

A Dawg Dream

by
Dave Walley

To Chelsea Wilkinson, Alex Hugo
and Kaylee Puailoa

Some dreams come true. Some dreams never had a chance.

And some dreams get almost close enough to touch, and then slip away.

The latter was what I was seemingly looking at in the late afternoon/early evening of Friday, May 27, 2016.

For me, it was a devoted fan's dream, an adopted dream in a sense. It was first and foremost the dream of the University of Georgia softball team.

The Bulldogs' 2016 season had been a roller coaster ride. At times they had played extremely well. They had one of the best offenses in the country, and their #1 pitcher, Chelsea Wilkinson, could shut down any team when she was on. However, she sometimes struggled either early or late in games, or occasionally even both. In fact, with or without Chelsea pitching, this team sometimes had trouble holding onto the lead late in a game. The overall result for both Chelsea and the team was a lot of excellent wins, and some very tough losses.

The 'Dawgs' ended the regular season with a 40-16 record. They were then eliminated in the first round of the Southeastern Conference Tournament by Ole Miss, a good team but clearly inferior to Georgia, at least on paper. With that lackluster tourney performance and a 40-17 record, most of the softball pundits didn't think the Bulldogs would get one of the top 16 seeds for the NCAA Tournament. This would have been a major setback: each of the seeded teams gets to host a four team, double-elimination Regional Tournament, the winner of which advances to the Super Regional round. Obviously, having home field advantage dramatically improves a team's chances to advance.

Thus many eyebrows were raised when Georgia was named the number 16 seed for the tournament. The brows were raised again when the Dawgs lost a game to Oklahoma State on the last day of the Regional. However, they came back to win the second and final game of that day, and qualified for the Super Regional.

That was the good news. The bad news was that since they were the #16 seed, their opponent in the best-of-three Super Regional would be the #1 seeded, #1 ranked and two-time

defending national champion University of Florida Gators. As if the odds weren't already bad enough, the games would all be played at the Gators' home field in Gainesville, Florida.

There was actually reason for a Georgia fan like me to be very cautiously hopeful about this series. Florida had the best pitching staff in the country, and one of the very best defenses, but their offensive production had been inconsistent all year. They had often struggled to come up with timely hits, leaving runners on base. They were still very successful because with the pitching and defense they had, they usually didn't need a lot of runs to win. Another factor was that Georgia and Florida had not played in the regular season in 2016, meaning that Florida's hitters had not faced Chelsea Wilkinson all year.

So, if Chelsea was on she had a good chance of keeping Florida's run totals very low; and the Georgia offense was good enough to have a decent chance of putting a few runs on the board even against Florida's excellent pitching. Everything would have to come together just right, including Georgia's infield defense, which had struggled sometimes during the regular season; but if it all did - and that was a big 'if,' of course - Florida could be beatable in this series.

That's where the dream came in, because winning the Super Regional series would give all of the current Bulldogs their first chance to play in the Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City, which was what every serious softball player dreamed of. It was an especially important dream for the six seniors on the Georgia squad, since this year was their last chance to get there.

I had adopted the dream of seeing the Dawgs play in Oklahoma City three years earlier, when I had become a fan of the team during the 2013 NCAA tournament. I had been a fan of women's softball at the international level since the sport made its Olympic debut in 1996, and had been following the National Pro Fastpitch league since 2009. Since 2011 I had been catching as much of the college tournament at the end of the season as I could, but not following the regular season at all. As I watched the tournament in 2013, however, I decided I should take the final step as a softball fan and become a full-time follower of the college game as well. I actually made this decision because two of the teams that were playing had captured my attention in a major way. One of them was the University of Tennessee Lady Vols, which that year featured three first-team All-Americans in the infield (Madison Shipman, Raven Chavanne and Lauren Gibson); the pitching Renfroe sisters, Ivy and Ellen; and the husband and wife coaching team of Ralph and Karen Weekly. The team was interesting on multiple levels, enough so that I decided I wanted to become a fan.

The other team I became a fan of was, of course, Georgia. In that case it was for a single primary reason: freshman pitcher Chelsea Wilkinson. I really liked her pitching style, and there was something so charismatic and likeable about her as a person that between those two factors I just couldn't help becoming a big fan of hers. So naturally I had to be a fan of her team as well!

