

FASTPITCH SOFTBALL COACHING KIT



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Dear Coach,

It wasn't that long ago that I was playing in youth leagues. I have fond memories of the fun I had and the friends I made on those fields. In fact, much of what I know about softball was learned in the youth leagues. And the most important part of my early softball education began with my youth league coaches.

All of us on the Louisville Slugger Advisory Staff would like to thank you for your involvement in youth league softball and baseball. It may sound cliché, but it's true: You will get just as much out of the experience as your kids will.

The purpose of this Youth League Coaching Kit is to help you become a better coach. Inside, you'll find a valuable playing guide with instructions on hitting, fielding, conducting practices and even dealing with your players' parents. We've also included a chart to help you select the proper bat for your players.

We've packed a wealth of softball knowledge into this year's Youth League Coaching Kit. We hope you and your players will benefit greatly from this information. So take time now to thoroughly read this material before your team takes the field.

Who knows, maybe a few years from now you'll see one of your former players competing for a gold medal in the Olympics.

Good luck on a fun and successful season!

Sincerely,
Jessica Mendoza
U.S. Olympic Softball Team
Member, Louisville Slugger Advisory Staff



When conducting a practice, it's important to use your time efficiently. Keep your practice simple and use drills that involve all players. The following are points to consider when planning a practice schedule:

1. It's helpful if you can secure a staff of at least two assistant coaches. The basic philosophy of the team should be established and agreed upon by all the coaches.
2. It's important to have enough balls, bats, helmets, etc. on hand for practice and games.
3. Try to secure a field that is properly maintained. It's difficult to teach proper fielding techniques on a poor field.
4. Know the attitudes of the players and parents. Hold a general meeting prior to the season to let both the players and parents know your philosophy and expectations.
5. Try not to get in a rut as you set up your practice schedule. Add new drills and change procedures to keep practice interesting.
6. Require all your players to obey instructions.
7. Practice means work, but it should also be enjoyable.
8. Require your players to always give their best efforts. Hard work and hustle should be expected and rewarded.
9. Teach your players to encourage their teammates at all times. Make it clear that one player criticizing another will not be tolerated.
10. Understand the difference between correction and criticism. Correction deals with the problem. Criticism is directed at the player and almost always has a negative effect.
11. Remember that each player is someone's child and develop a caring relationship with each one.
12. Most importantly: **STAY POSITIVE AND HAVE FUN.**



CONDUCTING A PRACTICE

SUGGESTED PRACTICE SCHEDULE

The time and order of each activity will be dictated by the length of practice.

1. Warm-Up

- A. Run. A slow jog stimulates blood flow to the muscles and joints.
- B. Stretch. Stretching exercises should include upper and lower body muscle groups.
- C. Throw. Begin with short throws to get loose and slowly progress to long throws, which will stretch and strengthen players' arms.

2. Drills

Divide the team by position and work on fielding fundamentals.

3. Batting Practice

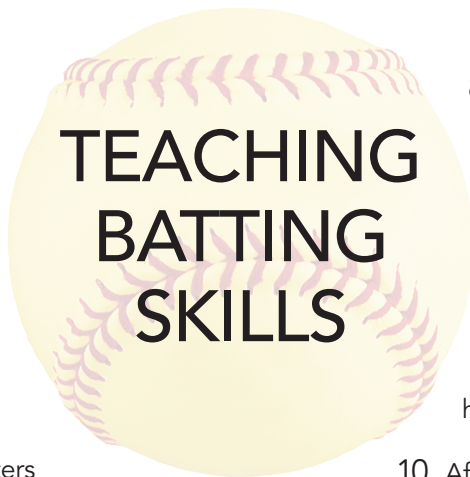
Only one player at a time can hit live pitching, so it's important to incorporate a number of hitting drills to ensure everyone gets plenty of swings. The three-station approach will allow for hitters to rotate from the tee station to the soft-toss station to live batting practice. Fielders should also be getting in quality work during batting practice. They can either play the ball live off the bat or take fungoes between pitches.

