

# Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

## Why Do You Want to Coach Rec Ball?

As we find ourselves about to start another season of rec ball, I thought it would be appropriate to remind coaches to ask themselves why they coach and what rec ball is all about. All too often, we all hear horror stories about the politics and in-fighting that go on in our local town softball programs. Recreational softball programs have existed for decades. Almost without exception they are managed and coached by parent volunteers. One observation, which is of course open for argument, is that parents sometimes coach baseball to get their sons playing time because they are not the top players, where parents usually coach softball because their daughters are the top players. This situation of coaches having their kids as the top players may not be a good thing in many cases and may set up even the parents with the best intentions to act in ways they could not predict.

Rec programs are often run for honorable reasons. You hear things like, "it's all about the kids" or "my daughter loves (insert your town's rec ball program

name) so she can have fun playing with her friends." Rec ball programs when run correctly, should be pure fun for the kids. Often they are not. Oh, it's not that the program organizers don't have good intentions, it's usually that the parents make demands that tarnish the purity of the basic concepts of rec ball – to have fun, to learn how to play, and to get some exercise. Parents demand playoffs, trophies, awards, etc. This sets up a major conflict between the coaches. Most coaches never get involved with travel ball, and don't understand the differences between travel and rec ball. They are worlds apart.

In the best programs, all teams make the playoffs, if they even have playoffs. This encourages the coaches to let the players have fun and not worry about their win-loss record. Programs that have bracketed or seeded playoffs are really looking for trouble. This helps to motivate coaches to win their games and to put having fun as a secondary goal. Coaches who are often pushed by the players' parents through a type of peer pressure to

win, respond to this type of motivation.

Most coaches will try to do the right thing and train their players how to play this wonderful game of fastpitch softball. Things go great in pre-season practice. The girls have fun, they pay attention (mostly) try to please their coach, they get some exercise, and look like they are having the time of their lives. Then the games start and it's like someone put Dr. Jekyll's potion in the seeds from the snack stand. The games quickly turn from "being all about the kids," and suddenly it's all about the coaches. Coach Bob has never beaten Coach Sue and will stop at nothing to beat her this season. Do you get it? "Beat her." It's not one team of youth athletes of all skill levels having fun playing with and against their friends, it's all about the coaches. He must beat "her." Coach Sue may be totally unaware that Coach Bob has a vendetta he plans on executing this season. Coach Bob must win at all costs.

What started out as a fun experience for these female athletes, turns into something it was never supposed to be. "Daddy Ball" comes into play (see my article in issue 6) and the Coach's daughter may play every inning while other kids sit one, two, or, three innings!

The coach may use tricks such as having the girls that aren't good hitters, step into the pitch and "take one for the team," or squat down at the plate so low that their posteriors are a mere few inches over the ground to minimize the strike zone. The coach may encourage his players to make noises while the opposing pitcher (who is probably friends with several girls on his team) is in her windup. Then, when his team is in the field, complains if even the slightest noise is made when his pitcher is in the circle. He may also instruct his pitcher to hit a good batter. Rules will be broken (that's how we have been playing it for years), rules will be made up (that's now considered a dead ball). In the most heinous cases, umpires may be encouraged to give preferential treatment to one team over their opponent.

In many programs, local rules exist to "ensure" that every player has an opportunity to play every position (pitcher and catcher may be the exception, or not). The Dr. Jekyll coaches (who by the way are often normal, mild mannered, upstanding citizens in the community off of the field) may not rotate their players so everyone gets a chance. Debbie, who always plays short stop (and may be a coach's daughter), plays every inning there, while the three (or four) outfielders are the ones that get rotated.

Many times, these coaches are the yellers. These coaches may berate their players, and curse from the comfort of their padded bucket in the entrance to the dugout. One little mistake, or bad at bat, and Captain Curser jumps off his bucket and unleashes a tirade of expletives at the poor girl who had the bad misfortune of being drafted by this uncaring coach. They may also use passive aggressive methods to mentally attack the players who don't perform as desired.

These coaches must win at all costs. They feel it's their reputation on the line. After all if they were really a good coach, they would have winning seasons every year, right? Think about the coaches in your organization who win year after year and take first place every year. Are they good coaches? They may know how to train their players. They may know all the tricks in the book, too. But look at the players. Are they having fun? Are there any girls crying on that team? Are there girls who always play left field and spend at least a couple of innings on the bench? What about the girls on the other teams when they play First Place Freddy? How do they feel? Now think about if this coach is really a good coach – probably not. At least not for rec ball. This coach may belong in travel ball.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, you have the coach who is all gung ho about running a team but either doesn't know how to train young female athletes, or doesn't have the time to hold practices. This Missing Marvin, may only hold warm-ups before games if they even attend the games. The girls don't receive the training they need and expected. They probably lose close to every game. They feel lousy about themselves – not because they lost their games, but because they don't know how to play or what to do. They feel ill-equipped to play.

Rec ball is for fun. Travel ball is for competition. I am all in favor of competition – but in the correct venue. Rec ball is not the correct venue. Competition in my opinion is important, necessary and teaches youth athletes required life lessons, but when appropriate. At the end of the day, who cares if your team came in first, second, or last? What is important is if your players had fun, learned how to play, and got some exercise. If your players did – then you are a GREAT coach and you helped to foster their love for the game of fastpitch softball. They will most likely sign up without hesitation to join next season.

If you are coaching rec ball, please honor the game and give everyone a chance.

Sit all players fairly. Rotate players so they can play any position they feel comfortable playing (and can safely handle). A girl who can safely try catching this season, may fall in love with it and request her parents to get her catching lessons in the off-season! Do not show favoritism to your daughter (or her best friends). Hold meaningful, fun practices – regularly, not sporadically. Treat the other team fairly and with respect. The coaches, players, and parents on the other team today, will be the coaches, players, and parents on your team next season. They will remember how they were treated. Treat the umpires with respect – be a role model for your players. If you yell at the umpires or curse them under your breath, you are teaching your players to do the same thing!

Teach your players how to handle conflict and disagreements properly. Remember you are coaching young girls and do not curse, talk about inappropriate topics, or

smoke around them. Treat your players with respect. They are in your care and the rec ball organization, the players, and their parents have put their trust in you to do the right thing.

So ask yourself “Why do you want to coach rec ball?” If you are honest with yourself, the answer may shock you. It may not have anything to do with community service, or training young athletes, or even being a nice guy/gal. It may have everything to do with your ego. If it does, re-think your reasons for coaching. If you cannot reconcile them so that your thinking is aligned with the best intentions of rec ball, do something else.

If you are a parent and your daughter ends up on a team with one of the coaches I mentioned in this article, please print this article out and show it to them. Hopefully, it will remind them why they are coaching rec ball and how to treat their players.

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