Prior to the 2014 season, Georgia added a sophomore transfer from the University of Kansas named Alex Hugo, who I also quickly became a huge fan of once I had a chance to see her in action. She was the most gifted pure athlete I had ever seen play softball, and had developed that huge talent into incredible skill both at the plate and in the field. At 5' 8" and with an average build, she could both hit the ball a mile and run like a deer around the bases. At second base on defense she had such high levels of balance, coordination and quickness that she was able to make some of the most amazing plays I had ever seen. So there were now two Dawgs that I was an especially big fan of, increasing my devotion to the team as a whole even more.

Of course I liked the other Dawgs too each year. The 2016 team was an interesting mix,

with all four classes represented among the primary players.

The regular batting order in the later part of the season opened with the Emanuel sisters: junior Sydni, who played right field, and sophomore Cortni, the leftfielder. The daughters of former NFL wide receiver Bert Emanuel, they were speedsters who excelled at getting on base through bunting and slapping, 'setting the table' for the hitters who came after them. They were followed by Alyssa DiCarlo at third base, who was one of the best hitting freshmen in the country. In the cleanup spot was senior first baseman Tina Iosefa, who had led the nation in homeruns and runs batted in (and yet inexplicably was only named third team All-American). Alex Hugo was next, followed by Maeve McGuire, a junior who had caught a lot earlier in the season but by the end was mostly being used as designated player. This was because senior Katie Browne, next in the order, had eventually established herself as the team's number one catcher. Freshman shortstop Lacey Sumerlin hit eighth, followed by senior Samantha LaZear, another excellent slapper and bunter who had not committed a single error all season in centerfield.

In addition to Chelsea, the other pitchers were sophomore Brittany Gray, who had started the season red hot but had struggled down the stretch; and freshman Kylie Bass, a five foot pixie whose spinning pitches had usually been quite effective in the relatively limited innings she had thrown.

There was one more senior on the team, a player who had frequently been a starter during her first three seasons and the first half or so of this one, but who was now mostly coming off the bench as a pinch-hitter. That was Kaylee Puailoa, a very good hitter and solid outfielder who was known as 'Moose' to teammates, family, friends and fans alike. In her senior season she had eventually become a victim of the fact that the Bulldogs had one too many players who were good enough to start. Sam LaZear was having such an excellent season hitting in the ninth spot and effectively turning the lineup over for the Emanuels that Coach Lu Harris-Champer had eventually decided to keep her in full time, leaving Kaylee as the odd person out. She was a dedicated team player, however, and had accepted her new role, delivering important pinch hits on more than one occasion.

As the season went on and I experienced the ups and downs with them from afar, I grew to care about the 2016 squad even more than the teams from the previous two years. I wanted very much for all of them to succeed as much as possible, especially the seniors, and extra especially my two favorites, Chelsea Wilkinson and Alex Hugo. By the end of the regular season I had also developed a special place in my heart for Kaylee Puailoa, because I felt bad seeing such a good player getting less and less time on the field. I eventually wanted to see the team get to Oklahoma City almost as much for her sake as for Chelsea and Alex's. I wanted it this year more than ever, of course, because all three of my favorite players were seniors who had no more 'next years' left. It was now or never.

I'm a person who is very emotional. It's just in my genes, I've always been that way. So I have to try to be careful about exactly what I get emotionally invested in, and how much, in order to have the best chance of keeping my emotions under complete control. Thanks to my life experiences and the guidance of the Good Lord in getting through them, I've also developed over the years a very optimistic outlook about life, which helps make me a generally very happy person, but which can complicate my emotional management at certain times. The days leading up to the Georgia-Florida series were almost a perfect storm in this regard. My emotions wanted very badly to see my Dawgs beat the Gators and punch their ticket to the Women's College World Series; my optimism pushed me to believe more and more that it really could happen; so the logical part of my mind had to keep reminding me that even though they had a realistic

chance if things went well, it was still a long shot, so I'd better not get my hopes up TOO high. As game one began on Thursday, May 26, this internal struggle was as intense as ever.

