

Softball always has been a priority for New Hope High School (NHHS) seniors Tatum McBride and Kaselyn “KK” Harcrow.

Even though McBride and Harcrow have played other sports, many of their earliest memories involve softball. As they matured, their confidence grew and their dreams of playing the sport they loved in college blossomed.

To realize those goals, extra swings – 100 to 150 -- had to be taken and pitching lessons were needed. While friends prioritized other things or pursuits, McBride and Harcrow remained committed and always had softball near or at the top of their to-do lists.

On Friday, McBride and Harcrow checked off the next item on their lists when they celebrated decisions to play softball at Itawamba Community College (ICC) and Northwest Mississippi C.C. (NWCC) during a signing ceremony in the NHHS multi-purpose room.

“My priorities were set right,” said McBride, who thanked her father, Derrick, for encouraging her. “I knew what I had to do to get there and I stayed consistent in my work.”

McBride, who has experience in the infield and the outfield, started playing softball when she was 5 or 6 years old. She first remembers harboring dreams of playing in college when she was in the ninth grade.

McBride, who has played volleyball for seven years, including on the NHHS team, said she thought she could realize the goal, but it wasn't until she gained experience in high school and on the travel ball scene (with the Mississippi Legends) that she truly believed she belonged.

Still, the summer before her junior year, McBride saw players around her receiving college offers and she didn't have one. She wondered if she had what it took and re-committed herself to doing extra work to hone her skills. She said her father impressed on her that it was imperative to put in more work if she wanted to take the next step.

"He would always tell me stories about when he was in high school and how he wishes he would have done more because now he looks back and he knows he could have went far," McBride said. "I think it is just the reality of knowing I only get one shot, and I don't want to look back and have regret."

NHHS softball coach Casey Finch-Halford said McBride brings "an edge and a spark" to a lineup. She said she is extremely gritty and takes the extra feet in any situation.

"At the plate, she's going to work hard in the weight room and cages perfecting her swings," Finch-Halford said. "On the base paths, she's extremely aggressive with high game IQ, so if any opportunity to make something happens arises, she doesn't really have to be told. She anticipates it.

"On defense, she is going to sacrifice her body no matter what is in her way to get the ball. She's pulled balls back over walls, flipped over temp fences and dove to catch a ball in no man's land, got up and popped a broken finger back into place and kept going. It's the kind of grit that makes others want to push harder."

NHHS volleyball coach and assistant softball coach Laura Lee Holman said McBride's work ethic will set her apart at the next level.

"She's a kid who isn't afraid to put in the work," Holman said. "She hates to lose, and she knows how to turn failure into motivation. I think her work ethic and competitive mentality will help her succeed in whatever she commits to in life. I'm excited to see how she grows at ICC and where she goes from there."

As a junior, McBride had a .500 batting average and a .990 slugging percentage. She had 48 hits, 28 stolen bases, 41 runs scored, 35 RBI, eight home runs, 13 doubles and five triples.

As a sophomore, she had a .439 batting average with 43 hits, five home runs, 35 RBI, 20 stolen bases and 38 runs scored.

"I really admire Tatum's work ethic because she always puts in the hours and the hard work into everything and it really shows," Harcrow said. "She is a really good leader with everybody, and she is a good teacher and coach."

Harcrow, who also plays her travel ball with the Mississippi Legends, said it feels good knowing the hours invested in pitching and the extra time put into hitting have helped her reach this point. Looking back, she said playing softball was "fun" when she first joined the NHHS varsity program. She sensed things grew more serious when she began working with pitching coach Gary Thomas in the seventh grade.

"He instilled in me, 'Hey, you're going to be good and you have to believe in yourself and know you're going to make it to the next level'," said Harcrow, who also has played volleyball at NHHS for the last five years. "He constantly put it in my head and gave me the confidence to believe in myself and know I can do whatever I put my mind to."

As a junior, Harcrow had a .356 batting average with 35 hits, one home run and 26 RBI. She also had a .938 fielding percentage. In the circle, she was New Hope's primary pitcher and had 148 strikeouts.

As a sophomore, she had a .425 batting average with 45 hits, three home runs and 21 RBI. In the circle, she had a 21-7 record and 157 strikeouts.

Holman said she has coached a lot of great athletes in her career, but she isn't sure if she has coached a better person than Harcrow.

"She is a great leader, competitor and teammate," Holman said. "Northwest is getting the total package, and she'll make an impact on their program from the day she steps onto campus. She makes you want to be better, and to me, that's what true leadership looks and feels like. I'm grateful I had the chance to coach her in volleyball and softball."

McBride echoed that sentiment.

"I love the leader KK is," McBride said. "If anybody is having a bad day at practice or needs help with something, they are always going to go to KK. KK is the best friend and the mom on the team. She always has an answer. We always lean on KK for pitching. She plays a really big role in the game and sets the tone. She is my best friend and is the best leader ever."

Harcrow said the coaches at NWCC will give her an opportunity to pitch and to play a position. She said she is looking forward to that challenge in part because he father, Barry, has helped her understand softball is a game of failure and that you have to believe in yourself to stay consistent throughout the ups and downs.

Finch-Halford said Harcrow has shown an unbelievable amount of composure, especially since she has been the team's ace pitcher since her freshman year. She said Harcrow maintains her cool regardless of what is going on in the game and that she "reads the room", reflects and then reacts, which helps her be an effective leader.

"She commands respect the way she carries herself and handles everything with so much maturity," Finch-Halford said. "She is a good

friend to everyone, and she does things the right way, which models behavior and expectations from those around her. She isn't going to be loud and in your face, but her work ethic, her presence and her sold-out devotion to every workout, bullpen and pitch speaks way louder than anything she could ever say."