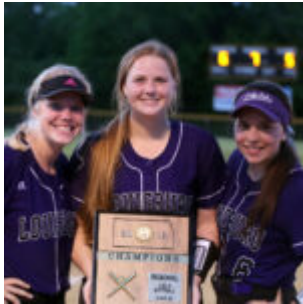


OPINION: Difficult years molded Lady Cat seniors into regional champions



Louisburg seniors (from left) Molly Rison, Karson Griggs and Madison Svoboda pose with the regional championship trophy following the Lady Cats' Cinderella run through Class 4A regional tournament last week in Ottawa.

In 2015, the Louisburg softball team had hit rock bottom just one year after its best finish in school history.

There was no gradual decline. It went from one of the best in the state to one of the worst in less than a year's time.

The Lady Cats finished the 2015 campaign with an 0-21 record after finishing fourth at state the previous year, and there wasn't a lot of momentum going with the program.

Playing softball at Louisburg High School wasn't something a lot of athletes had aspirations of doing, especially following a winless season. The losing streak reached 33 games halfway into 2016 and things looked bleak.

Louisburg did manage to get five

wins out of the year and then had a nice bounce back year in 2017 as the Lady Cats picked up 10 victories and nearly finished with a .500 record. Things appeared to be looking up.

Instead, things took a dive once again and Louisburg managed just three wins in 2018. It wasn't the easiest time to be a Louisburg softball player and then-juniors Madison Svoboda, Karson Griggs and Molly Rison knew it.

They watched as teammates came and went. Some graduated, others figured it wasn't for them and didn't come back out.

Having a winning season, much less a regional championship, seemed out of reach for all three players. What would they have to gain by going out for their senior season?

"Honestly, going into my sophomore year, I wasn't sure that we would ever get to state," Svoboda said. "We had just come off a 0-21 season and it was hard to come back from that. I just wanted to come out and have fun and see what happens."



Madison Svoboda shows the umpire the ball after getting an out against Chanute in the regional title game.

It wasn't a lot of fun early for any of the Lady Cats as they lost their first six games to start the season.

Louisburg totaled five wins going into its Senior Night matchup with Paola, and on what was supposed to be a special evening, the Lady Cats fell to their rival in two games by a combined score of 31-1.

"Our lowest point came against Paola," Louisburg coach John Ozier said. "I felt like we were too caught up in all of the emotional events that go on that night, and completely lost focus. Paola delivered a wake-up call, early and often that night."

"It turns out that it was just what we needed. We re-committed our efforts in practices leading up to the playoffs, approaching each game with

a 'we're not ready to be done' mentality."

It could have been easy for the three seniors and the rest of the Lady Cats to just hang it up for the rest of the year.

They were matched up with Parsons in the play-in game of the Class 4A regional tournament, and with No. 2 seed Ottawa looming, the road to a regional title was a difficult one.

The Lady Cats, though, flipped a switch and became a different team. Louisburg went on to rout Parsons, 17-2, and set up a matchup with Ottawa the next day.

Ottawa had swept Louisburg earlier in the season and it was going to be a tough task to advance to the regional championship. Fate had other ideas.

The Cyclones took a 7-4 lead into the top of the seventh and the Lady Cats had two outs with the bases loaded. They were one out away from elimination.

Instead, the Lady Cats went on to reach on an Ottawa error to score a run, drew a walk for another and then Lauren Cutshaw gave Louisburg the lead with a 2-run single.



Karson Griggs was all smiles after she hit the go-ahead double in the regional championship against Chanute.

Louisburg knocked Ottawa on its heels and the Lady Cats delivered the knockout blow when pitcher Brooklyn Diederich silenced the Cyclone bats in the bottom of the seventh to secure one of the biggest upsets in the last five years.

“We knew we could do it, but we just had to believe in ourselves,” Svoboda said. “Ottawa was a pretty high seed, but it also gives us an advantage because they were looking down at us and we had nothing to lose.”

If there were any doubters in the Lady Cats’ dugout when the tournament started, they all became believers when they

advanced to the title game against Chanute. This was not the same team that managed just five wins in the regular season.

“From the Parsons game on, these girls just had a different look in their eyes,” Ozier said. “They had a fire that I hadn’t seen before and you could tell that they believed they could win.”

Chanute was the last team standing in Louisburg’s way of a regional title and the Blue Comets had every intention of spoiling Louisburg’s Cinderella run.

The game was tied at 3-all going into the seventh inning and Chanute had all the momentum after a rally in the last frame. Again, fate stepped in when the Lady Cats needed it most.

Svoboda hit a routine fly ball to centerfield to open the inning, and it appeared to be an easy play. However, before the Chanute centerfielder could make a play on the ball, she tripped and fell and allowed Svoboda to reach on a single.

The rest as they say – is history.

Griggs doubled to scored Svoboda, while Paige Eccher and Diederich each had RBI singles to give Louisburg a 3-run lead. It was just enough as Chanute rallied to score two in the seventh, but Diederich came in for relief and struck out the final Blue Comet batter to secure their first trip to state since 2014.

The three Louisburg seniors, who had suffered through three straight losing seasons (technically four if you count 2019), have now found themselves in the state tournament after a memorable run through regionals.

“Especially with the last three years that we have had, just to be able to get this far is just an unbelievable feeling,” Rison said.

It allowed the three seniors to be able to suit up one final time with each other. Once it is all said and done, all three will be moving in different directions.



First baseman Molly Rison looks in a throw from teammate Karson Griggs last week during regionals.

Griggs will continue her softball career at Highland Community College, while Svoboda is leaving the sport behind

as she focuses on academics at Kansas State. As for Rison, she enlisted in the U.S. Navy and will be shipping out in less than a week.

"I want to cry, but at the same time I am just really happy," Griggs said. "It is exciting because I never thought something like this could happen, especially this year.

"This means a lot to all three of us, especially because Molly is going to be leaving really soon for the Navy.

Maddie is going to K-State and I am going my separate way to Highland. It will be an amazing experience out at state to be able to play with those girls one last time."

The Lady Cats had its two best days of softball in half a decade, and all of sudden, those years of losing records were gone. They didn't matter anymore.

For the three Louisburg seniors, the difficult times and run-rule losses were a thing of the past. They, and the rest of the Lady Cats, got a chance to celebrate for a change.

"It means everything," Rison said.

"I think I have played ball with Karson since we were like four and Maddie plays next to me on the diamond all the time and I wouldn't be half the ball player I am without those two. They are my best friends and I can't believe I get to play one more week with them."

It all begins today when No. 8

Louisburg will face off with No. 1 seed Andale/Garden Plain in the first round of the Class 4A state tournament – a game where Louisburg will once again be a big underdog.

It's nothing the Lady Cats aren't used to and they hope to use some of that momentum from regionals into a special run at state.

"Winning is fun," Griggs said with a smile.

And Louisburg hopes to have a lot of fun in Salina this weekend.