

# Jennie Finch To Retire Next Month, Focus On Family

## Gold Medal Pitcher, Winner Of Seven Straight World Championship Leaving Competitive Softball

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Olympic gold medalist Jennie Finch announced Tuesday that she will retire next month, bringing an end to a 10-year career in which she helped softball blossom in the United States.

The dominating pitcher will play her final games with the U.S. national team this week at the World Cup of Softball in Oklahoma City. She'll then finish the rest of the National Pro Fastpitch season with the Chicago Bandits before calling it quits at the age of 29 to focus on her family.

The 6-foot-2 Finch has a standout at Arizona before becoming an icon with the U.S. team, going 32-0 her junior year and putting together 60 consecutive wins — both NCAA records. She won gold at the 2004 Olympics in Athens and silver four years later in Beijing.

This month, she helped the U.S. win its seventh straight world championship.

"This whole career has been way more than I ever even imagined or dreamed," Finch said in an interview with The Associated Press. "The opportunities that

I'd be able to enjoy and appreciate and be a part of, it's been incredible."

Finch was much more than a pretty face as she took over for Lisa Fernandez as the most recognized player in a sport enjoying growing popularity. Her 60-game run stretched over nearly two years and included the 2001 WCWS title, a dominance that carried over to the national team, where she combined with the likes of Fernandez and Cat Osterman to make up the world's best pitching rotation through the early part of the decade.

"For Jennie Finch, she's a stud on the field and everyone's going to love her while she's playing but no one is going to forget her because of the person that she is," U.S. outfielder Jessica Mendoza said. "That is what she has over almost any other person that's at the top of their sport."

"She's the most popular person in our sport. How many other sports can you say that their most popular player is the best person to the fans than anyone else?"

Coupled with her softball skills, Finch's

beauty and charm landed her a place in pop culture. She struck out some of the big leagues' best hitters in appearances on "This Week in Baseball," competed on "Celebrity Apprentice" and made the rounds on late-night talk shows.

"She set the standard for softball in a new era of being able to be feminine and play this sport," Mendoza said. "Not that you have to be feminine to play this sport, but I see hundreds of thousands of little girls now with glitter headbands, hot pink bats, makeup. I'm not saying that every girl has to do that but when I was growing up, it wasn't like that."

"She has created a new era of softball player, and it's for those softball players — those little girls out there — that want to be cutesy with the bows and the glitter and still be that dirty jock. Covered head to toe in dirt but she's got her hair all perfect with a bow."

Finch, who will turn 30 in September, said it's time to turn her focus to her family. She and pitcher Casey Daigle, who has

split this season between the Houston Astros and Triple-A Round Rock, have a 4-year-old son, Ace, and hope to have more children.

The couple have spent about two weeks together at their Arizona home over the past year, Finch said, and the world championships in Venezuela meant 14 days away from her family.

"I just feel like it gets harder and harder every year with Ace getting older and time away from my husband and even family events such as birthdays and friends' weddings and things that I've always just missed out on because of softball," Finch said.

While many of her veteran teammates walked away from the game after the U.S. lost to Japan in the gold-medal game in 2008, Finch stuck around and helped with an unsuccessful bid to get softball added back into the Olympics. It won't be played at the 2012 or 2016 games.

As one of few veterans left, she became a team leader as the Americans re-estab-

lished themselves as the No. 1 team in the world.

"She's such a great ambassador for that," U.S. coach Jay Miller said. "That's going to be the most difficult thing to replace."

Finch hopes that eliminating travel and training will give her more time to help spread the sport, through her own camps and possibly with a role in USA Softball or as a coach or team owner.

"I hope to stay involved," she said. "It's been such a big part of my life and I can't imagine my life without it."

Even now, Finch gets a rush out of putting on the red, white and blue and hearing a home crowd chant "U.S.A." — something she'll experience a few final times at the World Cup beginning Thursday night. The Bandits' last regular-season game is scheduled for Aug. 22 at home in Elgin, Ill.

"Right now in my career, it's like I'm having more fun than I've ever had, so it's kind of like, 'Man, I can't stop now,'" she said. "I'm playing first base and pitching and hitting. I feel like I'm almost better than I've ever been. It's like, 'You're going to walk away like this?'"

## SEC Facing Off-Field Troubles Before Media Days

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Bar brawls and NCAA investigations will be hot topics at the Southeastern Conference media days — not just national championships.

Troubling events have made headlines in the two weeks leading up to the three-day SEC event that begins Wednesday. There was a bar brawl involving Tennessee players and there are potential NCAA troubles brewing at Florida and South Carolina.

The latest — and potentially biggest — issue arose with a report Monday that Florida and the NCAA are investigating an allegation that former offensive lineman Maurice Pouncey got \$100,000 from a representative of a sports agent before last season ended.

