

# Ace of diamonds

Story by **TERRY JORDAN**  
Photo by **ROB HILL**

**Canadian right-hander Karen Snelgrove achieves a low ERA on the mound and a high GPA in the classroom.**

**K**aren Snelgrove traveled 850 miles in August 1988 to attend MU and pitch for the softball team. On May 6, 1989, Coach Jay Miller realized the star hurler he always dreamed about had finally arrived.

That was the day when Snelgrove, a native of Kitchener, Ontario, pitched three shutouts — against Kansas, Iowa State and Nebraska in the Big Eight Tournament. “When you have a freshman come in and pitch three shutouts in one afternoon against Big Eight teams . . . that’s when I thought, ‘Hey, we’ve got something here,’” Miller says.

Snelgrove’s day in the sun was no fluke. She went on to post a 19-9 record and a 0.85 earned-run average for the season, best on the team. As a sophomore, she won both ends of a doubleheader against powerful

Florida State to give MU its first Top 20 ranking in seven years.

All of that paled in comparison to last year, however. The all-American won 18 games in a row in 1991, leading the Tigers to the College World Series and a fifth-place national finish. She became the only Big Eight pitcher in history to throw back-to-back perfect games, accomplishing the feat against St. Louis University and the University of Missouri-Kansas City in April. By the end of the season, Snelgrove held four school records and the lowest ERA in the nation — a minuscule 0.18. That means she gives up one run about every seven games.

**W**hile the University is delighted she is here, her home country still stakes a claim. The right-hander led the Canadian team to a silver medal at the Pan American games in Cuba last summer, throwing a one-hitter against the U.S. team — which went on to win the gold medal — and picking up a win against Puerto Rico.

Snelgrove is a big winner in the classroom as well. A business administration major with a 3.4 grade point average, she was the only Miz-zou athlete to attain first team Academic all-America status last year. “Karen is the ultimate student-athlete,” Miller says.

Nevertheless, Snelgrove seems unimpressed by her success. “I just play softball and go to class,” she says with a shrug. “I don’t see it as a big deal.” That sense of humility goes back years, her parents say. “Karen always has been the last person impressed by her accomplishments,” says her father, Bob, a financial planner in Kitchener. “She doesn’t understand why people make such a fuss over her.”

Perhaps it’s because she works hard for her grades, suggests her mother, Carol, a hospital receptionist. “School never has come naturally to Karen,” she says. “Her advantage is that she has developed good study

habits.” That fact is reiterated by Rechelle Johnson, MU’s catcher. “We’ll be on the road sometimes and some of us will be goofing off,” says Johnson, a senior from Dearborn, Mo. “Not Karen. She’s in her room, studying.”

The reason for such dedication is simple. “I hate to see D’s and F’s on my papers,” Snelgrove says. She admits a down side to her conscientious nature, however. “It doesn’t leave me a lot of time for outside interests. I like to go to MU football and basketball games, and I could probably tell you the plots of two or three soap operas,” she chuckles. “But some people probably would say I lead a boring life.”

Life is hardly boring for the batters who face Snelgrove on the mound. Johnson, who has caught Snelgrove for three years, says the Tiger ace has about six top-notch pitches: a rise, a drop and change-up, all at various speeds. “She doesn’t blow batters away with her fast ball,” Johnson says. “She confuses them, mostly with her rise ball.”

Coach Miller explains part of the secret: “Most pitchers throw rise balls that start out around the waist and end up around the shoulders,” he says. “Karen throws a ball that starts at about the ankles and rises to the knees. Batters don’t expect it, and it’s difficult to hit.”

He doesn’t want his star to depend on one pitch, though. “One day last season, almost as an experiment, we told Karen she couldn’t throw any rise balls — only drops and change-ups,” Miller says. “She pitched a one-hitter.”

**M**iller knew he had a solid prospect the first time he saw Snelgrove. She was a high-school junior, pitching for Canada at a world tournament in Oklahoma City. “Every good softball team needs one strong pitcher, and I thought Karen could be that person for us,” he says. “She was impressive.” Snelgrove, in turn, was impressed by her

recruiting visit to Mizzou. "I liked everything here — the academic programs, the look of the Campus, and most of all, the idea of playing softball for an NCAA Division I school," she says. "It's worked out great."

Snelgrove's success may have ushered in a new era in Mizzou softball. In 1990 the Tigers finished 20th in the country, and Miller was selected Big Eight Coach of the Year. Last season, the team's fifth-place national finish was the highest ever for an MU softball team. A home game on a warm, sunny day will draw up to 500 people; five years ago, it would have drawn about 100.

