-for-4 while Morris, Mauhree Jones, Kylee Thompson and Beaulieu each singled, scored and drove in a run. Erica Lyons also had two stolen bases for Neshoba. Willis pitched all seven innings for Neshoba and gave up three unearned runs on six hits while striking out two.

In the second game, the Lady Rockets used a seven-run fifth inning to pull away and take a five-inning, run-rule win over the Lady Hornets and secure the Class 5A state championship.

Neshoba had 11 hits in the contest and took advantage of seven errors and four walks. Grisham was 3-for-4 with three runs scored and two RBIs while Willis was 2-for-3 with a double. Kylee Thompson was 2-for-4 with two RBIs. Ben doubled and also had two RBIs while Sa'Nya Jackson, Morris and Mauhree Jones each scored two runs apiece.

Willis again pitched a complete game, going all five innings. She gave up two runs on three hits and two walks while striking out two.

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The Neshoba Central softball team rushes out of the dugout just moments after winning the Class 5A state championship.

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# Lady Rebels look to return to finals

By **ROBBIE ROBERTSON**  
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The Leake Academy Lady Rebel softball team was right where they are used to being and that's playing for a state championship.

Unfortunately, the Lady Rebels came up short as they lost to Hillcrest Christian in the Class AAAA championship series, losing 6-3 and 5-2 last fall.

The Lady Rebels finished the season with a 28-9-2 record. They last won the state championship in 2018.

"We had a good season and were right where we wanted to be," Leake coach Doug Jones said. "We were right where we wanted to be but just couldn't get past Hillcrest Christian. They were really good and had a really veteran group. We are losing some good players but also have a good group coming back next year."

One of the biggest holes the Lady Rebels will have to fill is that of departing senior Emmi Harkins, who signed to play at East Central Community College. Harkins was a

six-year starter for the Lady Rebels. She had a .446 batting average this past season with eight doubles, five triples and three home runs to go along with 41 RBIs. Harkins was also selected to play in the MAIS All-star game and was named to the Class 5A All-MAIS team.

Also headed to the next level is pitcher and first baseman Caroline Jackson who also signed to play at East Central. Jackson had a .369 batting average this past season with 10 doubles and two home runs. On the mound,

Jackson went 15-5.

But the Rebels do have plenty of talent coming back in All-MAIS players Emri Warren and rising senior Jenna Chamblee. Freshman pitcher Lynleigh Burt emerged as a force on the mound for the Lady Rebels along with freshmen Olivia Rudolph, Miley Billie and Emma Jane Leopard. Rising junior Grace Maxie will be expected to play a bigger role this season while rising eighth grader Lily McDonald will also look to improve on a solid seventh grade season.

# Lady Warriors make it to 3rd round

By **STEVE SWOGETINSKY**  
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The Choctaw Central Lady Warriors finished their 2021 fast-pitch softball season with a 13-10 record while making it to the third round of the Class 4A state playoffs.

"With the pandemic, we did great over-

all," Coach Mercedes Cotton said. "We had to roll with the punches and work twice as hard. Last year, we didn't do much over the summer but this year we will get back into routine and work to progress each day.

"We are losing one senior, but we still have our other starters returning."

Choctaw Central placed third in the

Region 4-4A standings. They opened the playoffs with a 2-1, 7-6 sweep of North Pontotoc. In the second round, they blew out Yazoo City 24-3, 15-0. But in the third round, they lost to Kosciusko 9-4, 9-3.

Final team batting averages were as follows: Ciji Vaughn .443; Leia Phillips .418; Malaka Morris .407; Ahnaya Williams .370;

Kodi Jimmie .302; Neera Bell .302; Tyra Billy .298; Tayla Willis .268; and Tori Henry .211.

Pitcher Neera Bell led the team in strikeouts with 42. Tori Henry had 21 strike outs and Lauren Frazier had 10.

# Tornadoes earn playoff berth

By **STEVE SWOGETINSKY**  
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The 2021 fast-pitch softball season was a rebuilding year for the Philadelphia Lady Tornadoes but they still made the playoffs.

The school year was overshadowed by the COVID-19 Pandemic and there were no practices before the team came together in January.

The Lady Tornadoes finished 8-10 over-

all. They put things together after a slow start. The Lady Tornadoes won seven games in a row and finished third in the Region 6-2A standings behind Class 2A state champion Lake and Union.

"We are putting the team together," Coach Judson Byars said early in the season.

The Lady Tornadoes lost two games to West Lincoln in the first round of the Class 2A playoffs and were eliminated. They finished with an 8-10 record.

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