

Ballhawks Win the State Championship in 1956

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The Ballhawks, Kewanee's outstanding women's softball team of the 1950s and beyond, captured their first of five state championships in 1956 and are shown in the picture accompanying this article.

Their prominence and the recognition they brought to Kewanee are the basis for the Ballhawks being honored July 6-10 with the painting of Kewanee's 19th Walldog mural.

In 1956 the Ballhawks had been "knocking on the door" with runner-up finishes in the Illinois Amateur Softball Association state tournament in 1952 and 1954.

Even in 1951, the first year that the Kewanee team was called the Ballhawks (from 1948 to 1950 they were the Merchantes), the team showed its promise as it posted an 18-10 record and finished second in their 6-team league. In the state meet they lost 2-1 to the eventual champion Caterpillar Diesettes, the Lettes 12th straight title. The match was viewed by an estimated 3,500 in Pekin.

In 1952 the Ballhawks were stymied once again by the Lettes, but this time it was in the championship game, thus earning the team its first runner-up finish. Two Kewanee girls were named to the association's all-state team—star pitcher Gerry Hammerstrand and leading hitter Joanne Hainline. The ladies finished with a 19-8 record.

The 1953 season ended with a disappointing 14-13 record and an early loss in the state meet to Springfield California Packing. One bright spot, however, was winning their league (Illinois Valley Girls Softball League) tournament at Windmont Park.

One of the Ballhawks' best years followed in 1954 as they produced a 22-3 record and finished second in the state tournament. Two of the losses were to the Lettes in the best-two-out-of-three championship series. Earlier in the season the Ballhawks managed a 2-2 tie with the Lettes in a game halted by rain.

1955 was another very good year with a 17-6 record, but the Ballhawks bowed out of the state tournament with a loss to Livingston in the semifinals. A special event in '55 was a game in Gerry Hammerstrand's hometown of Galva witnessed by an estimated 2,500. They saw Gerry pitch a perfect game retiring 21 straight batters with 20 by strikeouts. It was also her third no-hitter of the season.

The goal of a state championship was finally reached in 1956. It was even sweeter as it occurred before a home crowd as the Ballhawks hosted the state tournament at Windmont Park for the first time.



STATE SOFTBALL CHAMPIONS—Kewanee's Ballhawks gather around as Clair Gingrich of the Coca-Cola Bottling Co. presents the Illinois State championship trophy to Gerry Hamerstrand of the Hawks who won the title as they defeated Livingston, 5-3, at Windmont Park Tuesday evening. Kneeling, from the left, are Fran Olson,

"Cookie" Matson, Dot Larson, Nancy Huibregtse, Kay Lawrence and Ellie Ericson. Standing are Janet Holmes, Judy Wickham, General Manager Mrs. Grace Larson, Gerry Hamerstrand, Clair Gingrich, Elaine Kuster, Kathy Passalacqua, Manager Wilbur Osborne and Martha Gwinn.

The Ballhawks won four straight games, beating Taylorville 12-0, Litchfield 1-0, Springfield 12-2 and Livingston 5-3 in the championship game. Livingston was one of the better teams throughout the 1950's and during the '56 season had beaten the Ballhawks twice prior to

1956 State Champions - The Kewanee Ballhawks

the state tournament.

Three Ballhawks were named to the tournament's All-Star team—pitcher Gerry Hammerstrand, catcher Dot Larson and leading hitter Marilyn "Cookie" Matson.

Only two of the original Ballhawks/Merchanettes of 1948 were on the 1956 championship team, Frances "Fran" Olson who would remain on the team until a second championship in 1958 and Dot who would be a Ballhawk until the team came to an end in 1974.

The state title earned the Ballhawks their first appearance in the four-state Midwest Regional. Their trip to Indianapolis resulted in two exciting games, but

unfortunately the Kewanee girls lost 2-0 to a Milwaukee team and 1-0 to Manitowoc, Wisconsin in the double elimination tournament.

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that the Lettes did not have to compete in the state meet since they automatically qualified for the Midwest Regional as the defending champion. The Lettes were originally the Peoria Caterpillar Disielettes before becoming the Pekin Lettes.

Up next will be an account of the glory years of 1958 to 1962 that produced four more state championships and ended in 1962 with the Ballhawks hosting the Midwest Regional at Windmont Park.