

Stunned FSU rallies for title

By GERALD ENSLEY
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It may have stunned the crowd for a few moments, but in the end the finals of the AIAW Region III softball tournament proved to be a case of Muhammad Ali against Henry Cooper.

Like the English boxer who gained reknown for being the first boxer to knock down the three-time heavy-weight champion, Ali, underdog South Florida put Florida State on the canvas Saturday afternoon before about 250 fans at Messer Field.

But, just like Ali did against Cooper, the Lady Seminoles eventually recovered their poise, came out swinging and walked away a winner by defeating South Florida 5-2 in the championship game, after losing a first championship game 2-1.

It was a double-elimination tourney, meaning South Florida, which entered the first game with FSU unbeaten in the tourney, had to be beaten again to be ousted from the field.

The victory sends FSU, 52-10 and the defending national champion, into the AIAW national tournament May 13-15 in Graham, N.C. South Florida, as regional runnerup, also gains a berth. Third-place Florida, which eliminated Georgia Southern with a 6-5 victory before losing 8-3 to South Florida in the finals of the losers' bracket, is expected to gain one of the five at-large berths that will be awarded Monday.

The Lady Brahman, who lost to FSU 9-1 in the day's first game,

threw their knockdown punch in the first game of the finals — with a large assist from FSU and an umpire.

It came in the top of the seventh inning, with two outs and a runner on first, and South Florida behind 1-0. South Florida's Nancy Mason hit a soft bouncer back to FSU pitcher Susan Painter, who fielded the ball cleanly, and turned to make the final out of the game. But Painter's throw to first base took off like a jump shot from the three-point line. First baseman Sandie Williams managed to snare the ball with a good leap and come down on the bag before, it appeared, Mason touched it.

Umpire Brenda Welch disagreed, ruling the runner safe, putting South Florida runners on first and third. Pinch-hitter Toni Smith then followed with a single to tie the game 1-1.

"I took too much time, then just released it wrong," said Painter. "It was stupid of me."

"I thought the runner was out but I'm biased. She and the first baseman were both wearing white cleats and the umpire was just looking at their feet to make the call," said FSU coach JoAnne Graf. "She seemed real sure of the call."

After FSU was retired without a run in its half of the inning, South Florida took advantage of the second life to push across the winning run on a sacrifice fly by Michelle Lamont in the first extra inning and set up another championship game.

"We deserved a break or two," said South Florida coach Hildred Deese between games, mindful that her team had beaten FSU for only the second time in seven meetings. "But we're not hitting very well. We're going to have to start swinging aggressively in this next game."

Though South Florida had eight hits in the first game, Deese knows her business. The Lady Brahman managed on seven hits, to FSU's 10, in the second game. While USF went on top 2-0 after 2½ innings in that game, FSU made its hits count, tied the game in its half of the third, added single runs in the next three innings, and allowed USF three hits the rest of the way to capture the victory.

"They hit better than we did," said Deese afterward. "Still, I'm very proud of this team. This has got to be a boost to our ego, going into the national tournament knowing we can take one from them."

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