

# Teaching girls to pitch a softball the correct way is her job, her only job



**Rita Lynn Gilman stands by her speed pyramid at her pitching school. The star to her left has the number 55 which means that all the girls pictured in that section of the pyramid have been clocked at pitching a softball at least 55 m.p.h. The level above it is 60 and the speed at the top is 65. (Staff photo by Jim Fields)**

**By JIM FIELDS**  
*HP Sports Editor*

If there's one thing Rita Lynn Gilman knows how to do, it's the proper way a fast-pitch pitcher should throw a softball, and for the last 20 years, she has been teaching aspiring young girls how to bring it with authority.

At last count, over 20 of her students had moved on to pitch on the college level. This fall, Brittney Blankenship, who played high school ball for Midlothian, and Megan Cobb from L.C. Bird will add their names to Gilman's success list. Blankenship will take her talents to Wingate College and Cobb to Catawba.

Gilman's career as a pitching coach started in 1987 when her summer-league team's batgirl asked her for some pointers between games of a doubleheader. The batgirl, Natasha Johnson, eventually pitched for Marshall University.

"I started giving Natasha lessons and soon her mother was paying me," Gilman said recently

from her complex on Route 33. "Soon, her friends were calling, and I was also teaching them. I've never had to advertise. It's always been word of mouth from a student to a friend or teammate."

On any given day, Gilman will give lessons for up to 10 hours. Her students come from not only this area, but she has had students travel from as far away as New Jersey and West Virginia.

"The girl from New Jersey came on a Saturday and took three straight hours of lessons," she said. "She and her family spent the night, and headed back the next day after she had two more lessons."

The West Virginia student comes to town, takes three hours of lessons and turns around and goes home.

While admitting she is a self-taught instructor, she relies on "the best pitchers in the world" for help.

"I attended camps when I was getting started as a pitcher, and honestly, I didn't think the quality

of instruction was very good," Gilman explained. "I basically taught myself, and today, if you really want to do it right, you study the Olympic pitchers. Lisa Fernandez is absolutely the greatest and has a new video out that I study and use with my students."

For Gilman, a 1988 graduate of Patrick Henry High School, sports has proven to be a means to an end. In high school, she earned All-Region honors for three years in a row in softball and basketball. Thanks to her basketball skills and a GPA just over 4.0, the University of Richmond came calling.

"Richmond really didn't have a softball program then so basketball was my sport there," she explained. "I had a combination of scholarships to get me through. I had a partial basketball scholarship from Richmond, a \$10,000 scholarship from the Virginia Junior Academy of Science, a scholarship for being the female Richmond Times-Dispatch Scholar Athlete of the Year and an ROTC scholarship."

Because of the ROTC scholar-

ship, Gilman had a military commitment when she graduated and spent four years at Ft. Lee as a Medical Service Corps Officer.

"I even learned to jump out of airplanes in the Army," she said with a smile. "I earned my paratrooper's wings at Fort Benning."

After the Army, Gilman tried the real world as a pharmaceutical sales representative before becoming involved with Batter Up, a softball instructional academy.

"I eventually became co-owner at Batter Up," she said. "When it ran its course, we closed it, and I opened my pitching-only school here about three years ago."

Her present facility is on the farm she grew up on, and the demand for her classes is enough that it keeps her busy year-around.

"I take some time for myself to do some traveling, but this is my life," Gilman said. "Teaching girls the right way to pitch a softball is my job. My only job."