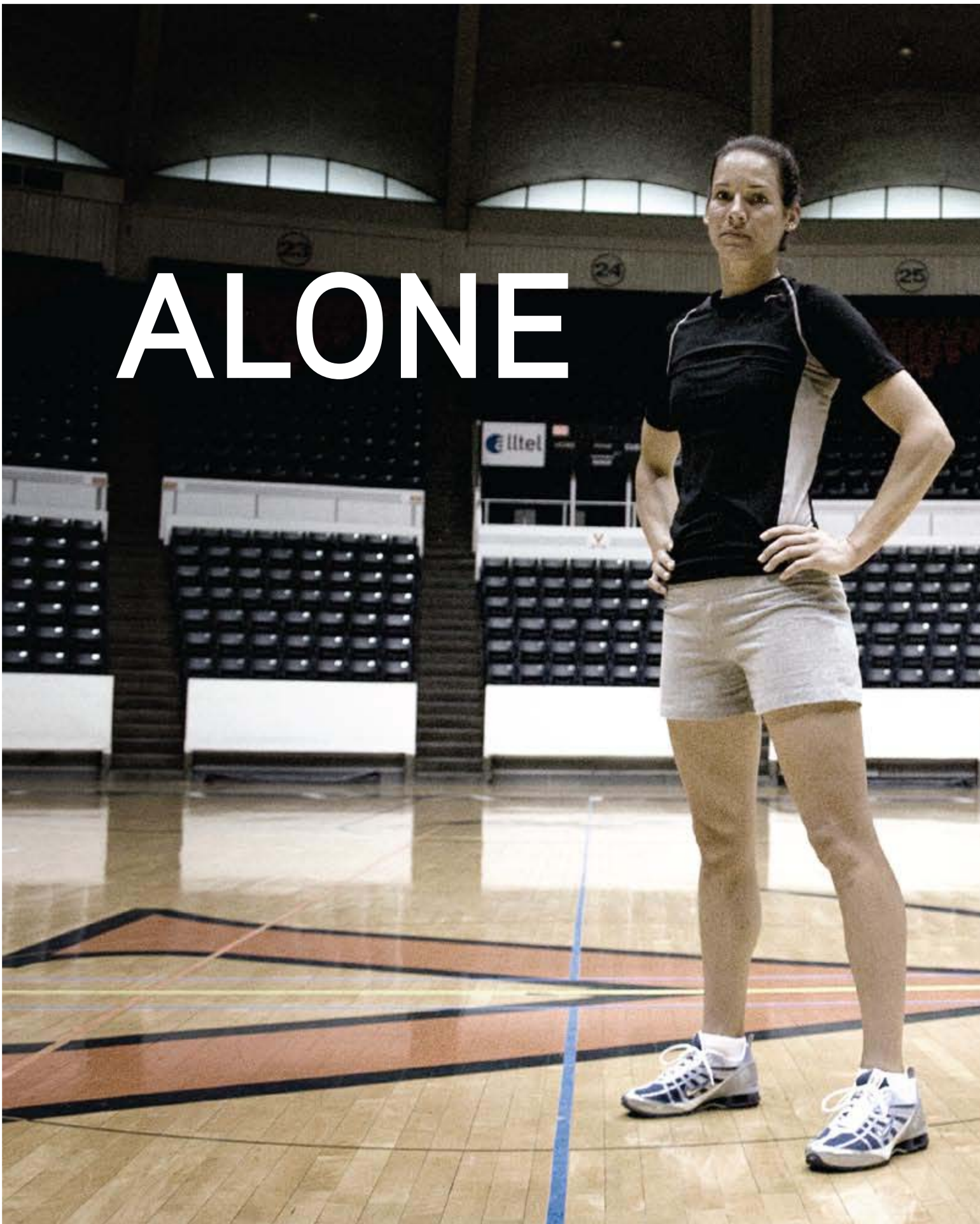


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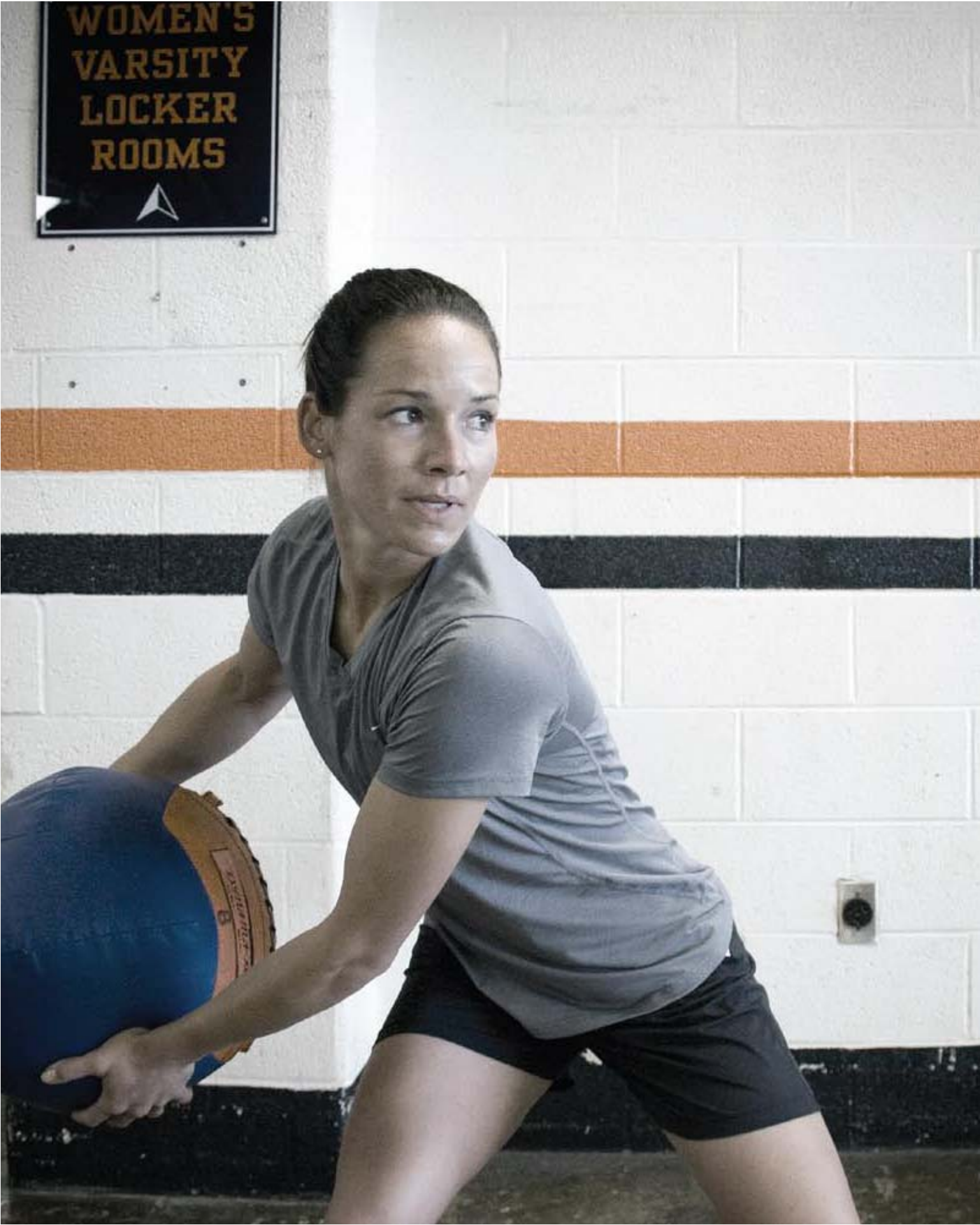
ON TOP



What makes one of the top performers in women's softball spend hours in the gym alone? SPARQ Mag found out when we spent a few busy days with Amanda Freed.

by Brentt Eads
Video & photos by Dominic Duchesneau







There aren't too many more softball mountains for Amanda Freed to climb.

One of the top fastpitch softball players in the world over the last decade, the 28-year-old pitcher/outfielder owns a Gold Medal from the 2004 Greece Olympics and was a member of the USA Softball National Team for eight years.

Amanda also won a National Championship ring at UCLA when she was in the circle closing out the Bruins' title game her freshman year.

Going back to her teenage years, the Cypress, CA native won two club titles playing for the top team in the '90's, the Gordon's Panthers, and even pitched her Garden Grove CA Pacifica high school team to a title.

And in no way is she slowing down now.

She's just finished up her first year as an NCAA assistant coach, tutoring the pitchers for the University of Virginia, and this summer she'll have played her fourth year in the National Pro Fastpitch league along with a first-year stint in Japan.

