

PROSE AND KOHN ■ RYAN KOHN

# With ace out, Mustangs rely on backup pitcher

Walking off the field with bags of ice taped to her right arm and her right leg May 14, Lakewood Ranch High junior softball player Ella Coiner looked more like a fighter than a pitcher. The look was appropriate because Coiner has been battling for her team to advance to the Florida High School Athletic Association state semifinals. On May 14, Coiner was the winning pitcher in the Mustangs' 7-2 regional final home win against West Orange High.

Lakewood Ranch (28-2) now heads back to the state semifinals, but the journey has been anything but typical, especially for a team ranked No. 4 by USA Today and No. 3 by MaxPreps. It has been a fight.

Throughout the regular season, Coiner was not the team's top pitcher. That honor belonged to sophomore Olivia Laney, a transfer from the Community School of Naples who went 17-1 with a 0.63 ERA. Coiner's numbers were more human. In 36 innings, she held a 3.50 ERA.

Heading into the regional quarterfinals, there was no question, from anyone, which pitcher would be the workhorse. At least until the day before the Mustangs' regional quarterfinal

against Steinbrenner High, when Laney started feeling arm soreness and was determined to be unable to pitch.

Without his ace, Mustangs Coach T.J. Goelz turned to Coiner. Handed a short amount of time to prepare, Coiner struggled at times against Steinbrenner but ultimately did enough (with support from the team's explosive offense) to earn a 15-8 win. With Laney still out, the team asked Coiner to pitch the regional semifinals and final, too. She improved, limiting Newsome High in a 15-4 win May 11 before the 7-2 West Orange win May 14. Against West Orange, Coiner was in three bases-loaded jams but was able to wiggle out of them with minimal damage each time.

"My teammates have my back," Coiner said. "They calm me down, and that helps me a lot. I've been working hard, working on my spin, working on everything. I feel much more comfortable each game."

Coiner's playoff performances would be a story even devoid of additional context, but there's another thing you should know about Coiner that makes it more remarkable. She's not really a pitcher. She tried it when she was playing 12U travel ball, didn't

like it and gave it up, focusing on the rest of her game instead.

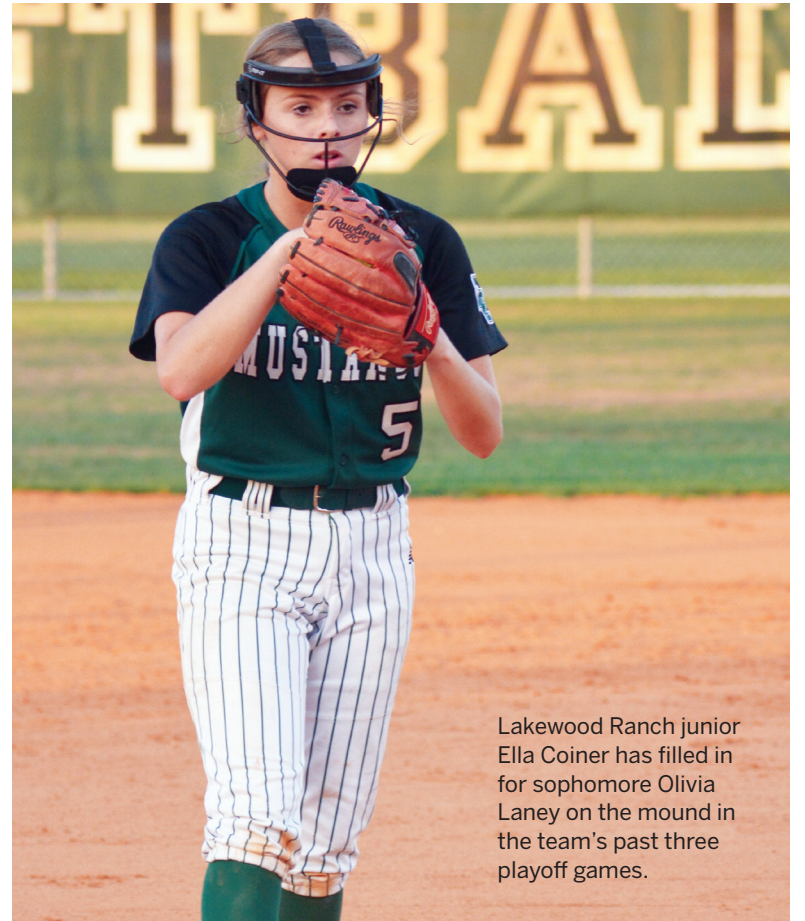
Coiner became a great hitter. She's batting .466 this season with seven home runs and a team-leading 36 RBIs. She's an important cog in the team's offense, which is averaging 10.5 runs per game. She never thought she would toe the rubber again until she received a text from Goelz in September.

"I was looking at our team, and I realized we might be thin on the mound," Goelz said. "I told Ella: 'You're a great athlete, and you've pitched in the past. Go find a catcher once a week, and start pitching again because we're going to need you.'"

Coiner said yes and immediately began searching YouTube for a pitch she could learn quickly and effectively. She settled on a screwball, which Coiner said has the added benefit of turning into a rise ball if she errs when releasing it, giving every pitch some sort of movement. At the beginning of the season, Coiner said, she was throwing it around 58 mph, though it is likely around 60 mph now.

"I'm starting to like pitching again," Coiner said.

It's understandable that, as Coiner said, she was feeling "a lot of butterflies" before her



Lakewood Ranch junior Ella Coiner has filled in for sophomore Olivia Laney on the mound in the team's past three playoff games.

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first postseason start. Lakewood Ranch is looking to win its first state title, and its hopes hang on a pitcher in her first season at the position. The deeper you go in the playoffs, the more important pitching gets. All the elite offenses the Mustangs have had over the years have ultimately been felled by elite pitching.

For a lot of teams, this scenario would spell disaster. The Mustangs are embracing it. Goelz said Coiner will likely get the start in the team's state semifinal game against Miami Palmetto High (24-4) at 1:45 p.m. May

21 in Clermont, even if Laney is healthy. Coiner has gotten the team this far, Goelz said, so she's earned the right to start again. Of course, he's also hoping Laney will be available in case anything goes wrong.



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