

Michaela Edenfield taking Florida State softball team to 'Area 51' with remarkable power

Curt Weiler

Softball may as well run in Michaela Edenfield's blood.

The redshirt freshman catcher on the No. 2 Florida State softball team said that every woman in her family played softball with the exception of her grandmother.

Her mom and older aunt both played in high school. Her younger aunt, Teresa Edenfield, played at FSU from 1997 through 2000, hitting .247 with 121 hits over four seasons with the Seminoles.

But Michaela has wasted little time staking her claim to being the best in the family. After redshirting in her first season with the Seminoles, she's hit the ground running in her first year on the field.

With two home runs in Wednesday's win at Troy, Edenfield is up to 11 home runs in 30 games this season. She's accounted for 11 of the team's 31 home runs this season and is on pace for one of the best freshman seasons in program history.

FSU softball legend Jessie Warren set the program record for home runs by a freshman at 19 in 2015. Given her current pace, Edenfield could challenge that record from Warren, who also set the program record with 83 career homers.

"I think it's how hard she hits the ball. We get the luxury of seeing her in batting practice a lot and she definitely hits the ball farther consistently," FSU head coach Lonni Alameda told the Democrat.

"We've had some players in the past that could launch them, but she's definitely strong. Her exit velocity and her strength are just pretty incredible. The more she learns and the more opportunities she gets in this game and the smarter she gets in how people are pitching her, it's gonna be neat to see if that can keep growing and she gets smarter. It could be dangerous when you have that kind of raw power."

So how did Edenfield go from growing up in Sneads, Fla., a small town of approximately 2,000 people about an hour west of Tallahassee, to quickly becoming a face of the Seminoles' program?

The legend grows

Standing two inches taller than any of her teammates at 6-foot-1, Edenfield looks far more like a volleyball player than someone who plays softball at the collegiate level.

She played both sports throughout her youth, but her love for softball, perhaps ingrained in her DNA, led to her choosing to commit to softball at the collegiate level.

"Softball was always my first love..." Edenfield told the Democrat.

"I'm happy I was able to play volleyball at a high level and very grateful for the ride. There was definitely one point I was like, 'Wow, I'm really going to miss playing volleyball.'"

With limited youth softball opportunities in Sneads, Edenfield joined the newly-formed Emerald Coast Jets youth team when she was 11. The coach of that team, Rick Green, is also the head softball coach and director of athletics at Arnold High School in Panama City Beach.

Edenfield credits Green with much of what made her the player he is now.

"I would say probably my hitting coach for the longest amount of time (Green)..." Edenfield said.

"I would like to say that I was always pretty strong growing up. Thankfully, I have the genetics, I have the height and the build. But definitely, the swing was something that kind of had to be earned. My mom always told me, 'You have all the skills in the world, but if you're not coachable then you're not going to mean anything.' Thankfully, I took that to heart and I tried my best to be very coachable and just really wanted to be good. Whatever it took, I was there."

Every Sunday that there were no travel-ball obligations from when she was 11 until when she was 16, Edenfield's grandfather, Roy, drove her three hours round-trip from Sneads to Panama City Beach so that she could train under Green.

She may credit Green with a lot of what she now is as a hitter, but to hear him say it, she was a special player from when he first met her.

"I knew right then she was going to have the tools to be a very good ballplayer one day if she worked at it..." Green told the Democrat.

"This is my 45th year in education and coaching. Talking boys, girls, I've not seen a better athlete."

Green was delighted to relive stories of some of Edenfield's feats, which are almost too remarkable to believe. He remembers her at 11 hitting a foul ball about 230 feet while playing at the Atlanta Braves' former spring training stadium in Kissimmee, which shocked the crowd in attendance.

He remembers her at 14 playing in a tournament at Tallahassee's Messer Park hitting a monster home run that traveled 305 feet and bounced off a car that was over 100 feet beyond the fence.

At 15, she could clear the scoreboard at Arnold's stadium that was 25 feet high above their 205-foot fence. She's also the only girl Green has ever coached who can reach 70 miles per hour with an overhand throw. She was clocked at 72 mph throwing from her knees off their radar gun.

At 16, she nearly beat University of Florida veteran first baseman Kayli Kvistad in a home run derby, tying her at 14 in the first round before losing 13 to 12 in the tiebreaker.

It was then that Edenfield's stock as a college prospect really began to blow up. The day after that home run derby, Rutgers, Virginia and Texas A&M were in attendance for her travel ball game to scout her.

Rutgers in particular pushed hard for Edenfield, flying her up for a visit and offering her a full scholarship. But she was adamant about wanting to play for nearby FSU, where her aunt had played and where her grandfather had taken her for summer softball camps throughout her youth.

"Her grandfather always brought her to camps and he was really influential in her life. He was awesome to us, he was just a fan of the game..." Alameda said.

"She was definitely on our radar and someone that we communicated with a lot and watched her grow up a bit. When she decided she really want to be all in softball then it was kind of a no-brainer for us when we were chatting her through the opportunities to attend Florida State."