4. Simulated Game

The simulated game pulls together everything worked on in practice. Players practice reacting to game situations and learning about the value of thinking before every pitch. Start with one player at each position and have the remaining players be base runners. The coach first gives a situation, then hits a ball in play. The fielders and base runners then react accordingly.

5. Conditioning

The last part of practice should be devoted to conditioning. This is a great opportunity to combine a base running drill with conditioning. Have players take turns simulating a swing and running out a single. After a short rest, continue with a simulated double, triple and home run.



When teaching young hitters, it's important to keep one fundamental thought in mind: consistent, solid contact makes hitting fun and leads to success. Coaches should emphasize the importance of hitting the ball hard, rather than hitting the ball far. Here are some basic fundamentals to help young players become better hitters:

1. Select the "right" size bat. The "right" bat is the one with which hitters can generate good bat speed. It's neither too long nor too heavy. Refer to the Bat Selection chart for guidelines based on a player's height and weight. The bat that feels comfortable and easy to swing is the bat that should be selected. Bat speed, not bat size, is important in hitting the ball.
2. Hitter's hands will automatically tighten up when they start to swing, so it's essential to keep them relaxed in the stance. This will allow hitters to take smooth, quick swings.
3. For the best look at the strike zone, hitters should stand in the batter's box with the plate in the middle of their stance. They may find it helpful to move deeper in the box when facing a good fast ball pitcher, and up in the box for a junk ball pitcher.
4. Hitters' stances should be balanced with the feet spaced shoulder-width apart and weight evenly distributed on the balls of the feet.
5. Hitters' heads should be turned toward the pitcher, so that both eyes can focus on the pitched ball. This will allow for a better view of the pitch. Remember, too, that the most successful hitters keep their heads and eyes level.
6. Hitters must look for good pitches to hit. They should be comfortable with the strike zone and swing at strikes. With two strikes, hitters should consider choking up on the bat, expanding the strike zone and protecting the plate.
7. Hitters should take a short stride toward the pitcher. This will allow them to stay balanced and generate greater power. If hitters should finish their swings off balance, try shortening their stride.

8. Good hitters accelerate the bat through the hitting zone. Their bats are always moving full speed at contact.

9. Hitters need to keep their head on the ball through the swing. This helps them track the ball into the hitting zone, as well as maintain balance. REMEMBER—hitters can't hit what they can't see.

10. After contact, hitters should focus on getting out of the batter's box quickly and running straight to the base. The first few steps out of the box can be the determining factor as to whether the hitter, now the runner, is safe or out.

11. Be positive. Hitters must believe in their ability to hit the ball.

DRILLS

A problem most young players face is that they don't get enough swings in the course of a practice. Most practices use one drill for hitting: pitching to the batter, one hitter at a time. The following drills will allow hitters to isolate key fundamentals of their swings and take enough swings to improve their hitting:

1. Tee Drill

In the Tee Drill, a player sets up to the tee in the normal batting stance. The tee should be placed so that the ball is in the hitting zone. Sharp line drives are the desired result. This is a good indication that the player is taking the proper swing path to the ball. Hitting off the tee simulates all aspects of the swing, which makes it an ideal drill for young players. The coach can then evaluate each player and make the proper adjustments before bad habits are formed.

2. Soft-Toss Drill

The Soft-Toss Drill requires two players—a tosser and a hitter. The tosser sets up next to a net at a 45° angle to the hitter, who stands about 15 feet from the net. The hitter assumes a normal batting stance and waits for the tosser to underhand the ball into the hitting zone. The same as when hitting off the tee, the desired result is a sharp line drive. This drill works on all aspects of the swing with the added benefit of tracking a moving ball.



BAT SELECTION CHART

The right bats for your players are the ones that let them generate maximum bat speed. The best way to find the bat that's right for a player is through trial and error. A quick swing is the key to good hitting, so try out different weights and lengths to find the ones your players feel most comfortable with. Extra length and weight in a bat won't make the ball go any farther if it's too heavy to swing.

