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Around the Columns

Rhea life

Rhea Taylor — All-American softball center fielder for the [2011 Big 12 champion Tigers](#) — loves making her teammates crack up. Her smile is luminous, her wit is sharp, and her laughter is contagious. In fact, she brings levity to the dugout even during intense Tiger rallies.



But don't let the sunny side fool you — she's a cold-hearted thief.

Senior center fielder Rhea Taylor is Mizzou's all-time leader in batting average, hits, runs and stolen bases. Photo courtesy of Mizzou Athletics

“When I'm at first about to steal second, I'm looking at the catcher thinking, I wish you would try to throw me out,” says Taylor, her face affecting a mock scowl. “I wish you would.”

Perhaps that's because she so rarely confronts a worthy challenger. The supersonic senior from Buford, Ga., is still adding to her Big 12 career stolen base record of 175, and as the No. 2 career hitter in Big 12 history (.404 average), Taylor rounds the bases often.

She also holds Missouri all-time records for hits (301) and runs (224), and her name is sprinkled throughout every other batting category in the Tiger record book. Taylor is arguably the best offensive player in Mizzou softball's 37-year history. But as a senior at Peachtree Ridge High School in 2006, she was nearly passed over.

No big-time program considered Taylor until Coach Ehren Earleywine — who left Georgia Tech to coach the Tigers that year — invited her to Columbia. He might have missed her, too, had one of his recruits not told him about the “really fast” right-hander at third base on her travel-ball team.

“We turned her into a center fielder because of her speed and turned her around to the left side to make her a slapper and bunter,” says Earleywine, who hopes to lead the No. 6-ranked Tigers (46-7 at press time) to a third consecutive Women’s College World Series in Oklahoma City June 2–8. “It’s been an amazing transformation. Those are the times when you feel like you know what you’re doing.”

Taylor’s father, Bobby, coached young Rhea’s first softball team, fittingly called “The Sweethearts.” The nickname still fits, in a sense. You just have to look past the icy glare and ruthless approach at the plate.

“When I leave here, I want people to say, ‘I really liked Rhea. She was a great person, and she was funny,’” Taylor says. “If they remember softball, then they do. But I want them to say, ‘She was my friend.’”

They’ll remember softball, too.

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