

Small-town girl, big-time success Berka turns her passion into the best career in the world | Nevada Iowa Journal

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Photo by Marlys Barker Myndie Berka, owner and instructor with BreakThrew Fastpitch, works with students at 3T's Inc. All Star Sports Academy in Ames. Berka is a Colo-Nesco graduate and a former Iowa State softball pitcher.

By Marlys Barker

No one will argue that when it comes to softball pitching instruction in the state of Iowa, Myndie Berka is one of the biggest names in the business.

What makes her success amazing is the fact that Berka is a product of small-town Iowa, and of one of Iowa's smallest school districts. The 1989 Colo-Nesco graduate went after her dreams, and now she's a self-made businesswoman, owner and instructor of one of Iowa's top softball pitching businesses, BreakThrew Fastpitch.

"I have the best job in the world," proclaims the tall, blonde, bubbly Berka, who you usually find dressed casually and with her long hair in a ponytail.

Her business achievements didn't happen overnight, but at the age of 42, Berka has experienced an incredible amount of success with her business endeavors. Pitchers she has taught hold "strike out" records in Iowa and Missouri. Her pitchers have earned state championships in multiple states. Young women she has worked with have played in the College World Series and won ASA National Gold Championships. She's had students who have played in the National Pro Fastpitch League (NPF), and perhaps the greatest success of all, she has former students who have followed in her footsteps and are now teaching pitching to others.

What she finds to be most rewarding about all of it, she says, is "watching the kids become successful, self-confident young ladies. I like that they really start to understand the value of being committed to something, sacrificing for something and working hard at something," because all of

this, she said, can be applied to other areas of their lives.

No one is better suited to understanding the commitment and training it takes to be a great pitcher more than Berka, who didn't start pitching until her seventh-grade year and had limited resources for learning it.

"I remember a couple of our high school players were our coaches for junior high. I thought they were so cool! They had these 'pitching tryouts' for anyone who wanted to try," Berka remembers. They were held, she said, in a back alley in Colo. "Five of us went. I'd never made a circle with my arm before, but that's how it got started."

Berka said she was a late starter compared to the many kids she teaches today, who often start around 8 and 9 years of age. But she liked it. And just out of eighth grade, with only 10 girls out for a high school team in Colo (which was not yet combined with NESCO), Berka got the job of pitcher by default. "I was the only one," she said.

It wasn't all success in the early going. "There were times in those early days where I would walk (put on base with four balls) double digits. I remember a game where I walked 20 people." She can laugh about it now, as she remembers that the game didn't use to be a "hitters' game" as she says it is now. "They didn't ever hit – they either walked or struck out."

Over the course of her high school career, Berka, whose parents Scott and Karen live northwest of Colo, worked with her high school coach Kathy Hovick and with a man named Bob Wright in Urbandale a couple times a year to learn more about pitching. She also attended a few pitching clinics.

And even though what she teaches now is a little different than what they taught then, Berka got better for the times she was pitching in. Good enough, in fact, that following high school she earned a spot on the Iowa State University softball team as a pitcher under coach Deb Kuhn, from 1989-1993.

When asked about her own pitching accomplishments and career highlights, Berka doesn't focus on awards and accolades. Instead, Berka said she'll treasure playing with friends. "It's about the memories you make with your teammates. The bus rides, the practices ... all that type of stuff. I hope that's what kids are getting these days too."

Post college

Berka graduated from Iowa State with a degree in exercise physiology/science. Her first job was with Farm Bureau in West Des Moines as a wellness specialist at the corporate offices. At Farm Bureau, "I did everything from teaching fitness classes ... to giving seminars on wellness," she said. She stayed with Farm Bureau five years, eventually moving into a management position in her department, and during those five years, she also earned her master's degree in health care administration from Des Moines University.

She left Farm Bureau to take a pharmaceutical sales job with Merck, for the next five years.

But, it was a connection that she made while at Farm Bureau that would prove to be of major importance to her future career as a softball pitching instructor.

