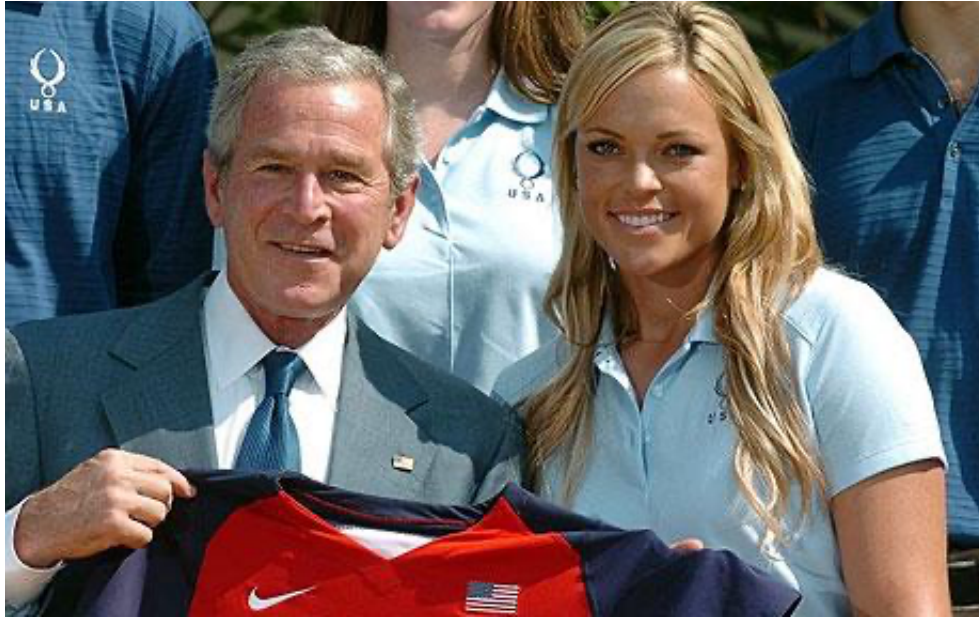


Beijing Softball: Jennie Finch fights to save her sport

American Jennie Finch is the face of a sport that is about to lose its Olympic identity.



Top talent: George Bush is presented with a US Softball shirt by Jennie Finch in the Rose Garden of the White House Photo: Getty Images

By Sarah Munday and agencies

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An Olympic gold medallist and double world champion, the blonde pitcher has gone from Athens Games pinup to mother and softball crusader.

Posters of Finch hang on the bedroom walls of girls across the U.S. inspiring Olympic dreams that she says will be crushed by the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to dump softball along with baseball from the Games, starting in 2012.

"It's a slap in our faces, boom it's gone," Finch said.

"You don't know who to blame, you don't know what to blame but it's on our watch and its failure, it's a loss.

"We take it personally because it is our lives and the future of our sport. We do take the blame, each and everyone of us - what more could we have done?"

Finch's father, Doug Finch, was her first pitching coach and invented the Finch Windmill, an arm conditioning device which he trademarked and sells, to help his daughter develop her ferocious power.

A three-time All-American at the University of Arizona, the right-hander set an NCAA record for consecutive wins with 60 in 2002 and later had her number 27 (taken because of her parents' first date) jersey retired by the school.

Armed with an arsenal of five pitches, including a 70mph fastball, Finch has been a mainstay on the American pitching staff. She helped the U.S. to Pan American Games gold (2003, 2007), World Cup titles (2006, 2007), world championships (2002, 2006) and an Olympic gold at the 2004 Athens Games.

"I'm trying to bring heat and movement at the same time," said Finch. "I just feel like I'm more diverse now, that I'm more prepared. I know my body a little bit better. I'm more mature."

Voted 2003's "Hottest Female Athlete" in an online poll by ESPN, Finch has graced numerous magazine covers and modelled swimwear in Sports Illustrated's swimsuit edition.

The 27-year-old Californian also landed her own segment on "This Week in Baseball" where she pitches against major league players. She recently appeared on "Celebrity Apprentice" and was fired by Donald Trump.

"Softball not only has given me a college education but much greater things," said Finch. "I met my husband playing this game and now I have a beautiful son."

There is little in Finch's life that is not touched by a glove and a bat.

In 2005, she married Minnesota Twins prospect Casey Daigle and the following year gave birth to Ace, who has accompanied her on the U.S. team's 60-game Bound 4 Beijing Tour.

"Right now we're on a bus tour and we have three kids with us," said squad member Jessica Mendoza. "Jennie's baby Ace is two; Antonio Lisa Fernandez son is 2-1/2 and Chase, Stacey Nuveman's son, is not one yet.

"We have these little boys just running up and down and we're feeding them sugar in the back of bus. They get crazy and we send them back to mom."