Florida's starting pitcher in that game was Delanie Gourley, who was second in the nation in ERA, trailing only her own teammate Aleshia Ocasio, who would pitch game two the next day. The Dawgs had their work cut out for them, and they were unable to get anything going early. Their only base runner in the first three innings came on a two out single by Maeve McGuire in the second. McGuire got another single in the fourth inning, but this time Alyssa Di Carlo was on second base, and Maeve's hit scored her to give the Dawgs a 1-0 lead after four.

Meanwhile, Chelsea Wilkinson was having an atypical game in some respects. She only struck out two batters in the entire game, well down from her average, and she was allowing base runners in almost every inning. However, she kept successfully working out of the jams, aided by solid defensive play behind her. Alex Hugo in particular had a great day, making several excellent plays, including a Sportscenter Top Ten effort: a grounder to first base got through the legs of Tina Iosefa, but Alex had broken hard as soon as the ball was hit and was somehow able to make a diving stop on the ball behind Tina and, while still sprawled on the ground, shovel the ball to Iosefa just in time to nip Florida's Kayli Kvistad and get the out. This turned out to be very important, because the next hitter, Kirsti Merritt, lined a double off of the wall in left-center, a hit that probably would have scored Kvistad had she gotten on base, and at the very least given the Gators runners on second and third with only one out. Alex's play kept the inning and game in complete control even with the double, as Chelsea retired the next batter on a pop-up to end the inning.

In the sixth inning Alyssa led off with her second hit of the day. Tina then walked, and Alex laid down a sacrifice bunt to move the runners to second and third. Maeve followed with her third hit to score Alyssa, and another run then scored on an infield out by Katie Browne. Going to the bottom of the sixth the Dawgs now led 3-0.

I had been experiencing an increasing level of nervous excitement all through the game. Even after the additional two runs came across to give Chelsea some breathing room, I couldn't relax: I remembered too well the games during the season where Georgia had failed to hold a late lead, and in this game they were facing the number one team in the nation, a team which seemed to always find a way to win, particularly during the NCAA tournament. The Gators hadn't lost a single game in the 2014 tourney, and in 2015 their only loss had come in game two of the best-of-three finals. In the Regionals this year, none of their three opponents had been able to score a single run against them. They could never be counted out until the game was officially over.

So I felt my heart sink when Chelsea began the bottom of the sixth by hitting Kirsti Merritt with a pitch. A free base runner was exactly what you didn't want to give the Gators in this situation, and despite my optimism I briefly had a bad feeling that this was the beginning of a comeback win. It was a false alarm, however, as Chelsea got the next three hitters. Georgia continued to lead 3-0 going to the seventh.

The Dawgs were unable to add to their lead in the top of the inning. I was on my feet now as the bottom of the seventh began. *Just three outs!* I said to myself. *We can do this! Get 'em, Chelsea!* However, the bad feeling returned as this time she began the inning with a walk. Another free base runner at the wrong time. I fought to keep my emotions in control as my stomach tightened up; but Chelsea followed with her second strikeout of the game, and induced the next batter to pop up to Alex. One out to go, and I wanted DESPERATELY to see it happen! Chelsea got ahead of star Florida freshman Amanda Lorenz 0-2. Then Lorenz lifted a deep fly ball to left. Cortni Emanuel moved back all the way to the warning track, almost sending my

heart up into my mouth; but then she made the catch.

The Dawgs had hung on to win! I breathed a huge sigh of relief, and little shivers went through me as my inner tension eased and a big smile came to my face.

"Yes, yes, YES!" I said out loud. "That's ONE! We can do this! I BELIEVE!"

The Dawgs' dream of reaching the Women's College World Series had taken a huge step forward with the impressive game one victory. At the same time, this was still Florida we were talking about, and getting a second win to take the series and make the dream come true was going to be very tough. The tension inside me soon began to rebuild as I considered what could happen the next day, when game two would be played and, if necessary, game three. I tried to put myself in Coach Lu's position.

First of all, you had to assume Chelsea would only be able to pitch one game. Not only would she be tired enough to lose her sharpness if she tried to throw a third game in two days, the well coached Florida hitters would surely 'figure her out' with that many at bats against her. So did you start her again in game two, or go with Brittany Gray or Kylie Bass and save Chelsea for a possible game three?

