



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Next Level Softball for Youth Teams

Ok, so your select/travel team is doing all the right things: your girls are throwing correctly with good mechanics, they are attacking the ball and have good swings, and their fielding is sound with few errors. In other words they consistently play well. So what's next? What do they need to do to get to the next level of play?

8u-12u play is basically the same – very developmental. You work on the basic mechanics of play and a little strategy. As they progress through 12u, you start working more on refining skills and increase the amount of strategy you go over. At the 14u and up level, it's time to work on bringing your players and team to the next level. At 14u and up, you're working with mini-adults and all their complexities. Hormones play a role. Pressure from school plays a role. Pressure from family and friends plays a role. Dating plays a role. Put all this into the mix and those that continue to play are usually dedicated to the sport and have decided they want to excel and keep playing. They are now ready to learn more strategy. It's no longer just go out and play. Now it's play with a purpose.

First on the “next level” list is batting. Players started off just wanting to make contact and hit the ball. Now, they still need to make



contact but it's become much more difficult. The pitching is getting faster, with fewer pitches being thrown over the middle of the plate. Spin and junk pitches are regularly being thrown.

- Situational hitting – Players need to have multiple tools in their tool boxes. They need to at a minimum be able to bunt. Even Crystal Bustos tells the story about how she was asked to bunt with a .500+ batting average! Another great tool that every player can work on is the slash (show bunt, pull the bat back and take a short swing) which opens up holes in the other team's defense. Some lefty players (righties too) should also master slapping from the left side of the plate. These are great situational swings that will bring a player's performance to the next level.
- Positional hitting – Instead of just batting the ball wherever it goes, players need to understand the strategy of placing the ball where it will be the most effective. If you have runners on first and second, you probably don't want to place a batted ball near third base or you will have a rather quick out. Instead, if hitting away, place the ball on the right side of the field to give the runner on second a chance to safely get to third.
- Pitch Selection – Instead of swinging at all pitches that are close to the plate, players need to understand the strategy of pitch selection. Have your players watch video of a WCWS game and you can see the players watch pitches go by or foul off a lot of pitches. The idea is to first know what your preferred pitch is: do you like to hit high and inside pitches? If the first pitch is your preferred pitch, you should be all over it. Let's say it's not and you don't swing – strike one. Now, you need to fall back to your second zone – in the



previous example of high and inside, maybe your second zone is any reasonable high pitch. If the second pitch falls in your second zone, swing. If not, let it go by. If you have 2 strikes on you, the third pitch needs to be addressed differently. Obviously if it's a ball, don't swing. If it's not a pitch in your first or second zones, foul it off. Keep doing this until you get the pitch you want. If players can learn this method, they have a good chance of either drawing a walk or getting the pitch they want and driving the ball. If a player isn't good at inside pitches, it doesn't help for them to be forced to swing at a pitch they will either pop out or ground out with. Using proper pitch selection and this method can also help wear down a pitcher, further helping your team.

Next on the list is improved fielding positioning and strategy. Watch many 12u games and you will probably see players mostly standing around, especially the outfielders. Players don't understand the next level responsibilities they have.

- Three B's – We work with our players to understand that they are always doing one of the three B's: playing the batted ball, making a play at or covering a base, and finally backing up the play. Most players that have played an infield position understand the basic responsibilities of that position. Shortstop is the position that requires early youth players to have a better concept of the three B's. They need to cover third base in some situations, second base in others, and backup throw backs to the pitcher (your shortstop is normally backing up throw backs from the catcher to the pitcher, right?)
- Outfielders need to bring their game to the next level instead of



just standing around. Get them in the habit of being the most active players on the field. Centerfielders need to back up right and left field. Corner outfielders need to back up throws to their infield counterparts. They also need to run in and cover the bases under certain situations. They also need to know when to play extra deep, extra shallow, and normal depth.

- Preventing runs – Players need to know the number of outs and score at all times. This knowledge will help them understand what they need to do to prevent runs. A little strategy goes a long way here. Knowing how to handle certain situations is key to keeping everyone on the same page and knowing what the coaching staff expects.
- Catchers and pitchers don't just stay in their respective chalked regions, they need to cover other areas on the field as backup. If there is a pickle play between first and second, the catcher can come down the first base line (if there are no other runners) and backup the throw back to first. Similarly, most pitchers know they need to cover the plate on a passed ball with a runner on third base, but do they know they have other responsibilities for backing up plays?

Base running is another important skill that needs to be improved to get to the next level.

- Early youth players develop a one base mentality. They get to a base and stop. Players need to understand when they can run and how to take advantage of earning extra bases. Slide and pop-up base stealing is important especially on second base which is fre-



quently overthrown by the catcher.

- Understanding how to tag up is another critical skill that must be practiced and improved on, especially for runners in scoring position.
- Players need to work on the timing of picking up the third base coach and understanding what they are being told to do and how to properly execute it.
- Watching for the throw back from catcher to pitcher and knowing when to take advantage of a missed throw back.
- Understanding that a pitched ball that hits the pitcher's leg or is dropped in the pitching motion is still live and the base-runner can advance (in most rules) can make a difference in one run games.
- Understanding the rhythm of the game. If a runner takes a lead off first base with second base open and the catcher tries to pick off the runner at first, the runner takes off for second base as soon as the ball is thrown. We don't want our runners to dive back for first base unless second base is occupied. We instruct our players to watch the catcher's fingers. As soon as the fingers are straightened, the ball can't be stopped. This is the signal to sprint to second base.

Finally, throwing is an evolving skill that must improve over time. Early youth players are happy to get the ball in the vicinity of their target. As the players mature, the throws get better and better: in-field throws become less like a rainbow and more like a clothesline.



- Outfielders need to work on making the throw to home on one or two bounces without a cutoff, but using the cutoff to help guide where to make the throw.
- All players need to practice various types of footwork and throws to be used in different situations. This includes dart throws, flips, three-quarter sway throws, etc. I can't tell you how many outs we have gotten by using front flips, back flips, and glove to glove flips!

The above is not an exhaustive list for next level play but it is a starting point. 14u and up players need to start to understand the strategy of the game. When to play short ball vs. long ball. How to “manufacture” runs. Pitchers and catchers need to work together on an appropriate pitching strategy for each pitcher. Catchers and infielders need to work on defending against the steal. Offense needs to work on taking advantage of every opportunity that presents itself. Each extra base earned puts the runner that much closer to scoring.

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.