However, 20 some years ago none of this looked remotely possible as Amanda was diagnosed with Scoliosis, a medical condition where the spine is curved side to side.

"My mother said back then I'd have to wear a back brace if I didn't sit up straight and have good posture," the athlete remembers. "I took that very seriously and fortunately everything worked out medically. It's why I sit and stand up so straight today!"

But that wasn't the only physical obstacle facing the future fastpitch star.



► "I always like to change up my workout routine so I never get bored."







"I was a good athlete as a kid," she explains, "but I was short and skinny and really didn't grow until my freshman year in high school when I grew five inches in three months. I entered high school at 5-foot-3 and left at 5-foot-8."

Though undersized as a youth, even in elementary school Amanda had God-given speed which was frequently put to the test against another future pro athlete.

"I grew up with Bobby Crosby (the current Oakland A's short-stop and 2004 American League Rookie of the Year)—we went through elementary school and junior high together—and he was the fastest boy in school and I was the fastest girl. Often the school would have us race each other."

With dynamic training still years away, Amanda remembers that "we didn't do a lot of running technique back then. As a kid, I just developed my athleticism by running around the neighborhood with my brother and two sisters."

The first she remembers of doing athletic training was with her club team, the Panthers, but even then "we didn't do training specific drills, a lot of it was reaction and quickness tied into softball drills, like quick-hand release drills."

By the time she finished high school, Amanda was a standout athlete in not only fastpitch softball, but also soccer and volleyball as well. Still, she says she was unprepared for the rigors of training once she stepped onto the UCLA campus.

"It was an eye-opener," she remembers. "We'd lift and train so hard—up at 6 am lifting weights, running at 8 am, classes mid-day and then throwing from noon until 1 pm followed by practice. I realized right away it was a full-time job and remember being so sore that first week I couldn't even sit on the toilet!"

► "Our (National Team) programs were very position specific. Pitchers, infielders, outfielders all had different points of emphasis."





Still, her college experience was beneficial in that it took her natural athletic ability to another level.

"At UCLA we focused on sport-specific drills instead of just all-around athleticism. Under proper supervision we did powerlifting and Power Ball work focusing on the core. We also did stuff like running box drills and change-of-direction drills."

▶ "I frequently have had to train on my own,...if I want to continue to compete at a high level, I've got to do what I know works for me, and I have to be religious about it."

Amanda says playing on the National Team for eight years accorded her the opportunity to work with even more advanced training provided by trainers such as Brandon Marcello, now at Stanford.

"I still use the training program Brandon had us on," she explains. "It was tailored to body type, position and



each athlete's strengths and weaknesses. For example, pitchers worked on strengthening their shoulders, legs and all the little connection points in-between."

The Gold Medal winner explains that most of the National Team's training took place when the best players in the country weren't together.

"We were given workout programs and most of the time it was up to each of us to get it done since we would spend most of the year apart except for the Olympic year," Amanda explains. "Our programs were very position specific. Pitchers, infielders, and outfielders all had different points of emphasis."

"As far as our cardiovascular fitness, during camps we were tested on things such as the one mile run, 300 yard shuttles, 20 yard shuttle, long jump, and 60 foot sprint. Each of these are relevant to our sport and we were responsible for making sure that we arrived at camp in shape."

"Sometimes after practice we

would divide into groups based on our position and work on fundamental footwork and speed drills. These were not designed to be cardio workouts—rather we were purely working on form. Most of the training we did as a whole group involved making sure we were each doing the things we needed to do to be in shape and then fine-tuning."

While Amanda still plans on playing for several years—she'll suit up for the Chicago Bandits this summer in the NPL after making it to Japan for the end of that season—she's enjoying being the teacher instead of the student, not just with the Virginia Cavalier pitchers she mentors but also younger kids she works with at clinics.