An argument in favor of the game three scenario was that Aleshia Ocasio, statistically the best college pitcher in the country in 2016, would be in the circle for Florida in game two. Ocasio had not lost a start all season, so it was very possible that even if Chelsea pitched well again, she could lose 1-0 or 2-1. Saving her for the possible (and in that scenario, likely) game three would mean she would go against either Gourley again, who the Dawgs had scored three runs off of, or freshman Kelly Barnhill. Either of those seemed to be a more favorable matchup.

Though there were points in favor of that, I knew it wasn't what I would do. If I were Coach Lu, I would start Chelsea in game two and go for the sweep. Florida was down right now after game one, and if they won game two they would have the momentum going into game three. Plus, in game two Georgia would be the home team in terms of taking the field first and batting last, which was a definite advantage. In a game three the Gators would be the home team again, in addition to coming off of a win. They would be extremely hard to beat under those circumstances, regardless of who they had pitching. Game two was the best chance for Georgia to win the series, and if it were me in charge, I would go all out to take that game. I was very interested to see what Lu's actual decision would be.

It was a long evening, night, morning and early afternoon as I waited for game time to arrive. When the lineups were announced, sure enough, Coach Lu had decided to go with Chelsea, just as I would have. I felt good about that, but very nervous too. We now almost HAD to win this game, with the best pitcher in the country going against us and Florida's backs against the wall.

My emotional struggle had reached an even higher level. I was still trying to prepare myself for the distinct possibility that this great Florida team would win two games today and take the series. I had to try to cushion the blow in case things played out that way. Yet with only 21 more outs standing between my Dawgs and Oklahoma City, I wanted that second Georgia win even more now. It was difficult trying to balance my optimistic belief and desire with the reality of Georgia's position.

The game started off promising, with Chelsea retiring the Gators in order in the top of the first. In the bottom of the first Sydni led off with a hit, and eventually the Dawgs loaded the bases with two outs and yesterday's hitting hero, Maeve McGuire, coming up. But Maeve was retired on a grounder to second, and the Dawgs failed to score.

I felt disappointed that we hadn't been able to grab the lead, because that would have

been big both practically and psychologically. Still, I had to feel good that they'd been able to get base runners against Ocasio right away. I hoped that was a good sign.

Chelsea again retired the side in order in the second. She was actually pitching better than she had the day before, when she had thrown a three hit shutout. That was very encouraging to say the least!

In the bottom of the second, the Florida defense had a very uncharacteristic lapse: on a weak little popup to the left side by Katie Browne, the shortstop and third baseman had gotten their signals crossed and allowed the ball to drop. It took a sideways bounce and rolled foul without being touched, which seemed to be a break for Florida, as the miscue had not resulted in a base runner. However, Ocasio might have been distracted by the fluke play, for she hung the next pitch, and Katie blasted it over the leftfield fence for a homerun. The Dawgs were leading, and Chelsea seemed to be in a groove. I was starting to feel better about the game, but still cautious: there was a long way to go yet.

When Chelsea retired the Gators in order again in the third inning, the positive feeling grew a little more. Meanwhile, Ocasio, who was known as a fierce competitor, had apparently reacted to her mistake to Katie by focusing herself even more. She had gotten the next three batters after the homerun, and continued to mow down the Dawgs in the innings that followed. Chelsea allowed one base runner in the fourth inning, but no harm came of it, and Georgia continued to lead 1-0 after four.

Now I began to feel an even greater desire for the Dawgs to pull this off. *Nine outs to go*, I thought. *We gotta get there! We just GOTTA!*

But in the fifth inning Florida finally got to Chelsea. Ocasio herself led off with a single. A groundout advanced her to second, and then Nicole DeWitt singled to center, putting runners on the corners with one out.

Now came some controversy. Florida's batters were notorious for leaning into pitches and getting hit by them to generate base runners. In 2015 they had abused this so badly that for 2016 the NCAA had felt compelled to revise the hit-by-pitch rules to make it harder to get away with lean-ins. With their backs against the wall and time running out, however, the Gators seemed to turn to their old tricks: the next two batters both were hit by pitches, and it appeared (to me at least) that the first deliberately moved her arm into the path of the ball, and that the second did the same with her leg. My view is admittedly biased, and it's possible I'm being unfair; but it's hard for me to accept that Chelsea would make the same mistake twice in a row to force in the tying run in such a crucial situation.

