



# Gotta Be a Champion

A close look at Mount Mary's new softball coach, Perry Clark

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**T**he scent of fresh cut outfield grass fills the air. The art of a newly dragged infield is a true marvel, and it will not be disturbed until the home team takes the field. The crisp clank of cleats shuffle through the dugout as the players grab their gear. Bownets soon line the field, and the pop of bats overpower the chatter.

Lines form and in perfect unison the players field balls to warm up. An uproar begins as a diving catch is perfectly executed. Cheers and chants fill the remaining time before the first pitch. Hand in hand, two straight lines are created, facing our nation's flag. Not a sound is made as the "Star Spangled Banner" is played. The home team takes the field, and after a few pitches, the opposing batter enters the box. The game begins.

Coach Perry Clark lives for these moments, and he can recall each before a game. Any mention of softball will bring the biggest smile to Clark's face.

"If it's done correctly, I love the smell of fresh cut grass," Clark said. "I like walking on a well-groomed infield as we are warming up ... The sound of

the people coming in and sitting in the bleachers and the teams cheering and doing chants getting ready for a game. If you are fortunate enough to play in a stadium that has concessions, popcorn is always a number one hit. You can always smell the popcorn wherever you're at."

Clark, Mount Mary's new softball coach, is here to make a successful program. In order to do that there needs to be a change in the entire athletic department, he said.

"We have to believe that we are champions, we have to believe that we are winners, and to do that you have to show that to your players," he said. "Whether you are soccer, volleyball, basketball, it doesn't make a difference. I think you need to treat your players as champions."

Talking the talk is only half of it. Clark said that walking the walk needs to come next.

"They got to be champions in the classroom, got to be champions in the workout room, got to be champions on the field," he said. "Losing has to hurt. That's why we play sports. I think changing the culture is number one."

Changing the culture is a challenge, especially when a program has been struggling for many years. This begins with setting attainable goals.

"We might not reach them, but it's okay as long as we are working hard to reach them," he said.

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This is not Coach Clark's first major project that he's taken on. He came to Mount Mary in the fall of 2017, leaving behind a legacy of success at Waubonsee Community College in Sugar Grove, Illinois.

"When I first got to Waubonsee, we literally made the field," Clark said. "They had a grass infield with some patches that were the bases; there was no backstop, no dugouts."

Teamwork and dedication are reasons that Coach Clark was so successful at Waubonsee.

"I was hired in December (of 1997) and by the spring I had some buddies help me," Clark said. "We put up a dug-out and we did everything we needed to do to make a field. We cut out the infield in the middle of the night, rolled up the sod and put it somewhere and brought in mix ourselves."

Mount Mary and Waubonsee, before Clark, were very similar. It was a program that had never been successful, more like a rec league, he said. Up until a few years ago, Mount Mary would search the halls for an extra player, experience not required, just to have enough players to compete.

Coach Clark loves to say that "winning makes a difference, and winners get things," and he has the history to back it up.

"After that we built it into a national powerhouse," Clark said. "We got built a \$34 million indoor facility, a brand-new field, state-of-the-art everything we needed. We were treated like Division 1 athletes ... Facilities from training rooms to locker rooms to everything we ever wanted."

Clark spent 20 years at Waubonsee Community College. In that time, he took his team to 19 National Junior College Athletic Association playoff appearances.

"We were in the Final Four seven times. Regional championship games five times. Regional champions twice. Went to the national championship in 2017," Clark said. "In the last 12 years, we never had wins below .25. We were always over .500."

This success was not Clark's alone. His focus is always on bettering his athletes. He has helped develop six All-Americans and numerous Academic All-Americans, he said.

"I have over 200 all-conference players," he said. "Over 100 all-region players. It's not me. I'll never say that. I've had an absolutely wonderful coaching staff along the way, and it's the players. It's easy to coach when players want to learn. The last 12 years at Waubonsee had very good athletes



Leading his team from third base, Coach Perry Clark gives offensive signals to senior first-baseman, Payton Hintz, during their game against Trinity International, April 28.

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**—Perry Clark**

who wanted to be better athletes. It made my job a lot easier.”

As a very devoted Catholic, Clark puts his faith above all else.

“The main reason I left was really God’s calling,” he said. “I know it sounds weird, but winning became an everyday thing, it wasn’t challenging ... Going to the national championship was a dream come true, and I thought at that time it was the pinnacle of my coaching at the junior college level.”

He looked at other universities and had other job offers, but he wanted to develop Mount Mary’s program.

“Mount Mary came up at the most perfect time ... It is a challenge and I accept it 100 percent and we’ll do well,” Clark said.

Religion and family, education, and softball. This is the structure that Coach Clark bases his coaching around.

“Keep religion and family number one in your life and you’ll do very well in life,” he said. “Number two is education. We

need to understand that we are here as educators. Yes, we love softball, and we want to win and never want to lose, but at the end of the day athletes are getting an education from Mount Mary University. Third is softball. I always make sure those three things are maintained in all my teams.”

Hannah Harnsbarger, the sophomore pitcher for Mount Mary, said Clark is brutally honest.

“He is going to get on you when you make a mistake and that’s okay,” Harnsbarger said. “He’s going to make you work really hard over those mistakes, but he is going to congratulate you for your accomplishments ... As soon as you do get it, he’s going to move onto the next thing because we need to keep moving forward.”

Clark’s straightforward attitude often has him mislabeled by other coaches and spectators.

“I think an outsider would describe me as a hard-ass, not very caring or giving, cold,” he said. “That’s fine; it doesn’t bother me. It’s what my team feels, that’s what I care about the most.”

It truly is all about the players and how they respond to Clark. What others misinterpret about Clark is what Harnsbarger appreciates most about his personality.

“He’s very honest and won’t hold back because he knows if you hold back you won’t get everything that he’s wanting to give,” she said. “I like that about him.”

Kelsey Peterson, head coach of the volleyball team, joined the softball team for their trip to Orlando, Florida, for spring training and was able to see how Clark handled a team that was struggling.

“It was definitely a shock to his system as well as to the players,” Peterson said. “Perry has a very, very high standard with as many years of experience that he has.”

Peterson said that Clark does not hide anything from the team, and it’s refreshing.

“He is trying to help the players improve both physically and mentally and have more of that winning attitude,” she said. “He doesn’t hold on to mistakes that were made. He might yell at you, but the next minute he doesn’t hold onto it. He doesn’t hold any grudges.”

Clark’s vision for his players extends far beyond the softball diamond. As a coach, he is responsible for developing athletes, and also preparing them to be successful in their futures.

“We want to make our student athletes better people who are better prepared for the world, the real world,” Clark said. “When they leave here, they are going to have some downs, and they are going to go up against some struggles. Their bosses might not be the best in the world, but hopefully I have shown them how to overcome that ... I hope I can leave my players with that feeling that you are going to get knocked down, but you’re good, you need to get right back up.”

