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TOP STORY

## WKU SOFTBALL

# WKU's hometown players celebrate special C-USA title

East grads Smith, Gardner and South grad Nunn win championship in BG

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May 16, 2021

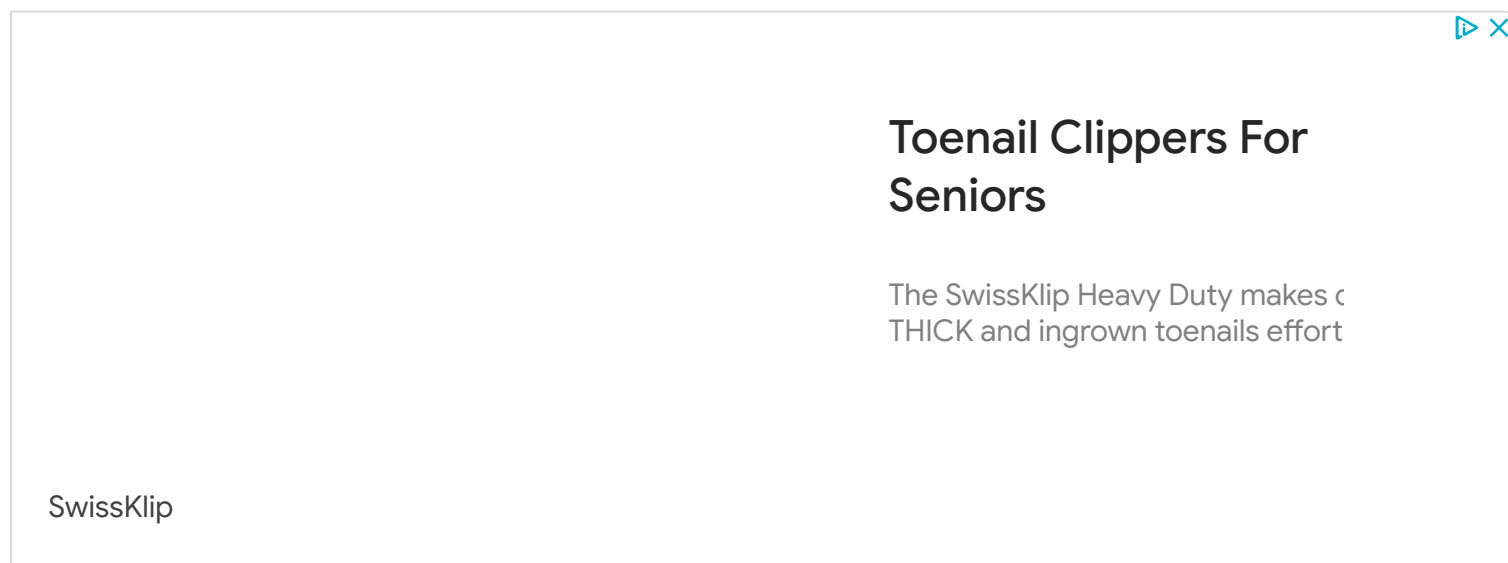


**Above:** Western Kentucky's Shelby Nunn (right) and Kendall Smith celebrate against UAB at the WKU Softball Complex. **Below:** Smith (left) and Katie Gardner

PHOTOS BY Steve Roberts/WKU Athletics

Four years ago at the WKU Softball Complex, Kendall Smith knelt at home plate with her catcher's mask pressed against the dirt and tears in her eyes.

She had just watched South Warren pitcher Shelby Nunn hit a two-run walk-off single with two outs in the seventh inning of the Region 4 championship game, ending her high school career with Warren East.



The advertisement features a large, empty rectangular frame on the left side. To the right of the frame, the text reads: "Toenail Clippers For Seniors" in a bold, black font. Below this, in a smaller font, it says "The SwissKlip Heavy Duty makes c THICK and ingrown toenails effort". In the bottom left corner of the frame, the word "SwissKlip" is written in a simple, black font. In the top right corner of the frame, there is a small blue icon of a play button and a close button (an 'X').

On Saturday, Smith was again on the ground near home plate at the WKU Softball Complex, but this time she was facing up with Nunn on top of her screaming as the two celebrated beating UAB 13-4 in the Conference USA championship game together with the Hilltoppers.

“It’s definitely a better feeling, for sure,” Smith said. “It makes me proud. I knew she could do it, I knew she could pitch the ball. She just had to clear her head. But it was definitely nice. I can’t wait to go look at the photos of us jumping because our senior year I was on the ground crying and she was celebrating, so I was glad that we were celebrating together and I can’t wait to go back and look at all of it.”



Warren East catcher Kendall Smith reacts Thursday after South Warren scored the game-winning run during the Region 4 Softball Tournament championship game at the WKU Softball Complex. South Warren won 3-2. **For more photos and video, visit [bgdailynews.com](http://bgdailynews.com).**

[Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com](mailto:AustinAnthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

The two formed a pitcher-and-catcher battery that was huge for the Hilltoppers as they faced elimination, while Katie Gardner – the third Bowling Green native on the team and another Warren East graduate – played a key role earlier in the week as WKU became the first host to win the C-USA Tournament since fifth-seeded East Carolina did in 2011.