The NCAA is also looking into a possible rules violation involving South Carolina tight end Wesley Saunders.

SEC commissioner Mike Slive declined to discuss specific issues involving Florida and South Carolina, but said in an interview Monday with The Associated Press that he would like the NCAA at some point to consider changes to rules involving agents.

"The agent issue is one that's been of concern not only to us but I think to everyone associated with intercollegiate athletics and I do think it's time to re-examine some of the NCAA rules that relate to agents," he said. "I have felt for a long time that it would be helpful to be able to provide student-athletes with more information and more opportunities to learn what their professional potential might be than is currently allowed by NCAA rules."

Florida coach Urban Meyer — and Pouncey's brother, Mike — are scheduled to appear at media day on Wednesday afternoon.

Slive said the SEC had already taken steps to help member schools deal with agent issues before the recent NCAA investigations.

The league brought in consultant Joe Mendes earlier this year to meet with officials at all 12 institutions, "and several have retained him to help provide the kind of information and knowledge that our student-athletes need to make good decisions about their future," Slive said. "And to do it the right way and not in violation of NCAA rules."

National champion Alabama is among the schools enlisting the services of Mendes, a longtime NFL executive who was vice president of football operations for the Washington Redskins. He now runs Cornerstone Sports Consulting in Leesburg, Va.

Slive steered clear of another hot-button topic — conference expansion — in his first interview since Nebraska and Colorado opted to bolt the Big 12 for the Big Ten and Pac-10, respectively, and Boise State headed to the Mountain West. He said he would address that briefly at the podium Wednesday.

Slive and the SEC were quiet players in that movement. Oklahoma president David Boren said the SEC extended offers to his school and Texas A&M.

The ongoing police investigation of a bar brawl in Knoxville, Tenn., involving several Volunteer football players is another black eye for the SEC.

All of the negative publicity is taking some of the luster off the big preseason event for a league that won its fourth consecutive national football title and divided up \$209 million among the 12 members last year.

"I'm always concerned when there are issues off the field that (put focus) off the field rather than on the play on the field," Slive said.

On the field, the SEC has enjoyed tremendous success.

And Slive isn't reticent when it comes to touting it.

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## SDGA JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

