

# Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY *The Softball Academy*

Welcome to 2013 – winter workouts are well underway for most youth travel teams. The indoor facilities are jam-packed with coaches and parents running every kind of throwing, fielding, and hitting drill imaginable. Lots of coaches are working on agility and strength building as well. Most of us have heard the statement that softball is 80% mental and 20% physical, and the physical aspect is what most coaches focus on for their winter workout clinics. These physical workouts address the 20% of the equation and maybe a little of the mental part, but largely the 80% is overlooked! This is especially important for youth players, who come from varied levels of training and experience. So how can you effectively address the 80%?

One method that has been very effective for us is to hold Softball Academy sessions (hence the name of this column). You can hold them on the field with a 2x3 whiteboard. Even better during the winter, is to hold Softball Academy at the manager's or coach's house. Gather the players in a room or

finished basement and get a large whiteboard and dry erase markers. This is very effective for youth softball players, especially for the 14u and under teams. Have a different family provide snacks and hot cocoa each week.

Here are a few of the topics we have had success with. Have a session discussing live versus dead balls. You would be surprised how many players, not to mention coaches have very little understanding of when the ball is live. Not sure yourself? Grab a rule book from the organization you regularly play under and highlight all of the rules that dictate live/dead ball play and then put a post-it note on the edge of the page so you can easily find each rule. Another possibility - and the players ALWAYS love this – invite a local high school or better yet, college softball player to come down and teach this academy session. Ask the players to think about when the ball is live and dead and raise their hands with ideas so you can compile a list on the whiteboard. Usually, the obvious ones are listed on the top and the less obvious ones are on the bottom.

This gets the players to think about the topic and their experiences. Almost always, one player asks a question about a play from a recent game they didn't understand and why the ball was either live or called dead.

Once you have established the players understand when the ball is live, have another session about stealing and especially delayed stealing. Draw a diamond on the board and illustrate various scenarios and ask the players what they would do in each case. Go around the room and ask specific players, how they would handle each play. You can run the scenario "live", by drawing where the runners are, where the fielders are, and where the ball is. An especially effective use of this tool is to ask players who you know have had difficulty with certain scenarios to run the play and tell you where they are. You can have them speak their answers, or you can give them a marker and have them draw what they would do or where they would go as you draw what the fielders and the ball are doing. For example, if you have a player that has difficulty taking off for second on a passed ball, run that scenario with her. Have her describe in detail what she's looking for and what she's doing. Another great use of the whiteboard is

to teach and reinforce positional play.

The player who usually plays first base probably does not understand the nuances of how to play second or short stop. We've all seen this – a player can't make a game or tournament and you need to shift things around, and the player who is great at one position doesn't know what to do to backup another position. Use the whiteboard. Draw a diamond on the board and give each player a token of some kind that says what position they are playing. The tokens can be softballs with the positions written on them, or baseball caps with the positions clipped on to them, or even just coffee can lids. It doesn't really matter what you use. Start a game, and your fielders need to say what they are doing. Before you declare that the pitch is thrown, have them call where the play is. Infielders call together, and outfielders call where to go if the ball is in the air or on the ground. Correct as necessary until they get it right. Next, point to each player and ask what they are doing or where they are going. Work on bunt positioning, how to handle overthrows to the pitcher, outfield backing up the infield, cutoff positioning, etc. When the fictitious other team hits deep to the outfield, have the players change where to make the play and throw the ball. Write balls and strikes and outs on the board.

Switch up positions after the inning is over. You can just rotate the tokens left or right. After you do this a few times, the players will really start to understand how to play each position. They also have the benefit of hearing the starters for each position say what they are doing.

Make sure your softball academy sessions are fun for the players so they want to come back next time. An optional way to end the session is to replay old varsity or professional softball games you may have games you may have on your DVR. The WCWS games

are great to watch and comment about, but the high school games offer more mistakes for you to use as teaching tools. Don't keep pausing and rewinding as the players quickly lose interest. Keep the volume on the TV low so you can be heard without yelling. These softball academy sessions will really pay off by reducing mental mistakes and making sure your players understand the rules of the game! One final tip, take pictures of the lists you compile on the whiteboard and email them out to the team for reinforcement.

*Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at [mitchalexander@optonline.net](mailto:mitchalexander@optonline.net).*



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