BATTER'S WEIGHT	BATTER'S HEIGHT								
	3'-3'4"	3'5"-3'8"	3'9"-4'	4'1"-4'4"	4'5"-4'8"	4'9"-5'	5'1"-5'4"	5'5"-5'8"	5'9"-6'
under 60 lbs.	26"	27"	28"	29"	29"	-	-	-	-
61-70	27"	27"	28"	29"	29"	30"	-	-	-
71-80	-	28"	28"	29"	30"	30"	31"	-	-
81-90	-	28"	29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	32"	-
91-100	-	28"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	-
101-110	-	29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	-
111-120	-	29"	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	-
121-130	-	29"	30"	30"	30"	31"	32"	33"	33"
131-140	-	29"	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	33"	34"
141-150	-	-	30"	30"	31"	31"	32"	33"	34"
151-160	-	-	30"	31"	31"	32"	32"	33"	34"
Over 160	-	-	-	31"	31"	32"	32"	33"	34"

BAT CARE TIPS

A good aluminum bat is an investment. Here are some suggestions on how to care for this high-performance piece of equipment and protect your investment:

1. Don't use an aluminum bat in extremely cold (Below 60°F) weather. Balls become more dense in low temperatures and could dent the bat when you hit them.
2. Aluminum bats with end caps are also sensitive to hot temperatures. That's because an end cap expands and contracts at different temperatures than the rest of the bat. So don't store the bat in a hot place like a car trunk. Fortunately, if the end cap ever gets damaged, it can be replaced.
3. Composite bats combine graphite, fiberglass and resin. These bats have a unique sound and feel that many batters prefer, as well as a large, forgiving sweet spot.
4. On each trip to the plate, make sure your players rotate the bat. This prevents denting that results from hitting the ball repeatedly on the same side of the bat.
5. Use older bats for batting cage practice. Today's high-performance bats are not designed for batting cage balls which are more dense than regular balls. Save your good bats for games.

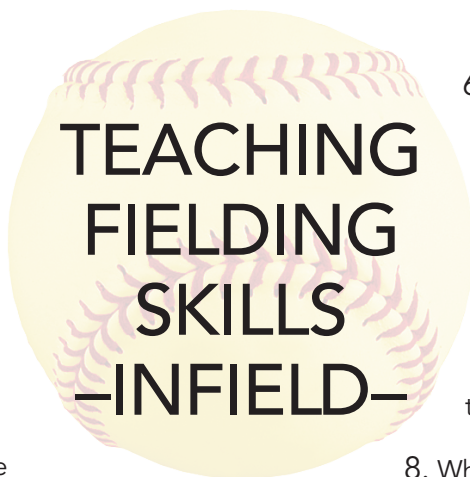


TPS[®]

The most important aspect of fielding is to anticipate every pitch. Each infielder should be prepared to react and field the ball. This will enable your players to get a good jump and will keep them from being surprised. They should field the ball first. Too many errors occur because a fielder is thinking about throwing the ball before she has it. Tell them to be aggressive and to attack the ball. Teach them to communicate with their teammates, and to always know the situation. Before every pitch, each player should know what she'll do, regardless of where the ball is hit. They should also be ready to back up plays that don't directly involve them. Practice the following methods to improve your team's infield and outfield play:

INFELDERS

1. As the pitcher winds up, players should be in the "ready" position—a well-balanced stance with feet shoulder-width apart, weight evenly distributed on the balls of the feet, and a slight bend in the knees. Your players' gloves and throwing hands should be extended in front of their bodies at the waist.
2. When fielding grounders, players should be aggressive and go after the ball. Don't let the ball play your team. A fielder should continue to move her feet as she fields the ball.
3. Tell fielders to keep their heads down and their eyes focused on the ball. This makes it easier to track the ball into the glove.
4. The ball should be fielded away from the body, using both hands. A player should field the ball between the inside of her left foot (or right foot, if she's left-handed) and the middle of her body.
5. Tell players to come out of the fielding position ready to throw the ball. To throw, a player holds the ball across the seams, aims for a specific target (i.e., the letters on a jersey), steps toward that target, and follows through. Players should allow their momentum to carry them toward the target after releasing the ball.