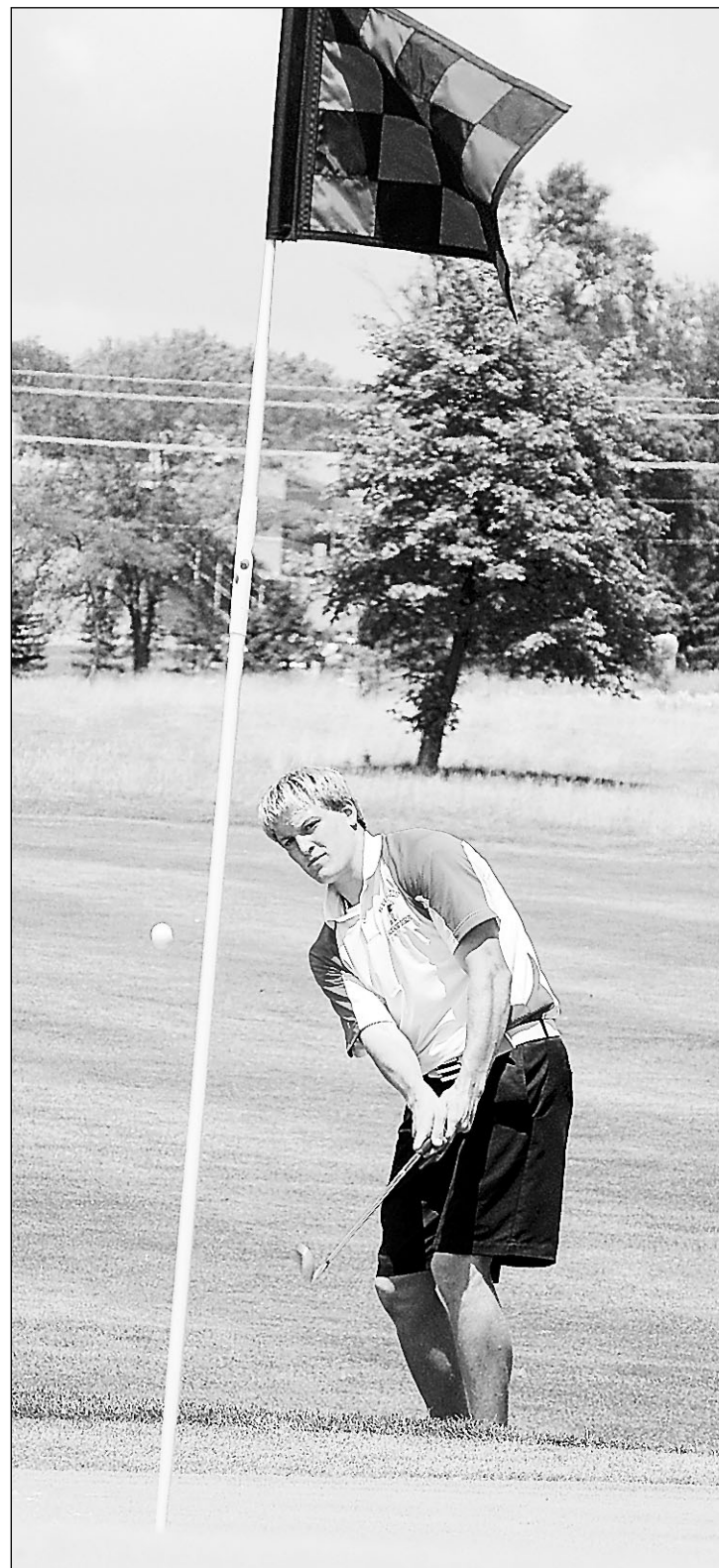
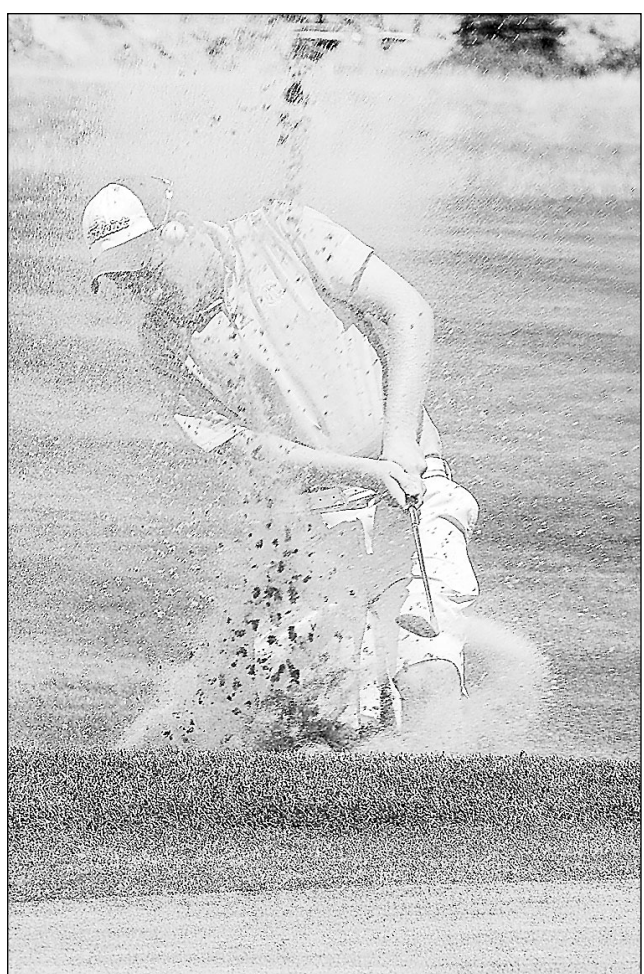


Several young golfers spent the last two days in Yankton for the SDGA Junior Championships at Fox Run Golf Course.

LEFT: Yankton's Megan Mingo places her ball and eyes a putt during Tuesday's final round.

RIGHT: Kyle Kopplin of Piedmont chips onto the green during Tuesday's final round.

BELOW: Aberdeen's Tyler Zahn works out of the sand during Tuesday's final round.



## Favre: No Deadline For Decision

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Brett Favre shared a laugh with Brad Childress about the two of them butting heads over the direction of the offense during a recent visit the Minnesota Vikings coach made to Hattiesburg, Miss.

What Favre didn't share with Childress is any decision about his future.

Favre told USA Today on Tuesday that Childress stopped to visit him on his way home from vacation in Florida. The two chatted about a lot of things, but no deadline was imposed for the quarterback to announce a decision about returning for a 20th NFL season.

"Our visit was great," Favre told the newspaper. "I think the world of him (and) his patience. He and I joked about how there were some rocky times (between them) last year. ... We're both competitors, that happens."

Favre and Childress had a very public spat in December last season after the two of them argued over play-calling in a loss at Carolina. They resolved their differences and the Vikings advanced to the NFC title game, where they lost in overtime.

Favre injured his ankle in that game and had surgery on it earlier this summer and has been throwing to receivers at Oak Grove High School near his home while to test it out.

"After almost nine weeks, it's not where I would like it to be, but I'm working at it," he said. "Maybe it never gets to where I want it to be. Forty years old ... three surgeries ... that's all you need to know."

