

# DOUBLE BARRELED

Mexicano, Diller reflect on 4 years of record-breaking offensive prowess

BY RICH MAYOR  
STAFF WRITER

You're Linda Kalafatis, Ohio State head softball coach. It's the top of the third inning of a March 30 doubleheader at Buckeye Field in Columbus, Ohio, and your team leads Illinois 1-0 in the first game. You watch as Angelena Mexicano, the Illini's dangerous No. 2 hitter, feared for her ability to manufacture

runs with one sweet swing of the bat, as she steps to the plate. The first pitch from your hurler, junior Kim Reeder, is fouled off. The next two are balls. Now, with one out and the count in favor of Mexicano, you have a decision to make.

You look over to the on-deck circle, where Shanna Diller awaits. Diller is capable of just as much damage as Mexicano, even more so if Mexicano reaches base. Still, you see the current hitter and count as a greater threat, and perhaps you and Reeder would like to take your chances with a fresh count and Diller. Reeder throws two more balls, and Mexicano walks on five pitches. Diller steps to the plate.

The right-handed Reeder throws her first pitch to the lefty Diller, and a strike is called. You

watch as a ball, called strike, two foul balls and two more balls follow. It's now a 3-2 count, and pitcher and batter dig in for the payoff. The pitch is delivered, and you cringe as Diller makes contact — exit stage left. The ball flies over the fence in left-center field, and just like that, the Illini lead your Buckeyes 2-1. What went wrong?

The reality is that nobody could blame Coach Kalafatis for pitching around the senior shortstop Mexicano, who leads the nation in home runs with 24 and is tops in the Big Ten with 62 RBIs.

This is a conundrum every Illini opponent faces each time through lineup. It's a pick-your-poison situation: Mexicano or Diller. Illinois head coach Terri Sullivan imagined what it'd be like in the opposing dugout, being forced to face these two.

"I think I'd need a couple Tylenol," she said with a laugh. "I know it's very difficult for the teams that we face. The teams really have to locate their pitches and not make many mistakes to either one of them. You really just have to go at them, which allows them to try to win the pitcher-hitter battle."

The battle began four years ago in the spring of 2004, when Mexicano and Diller began their Illinois softball careers. The duo finds its roots in two different parts of the country — Mexicano from San Jose, Calif., and Diller from Bloomington, Ill.



PORTRAIT BY DONALD EGGERT THE DAILY ILLINI

Upon arriving in Champaign-Urbana, the distance between the two went from 2,134 miles to less than one. With the exception of one Diller sick day this season, the two have started in each of the 218 games since day one of freshman year. Their maturity and growth over this stretch

didn't go unnoticed.

"(Diller, Mexicano and (senior center fielder Sarah Bryers) are the first tri-captains we've had in the program's history because of their unselfishness and how hard they work," Sullivan said.

Diller reflects on how she's

progressed since her first year as an Illini: "My confidence level has definitely grown since then. You know, freshman year can be extremely overwhelming at times and you want to come in and make an impact, but you don't know necessarily what your role is on the team. I

think this year especially, we've taken the senior leadership to heart. We want to lead this team through our performance and the way we communicate."

This year, the Illini (30-29, 8-10 Big Ten) have battled through

See **RECORD SETTERS**, Page 3B

## Pass the baton: Coach Winckler leaves legacy

Women's track coach to retire

BY ANTHONY ZILIS  
STAFF WRITER

Gary Winckler knew when he took the job as head women's track and field coach at University of Illinois 22 years ago that it would be difficult to get the best athletes to come to the cooler Midwest as opposed to Florida, California or Texas, where training year-round is more comfortable.

He realized recruiting would be more of a challenge than it was in his previous job as head coach of Florida State, where he won two national championships.

If he was going to succeed at Illinois, Winckler knew he would need to look beyond pure times and athletic aptitude.

"You look for athletic ability, but I also look for some of those intangibles, like desire to succeed," Winckler said. "If the individual has the desire to succeed ... you can succeed here and you can succeed in life. That's a lot of what I look for."