6. If a hot grounder is not playable, an infielder should try to knock it down. However, she shouldn't turn her head, as this only increases the chance of injury.

7. On pop-ups, tell your players to always use both hands to catch the ball. They must also clearly communicate with the other fielders to avoid collisions.

8. When tagging runners, an infielder must secure the ball in her glove with her throwing hand.

9. On run-down plays, there should be no more than two throws. The objective is to make the tag while forcing runners back to their original bases.

DRILLS

The following drills are designed to employ skills which fielders will perform during the course of a game:

1. Pick-Up Drill

Two players face each other about 20 feet apart. One player, the tosser, kneels down while the other player, the fielder, takes a fielding stance without a glove. The tosser then rolls the ball to the fielder's left or right. With palms facing up, the fielder shuffles to the ball, fields the ball and throws it underhanded back to the tosser. The two players reset and continue the drill until the fielder handles 10 balls to the right and 10 to the left. Once done, the players should switch positions and begin again.

2. Short-Hop Drill

The Short-Hop Drill also requires two players and uses the same alignment as the pick-up drill. The only difference is that the fielder uses a glove for this drill. The tosser throws sharp, one-hop grounders to the fielder. The fielder works on watching the ball into the glove and developing fluid fielding motion. Continue the drill until each player has fielded 10 chances cleanly.

The most important aspect of fielding is to anticipate every pitch. Each infielder should be prepared to react and field the ball. This will enable your players to get a good jump and will keep them from being surprised. They should field the ball first. Too many errors occur because a fielder is thinking about throwing the ball before she has it. Tell them to be aggressive and to attack the ball. Teach them to communicate with their teammates and to always know the situation. Before every pitch, each player should know what she'll do, regardless of where the ball is hit. Players should also be ready to back up plays that don't directly involve them. Practice the following methods to improve your team's infield and outfield play:

OUTFIELDERS

1. As the pitcher winds up, players should be in the "ready" position—a well-balanced stance with feet shoulder-width apart, weight evenly distributed on the balls of the feet, and a slight bend in the knees. Your players' gloves and throwing hands should be extended in front of their bodies at chest level.
2. For maximum visibility, your outfielders should use gloves with open webs.
3. An outfielder should listen to her cut-off for instructions on where to throw the ball.
4. When pursuing fly balls, outfielders must keep their eyes on the ball. If the ball is hit to an outfielder's right, she should turn to the right and look over her left shoulder. The opposite is done if a ball is hit to the left.
5. When catching fly balls, teach your players to move toward the ball and catch it with both hands at eye level on the throwing side of the body. This will best prepare them to make quick throws to the infield.
6. Outfielders represent the last line of defense. If an outfielder is unable to field the ball cleanly, she must be in a position to keep it in front of her to prevent the runners from taking extra bases. Also, remind your players to back each other up.



7. When throwing to the cut-off, outfielders should keep their throws straight and on a line.
8. On balls hit in the gap, each player must communicate clearly with the other fielders to avoid collisions.

DRILLS

The following drills are designed to employ skills which fielders will perform during the course of a game:

1. Drop-Step Drill

The Drop-Step Drill is designed to teach young players how to catch balls hit over their heads. Two players face each other about 30 feet apart. One player acts as the tosser while the other is the fielder. The tosser throws a flyball in one of three directions: over the fielder's left shoulder, right shoulder or straight over the fielder's head. The fielder breaks from the fielding stance and runs the ball down. Players must remember the first movement is to open up and step in the direction of the fly ball without back pedaling and that they must focus on the ball by looking over their shoulders.