Bob Quinn, a big name in WHO's farm broadcasting medium, spent a lot of time at Farm Bureau and had a 10-year-old daughter who played softball and wanted to improve at pitching. "He asked if I would give her a few lessons, so I started doing a few private lessons," Berka said.

Quinn, while on a business trip to Nashville, Tenn., randomly met one of the biggest names in fastpitch softball – Cheri Kempf, who owned a softball pitching business in Nashville. Kempf, who since 2007 has been commissioner of the National Pro Fastpitch League, sold Quinn an indoor softball game called RIPS. Quinn and a business partner, Neal Mack, opened a facility in West Des Moines called RIP City, where kids could work indoors on softball and play their indoor game. Quinn also opened up use of that facility to Berka to teach pitching lessons.

“I started with about three kids, and over a four-year period, it grew to over 100 kids,” she said. “I was selling pharmaceuticals during the day and going to RIP City evenings and weekends to do pitching lessons.”

It was when RIP City celebrated its grand opening that Berka got to meet Kempf, who traveled to Iowa for the big event. After that meeting the two began to correspond, and eventually, Berka received an invitation to attend a three-day training session that Kempf was holding for people wanting to learn more about pitching instruction. That three-day session was a huge inspiration to Berka.

“I learned more (about pitching) from her in that time than I did in my entire playing career,” Berka said, adding that she shared a lot of Kempf’s same philosophies about pitching, so her advice made teaching “so simple.”

Berka was offered the opportunity to teach for Kempf at the facility – Club K - in Nashville. “I would be teaching pitching, but would also be responsible for market expansion for her – going all over the country, Southeast and Midwest mostly – and teaching lessons and clinics.” The most important thing was that Berka could also keep working with her Iowa students.

For five years, Berka took on the role of expanding Kempf’s pitching empire. It was a lot of travel, but she loved it ... loved working with so many pitchers, some of whom have pitched in SEC, Big 12 and Big 10 conferences.

When Berka decided she wanted to slow down on the traveling and settle in a little more at home, she opened her own pitching business. That was six years ago, and it worked out well for her. Still a permanent resident of Tennessee, Berka works with some of Kempf’s clients there for her, but travels regularly back to Iowa to teach around 250 students that she has enrolled in classes that she teaches in Ames, Des Moines, Williamsburg and Fort Dodge. Her classes are generally full, as are the pitching clinics she often holds in the summer.

Between September and May, Berka works hard, giving lessons 42 hours a week in Iowa and Tennessee (Berka teaches clients there once a month). In addition, she works to keep up on her email communication, website (www.breakthrewfastpitch.com) and other social media connections and marketing aspects of her business. When the lesson season is over, Berka enjoys her summer break – a time for her to take a vacation, but also a time when she can go and watch many of the games that her students play in, which she said is a really fun thing for her to do after working so many hours with her students. “It’s so much fun when I see them doing the things we’ve talked about.”

Berka has had opportunities over the past few years to take her career in a different direction. “I’ve had some opportunities to be a pitching coach at the college level, and that would be a really fun job,” she said, especially because Berka communicates a lot with college coaches as she tries to find collegiate opportunities for her pitchers who want to move on.

But she doesn’t see herself leaving “the best job in the world.” Not yet. She’s working at this time to grow her business with more use of technology.

Today is a great time, she said, to be working with female athletes and for female athletes to be enjoying their hard work. "There's more opportunities for female athletes now than ever. If you're passionate and you want to put time and energy into practice, no matter what sport it is, there is also money out there (scholarships) to help pay for college," she said.

When it comes to being the small-town girl with the big time career, Berka said anyone with a passion for something can make it happen. "Passion is the key to being successful," she said.

And to others growing up in the types of communities like her hometown of Colo, Berka's advice is to embrace it. "I wouldn't change being from a small town. The experiences you get to do so many things, makes for well-rounded individuals."