He will turn 41 in October and is coming off one of the best seasons of his brilliant career. But Childress has repeatedly said he will not put any pressure on Favre to make a decision, saying that he would be fine with a similar scenario to last year. Favre skipped the first two weeks of training camp last year and joined the team after the first preseason game.

## 'Football At Fenway' Will Keep Ballpark Buzzing

BOSTON (AP) — It's just past noon, and fans are lining up along Yawkey Way to get into Fenway Park. First pitch is seven hours away, but that's not really an issue because this Boston Red Sox game, like the 597 before it, is sold out.

These fans are waiting to tour the ballpark, paying \$12 apiece to see the Green Monster without Ted Williams or Yaz or even Daniel Nava patrolling the grass in front. In all, almost 350,000 people will pass through the turnstiles this year without seeing a baseball game.

The oldest ballpark in the major leagues, Fenway is approaching its 100th birthday with what could be its busiest year ever, starting on New Year's Day with the NHL Winter Classic and continuing on Wednesday night with "Football at Fenway," a soccer match between European clubs Glasgow Celtic and Sporting Lisbon.

"We think Fenway Park is a great place to go in the summer with the kids," said Sam Kennedy, the Red Sox executive vice president and chief operating officer. "We're in the business of selling the brand of baseball, but the soccer crowd is an opportunity for 30,000 new people to experience Fenway Park."

Officials from the soccer clubs exchanged jerseys on Tuesday night and posed for pictures with the 2004 and '07 World Series trophies. Behind them, a soccer pitch was laid out over the baseball diamond, with the goals along the third-base line and in front of the baseball bleepers in right field; sod had been placed over the infield dirt and where the pitcher's mound would be.

"For me, personally, it's a dream to be at Fenway Park," said Celtic commercial director Adrian Filby, who in a thick Scottish accent rattled off references

to Teddy Ballgame and the Curse of the Bambino. "I've been telling them all about Fenway. These guys get it. When they walked in they could see the history of the park. They could see how special this place is."

Sporting football director Francisco Costa said he knew little about baseball before arriving in Boston.

"It's impressive," he said. "You feel some kind of magic here."

Since the ownership group led by John Henry, Tom Werner and Larry Lucchino bought the team in 2002, the Red Sox have given Fenway a total makeover, putting seats atop the Green Monster, turning Yawkey Way into a plaza on game days and modernizing the ballpark in hundreds of other ways from waterproofing to wheelchair accessibility.

During that span, the ballpark has also won two World Series and reached the playoffs in all but two seasons while selling out every game since May 15, 2003 — a record streak that reached 600 on Sunday.

The success on and off the field left them looking for other ways to expand their business. And they quickly realized that the most underutilized asset they had was the "lyric little bandbox of a ballpark" that was christened the same week in 1912 that the Titanic sank.

"Immediately after we got here, we recognized that there was this great facility sitting here year-round that we controlled and operated," said Kennedy, who also serves as president of the business spinoff Fenway Sports Group. "We have the luxury of looking at new opportunities because our core business is so strong. But we never take our focus away from the core business."

They have held concerts, starting with Bruce

Springsteen in 2003 and also including groups like The Rolling Stones and, next month, Aerosmith. They have brought in their minor league affiliates for a "Futures at Fenway" date, hosted the Cape Cod League All-Star Game and turned the field over to the local colleges in the Baseball Beanpot.

Things took off with the Winter Classic, which used Fenway as a picturesque backdrop for the outdoor game between the Boston Bruins and the Philadelphia Flyers. The Red Sox added a college hockey game between archrivals Boston College and Boston University — the two most recent NCAA champions; the rink was also opened up for public skating and rented out to local teams.

"Puffing off that event gave us the courage to talk about other non-baseball events," Kennedy said recently over lunch in a restaurant that has been built inside the ballpark's walls.

This year's Red Sox schedule left Fenway empty for most of July,

including a 10-game West Coast road trip that the ballclub began on Monday night in Oakland. Kennedy spent much of the spring trying to woo top European soccer teams to Boston, hoping to capitalize on an anticipated World Cup bump in interest.

He eventually landed Sporting and Celtic for the 19th soccer game played on the Fenway field — the first since Pele brought Brazil's Santos in 1968 to play the Boston Beanecons of the North American Soccer League.

More than 30,000 tickets have been sold for Wednesday night's match, helped by the strong draw from the Portuguese community around New England. Corporate sponsorships have also been strong, Kennedy said.

"It was a big risk: Soccer is not Bruce Springsteen; it's not the Winter Classic," he said. "From an artistic perspective, obviously a sell-out crowd would be great. But not everything needs to be a sellout to be a success."

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