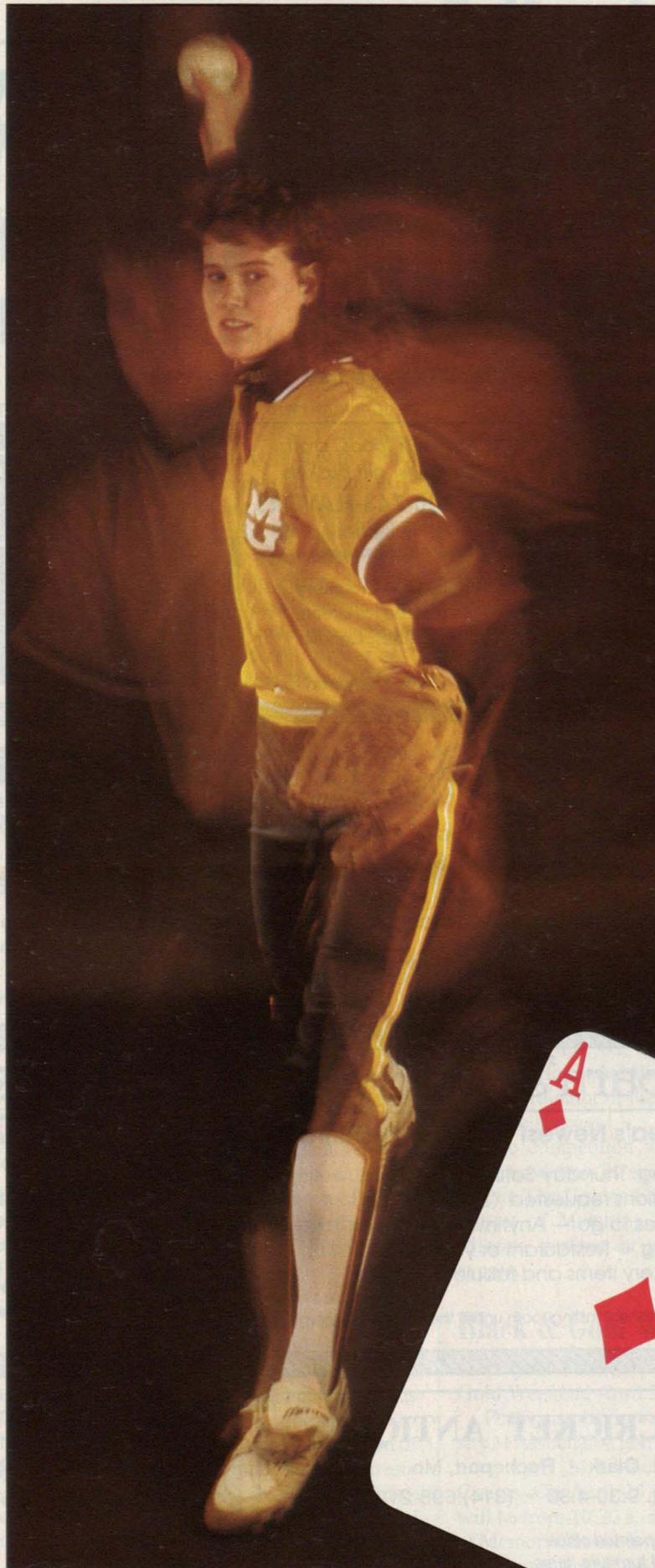
**A**nother sign points to the program's growth: A booster club. For \$25 annual dues, members of the Tiger Softball Fan Club receive a media guide, newsletters and opportunities to meet the players. "Our team budget is the lowest in the Big Eight," Miller explains. "The extra money helps to pay for things like travel, meals and equipment."

All of that may be needed as the team prepares for what could be its best season ever. This spring's lineup includes six seniors, including Snelgrove, and all but two starters from last year. "On paper, we look terrific," Miller says.

Snelgrove's future looks bright as well. After graduating from MU in December, she would like to land a marketing job with an athletic goods company in Canada. She notes that women's softball will be an Olympic sport for the first time in 1996, and she hopes to pitch for Canada. "That would be a dream come true," she says.

Some dreams are coming true now for Miller and Tiger softball fans. "With Karen on the mound, all we need is one run," Johnson says with a laugh. "That's a commanding lead." Adds Miller: "I wouldn't trade her for anyone. I think she's the best pitcher in the country."

He pauses. "No. Make that two countries." 



Softball pitcher Karen Snelgrove, whose MU career will wind up this spring, tossed 18 shutouts last year and has thrown four perfect games for Mizzou. 'I wish she was a freshman and had three years left instead of one,' says Coach Jay Miller.