It has been Winckler's ability to find athletes who he can develop and mold into outstanding performers that has enabled him to coach more than 300 All-Americans and helped his teams win 11 Big Ten Championships. With this knack for finding hidden talent, he discovered Tonja Buford-Bailey.

"(Tonja) was talented in high school but wasn't by far one of the top kids in the country," Winckler said. "But she did have a desire to really succeed and was very

competitive, and I think in a lot of people's eyes she was a big surprise with what she accomplished."

A 10-time All-American and four-time Big Ten Athlete of the Year, Buford-Bailey will be Winckler's replacement when he retires at the end of this season. She remains one of the greatest and most celebrated athletes in Illini history.

After she finished college, Winckler coached her to three Olympics in the 400-meter hurdles, winning a bronze medal in Atlanta in 1996. He calls this one of his proudest moments as a coach.

"We worked a lot of years together before she was able to achieve that," Winckler said. "I just think you just reflect back on all the hard work, all the ups and downs. It's that journey that makes it so satisfying, really."

Winckler's journey started long before this, when he decided early on he wanted to be a coach.

"Even in high school, my intention was to become a high school math teacher and coach," Winckler said. "I just always enjoyed coaching, and coaches have been real mentors to me in my life and made a big difference in my life, so it's just a role that I wanted to fulfill myself."

Track was always a special sport to Winckler, one that deals with individual accountability and desire, skills he said not only



TOM ROOT THE DAILY ILLINI

Head coach of the Illinois women's track and field team Gary Winckler looks on during the Illinois Twilight meet Wednesday. Winckler, who has been head coach for 22 years, will retire at the end of the season.

matter in sports but in life.

"There's no one else to pass the ball to in track and field, there's no helmet to hide behind, there's no uniform to hide behind. I mean, you are there in your lane and you're exposing yourself to your competition and to everybody watching that competition. I think it's the ultimate test of character," he said. "That to me has made the sport really special."

His first coaching job came when he volunteered as an assistant coach at his alma mater, Seattle Pacific University, one year after graduating. He then became a volunteer assistant at Oregon State University, where he attended graduate school.

Winckler landed his first full-time job as an assistant at Florida State in 1980, where he spent one year as an assistant before becoming head coach. After winning two NCAA National Championships at Florida State, Winckler found a better opportunity to coach at the University of Illinois.

"University of Illinois was a better academic institution, in the sense you could recruit good students here. There were a lot more majors offered, just a much more diverse institution," Winckler said. "The Big Ten is a great conference, so it just seemed like a good fit for me and my philosophy."

The rest is history, as Winckler has become known around the country as one of the most knowledgeable coaches in the NCAA. Along with winning 11 Big Ten titles, he twice coached the Illini to fourth-place finishes at the National Championships. He credits his success to great organizational skills, and stresses to his athletes how essential those skills are on the track and in life.

"I think they're one in the same," he said about life on and off the track. "I think if you have a good plan in your athletic training, in your competition plan and your racing plan, then I think those kinds of habits are going

to reap the same kinds of benefits in your personal life and in your business life."

The 10-time Big Ten Coach of the Year has always preached the importance of academics to his athletes.

"It's the primary reason we're here, we always have to keep that in mind," he said. "As much as sport has become important in our society, 99 percent of the athletes that go through the Illinois program are not going to continue on to a professional career, so they need to prepare for something beyond."

While he said it has been particularly satisfying to see his athletes succeed in life after college, his most rewarding moments as a coach have come when one of his athletes succeeds on the national and international stages.

"I think when I look back, probably the most satisfying are those individuals that have won National Championships and obviously

See **WINCKLER**, Page 3B

## Men add regional qualifiers at home

Runners win first, second in 400, 200

BY KEVIN OLSEN  
STAFF WRITER

It was a dominating afternoon for the Illinois men's track and field team Wednesday at the Illinois Twilight meet.

In front of a home crowd, the Illini scored three NCAA regional qualifiers in impressive fashion, despite weaker competition.