The next batter grounded to Tina, whose only play was first base unassisted, and the lead run scored. Chelsea got out of the inning with no further damage, but Florida had now taken a 2-1 lead.

I felt deflated. Exactly what I had feared all along was finally happening: Florida was fighting back, trying to find a way to take the series after all, starting with this game. The dream began to feel farther away. Reality seemed to be setting in at last.

Ocasio continued to cruise, retiring the side in order again in both the fifth and sixth innings. As I watched Chelsea allow one base runner but no more runs in the top of the seventh, I kept thinking back to the fifth inning. The tying run had scored with one out. *Eight outs*, I kept saying to myself. *We were only eight outs away*. I still wanted the Dawgs to win as badly as ever, and my heart still clung to the belief that they could; but there was a reason Aleshia Ocasio was undefeated as a starter this year, and the Dawgs were seeing it now. She only had to get three more outs, and it would be on to game three, in which the Gators would be very heavily favored.

There was still the bottom of the seventh, though, one more chance to try to at least tie the game up and send it to extra innings. Alex Hugo was due to lead off, followed by yesterday's hero Maeve McGuire. There was potential there, for sure. I stood up now, feeling too nervous and anxious and helpless to remain seated any longer.

Alex's offensive numbers in 2016 were down from her previous years. Many, including myself, thought that she had simply put too much pressure on herself as a senior team leader. Though her bat hadn't been quite as potent this season, her glove was as great as ever. She had shown that again in the top of the sixth inning, when she had done perhaps the most beautiful pivot at second base I had ever seen to complete a double play, stifling another potential Florida rally before it could really get started. Plus, Alex had taken the leadership role very seriously, and had worked hard all season to encourage and motivate her teammates. I was certain there was no way the Dawgs would have ever gotten this far without her.

So as she came to the plate to lead off the seventh, I thought that maybe this was a time when she would offensively find the Alex of old, blasting a game-tying homer, or at least a double to get the tying run into scoring position immediately.

It wasn't to be. Alex gave it her best shot, as she always did, but ended up flying out to center. We were down to our last two outs in this game.

Ocasio had now retired 16 consecutive batters, and it seemed like there was no way the Dawgs would be able to get to her for the run they desperately needed right now.

Maeve McGuire was next to try to get something started, and she hit a chopper up the middle that was fielded by the shortstop, who made a quick throw while straddling second base that was in time to get Maeve - except that she sailed the throw high enough that the first baseman had to come off of the bag to catch it. Her toe seemed to come back down on the bag at the same instant that Maeve's foot got there. It was an extremely close play that could have legitimately gone either way. Even the replays were inconclusive. It could have been out number two, and I couldn't have reasonably complained about it; but the first base umpire called Maeve safe, putting the tying run on base.

The Dawgs' chances of scoring were a little better now, but there were still 180 feet between Maeve and home plate, and with Aleshia Ocasio in the circle and one out already recorded, that was a very long distance.

Katie Browne, who was responsible for Georgia's lone run in this game, was up next. Could she come through again?

No, that wasn't to be either. On an 0-2 pitch, Katie hit a fairly soft liner to the shortstop for the second out.

Now I started preparing myself in earnest for accepting the defeat. It was devastating to think that the Dawgs had gotten so close to their dream, almost close enough to touch it, and then had it slip away. There was one out left, and my heart still believed that it was possible for the game to be won; but my mind was telling me that it was very unlikely, and that a win in game three was even more unlikely.

As these thoughts were going through my head, the TV play-by-play announcer was saying that the next batter would be Lacey Sumerlin. This immediately brought me fully back into the moment, because I, as well as every other informed Georgia fan watching the game, knew that Lacey wouldn't be hitting in this situation even before the camera showed the actual next batter. I knew already that it was Moose time, and a moment later the camera cut to a shot of Kaylee Puailoa as she was about to step into the batter's box to pinch hit.

On the one hand, Kaylee was an excellent hitter who had pinch hit successfully on other

occasions, so there was some cause for optimism. On the other hand, she was coming in cold off the bench to face the best pitcher in the country who had been lights out since the second inning. Since I liked Kaylee so much, and since it would be a great moment if she could somehow keep the game going, a little more hope came back into my heart.