Unfortunately for Edenfield, Roy was diagnosed with cancer shortly before she enrolled at FSU. He died before he was able to see her play in a game at the stadium he'd brought her to so many times growing up.

"My grandpa was one of my biggest supporters," Edenfield said.

"He took me to any volleyball tournament, softball tournament, camp possible."

An unexpected setback

Edenfield's redshirt season upon her arrival to FSU in 2020 was planned.

How it played out was not.

Arriving a few months after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Edenfield's medical testing upon her enrollment all came back clean. However, she tested positive for COVID-19 that September not long after the fall semester began.

As part of the university's requirements for athletes returning to action after testing positive, she had to undergo a round of heart testing. This time, a heart murmur that hadn't been there before showed up during her echocardiogram exam.

This setback sidelined Edenfield indefinitely, per FSU's guidelines, and subjected her to significantly more testing with so much still unknown about the effect that COVID-19 could have on peoples' hearts.

Because of this, she wasn't allowed to work out in any of FSU's facilities. She couldn't lift in the weight room, hit in the batting cages or so much as throw a softball out at practice until she was cleared.

For a freshman just getting to know her new teammates, this forced her to focus on finding other things to build relationships.

"A lot of people (around the team) didn't even know like if I was good or not, really. I had to kind of find my identity outside of the sport and how to connect to the girls without touching a softball and throwing it around," Edenfield said.

FSU catcher Michaela Edenfield missed almost all of her first fall with the Seminoles while dealing with COVID-19 complications before she was finally cleared.

"I think now I'm even more grateful because that allowed me to make stronger relationships for this year's team and I found my identity outside of the sport. That's a lot. Not many people want to talk about that..."

"You meet all sorts of people through the sport, but it's funny like when that sport gets taken away from you for a short amount of time whether it's injury or out for COVID or something as simple as that, (it makes you think) who am I, how do I make friends? It's like going back and trying to make friends in high school."

To keep herself somewhat attached to softball, Edenfield would go to nearby Messer Park and hit balls at its softball fields. During practice, she was practically working as a team manager, feeding balls into pitching machines and doing whatever else she could to remain attached to the program while she couldn't participate.

She was finally cleared to return on the final day of fall practice her true freshman season. On the schedule that day was a team scrimmage to finish out fall camp. Even though she hadn't been able to practice with the team at all, she was given three at-bats during the scrimmage.

In her second at-bat, Edenfield hit a home run off FSU pitcher Emma Wilson in what quickly became a cathartic moment for the FSU catcher after a fall loaded with unexpected obstacles.

"That moment made it all worth it. It was like, 'Okay, I can swing the bat. I don't have to put a lot of pressure (on myself) to be perfect,'" Edenfield said.

"After that moment, some of the people truly accepted me and brought me under their wings. (Former FSU catcher) Anna (Shelnutt), she brought me under her wing that following spring. Working underneath her and becoming the bullpen catcher taught me so many different skills and traits. I'm so grateful for it."

Edenfield isn't entirely done with the testing that has come as a result of her unexpected heart murmur. She had to get tested again this past fall and anticipates she'll have to get yearly testing done at least through the end of her FSU career.

But she was able to be the Seminoles' bullpen catcher for their miracle run to the Women's College World Series Championship Series last year and has started all 30 games at catcher this season.

"I'm so grateful that I was able to redshirt. I know before I even wanted to put my name of paper that was the plan for me to redshirt. The fact that COVID and everything came and Anna was able to have another year was just a bonus," Edenfield said.

"It's great that she came back and wanted to play for the program again, but for me, to be able to work underneath someone that had that experience and was able to feed so much information down to Kaia (LoPreste) and I (was great)."

Going to Area 51

Long before Edenfield made her official FSU debut, the members of the FSU softball team knew the type of insane power she had.

They had regularly seen her reach places few others could during batting practice, hitting towering shots that defy physics.

Inspired by the 51 jersey she chose to wear at FSU, assistant coach Troy Cameron pitched her on an "Area 51" nickname for the moonshots she hits. Area 51 in Nevada has long been conjectured to be a research site for unidentified flying objects, and Cameron joked that the type of home runs she hits qualify as UFOs.

As she began regularly hitting monster home runs early this season, FSU began sharing the nickname on social media and it immediately caught on.

"I like it, I think it's different. I've never heard of anything like that before," Edenfield said.

Before enrolling at FSU, Edenfield had never worn the No. 51 before. She was forced to pick a new number when all her previous numbers were worn by current Seminoles. She elected to go with the 51 her mother, Tami Powell, wore when she played softball.

What started as a sentimental thank you to her mom has become so much more early in her FSU career.

"She cried, and she just thought that was like the best thing I've ever done in my whole entire life, as you can imagine," Edenfield said.

"All of this like 'Area 51' stuff, it's really cool. It's kind of interesting because it's making its own brand and label for myself. I would have never had this if I didn't choose to wear her number."

Within the next few weeks, Edenfield will be inviting fans to join her in Area 51. She's launching a t-shirt through former FSU pitcher Caylan Arnold's Sunday Golds Co. that will soon be available for purchase.