

A HOME RUN THAT REALLY COUNTED

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PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) - With two runners on base and a strike against her, Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon University uncorked her best swing and did something she had never done, in high school or college. Her first home run cleared the center-field fence.

But it appeared to be the shortest of dreams come true when she missed first base, started back to tag it and collapsed with a knee injury.

She crawled back to first but could do no more. The first-base coach said she would be called out if her teammates tried to help her. Or, the umpire said, a pinch runner could be called in, and the homer would count as a single.

Then, members of the Central Washington University softball team stunned spectators by carrying Tucholsky around the bases Saturday so the three-run homer would count - an act that contributed to their own elimination from the playoffs.

Central Washington first baseman Mallory Holtman, the career home run leader in the Great Northwest Athletic Conference, asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Tucholsky.

The umpire said there was no rule against it.

So Holtman and shortstop Liz Wallace put their arms under Tucholsky's legs, and she put her arms over their shoulders. The three headed around the base paths, stopping to let Tucholsky touch each base with her good leg.

"The only thing I remember is that Mallory asked me which leg was the one that hurt," Tucholsky said. "I told her it was my right leg and she said, 'OK, we're going to drop you down gently and you need to touch it with your left leg,' and I said 'OK, thank you very much.'"

"She said, 'You deserve it, you hit it over the fence,' and we all kind of just laughed."

"We started laughing when we touched second base," Holtman said. "I said, 'I wonder what this must look like to other people.'"

"We didn't know that she was a senior or that this was her first home run," Wallace said Wednesday. "That makes the story more touching than it was. We just wanted to help her."

Holtman said she and Wallace weren't thinking about the playoff spot, and didn't consider the gesture something others wouldn't do.

As for Tucholsky, the 5-foot-2 right fielder was focused on her pain.

"I really didn't say too much. I was trying to breathe," she told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Wednesday.

"I didn't realize what was going on until I had time to sit down and let the pain relax a little bit," she said. "Then I realized the extent of what I actually did."

"I hope I would do the same for her in the same situation," Tucholsky added.

As the trio reached home plate, Tucholsky said, the entire Western Oregon team was in tears.

Central Washington coach Gary Frederick, a 14-year coaching veteran, called the act of sportsmanship "unbelievable."

For Western Oregon coach Pam Knox, the gesture resolved the dilemma Tucholsky's injury presented.

"She was going to kill me if we sub and take (the home run) away. But at the same time I was concerned for her. I didn't know what to do," Knox said.

Tucholsky's injury is a possible torn ligament that will sideline her for the rest of the season, and she plans to graduate in the spring with a degree in business. Her home run sent Western Oregon to a 4-2 victory, ending Central Washington's chances of winning the conference and advancing to the playoffs.

"In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much," Holtman said. "It was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she deserved a home run."