Then Ocasio's first pitch was called a strike, even though it looked to me to be clearly outside. As Kaylee stepped out of the box and took a practice swing, some of the hope went back out of me again, because the best pitcher in the country getting a gift strike call in such a crucial situation seemed to be a sign that a rally just wasn't meant to happen.

Kaylee stepped back in, and fouled the next pitch back behind the plate and out of play.

Now the Dawgs were down to their last strike, and things seemed almost completely hopeless. I knew that Kaylee wasn't the kind of hitter to let strike three go by in this situation, and the Gators knew it too. The next pitch would almost certainly be either a drop ball that started at the knees and fell to the ankles before reaching the plate, or a rise ball that started at the top outside corner of the zone and tailed up and away. In either case, Kaylee would feel compelled to swing, and if the pitch was thrown properly she would almost certainly miss; and part of the reason Aleshia Ocasio had stayed undefeated as a starter all season was that in crucial situations she threw good pitches. She had already made one mistake in this game, to Katie in the second inning. There didn't seem to be any way she would make another now.

All of these thoughts were pretty much instinctive, taking only a few seconds to go through my mind. So when Florida catcher Aubree Monro walked out to the circle at this point for a brief conference with her pitcher and infielders, I still had time left to think ahead.

Maybe we can still pull off some kind of miracle in game three, I thought. They haven't seen Brittany or Kylie either. Maybe between them they can put together a few good innings, and then Chelsea can come back for the last couple if we can get ahead.

Hope and desire were driving these thoughts, but I also knew that as a practical matter there was very little chance of the third game playing out that way. The Gators were still the Gators, a championship team that knew how to win games when they needed to. If they had found a way to win this one, they would almost certainly find a way to win the next one too. That was painful to think about after the Dawgs had put up such a good fight, but logic seemed to demand it.

The dream appeared to be dying before my eyes.

Monro resumed her position behind the plate, and as Kaylee stepped back into the batter's box I whispered, "C'mon, Moose!" My heart still held out hope, even though my mind had almost given up.

Ocasio fired the 0-2 pitch. It was a rise ball up and away, one of the pitches I had guessed. However, somehow she didn't get quite as much spin on it as she intended, and instead of rising and tailing out of the strike zone, the pitch came in over the outside edge of the plate at about the letters.

Kaylee took a mighty swing and connected, and the resulting sound of ball-bat contact was exceptionally loud. The ball took off like a shot to straightaway center, and the view on TV quickly shifted to the camera behind home plate, showing Florida centerfielder Kirsti Merritt sprinting toward the outfield wall.

As a veteran of over half a century of watching baseball and softball, I was able to process all of this information so fast that I instantly knew the ball had a good chance to leave the park, which meant that the dream that had seemed only a second earlier to be breathing its last was suddenly more alive than it had ever been.

An adrenaline rush for the ages immediately surged through my body, and all of the emotion that I had been trying to contain and control for five days was explosively released.

"GET OUT!" I screamed at the ball. "GET OUT! **GET OUT!!**"

At the same time Merritt, who was focused solely on the ball with no regard to where she was on the field, turned her body as she ran and backpedaled two steps. Then she abruptly ran out of room, and bounced off of the centerfield wall. A moment later the ball came down into some large bushes ten feet or so beyond it.

Kaylee Puailoa had hit a two run, game-winning, SERIES-winning homerun!

Against all odds, and in the most spectacular fashion possible, the dream had come true!

My beloved Bulldogs were going to the Women's College World Series!

"YEEEEEEEESSSS!!!!" I shrieked in pure joy. Tears had filled my eyes at the same time, and I quickly wiped them away so I could clearly see Moose finish her trip around the bases toward her extremely excited teammates and coaches, who were already waiting for her at home plate. As her foot touched home they mobbed her, knocking her to the ground and then falling on top of her - a literal Dawg pile!

"They did it, they did it, they actually did it!" I said in a wavering voice as I watched the joyful scene. The emotional release and turnaround I had experienced was so abrupt and powerful that I was now trembling with happiness and excitement, and part of me was still in shocked disbelief, unable yet to fully grasp that the homerun had really happened.