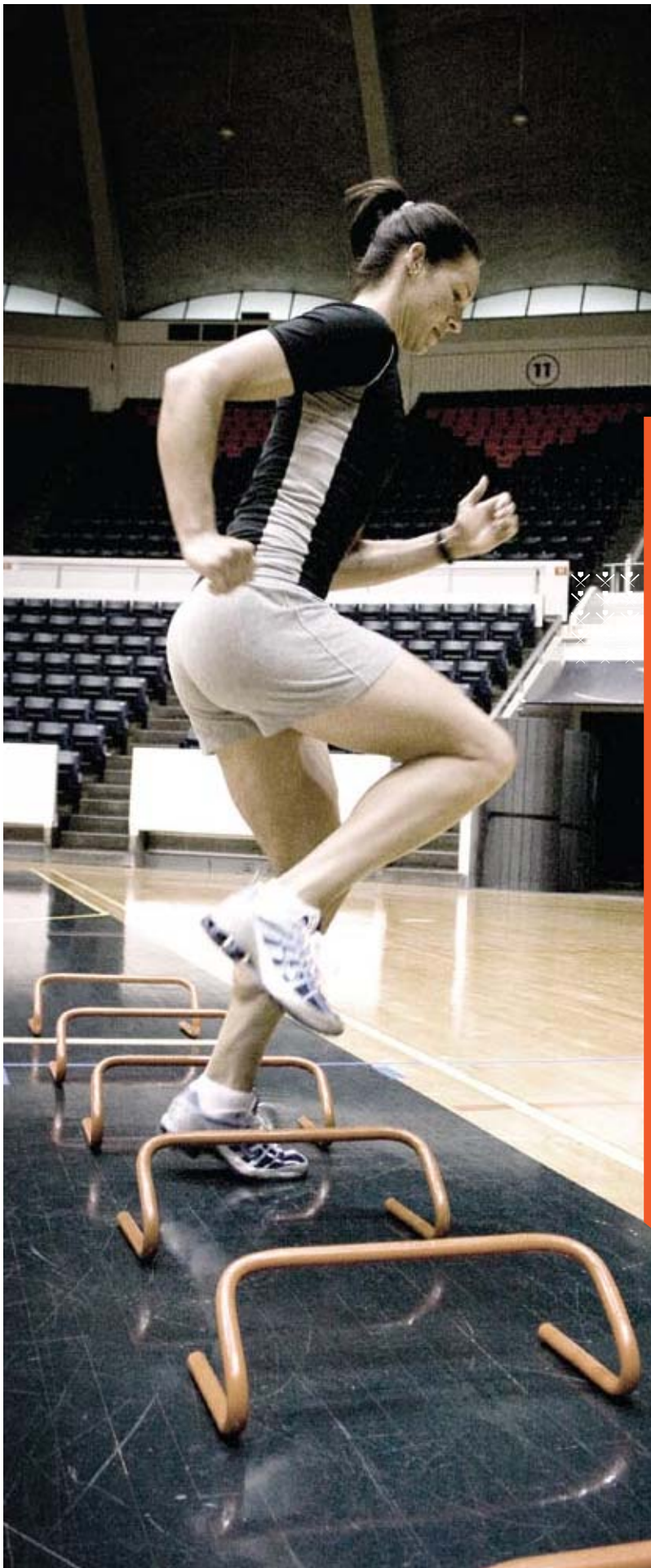
"I love working with the younger girls, sometimes as young as 10 years old," she says. "They're very impressionable and soak up what you teach them. I work a lot with footwork at that age. I'll occasionally run them through hurdles working on high knee position and make sure they're conscientious of moving their feet. I also like running them through ladders and having them expect the ball (grounder or fly) once they finish."

And what's it like working with collegians?

"I like it," she admits, "it's more mental than physical, the girls easily try new things and you see the results more quickly. Plus, there's the advantage of getting to work with them throughout the fall, preseason and into conference games so you get to see progression no matter how small it may be."

One of the difficulties, however, of being in Virginia is Amanda doesn't have the friends or training partners she's accustomed to in her native California.

"I frequently have had to train on my own," she begins. "It's not my favorite thing and, of course, I wish I had teammates



Areas young players need the most improvement:

- ▶ I'd say footwork... using the feet efficiently. It goes back to being athletic. You need to keep your feet beneath you to move in the right direction. If your feet are going the wrong way, it can cost you that tenth of a second that can mean a hit or an out.

beside me or a full time trainer, but in my position I have no other choice. If I want to continue to compete at a high level, I've got to do what I know works for me, and I have to be religious about it. I've worked with many trainers and I've been involved in many programs throughout my career so I know what works for me and what doesn't."

The player and coach says experience has been invaluable in allowing her to know how to push herself while training.

