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**AJ Henderson - Georgia Southern**

**Southern Staff Stories: Dani Price, Softball**

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Coaching any sport is a calling. It's a job that requires sacrifices, demands excellence and for many, the rewards are not immediate. It's also a profession unlike many others where there is no one true path to becoming a coach. The roads that lead coaches to their destinations are as varied and diverse as the student-athletes they work with day to day, year to year.

Dani Price knew early on that she wanted to join the coaching profession. But the road that led the assistant softball coach to Georgia Southern is definitely the road less taken - and she wouldn't have it any other way.

In her second season with the Eagles, Price and the rest of the staff has already endured its share of adversity, as have we all with the current COVID-19 pandemic. But that hasn't deterred her from completing a coaching journey that started back in her grade school days in Texas.



### ***Born To Play***

Growing up just outside of the Houston area, Price first played baseball before moving over to play softball. "I lived next door to two boys, and their dad was a baseball coach," Price said. "I just loved it, so I joined their baseball team and played for a couple of years until I was probably eight. We didn't even know softball was a thing. My dad was like, 'what are those fields over there?' 'Oh, those are the fields where the girls play.' I transitioned to that, and I just fell in love with it. I used to drag my dad to the park all the time."

Thanks to her father, Price was exposed to not only youth softball but professional softball as well. From 2004 to 2006, the Texas Thunder competed in NPF (National Pro Fastpitch) and Price was a bat girl for one of their games. She also attended college games, at the University of Houston and the University of Texas. And of course, summer camps were in the picture as well. She attended Baylor's camp, LSU's camp and others nearby to her hometown.

Pretty early on, Price knew she wanted to play softball collegiately. But where did she want to go play?

"My dream was Baylor," Price said. "I started going to camps there when I was 12. But, I was told I was just too small. What I didn't realize at the time, though, was that I was catching the attention of other coaches. On September 1 of my junior year, I started getting calls."

One of the recruiting calls came from McNeese State.

"My next door neighbor, who was my very first baseball coach, he played football at McNeese State," Price said. "So it was a little bit familiar enough for me to be really interested. I didn't know a lot of the other schools who were sending me letters. But I knew I couldn't go too far away from home, and once I went on campus, it had such a family feel to me. I fell in love with the community. That's why I ended up there."



### ***Success on the Field***

Price played for four seasons for the Cowgirls, from 2009-12. She started 233 of 235 games for McNeese State, and her 235 games played is tied for third all-time in program history. In 2010, she earned Honorable Mention All-Southland Conference honors at third base, hitting .242 with two home runs, 24 RBI and 20 walks.

In addition to her games played, she still ranks in the Top 10 career numbers in several more categories for the Cowgirls. Her 233 games started ranks fourth, while she is seventh in career at-bats with 646. Her 89 career RBIs rank 10th and her 80 walks drawn ranks sixth.

As her playing career began to wind down in 2012, the next step of Price's softball journey was a logical one to her.

"At the start of my senior year, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do," Price said. "I knew I wanted to coach, and so I'd always been told that if I had my master's degree, that would be helpful. Math was my strongest subject. I was just planning on getting my master's in math, and then move into coaching."



### ***Another Path Opens Up***

During that pivotal senior season, Price had a seemingly innocuous opportunity that would lead her on a different path - and that path would lead her back to a familiar place.

"I had randomly been asked by one of the local high school teams to come speak at their practices, as kind of a chaplain," Price said. "I ran the idea by my mentor in Lake Charles, Steve, who was our FCA {Fellowship of Christian Athletes} Director.

"He said, 'That's really weird you would ask that, because I just got this brochure about a sports ministry program starting up at Baylor. And it was like my two loves colliding. I looked into it, and found out that there was a scholarship available. I threw my name in the hat not even knowing.'

She would receive the scholarship to the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University and, albeit a few years after the fact, Price would be on her way to her dream school to pursue a master's degree in divinity, with a sports ministry concentration.

"Sports ministry is becoming a bigger concept for schools to put into a seminary," Price said. "It was probably two years old when I entered the program. So at that point, softball wasn't even in the picture. I was just going to go for the sports ministry program."

The course curriculum was a rigorous one, Price relates. Instead of a more conventional graduate degree encompassing one or two years, the divinity degree was a three or four year program requiring 93 credit hours. Included in the curriculum were base-level bible classes, base-level theology classes and history classes, leading into the sports ministry track.

"Sports has always been a love of my life," Price said. "And I've known I've wanted to coach since I was in the eighth grade. So I just thought, what a ministry it could be to put the love of God with this love of sports and coaching that I had. It just felt like a perfect storm."

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### ***Opportunity Begins With A Knock***

Baylor Head Softball Coach Glenn Moore has directed the Bears program since 2000. He was the coach when a young Dani Price was attending softball camp, and was still there when she began her graduate studies. So it was natural that Price would want to meet with Coach Moore once she got to Waco.

"I met with him just to say hi," Price said. "He then said, 'I know this is a shot in the dark, but we're looking for a manager. It's not a great job - washing clothes, doing field work, all this stuff.' He asked if I was interested. Yes, I was! So I got a foot in the door in my first year of graduate school. Just being around that caliber of program was great."

As is usual for collegiate coaching, Price stepped into a volunteer assistant spot after a previous coach left. With the first step planted, she was on her way down the road that would eventually lead her to Statesboro.