Then, as I continued to watch the Dawgs' ecstatic celebration, in my mind I began to simultaneously see another scene, one that I now knew I would be watching in six days: Chelsea and Alex and Kaylee and all the others out on the field at ASA Hall Of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City, taking part in college softball's ultimate event.

At that point the reality of the current moment fully set in at last, and I was lifted to an even higher level of happiness, the kind of happiness that can only truly be felt for a person or group of people that you care about dearly. Because it had actually happened! My Dawgs had ended Florida's season and qualified for the Women's College World Series! I was so happy for all of them that I felt like I could burst open. So happy for Chelsea, who had pitched her heart out all season and especially these last two days; so happy for Alex, who had kept a positive attitude despite below average hitting and been a great team leader all season; so happy for the other seniors, who were going to end their college careers by living out their greatest softball dream; so happy for all the other Dawgs, who in their remaining seasons wouldn't have any anxiety about missing out on their greatest softball dream; and, at that moment, happiest of all for Kaylee, who had also stayed positive and worked hard even when she had stopped being a starter, so she could be as ready as possible for any situation where she was needed. Her dedication had been hugely rewarded, because with that one great swing she had made herself a University of Georgia sports legend, and created a moment that softball fans everywhere would always remember.

To me, this was what being a sports fan was all about: to link your heart and mind to a team and particular players, to support them and to go through all the ups and downs with them that they experience over a single season or, especially, over multiple seasons, so that when a big triumph happens you have earned the right to share in that joy as well. It was being in the Dawgs' corner as a devoted fan for three full seasons that allowed me to feel so happy about their dream coming true, because it had become my dream too.

As I write this it has been over a month since the Georgia-Florida Super Regional came to that unbelievable, exhilarating end. The next week the Bulldogs opened their appearance at the

Women's College World Series by beating Florida State. So the Dawgs got to experience victory in Oklahoma City as well as the thrill of just being there, which I was naturally delighted to see. They were leading 3-1 after six innings in their second game, against conference foe Auburn, but this time couldn't hold on, and ended up losing 4-3. They were eliminated by LSU in their third game. I was somewhat disappointed that they weren't able to at least get closer to the national title, but that feeling couldn't really take root or last long. As far as I was concerned, what they had done to get to the WCWS was on the same level as the national championship itself, and I remained tremendously happy for them for having achieved it.

In fact, I DVR'd the clinching game and saved it, and at least a dozen times since then I've replayed the whole ending sequence. I still get a little emotional watching it. The drama of that moment is just so amazing, especially with all of the circumstances surrounding it: trying to take out the #1 ranked, two-time defending champs, winning the first game, leading the second but then falling behind late, being down to their last strike and looking like they would not only lose that game but, since Chelsea had already pitched two full games in two days, that they were destined to go on to lose the series as well; and for the final stroke to be delivered by a player who had lost her starting job earlier in the season and was then called on to try to save and extend that season, and to see her come through in the most electrifying manner possible, made it all even more special. Plus, my two favorite Georgia players had also made contributions that were crucial to getting the Dawgs to the point where that moment could happen: Chelsea Wilkinson's great pitching over the two games, and Alex Hugo's superb defensive plays in each of them. The two of them did more than anyone else to keep Florida's offensive limited to two runs in two games, which set up the situation that brought Moose to the plate in the bottom of the seventh.

So for all of these reasons, Kaylee Puailoa's walk-off two run homerun that sent my Georgia Bulldogs to the Women's College World Series is now my all-time favorite sports moment, and it's hard to imagine anything that could ever happen to replace it.

But hey, with softball you never know, which is one of the many reasons it's my favorite sport to watch. Right now I'm thoroughly enjoying the current National Pro Fastpitch league season, and rooting especially hard for the Akron Racers. I'm particularly interested in one of their players, a rookie who has gotten her pro career off to an excellent start: Alex Hugo. So for the second time this year I'm hoping to see her play for a championship - and trying to keep my hopes realistic, of course!

After the pro season I'll be counting the days (only figuratively, though!) until the start of the next college softball season in February. Chelsea and Alex and Kaylee won't be back, but I'll still be fully supporting the 2017 version of the Dawgs through whatever course their season may take.

Just thinking about it makes me smile!