"I know that my career will come to an end shortly," she admits. "I'm getting older, maybe I'm not as fresh physically but I'm definitely wiser. I figure I've got two choices: one, I can do what it takes to get by, or two, I can use the wisdom that I've



acquired over the years and leave it all on the field. I guess that's my motivation."

"For a really long time I've played at the highest level possible. I don't know any different and I don't want to disrespect my career and level that I've achieved by lowering my standards. Simply "doing what it takes" doesn't cut it for me, that mentality doesn't exist. Training on my own is the best thing for me right now. I get up early in the morning and stay late if I need to because it's what I want to do, not because someone is telling me to. When my career is over, I want to look back and think, "Wow, I worked really hard to get to where I was," and have no regrets."

Amazingly, the future Olympian and pro player began playing softball at the age of four as she followed her older sister, Kristin, while she was playing for their mother. Amanda says she's seen a definite shift in the last two decades towards an emphasis on athleticism, but it hasn't all been all positive.

"Parents are investing so much

time and money into one sport these days," Amanda begins, "and we live in such a competitive society so it's not surprising technology has given us many avenues to improve training and athleticism. We can videotape an at bat or pitch and hit stop, pause, and rewind to break down a swing into nine parts. We can also look at smaller details in everything from running and pitching.

"But as a whole, I believe natural athleticism is going down because we're so focused on softball and playing beyond high school. People ask, 'How am I going to get there?' without doing what it takes to just be a better athlete."

Being a multi-sport athlete as a teenager, she admits she's biased to cross-training.

"I didn't know I wanted to just play softball until my junior year and played every sport I could, even track and cross-country. Even today, I feel that you should be athletic and everything else will fall into place. We know more about the sport now, but it's important we don't forget that to be a good softball player you first have to be a good athlete."

And a large part of being a good athlete, Amanda stresses, is knowing how to properly train in season or in the off season.

"It's always good to train with a purpose," she begins. "You have to take a look at the amount of time you are dealing with and make a plan. As for softball, there is always something we are training for. It might be our 'season' or a big tournament."

"This off-season I was preparing to begin playing in Japan on May 1. This past fall I think I took the longest break I've had in my entire career, a month off. When I say off, I mean completely off. I needed it! After that, the time frame I was

working with was roughly mid October through the end of April. I knew that come the beginning of May I needed to be in the best shape possible in order to endure the long season."

"I spent October through December getting myself back into the swing of things. I essentially wiped my slate clean and was starting over. The first couple of weeks I started with four to six days of just cardio, mostly long distances. It gave me a good cardio base but also built a certain amount of strength to begin weight training."

"For the next couple of months I built up to heavy lifting and running/biking/swimming long distances. Lifting would usually be three times a week and cardio five to six times a week."

55 "Beginning in February I continued to build strength by lifting but most of my cardio became interval training. One day I might run stadiums and then the next day would be bike sprints (five minute warm ups, 15 second sprints, 45 seconds to relax—all for 20 minutes followed by a minute cool down).

"I want the girl who's an athlete because I can work with her—if she's just 'fundamental,' there's not as much room for improvement."

Longer shuttles—for example 300 yards, 25 yards up and back times six trips) are also very good for our sport because of the explosiveness and change of directions."

"Come April I had four weeks left before starting (in Japan) so I started to do more 'softball specific' running, ladders, cones, hurdles, agilities, and sprints. It's inevitable that the first couple of weeks of full-time training in cleats is going to wear on my body so I hope that the running and lifting will reduce soreness as well as the risk of injury."

Not surprisingly, Amanda reduces her training once the games begin but not totally.

"In season it is important not to completely shut down your training for the game. The schedule gets a little more difficult and it becomes harder to find the 'right' time to get your off-field training in, but it is important to maintain a certain amount of strength and endurance to get through the season."

"Generally I'd lift twice a week

and cardio for about four to five times a week, outside of normal team practices. Also because I'm a pitcher I think it's important to work extra hard at building stamina."

Being a great athlete has helped Amanda recognize one when she's wearing the hat of a college coach and recruiter.

"I can look at one swing and tell if a girl is an athlete or not," she says flatly. "As a coach you want someone who swings the bat athletically, who's flexible and has good hand-eye coordination. I want the girl who's an athlete because I can work with her—if she's just 'fundamental,' there's not as much room for improvement."



► "Lately, I've really enjoyed Power Ball throws because I can really feel the difference in (my) core."

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AMANDA FREED
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