Coach Moore recalls that first meeting with Price, when she offered her the manager position. "I told her that I know it would be a step down for a college graduate, but I would certainly love for her to consider it, because I would love to work with her. She thought about it, and while I don't believe many people would have humbled themselves to the point of being a servant to athletes younger than her, who were less experienced than her, it did not surprise me that Dani chose to take that position."

Price spent four years with the Bears while pursuing her degree. From 2014-17, Baylor appeared in four NCAA Regionals and advanced to the Women's College World Series in 2014 and 2017.

"Dani contributed in all aspects of our program, from film study to coaching, working with our outfielders," Coach Moore said. "She is a very versatile coach, with the ability to coach at a high level in any position. She is a true student of the game."





### ***The Road To Statesboro***

Finishing her graduate degree in 2017, Price received the opportunity to return to her alma mater and coach at McNeese State for two seasons. She worked with both hitters and pitchers, but concentrated on pitching during the 2019 season, helping the Cowgirls lower their team ERA a full point from the previous season.

In the Spring of 2019, Georgia Southern Head Coach Kim Dean needed to hire a new assistant coach to work with the pitching staff. The hiring process brought many resumes across Coach Dean's desk, so what did she think when she saw the resume of one Dani Price, with her master's degree in divinity?

"I definitely noticed it," Coach Dean said. "I can't say that it didn't intrigue me, more or less. But it allowed for really in depth and intriguing conversations. My mother got her master's in theology, and it was a good ice breaker to communicate about. It created a unique bond between us, even throughout the hiring process. The idea that it was somebody who was using faith to give back to a sport that we both love."

Price was hired in July of 2019 to be the Eagles' assistant coach in charge of pitching. Also included in her duties were helping to direct the team's alumni relations and special events, while assisting in recruiting.

A journey that began a decade ago as a fresh-faced student-athlete at McNeese State had led her to a program where both Coach Dean and Price feel is a fantastic fit.

"Within the first hour of sitting down and engaging with her during the hiring process, it was pretty apparent to me that she was going to be the one," Coach Dean said. "Her whole demeanor and approach to how she wanted to attack the coaching world just really made me excited to bring her on.

"One thing I thought was really cool, was she asked all the girls, 'Tell me something you've been hearing since you were a kid about pitching.' She was learning their terminology and language," Coach Dean said. "She didn't tell me she was going to do that, but it was a great way to create instant communication. And she does it with each pitcher. I really appreciated that she humbled herself, to say 'I know I was hired because of these things, but your terminology is more important than mine.'"



### ***Lessons Learned***

For Price, the decision to go to the divinity program at Baylor helped her accomplish her goal of becoming a collegiate softball coach. But what was the impact of taking that less traditional route?

"I think my perspective just changed with the program," Price said. "I was a softball junkie as a kid. I lived at the field. I watched baseball on TV every night. Everything I did was softball. And I still love it, but it brought me the perspective that this sport is just a vehicle to make young people, better people.

"I dreaded the day softball ended for me. And I learned through that, it's going to end for all of these women. Widening my perspective to see that softball is a way that we express our talent, but also a vehicle to grow, face adversity and overcome challenges. We find the limits that we put on ourselves



aren't as small as we think the are. There's more to who we are than we think. I think that was very evident in the way last season ended. When softball's ripped away, how do you stand in front of this team and say - you can still have faith, that the work you put in isn't going to be wasted. It wasn't just softball you were working on. You were working on **you**, as a human being. It helped me not lose that human being aspect. There aren't many days I go home and think about who these student-athletes are as people. That their heart, at the end of the day, is ok, rather than just their talent."

That kind of coaching, that culture, was what sold Coach Dean on bringing Price on board for Georgia Southern softball.

"When we sat down, my big approach was trying to solidify our culture," Coach Dean said. "I thought we were bringing in really talented kids, and I wanted to create that family atmosphere. When she finally got to Statesboro, we talked a lot more about the kids as individuals. Everything we talked about, continued to impress me and excited me about her joining the program. I had a philosophy we were trying to create and I found a person who was that philosophy."

Although the 2020 season was truncated, the proof was on the field for Price and the Eagles. Just two weeks into the season, Georgia Southern led all of NCAA Division I in team ERA. And after 24 games of action, the team's 2.93 ERA was on pace to be the lowest for the Eagles in the Sun Belt era.

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### ***On Faith***

The similarities between coaching and religion are quite evident - in religion, people are asked to take things on faith. In coaching, student-athletes are similarly asked to take things on faith. Faith in the school, in the coaching staff and in the program to deliver the kind of growth and experience each one needs.

"When I think about coaching, I'm only given these young women - if we're lucky - for four years of their life," Price said. "It's such a transformational age, from 18-22. They're trying to come into their own. I've always been challenged, encouraged and empowered by my faith. My whole hope in coaching is the same - that I can be the one to empower, encourage and challenge young women because sports is going to end. If they can walk confidently in who they are created to be, then it's like, we can send them into the world and I know they're going to make a difference."

"Any time you accept a position, you're showing faith in something that wasn't proven," Coach Dean said. "I painted a picture - I need this type of coach to help me get there. Are you up for the challenge?"

She bought in. She always says that she's about people. I think her faith allows her to get through adversity, and adversity that no one ever knew. COVID is an adversity that we all went through. Her faith in seeing the best in people. Dani is now the heart of our coaching staff. She's very intense, but in a different way. I just think she wholeheartedly believes in what she's doing. I believe her faith in God allows her to feel that way. And when you think of a coach who loves the sport of softball, she embodies it."