

Fastpitch Fever

By Jody Studdard

Chapter 1

Everyone thinks being a fourteen-year-old fastpitch softball player is nothing but fun and games. Trust me, it isn't. Take today for instance. It's the final inning, and my team, the Washington Wildcats, is losing to our arch rivals, the Bellevue Beast, 4-3. We have two outs in the final inning, and it's my turn to bat. Normally, I like batting, and I'm pretty good at it, but not today. The Beast's pitcher, Nichole Williams, is really tough, and she's already struck me out twice earlier in the game. She throws several different types of pitches, and she throws them all well, but her best by far is a nasty riseball. I've never seen anyone throw a riseball as well as her. No matter how hard I try, I just can't hit it.

As I step into the batter's box, I glance quickly at the stands. My dad is sitting with the other parents in the bleachers, and he doesn't look happy. He hates it when my team loses, and he especially hates it when I strike out. If I know what's best for me, I better hit one of these riseballs, or it's going to be a long car ride home for sure.

Nichole winds up, then throws. It's just what I was dreading. Another riseball. I swing as hard as I can, but I miss it by a mile.

"Strike one," blue shouts. In softball, we call the umpires blue, since they usually wear blue uniforms.

I shoot a glance at my dad. He doesn't say anything, but his face is turning red.

Nichole winds up again. This riseball is even nastier than the first. I miss it by two miles.

“Strike two,” blue shouts.

“Come on, Rachel,” my dad calls from the bleachers. “Keep your eyes on the ball. Keep your hands up.”

I take a deep breath as I dig my cleats into the dirt. This is my last chance. If I don’t hit the next pitch, I’m in deep.

The final riseball is so fast I barely see it. I miss it by three miles.

The Beast players cheer and congratulate Nichole. In the meantime, I walk back to our dugout, my head down in defeat. My coach, Ryan Taylor, greets me and tells me, “Good try,” but I’m not concerned about him right now. I take my time rounding up my gear and putting it into my softball bag. I’ve learned from experience it’s best to give my dad a few minutes to cool down after a bad game.

It’s deathly silent in the car until we’re half way home.

“What’s the deal with riseballs?” he asks.

“I’ve never been able to hit riseballs,” I respond. “You know that.”

“But why?” he asks. “They’re just like any other pitch.”

“No, they’re not. They start low, like a fastball, but then they go up. I always swing under them.”

“So swing higher,” he says.

I sigh. If only it were that simple.

“It’s not that easy,” I say. “I can’t tell how high they’re going until they get there. And then it’s too late. Especially against someone like Nichole. She throws so hard.”

My dad shakes his head. “It isn’t that difficult, Rachel. You just need to have quick hands. Here, I’ll show you.”

We stop at McCall Park. McCall Park is a Little League field just a couple of blocks from our house. My dad and I practice there a lot when it isn’t being used by someone else.

My dad walks to the pitching circle with a bucket of balls in one hand. We keep a bucket of balls in the trunk at all times, just for occasions like this, when he wants to teach me something. In the meantime, I take my place (somewhat hesitantly) in the batter’s box.

“Hitting a riseball isn’t rocket science,” he says. “Just keep your eyes on the ball, as it comes in, and keep your hands up high. Don’t let them drop, or you’ll swing under it, just like you’ve been doing. Okay?”

I say okay, even though I know better. My dad and I have been through this drill hundreds of times. I’ve been playing softball as long as I can remember, and I’ve never been able to hit riseballs, no matter how hard I’ve tried, no matter how hard I’ve worked. Regardless, my dad insists he can teach me. He’s extremely stubborn that way.

He throws me a riseball. I miss it by four miles.

“Rachel,” he says. “Keep your eyes on the ball. Watch the ball hit the bat.”

He throws me another pitch. I miss it by five miles.

“Eyes on the ball,” he repeats.

He throws me another pitch. I miss it by six miles.

“Are your eyes on the ball, young lady?” he asks. He’s clearly getting irritated again.

“Yes,” I say as I bang my bat on the ground. He’s not the only one getting irritated.

He throws me another pitch. I miss it by seven miles.

“Are you concentrating?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“It doesn’t look like it. It looks like you’re messing around. Get serious. Get ready and hit the ball. I’m not going to tell you again.”

He throws another pitch. I miss it by eight miles.

“Rachel,” he says as he steps out of the pitching circle. “Take that fancy bat of yours and hit the ball. Got it?”

“I’m trying,” I plead.

“You’re not trying hard enough. Try harder.”

He throws another pitch. I miss it by nine miles.

Now he’s furious. “I swear to God, Rachel, if you swing and miss once more, you’re grounded for a week.”

One pitch later, I’m grounded for a week.