

From playing to “instructing” the love of the game never dwindles

By Dustin Riese

Reporter

When people decide to own a business a lot of steps need to be taken. What will the business be called? Who will run the finances? Who will be the employees? These are all things that need to be answered. For Maria Van Abel and Laura Van Abel Beyer of Kaukauna, owning a business has taken a new meaning as they have incorporated their passion for a sport with it.

The Van Abel sisters are co-owners of 360U Softball based in Kaukauna. The sisters, and Kaukauna High School graduates, have always taken a love to the game of softball from watching their dad play when they were young, to their playing years in high school and college. Now, the two of them are sharing their love and passion for the game of softball to kids of all ages.

With such a strong passion for the game of softball, it comes as no surprise that this close duo came together to start a business focused around a sport they played since they were kids. What made them decide to not only start this business, but to go in this business together? Maria felt the main reason for it goes back to the need to educate young players with proper instructions.

“We decided to start 360U because we knew there was a need for something like this in our area,” Maria said. “There are so many young softball athletes looking for instruction to bring their games to the next level. However, they do not have many resources to do that. Having both played in college and coached at all levels, we knew we had the knowledge to provide quality instruction. Most importantly, we knew we could relate to these athletes because we have gone through the things they will eventually go through.”

With the ever-changing attitude of coaches now a days, players become easily frustrated and may tend to crack under pressure. The name 360U has a ring to it, but where exactly does it fit in terms of softball? Maybe it has to do with coming full circle from learning the game, to playing it, and eventually coaching it. The Van Abel’s brainstormed many names over the process, but the name 360U continued to come around.

“We threw around some different ideas for the name, but always came back to 360U,” Van Abel said. “The idea is, when you come train with us at 360U we spend as much time developing these kids into young women who stand out in the classroom, at home, in the community as well as on the diamond. After our time as collegiate student-athletes, we saw such a strong correlation between the most well-rounded student-athletes and the ones who performed the best on the field. They go hand in hand, it's all about balance.”

That is a great message to deliver young kids, especially when they will be the future leaders of their community. 360U gives kids from ages 8-18 a chance to learn the game of softball from some highly respected people and improve their game at the same time. One of the many benefits 360U offers was their summer camp this past summer, along with other camps throughout the summer. Their most recent was the 360U Badger State Softball Camp that was in the works for some time.

It gave the kids attending the camp not only a chance to work with current college athletes, but to work with college coaches such as Scott Beyer of UW-Oshkosh and Yvette Healy of UW-Madison.

“When you have two coaches of that caliber wanting to get involved at this level, that's pretty special,” Maria said. “It says a lot about the types of programs they run at Oshkosh and Wisconsin.”

The camp was a one-day camp that was broken down into two sessions. Session one was in the morning and lasted a few hours with all the high school age athletes. The second session was an afternoon session that was comprised of the grade school and middle school age kids. In total, this year's camp brought in over 100 softball athletes from 35 different cities. With such a strong showing, would 360U ever consider running a camp like this again next summer?

“We will likely only do this once per summer,” Van Abel said. “We'll see how it goes,” she said. “Between their fall and spring college ball seasons, and the recruiting schedule they have all summer, we'd be thrilled if we could do something like this annually.”

With this camp being a first time thing this season, 360U offers many other services to their athletes throughout the season. They offer a variety of instructions such as year-round weekly small group hitting sessions, defensive camps, private lessons, and entire team camps. Once the younger athletes reach their high school years and the recruiting process begins, 360U also offers a recruiting package where they put together a recruiting skills video for them to go along with a player profile that they can send out to schools. Maria is very excited with who they have on their staff as she feels they all fall into what the business believes in.

“We're really excited about the women we have on board our staff, consisting of former DI-DIII softball athletes, as their belief system strongly aligns with ours at 360U,” Van Abel said. “We're a little unique in how much time we spend on the mental side of softball, it's everything. We are a high-energy staff that heavily relies on positive reinforcement in our instruction. These kids get told so much of what they do wrong, which can be totally demoralizing at that age. They face so much more pressure in this game than we remember existing when we played. We pinpoint areas of improvement and work hard to empower our athletes with the correct fundamentals, then we build them back up.”

With the business still being relatively new there is no telling what the future holds for 360U Softball. As more and more young athletes experience this unique level of training, the business only has one place to go and that is up. Even though Van Abel and her staff still are taking things on a day-by-day basis, they would love to potentially expand state wide or even bigger in the future.

“We've been taking things one day at a time and are keeping up with what we think is most important for our athletes and their families,” she said. “We moved into our facility in June, which was a bit quicker than we expected, but knew it was important to offer year-round training. We want to change the way the game is played, coached, parented and viewed. Youth sports are a tough environment right now, we see a lot of transactional coaching and programs weeding kids out at such an early age. So many kids think they're not good enough when they're 8 or 10 or 12 because they get cut or don't play, or make the "B" team. That's just not right and we want to change it. We're working on some really exciting projects right now that deal with educating people on the mental and emotional side of softball that these girls experience. That's the direction we're continuing to be pulled, to be a mentor and a voice for these young female athletes, so we'll see what happens.”