

Softball

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pared to the one-hitter she threw earlier in the season.

"We're a pretty good hitting ball club," head coach Rick Gamez said. "And when we are shut out like that, it's very frustrating."

Oregon started out on the right foot as Gustafson opened up the

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game with a single to left field, but was quickly called out at first for leaving first base too soon.

The Ducks went right after it the very next inning with Lindsey Welch ripping a one-out single up the middle to center field. Triawn Custer then struck out, but Welch swiped second base, giving Oregon a chance at an early lead. But Blades again worked her magic

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and got Andrea Vidlund to go down swinging.

Gustafson again reached base in the third on a two-out single to center, but was stranded when Alyssa Laux grounded out.

"I think Oregon definitely came out swinging," said Blades, whose 10 strikeouts further improves her NCAA single-season strikeout (580) and NCAA career strikeout (1690) records. "Since we had played them earlier in the year they knew a little about what I was throwing. They weren't watching many pitches."

Neither were the Golden Eagles. Before the game, Gamez described his opponent as being a "feisty group" who scraps for runs. They proved him right in

&& [Blades] did a great job of mixing it up and keeping us off balance.

Rick Gamez coach

the bottom of the third.

Southern Mississippi started off the inning with Kristie Martin reaching first off of a throwing error by Duck third baseman Holly Ray. Amy Berman followed that up with a fielder's choice to put two runners on. Oregon ace Connie McMurren (15-18) recorded an out on the next batter, but then gave up an infield bunt to Chrystal Stevens to load the bases.

Designated hitter Erin Johnson then stepped to the plate and delivered with a hard shot RBI single up the middle, to put Golden Eagles up 2-0.

That would be all the runs that Blades would need.

But just to be sure, SMU catcher Kenya Peters extended the lead to three when she led off the fourth inning with a bomb over the leftfield porch that she wasn't even sure had cleared the fences.

"I didn't even know it was gone until I got half-way around second [and the umpire signaled a home run]," said Peters, who also singled in the second. "I was focusing on getting my hands out and staying inside the ball. I've

been working on that in practice.

The Ducks didn't give up, however, as they tried to make a game of it in the fifth and sixth innings.

Vidlund led off the fifth with a walk, and moved to second on a Ray sacrifice bunt, and to third on a wild pitch. But she was left stranded there after Blades got Christi Shelton to foul out to the catcher and Gustafson to strike out swinging.

Oregon's final rally came in the sixth when Laux opened up the inning with a single to center, and took second on a wild pitch by Blades. After Missy Coe went down on strikes, Jill Robinson walked to give the Ducks two runners on with only one out.

But again, Oregon couldn't produce when it had to. Welch fouled out to third, and Custer became the eighth Duck on the afternoon to fall victim to the arm of Blades.

"I think the key to us losing today was the lack of execution with runners in scoring position," said Gamez, who has led the Ducks to its third-straight postseason appearance. "One thing we talked about prior to the weekend was when we had opportunities to score we needed the focus and discipline at the plate.

We didn't do that."

The mood was a little better on the winning side, as SMU coach Lu Harris was full of praise for both teams.

"I thought it was an excellent game today," SMU coach Lu Harris said. "This was a top Division I[-A] game. It's what regional's all about. Oregon is a very good hitting team, and they came out swinging early and all game long."

But Oregon's swings didn't connect often enough with Blades' pitches, and Gamez realizes that when Blades has it going, she is extremely tough to beat.

"I have to give credit to Courtney Blades," Gamez said. "She did a great job of mixing it up and keeping us off balance."

Oregon now must forget about Blades and rebound quickly if it wants to keep alive any hope of reaching the coveted College World Series in Oklahoma City.



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