“I think it’s great to be able to go to school in your hometown, represent the school you grew up watching and more than likely being a fan of,” WKU coach Amy Tudor said. “Bowling Green’s a great community and obviously Western Kentucky is very special. We have a lot of pride and our fans are huge. Our atmosphere – it’s a family atmosphere. Not being from Kentucky, it felt like home to me.



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“Just seeing old faces that have been along the journey in the crowd, it’s just been awesome, so I’m proud that those three got to celebrate. They had a lot of high school success and travel ball success, but proud that they got to celebrate here, our locals.”

Smith was behind the plate for the duration of the tournament – a loss to North Texas in the quarterfinals left WKU in the losers’ bracket and facing more games than any other team in the tournament.

Before that, however, Gardner helped WKU to a 3-2 opening win over UTSA. The redshirt freshman came in during the fourth inning with two on and nobody out in a 1-1 game. She hit the first batter she faced, but got out of the jam after the Roadrunners got just one more run on a sacrifice fly. Gardner finished the game allowing just one hit and two walks in four innings while striking out six batters, including the final two she faced to close out the win.

Nunn was the starter in the quarterfinal matchup with North Texas on the first day of double-elimination play, but struggled early and was removed after giving up two runs on a hit and



Western Kentucky's Kendall Smith (left) and Katie Gardner celebrate Saturday during the Conference USA championship against UAB at the WKU Softball Complex.

Steve Roberts/WKU Athletics

three walks in a third of an inning. Gardner replaced her and kept WKU in it by allowing just two runs on three hits and two walks over the next 5 2/3 innings, but WKU ultimately fell 4-1.

But facing elimination, Nunn came back strong.

The South Warren graduate came on in replacement of Kennedy Sullivan – the eventual tournament MVP – with one out in the seventh to stop a Charlotte rally one run shy of tying the game and the Hilltoppers kept the season alive with a 3-2 victory.

“That first outing, it was a little on the rough side, but Coach T and one of my old pitching coaches had a conversation with me before the game and that really helped me,” Nunn said. “It

was a new day, a new start and I just had to completely forget about what had happened and I couldn't let it drag over and let it affect the performance.”

She followed with a strong outing against the team she struggled with the day before – North Texas. Nunn pitched a complete-game two-hitter, allowing just one earned run and striking out two batters in the 4-2 WKU victory to earn a spot in the championship.

“We have a very special relationship,” Smith said. “Most people would think that we are mean to each other and we are not. Everything we say is out of love. I mean, we've been friends since we were five years old. I couldn't imagine having a better relationship with a pitcher. I know how to get to her – I have to give her a little bit of tough love every once in a while and same for her with me. I know how to calm her down and even yesterday when she pitched, she had a new mindset and she was ready to roll.”

Facing its fifth game and down to three in the pitching staff, Nunn was called upon in relief again in Saturday's championship. She came in for Gardner in the third inning



Western Kentucky coach Amy Tudor (right) talks with pitcher Shelby Nunn (left) and catcher Kendall Smith on Saturday during the Conference USA championship game against UAB at the WKU Softball Complex.

Steve Roberts/WKU Athletics

and helped keep WKU's then 3-2 lead intact by getting three straight outs after the 49ers got two runners in scoring position. Nunn finished the game allowing just two runs – neither of which was earned – on three hits and one walk while striking out four.

WKU got its bats going in the rout, and Smith was a key contributor in that.

Smith had shown off her arm by picking off multiple baserunners in key moments in elimination games throughout the tournament, but had struggled at the plate the previous four games. On Saturday, she finished with two hits, including an RBI single in the top of the first and a two-run homer which highlighted a six-run fourth inning that blew the game open.

“My approach was just see it and hit it. I hadn’t been very successful this year,” Smith said. “Going into this tournament I was like, ‘It’s going to come when we need it,’ and it came when we needed it.”

Despite getting two runs back in the bottom of the fifth, Charlotte could never catch back up. WKU added to its lead with a run in the sixth and three in the seventh. Down to three outs, Nunn handled a grounder back at her, forced a ground out to Taylor Sanders at third and forced a pop up to Jordan Ridge at second base.

After the final out, the pitcher and catcher embraced in front of home plate surrounded by teammates to celebrate the C-USA championship in their home town.



“Obviously me, Kendall and Katie have known each other forever. I think I’m going on 15 years of friendship with Kendall. We’ve had our ups and downs. I think that has helped us so much,” Nunn said. “It being in Bowling Green, it means a lot to be able to win on home turf and just to have a little bit of fun in Bowling Green, because who would’ve thought you could have a little bit of fun in it?”{&end}

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