

Lexington's Maddie Orcutt taking Polar Crush express to Cornell diamond

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Last summer, as she was about to enter her senior year at Lexington High, **Maddie Orcutt** was seeking guidance regarding her future on the softball diamond.

She certainly had the talent to play at the next level — having compiled a 17-2 record with 203 strikeouts in her junior campaign for the Minutemen — but she needed help with the recruitment process.

When she earned a spot on the Polar Crush 18U Gold team in August, she informed program director **Phil McElroy** that she and the Cornell softball program seemed to have mutual interest; Big Red coaches had spotted her at a camp in Pennsylvania.

McElroy called up Cornell head coach **Dick Blood**, who then came out to watch the 5-foot-10 righty in a showcase in Concord. By October, she had committed to the Ivy League program.

McElroy gets a lot of the credit, said Orcutt, the Middlesex League's Liberty Division MVP this spring. "I really don't think I would have been recruited to Cornell if it weren't for him."

Over the last 22 years, the Polar Crush fast-pitch softball organization, currently based in Devens, has prided itself in helping its players advance to the next level, landing more girls in college programs than any other organization in New England; roughly 80 percent of its current 18U Gold team have committed to a school.

"We not only teach the kids how to play the game of softball, we're going to find the best academic fit for a kid and also to get them the added bonus of playing softball in college," said McElroy.

The Crush organization is not alone. The Concord Raiders, the Plainville-based Rhode Island Thunder, and the Taunton-based Mass. Drifters are also options at the 18U Gold level for players who want to keep playing after high school.

Alissa Karjel, a rising senior at Hopkinton High, joined the Crush a couple of years ago, and in late May, the 2013 Tri-Valley League MVP verbally committed to St. Bonaventure.

"The Crush helped me a lot because I got the opportunity to travel all over the country and play in front of lots of college coaches, so it gave me great exposure," said the 5-foot-5 pitcher and shortstop.

Liv Sloane, a rising senior pitcher at Newton North High, says there's more stress in competing at the showcases, but she believes it is preparing her for a college career.

"There is more pressure, because the coaches here hold you to a higher standard," said the Holy Cross verbal commit, who won the Bay State Conference MVP title in 2013.

"Since you made it on this team, you must be good at what you do, so they expect you to be in a college mind-set during the games."

The girls have played in tournaments near and far this summer, ranging from Binghamton, N.Y., to Boulder, Colo.

While at the Louisville Slugger Independence Day showcase in Colorado, the Crush went undefeated in pool play, beating teams from top West Coast programs and belting 17 home runs along the way.

And they did that all without Orcutt, who was at a Cornell softball camp at the time.

But this weekend, she will help lead the squad — as New England's only representative — in the American Softball Association's 18U Gold Nationals, which open Sunday and continue through Saturday in Oklahoma City.

McElroy says Orcutt plays a vital role in these showcases, acting like another coach on the bench.

"She's just such a student of the game," said the Arlington resident. "She's in the dugout a lot of the times hailing our batters and telling them what their pitcher is going to do and how's she's doing it, just by the way that a kid's throwing the ball."

“I want to help my team out in any way that I can,” said Orcutt, who has been a Lexington Little League softball pitching coach since 2010. “So being able to read pitchers is one of the ways that I feel that I can do something while I’m not actually in the circle.”

And when she’s in the circle, she’s downright dominant.

She compiled more than 450 strikeouts over her final two seasons at Lexington, including a 15-inning, 31-punchout performance against Everett this spring.

“She’s committed to her craft and to fine-tuning things that she needs to correct,” said Minutemen head coach **Frank Pagliuca**.

“She has the ability to really study and break down the hitters, and really has an understanding of what she should throw in certain situations.”

After the national tournament, Orcutt will return with the Crush for one final local showcase in Plainville at the end of the month.

She says with the combination of recruiting connections and top-notch competition, the Polar Crush organization has prepared her for her college career as much as she could have ever hoped.

“I came here wanting to improve my skills and to be ready come fall to play in college,” said Orcutt. “It really has prepared me for that because we’re playing higher-level competition than I have in the past, so it’s created a perfect situation for me.”