2. Catch Drill

The Proper Catch Drill is designed to teach players how to move forward when catching a fly ball. This gives outfielders the momentum required to make quick, strong throws to the infield. Use the same two-player alignment as the drop-step drill. This time, the tosser will throw a short fly ball that the fielder must break in on. The fielder times it so they catch the ball on the move—never flat-footed—and follows with a throw. Players must remember to catch the ball at eye level on the throwing side of the body, thus allowing for a quick release.

Your catcher is your “field general.” She directs all defensive play, so she must be loud and direct and aware of the situation on the field. She must read the batters as best she can and call pitches accordingly.

CATCHERS

1. Your catcher must always be aware of her position behind the plate. Her glove hand should be set up to be in line with the back elbow of a batter. Her feet should be shoulder-width apart or slightly more. She should put her weight on the balls of her feet.
2. To conceal signals from opponents and the first and third base coaches, your catcher will give the signs close to her body and will hang her glove hand below her glove-side knee.
3. Teach your catcher to give your pitcher a large, stationary target.
4. When blocking balls in front of the plate, the catcher's first priority is to stop the ball. To do this, she drops to both knees, places her glove between her legs, and keeps her head down and her body in front of the ball.



TEACHING CATCHING AND BASE RUNNING SKILLS

Good base running is smart base running. Players must understand their own capabilities as well as those of their opponents (i.e., knowing who has a strong arm), and make sound decisions based on those factors. Remember, the fastest runner is not always the best base runner.

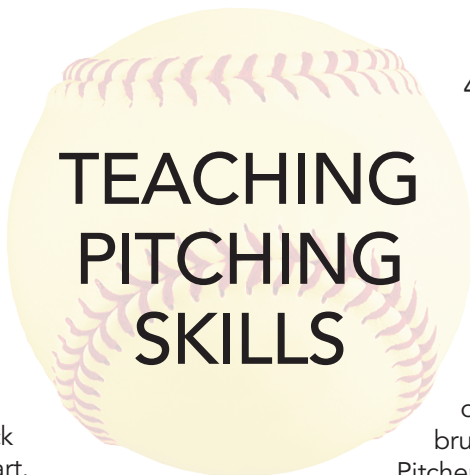
BASE RUNNERS

1. When a player makes the decision to slide, she shouldn't change her mind. Most sliding injuries occur when players change their minds in the middle of a slide.
2. When tagging up on a fly ball, a runner's eyes should follow the ball. One foot should be on the edge of the base ready to push off, and the other foot in a direct line to the next base.
3. All batted balls should be run out, fair or foul.
4. Base runners should always know the count, the number of outs and how important their run is. Most importantly, they should always know where the ball is.
5. Runners should touch every base. They should never slow down, even if they think they're out. Remember, it's the umpire's decision whether a runner is safe or out.
6. Runners should be alert, aggressive and confident. They should always anticipate the play before it happens.
7. Every runner should be sure to pay attention to the base coach for instruction.

Good technique in pitching has two benefits: the first is better game performance, the second is avoiding injury. Keeping the pitching arm in good shape is especially important for young players. Here are some tips for improved pitching performance:

PITCHERS

1. The pitcher puts her front foot on the rubber, her weight on her back foot, and her feet shoulder-width apart. She keeps her right foot slightly turned toward third base to allow for better leg and hip rotation.
2. Teach the pitcher to hold the ball on the seams without squeezing the ball. She should keep her wrist and forearms relaxed.
3. With hands together, she shifts her weight from the left foot to the right foot with a slight bend in the right knee. Her upper body will now be leaning forward.



4. Your pitcher's stride should be about the length of a long walking step and should be aimed toward her target. She should land on the ball of her stride foot to create a firm front side.

5. The arm swing must stay in line with her target. Teach her to keep her arm close to her ear at the top of the swing; her forearm should brush her hip at the release point.

Pitchers should keep a slight bend in the elbow, which allows for a loose pitching arm.