Junior All-American Gakolgelwang Masheto competed as an individual for the first time in the outdoor season and did not disappoint.

Masheto took first in his signature event, the 400 meters, with a qualifying time of 46.61 seconds and finished second in the 200 meters behind teammate Dominique Worsley.

"For a meet that wasn't supposed to be that big, these guys stepped up and made it big for themselves," head coach Wayne Angel said. "Things are starting to come together now and (we are) so much more comfortable as we get closer to the Big Ten Championships."

Right behind Masheto in the 400 was sophomore Brandon Gray, who finally broke through for a regional qualifying time, finishing in 46.93 seconds.

Along with Yawusa Kinda, the Illini now have three regional qualifiers in the 400 meters to go along with a qualifying time in the 4x400 relay, which is still the fastest time in the Big Ten this season.

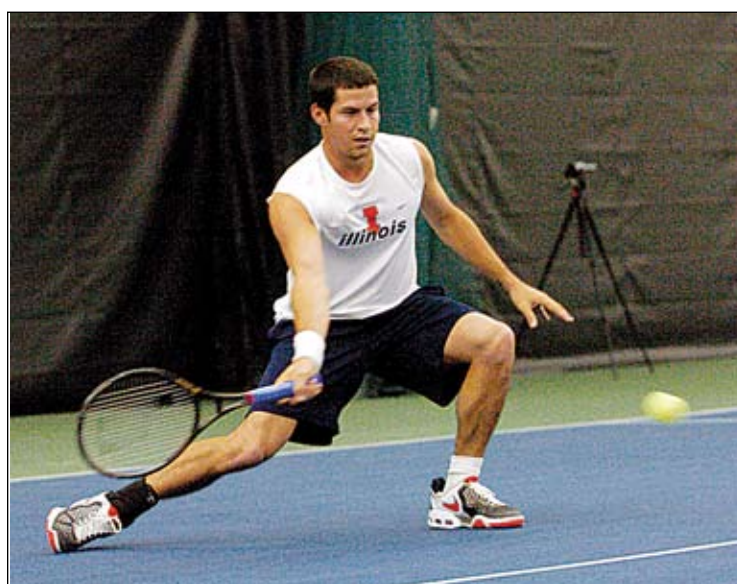
Also putting in a record performance was sophomore Greg Shroka in the high jump, who took first with a jump of 7 feet, 1/4 inch.

He became just the fourth jumper Illini in program history to jump more than seven feet and is second all-time in the event.

The mark was also good enough to tie him for first in the Big Ten this season.

"I'm pleased with Masheto, Gray and Shroka," Angel said. "There's just a lot of performances that I didn't expect

See **TRACK**, Page 3B



JEREMY BERG THE DAILY ILLINI

Illinois' Marc Spicijaric returns the ball at a match against Indiana on April 13.

## Men's tennis extends streak with 13th straight NCAA bid

Illini get Xavier in first round, savor home-court edge

BY ALEX INIGUEZ  
STAFF WRITER

For the 13th straight season, No. 15 Illinois (18-8) is preparing for the NCAA tournament. After a season of triumphs and tribulations, the Illini are priming themselves for a strong tournament run beginning May 9, when

the Orange and Blue host Xavier (16-8). The undefeated No. 46 Drake Bulldogs (24-0) and No. 18 LSU (14-8) round out their region.

"It's very important for a lot of reasons," head coach Brad Dancer said about hosting the regional. "It allows the players to focus on exams and get our preparation in order without having to worry about traveling. We won't have any distractions, and we get to play at the friendly confines of Atkins. We love playing here. The fans and local support are

huge. We're very pleased to be in this position."

Xavier is making its first NCAA tournament appearance in school history, and the Atlantic 10 champions are coming in hot. The Musketeers had an eight-match win streak during the season and carry a five-match streak into Urbana.

"Right now, we don't know a whole lot about Xavier," Dancer said. "LSU is very good. I don't think we saw their best

See **TENNIS**, Page 3B