



STEVE HOCKSTEIN/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Rancocas Valley players pose with the NJSIAA Group 4 trophy after defeating J.P. Stevens, 2-0, in the title game.

# Rancocas V soared to the top

No. 1 team took different approach to help maximize potential, focus on goals

## TEAM OF THE YEAR

BY SEAN REILLY  
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Some teams try to get better with conventional techniques such as extra batting practice. Rancocas Valley prefers a much different approach.

The team from Mount Holly often reaches out to Keith Waldman, a professional team-building, performance-enhancing consultant in the South Jersey area in order to help maximize its potential.

"Girls sports can get emotional," senior right-hander Lisa Sweeney said. "As athletes, we're very emotion-driven people and we can be very hard on ourselves. If you never accept anything as being good enough, it can get to the point where it can be self-destructive. He toned those things down with us and made us focus on our goals rather than our failures."

While Rancocas Valley rode the dominant pitching of the All-Stater Sweeney to a 31-2 season that culminated with the NJSIAA Group 4

state championship, the players and coaches credit their success — which includes The Star-Ledger Top 20 Trophy as New Jersey's top-ranked team — to the bonds they shared and their trust in each other.

One of Waldman's most important sessions came just before the start of the state tournament.

At the conclusion of a practice, he gathered the players and coaches in a circle for an exercise called "Hold the Rope."

Beginning with a large ball of yarn, the first person would grab hold of the yarn and the pass the ball off to a teammate, while also stating what that teammate brought to the team. Others would also add comments. Nearly two hours later, every player and coach had a greater idea of what they brought to the group, while the yarn in front of them had been transformed into a symbolic web.

"You could say whatever you wanted about the person," Sweeney said. "It's pretty cool at the end to look down and see that web.

It's neat to see the connections between everyone."

Once the exercise was completed, Waldman cut up the yarn and each team member took home a piece. For the remainder of the season, each player kept it close at hand. Some tied theirs around their ankles. Others wore it in their hair. One player even affixed her piece of the string to the handle of her bat.

"When you looked at your string, you were reminded that you had 25 people behind you," Sweeney said.

Togetherness and understanding one's importance were especially important for Rancocas Valley because Sweeney struck out a state-record 520 batters in 229 innings this spring. That meant 76 percent of the team's outs were by strikeout, so some fielders would go games at a time without seeing a batted ball.

"That never became an issue," Rancocas Valley coach Deb Hauth said. "Everyone had an understanding of their role."

"They're a great group of kids," Waldman said. "Lisa was the focal point, but so many kids contributed. They were very open-minded and committed to learning new things. I really had a blast with them."

Rancocas Valley was 7-0 when it lost a 3-1, 10-inning game to rival Northern Burlington of Columbus on April 14. Nine days later, it dropped to 11-2 following a 1-0 defeat to Hammonton in the semifinals of the 16-team Rancocas Valley Elite Tournament.

The Burlington County team collected itself and won its final 20 games, including rematch victories over Northern Burlington and Hammonton. The penultimate game was a dramatic 2-0, 18-inning triumph over Washington Township in the Group 4 semifinals, followed by Sweeney's 18-strikeout, no-hit masterpiece in a 2-0 victory over J.P. Stevens in the Group 4 state final on June 11 at Toms River East.

"We had a great season," Sweeney said. "But we also had a lot of fun."