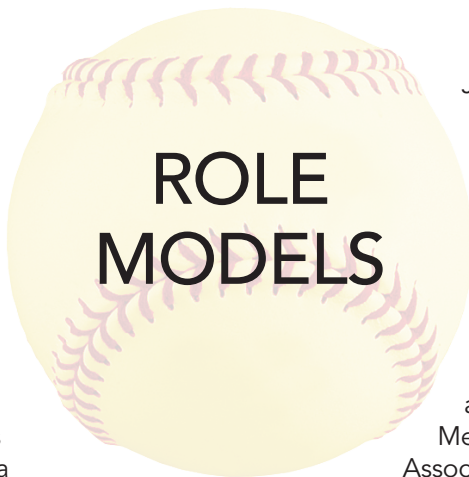
6. Your pitcher needs a relaxed follow-through. Her pivot foot should swing forward and behind the stride leg, and then be planted to the side for balance. She should finish with her glove open toward home plate, ready to field the ball.



From Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn to Ken Griffey Jr. and Derek Jeter, boys have long had baseball greats to look to as role models. Through the years, girls have had role models to look to as well. But until recently, few female players have received the recognition they deserve.

Today, standouts like Jessica Mendoza are bringing female players into the spotlight in a big way. Jessica came into prominence as a four-time, first team All-American at Stanford University, leading the team to its first NCAA Women's College World Series appearance. She was named Stanford Athlete of the Year for three consecutive years.

At the U.S. Cup event in 2001, Jessica earned what would be the first of many gold medals. A year later, she earned a gold medal at the ISF World Championships, where she hit .313 (10-13) with eight runs and seven RBI. Her streak continued when she received a third gold medal in 2003 at the Pan American Games



Jessica played a major role in bringing home a gold medal at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Jessica hit five runs and five RBI, helping ensure victory for Team USA.

As a result of her achievements on and off the field, Jessica was named President of the Women's Sports Foundation in 2009. She has also been chosen to serve as a Board Member for the National Education Association Foundation. In 2008, Jessica was chosen as one of five Olympians to visit troops and hospitals in Afghanistan.

Today Jessica is an important part of the Louisville Slugger Advisory Staff. We're proud of the work that Jessica does for us. But we're even prouder of what she does for young women across the world by giving them a true role model to follow and look up to.



Coaching a youth league team is exciting and rewarding. But from time to time, you may experience difficulty with parents. Some may want their children to play more, or they might question your judgment as a coach. This is normal, so don't feel that you're alone if this happens. Here are a few thoughts to remember when dealing with parents:

- Know what your objectives are and do what you believe to be of most value to the team, not the parents.
- Encourage parental involvement. Always listen to their ideas and feelings. Remember, they're interested and concerned because it's their children who are involved.
- Express appreciation for their interest and concern. This will make them more open and at ease with you.
- No coach can please everyone. Don't try.
- Most importantly, be fair. If you treat all players as equals, you will gain their respect.
- Resist unfair pressure. You are the coach and it's your responsibility to make the final decision.
- Don't blame the players for their parents' actions. Try to maintain a fair attitude.
- Make certain all parents know your ground rules. Have your rules, regulations, philosophy, practice dates and times, etc. printed and distributed to all parents. If necessary, have a parent meeting before the season begins to discuss your operating procedures.



- Be consistent! If you change a rule or philosophy during the season, you may be in for trouble. If you do change something, make sure the parents are informed as soon as possible.

- Handle any confrontation one-on-one and not in a crowd situation. Don't be defensive. Don't argue with parents. Listen to their views and be thankful.

- Don't discuss individual players with other parents. The grapevine will hang you every time.

- Ask parents not to criticize their children during a practice or game. Don't let your players be humiliated, even by their own parents. Explain that you as the coach must be given complete control of your team when they are on your "turf."

- Parents must accept the fact that umpires, coaches and other league officials are volunteers and should not be subjected to public criticism.

Always remember that you will be dealing with children and parents with different backgrounds and ideals. One of your main challenges as a coach is to deal with these differences in a positive manner so the team's season will be an exciting and enjoyable experience for all.