

SOFTBALL IS GOOD *for Academics*

By MITCH ALEXANDER

Many of us have heard the “common knowledge” claims that boys who participate in football or baseball are more successful in life. Participation in sports is thought to help boys develop leadership skills in the sometimes quasi-military roles in boys’ sports. There are “captains” who lead the team. There are often rites of passage for new team members. There is a seniority system. The leadership skills they learn are thought to translate into teaching boys how to lead or be led, which may help to make boys into good soldiers, policemen, and even salesmen.

What about girls’ youth softball? Are there any life skills developed as a result of being on a softball team? You bet there are. My daughter and her cohorts just entered into middle school. As I waited to pick her up on her first day of school, I witnessed several conversations between new middle school students and their parents. I knew many of these kids; some through coaching them in softball. I performed an informal survey to see which kids were happy or unhappy on their first day of school. What I saw amazed me. Every new student that I knew who plays softball came out bubbly and happy. Not one softball player was sad or seemed stressed out. However, I saw plenty of girls who were unhappy. One even pleaded with her mother to not make her go back the next day. I spoke with a few other parents of softball players and their daughters were also taking the new school experience and responsibilities in stride. I began wondering what role softball had in helping the softball players be so well adjusted to this new environment.

When kids are part of a team, each player has a role and a set of responsibilities. They know what is expected of them. Pitchers need to strikeout batters. Outfielders need to track the ball and make that important catch. They know the consequences of not

fulfilling their responsibilities. They know what it’s like to be counted on to perform. Their teammates will suffer the consequences if they don’t perform well. Kids who haven’t played on teams don’t have these experiences and may not understand the concept of roles and responsibilities. In the school setting, families are the “team” and they count on their “players” to get a homerun (good grade on a test) or to perform to the best of their abilities.

Softball players also understand how to learn new skills and how to participate in organized practices. They know what is expected of them so that the practices run smoothly and efficiently. Practices are not very different from going to class or from studying for tests. These are where new skills are taught and improved through repetition. Players have learned how to organize their study sessions much like practices – certain parts require memorization (repetition), others require understanding (game strategy). Tests are similar to the “big game” or tournament on the weekend. The test (game) is where you perform your skills – some new ones, and some cumulative.

Playing youth softball also exposes the players to new challenges, ones they need to adapt to. When playing a new team, a different strategy may need to be employed to excel. In one case, you need to rely heavily on the short game if your batters can’t solve a certain pitcher. In another, the long ball is called for. If the catcher is slow, you can delay steal and manufacture some runs. Every game is different. This teaches the players to be flexible and not be stressed when up against something new or different. Playing softball also teaches kids to learn how to motivate themselves and their teammates. When the team is down in runs, and one player hits a heroic shot to the fence, they show the other players that the game can change with one hit from a motivated player. One player’s motivation can start a rally. The same is

true for school work – the student athlete is tired and wants to watch TV, but knows they need to motivate themselves to keep going so they can achieve their goals.

The softball players I “studied” who started middle school this year seemed to adapt quickly to their new environment and they were ready to face new challenges. They appeared to understand their roles and responsibilities as students. They know how to or-

ganize good study sessions and have learned good study habits from attending well run practices. They know what it takes to compete in both school and on the field. They know how to motivate themselves and their study partners (teammates). They respect their teachers as they would their coaches. Playing softball provides life lessons and real world usable benefits that can have a positive impact on both schoolwork and in the workplace.



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