



Staff / Jon-Michael Sullivan

Less than a month after helping the Atlanta Vipers to a national championship as teammates, Bryanna Vazquez, left, and Taylor DeCelles find themselves as adversaries. Never will that be truer than tonight, when Vazquez's North Cobb team faces DeCelles' Hillgrove squad in a key Region 4AAAAAA game.

# FRENEMIES

## Championship teammates in the summer, softball duo enter fall on opposing sides

By Carlton D. White  
*cwhite@mdjonline.com*

Bryanna Vazquez and Taylor DeCelles will always have a bond as opponents over the next couple of years, whenever North Cobb and Hillgrove face each other on the softball field.

According to DeCelles, a freshman pitcher and outfielder for Hillgrove, she and Vazquez, a sophomore third baseman for North Cobb, have always been close. They've had to face each other on different softball teams growing up.

However, tonight's matchup pitting the Lady Warriors and Lady Hawks won't just be about Region 4AAAAAA positioning. It will hold a special meaning for the players who shared a unique moment as

teammates for the Atlanta Vipers' 14-and-under team this past summer.

They were participating in the third-annual Premier Girls Fastpitch national championship in Irvine, Calif. In the invitation-only tournament, played the same week as the Amateur Softball Association of America's national championships, the Vipers battled through the losers' bracket to win the national title Aug. 4. They prevailed with a 9-1 record in their age group, over 49 other teams.

Featuring some of the top squads from across the country, as well as a large majority of the best teams from California in four age groups, the Premier Girls Fastpitch championship was another crowning achievement for the state's travel softball teams. Two years prior, the

East Cobb Bullets won the ASA 18U Gold title.

"We got an invitation and wanted to see the California teams, since some of them don't play in the ASA championship," Vipers coach Vic Loveless said. "What it means to bring that trophy home is great for Georgia. It sent shockwaves through the Southeast because no other team outside of California had won a Premier championship (in the three years of the tournament). The girls just wouldn't be denied. I'm so proud of what they accomplished, and for bringing the Vipers organization its first national championship."

Vazquez and DeCelles were especially ecstatic to be a part of history.

See Duo, Page 3C

# Duo

Continued from **Page 1C**

“We didn’t give up,” said Vazquez, who started for the Vipers at third base. “Winning the whole thing meant a lot to me and for the Vipers team. We felt like a family.”

“It was a great experience being with the team,” added DeCelles, who led the Vipers with a .448 batting average as the starting first baseman.

DeCelles also finished 3-0 from inside the circle with two saves, a 0.68 ERA and 20 strikeouts in 20 2/3 innings pitched.

“We’d been through a lot the last few years, but we came together and understood each other,” DeCelles said. “We knew each day that we needed one more game to keep getting closer.”

As inspiration for their drive to the title, the

Vipers leaned on each other — particularly teammate Katey Lynch, whose father, Steve, died from cancer in March. Steve Lynch had spent several seasons as an assistant coach for the Vipers.

“We felt like we were blessed. We played for him,” Vazquez said. “We had a bunch of close games, but we wouldn’t give up. It was like he wouldn’t let us.”

The Vipers even came up with a motto to express their feelings for their fallen coach — “You can’t spell softball without ‘SL,’” referring to Steve Lynch’s initials.

“He definitely inspired us,” DeCelles said. “That championship was for him as well as for us. He brought us closer and made us family.”

Following two days of pool play, the Vipers advanced through the 14B winners’ bracket before losing in the semifinals. With the tournament on

the line, they went 3-0 to win the losers’ bracket, and they won two games against the San Jose Sting — the 14A winners’ bracket champion — to set up a winner-take-all championship against the So Cal Athletics.

The Vipers took a 3-2 lead in the bottom of the sixth, and DeCelles stranded the tying run on second to pick up the save and clinch the championship.

“Taylor threw a shutout the night before against the Sting and had an incredible game that got us to (the championship),” Loveless said. “Without her, we don’t get there. She was on fire all week and was our most consistent hitter.

“Together, her and Bryanna were part of the last out of the game. Taylor threw a hard pitch, but the girl hit the ball to Bryanna, who had to scoop it up back-handed down the third-base line and turn and fire to first for the last out. All of the girls were just so

excited when it was over.”

However, for Vazquez and DeCelles, the excitement of winning a national championship is a thing of the past, and their futures rest with the outcomes of their respective high school teams.

“We were like family on the field with the Vipers,” Vazquez said. “But now we have to go our separate ways and play for our teams. It’s just another game and we have to go through it.”

“It will be interesting to see how we play on our teams (today) and on opposite sides of the field, (rather) than on the same side,” DeCelles added.

“It’s always good to see (Bryanna) and think back to that championship. Now, we have to play against each other. It will be like reuniting the Viper family, but it’s Hillgrove versus North Cobb. This is my new team, and I’m supporting them and winning for them now.”