

# Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

## Summer Tryout Mayhem – Too Many Choices

Up here in the New York / Tri-state area we hold our annual softball team tryouts during the month of August. Some teams start the first weekend, others wait until the middle and finally some wait until the end. The pattern seems to be that the perceived top flite teams start early to try and lock in the better players, the middle level teams wait until the middle of the month once the best players have committed and the mid-tier players received their rejections, and then the town or rec type teams hold tryouts at the end of the month.

We held our tryouts the second weekend in August – as our organization was still involved in 18u showcases, so we waited. Our local newspaper had advertisements for tryouts for no fewer than fourteen teams at the 12u level, and not everyone advertised this year. Some of the bigger organizations decided they didn't have to. By the time our tryout day arrived, we were aware of eighteen organizations holding tryouts that weekend. Tryouts are not coordinated between the teams so many teams had tryouts at the same time all located in different towns and counties. Our local softball scene is incredibly diluted right now. Some organizations have two to four teams competing at the same level, as well as with other teams. All together, we probably have close to thirty 12u teams vying for the same players!

In the past, there were four or five good organizations and four or five mid-tier organizations. Each typically only had one team, giving a total of no more than a dozen teams. The rosters used to be twelve to fifteen players deep. Now rosters are only nine or ten players on average and the exception is the twelve or thirteen player team. Some parents who thought they could do a better job than a past

coach picked a team name and started their own “organization” or asked an existing organization to let them start another team at the same level they were playing at.

Is this a good situation? Well, I guess it depends on your vantage point and what type of player your daughter is. From an existing manager’s perspective, we now have fewer players to choose from, meaning each team is likely to have a lower overall talent level as there are only so many highly talented players to go around. Some teams will certainly fold as they can’t find enough players to fill a roster and deal with illness, injuries, or things like birthdays and vacations. If you’re a high end player, this isn’t a good situation either as it means the all-star team you were dreaming of being a part of won’t happen. However, if you’re a mid-tier or town/rec type player, this is great news. Smaller rosters mean more playing time for you and more choice in teams.

We’ve also seen another major downside in this. Players of all types playing on what would normally be considered the “wrong” type of team for them. High-end players playing on mid-tier or even town/rec teams so they look like superstars. It’s a great power trip for the player, at least for the time being. However, once the other players catch up a bit, and the high-end player isn’t receiving high-end instruction, the gap between high-end and mid-tier closes quickly. Mid-tier players who may have been invited to play on a high-end team, now don’t want to be the last player on the roster. They would much rather play on lower-end teams to be looked at as a superstar as well. In the end, these players miss out on some of the better training and coaching that the high-end teams would have provided.

Local teams that have been powerhouses for years have recently broken up. These teams were a staple here. You could always count on them having the best players and winning most of the tournaments. Families are angry with one another. Players aren’t speaking or as I guess is now done, “Instagramming”

each other. Players who were best friends last season are now blocking each other on social media so their ex-friends can't follow them. The players and teams are all re-aligning. The chit-chat on the sidelines and over text messaging is amazing, and the fall tournament season hasn't even started yet.

I have spoken with several managers who "lost" their teams. They don't know what happened or what they did wrong. Some merged with other teams, some have placed their daughters on other teams and are taking the season off to regroup in the spring. They put a lot into these teams: two practices a week, indoor training, special guest instructors, fifteen or more tournaments a year, league play, etc. They repeatedly say, "I don't know what I did wrong. What else did the parents want?" The answer is complicated, yet simple. Families have more choices now and people often believe that some other team will be a better fit for their player using the "grass is always greener" concept. Oftentimes, parents later realize they made a bad decision and the new team is not a good fit, but it's too late.

I've also seen a lot of parental indulging lately, where parents give into their players' little-thought out desires. Sue wants to play on a team with her best friend Emma, even though Emma's team is not in the same talent class as Sue's old team was. In fact, Emma's team doesn't even play in tournaments, just league play with other rec type teams. However Sue's parents want their daughter to be happy and are equally tired of hearing Sue complain about her old coach's hard practices.

My team saw significant changes this fall. One player left via the grass is always greener concept, another left on a "if she's going there I want to go there too" tagalong, one aged out, one decided to take the fall off for personal reasons, one changed teams three times and ended up with the last team she tried out for although she accepted positions on all three teams. Choices. Now there are more teams to choose from. Players can move around. Many times when one

player moves, another or a group move because they want to stay together and be with their friends. This is the “safety in numbers” concept and support system.

Psychologist, Barry Schwartz noted in his 2004 book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, that choice brings freedom and autonomy but it also brings about anxiety over making the RIGHT choice. Sometimes having too many choices affords the participants to not spend the necessary time deciding if they are making the RIGHT choice. Instead, sometimes it’s just easier to pick one alternative over the other and move on. Schwartz provided a six step process for making good decisions, which is a good framework for parents and players to follow:

1. Figure out your goals. What do you want out of a softball team? Remember your last/current team, especially when things were at their best as well as when the season ended.
2. Evaluate the importance of your goals. Assign an importance to each goal. For example, a high level of training is a 9 out of 10 of importance to me.
3. List your options. Determine which teams are included in your wide set of possibilities. Don’t eliminate any yet unless they are out of the question, like too far away.
4. Evaluate each option and how it will help you meet your goals. Weigh the pros and cons for each goal on each team. If you don’t have enough information upon which to make an informed decision, do some research. Speak with the coach, past and current players and visit the organization’s website.
5. Pick the best fit. Now that you have evaluated each goal and how each team is likely to meet it, you are ready to make a decision.
6. Modify your goals. Now that you’ve made a decision, and hopefully are on the team of your dreams, reconsider your goals. Are they still valid? Has anything changed? For example a 14u player might not care much about college recruiting, but a 16u player might.

Often consumers don't make the correct choice and suffer the consequences. The same holds true for families picking a softball team. It's easy to move in the fall, but more difficult in the winter or spring. If you don't get the decision right, it could mean a year of lost progress. Schwartz also warns that when there are too many choices, people will make hypothetical trade-offs instead of really examining each opportunity's potential. Be careful not to make these trade-offs while you are evaluating each option. Instead hold off on these until the very end and only use trade-offs if one option does not outshine all the others.

Families should seriously consider their choices. Hardly ever is the grass greener elsewhere. It's usually the same grass just cut differently. Once you walk on it a few times, you quickly see it's the same. Sometimes it's not grass at all but plastic turf. Yes it's green, and yes it's shaped like grass, but it's artificial all the way through. Most people only consider the bad things about a current team or situation. They fail to account for or recognize all the good things as well. You really need to consider both sides before deciding on making a change. Parents also need to understand what is motivating their players to consider changing teams. What's behind it? Is it a valid reason to make a change or is the change being considered just because it's available? We picked up some great kids at our tryouts and I'm excited to spend at least the next year working with them.

*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 [fastpitch2001@optonline.net](mailto:fastpitch2001@optonline.net).*

