

## Versatile Stephanie Brown a self-made pro

Contributed by Danielle Baird  
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In her hometown of Chandler, Ariz., Stephanie Brown has gone from dancing on stage to tracking fly balls dancing across the windy Chicago sky.

She traded her dance shoes for softball cleats at age 11 after watching her best friend's softball game.

"Mom, I want to play softball," she said after the game. The next day, the Brown family was looking through phone books to find a team for Stephanie.

Just 10 years later, Brown has earned a spot on the Chicago Bandits professional fastpitch softball team alongside some of her idols.

"The Olympic players are always a great inspiration — including [players] like Jennie Finch and Jamie Clark — [they're] some of the best of the best," said Brown. "To actually be on a team and play with them — it's very exciting."

Brown started her career playing on a Little League team for three months before joining a club team, the Southern California-based Firecrackers. She would travel from Arizona every weekend with friend and now-Bandits teammate Megan Willis to California to play. Under Head Coach Tony Rico, the Firecrackers placed third at the 18-under gold national tournament in 2003.

She credits Rico for her knowledge of fundamentals and approach to the mental aspect of the game. Brown said she enjoyed playing "small ball" in college and keeping the fielders on their toes because of her ability to bunt, soft slap, hard slap and hit away.

Brown racked up softball honors at Corona Del Sol High School in Tempe, Ariz. She was a three-time all-conference selection and she helped her team to the state 5A championship, earning all-state honors while tallying a .505 batting average.

At Notre Dame, Brown seamlessly switched from the infield to the outfield where she had enough range to play any outfield position. As a freshman, she started all 69 games at second base, setting the school record along with two other former teammates, Sara Schoonaert and Meagan Ruthrauff. She also earned first-team all-Big East honors after hitting .323 in conference play with seven doubles and 15 RBI.

She switched to rightfield as a sophomore and finished second on the team in batting average (.339) while hitting from the leadoff spot for most of the season. She led the team in conference play at a .431 clip.

In her junior year, Brown continued in the leadoff spot for the Irish and made another position change 23 games into the season. Moving from rightfield to center didn't affect her at the plate, as she continued to set records. She also hit her first career grand slam, set a new Big East conference record for hits (38), and had 21 multi-hit games.

That season, Brown also hit a walk-off two-run homer in the bottom of the seventh to defeat No. 10 Arizona State in a 3-2 victory.

"That's probably one of my favorite memories," she said. "It was especially sweet to hit it against my hometown."

As a senior, she was selected to the 2007 National Fastpitch Coaches Association's Mideast All-Region First Team as an outfielder. She ranked among the conference leaders in batting average (.406), on-base percentage (.464), runs scored (40) and hits (67), while earning a marketing degree from the Mendoza College of Business and finishing with a 3.42 GPA.

Brown has continued in the outfield this season for the Bandits, but the Windy City has created some challenges for her.

"The ball can definitely dance on you out there," she said of the conditions. "You just have to go with it."

Her strategy is to take plenty of fly-ball practice and try not to over think the movement of the ball.

"You just have to take it pitch-by-pitch and play-by-play," she said.

Brown's advice to younger players who want to make it to the professional level is simple:

"You gotta love the game. When you love it, you'll do anything it takes to get to that next level and get better each day. Play with your heart. Don't let anyone try to tell you to do otherwise."

She also said that it takes a lot of practice to work up to pros. In college, she worked out every day with the Notre Dame personal trainer.

"I would always go swing, throw, and take reps on my own. I'd do that with teammates or ex-players that I used to play with back home; we'd get together and work out. You have to train every day to keep in shape and stay on top of your game."

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