



# SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

## *How to Pick a New Travel Team*

Last September, I wrote about the mayhem of our local tryouts (“Summer Tryout Mayhem – Too Many Choices” in Fastpitch Softball Magazine Issue 13) with 30 teams vying for the same players. I offered some advice on using a six step method developed by Barry Schwartz to make good decisions and applied it to selecting a travel team. This tryout season, I offer a perspective on the attributes that may be important to you and your daughter when selecting a new travel team.

Families may get aggravated with their current team - with the players and/or the coaching staff. Parents and kids may not agree with coaching decisions. There are many triggers that start families thinking they want to look for a new team. Maybe some of the other players aren't putting in the effort they should be. Maybe some kids don't attend every practice. Maybe some can't make every game due to one reason or another. Maybe the player feels she is being pushed too hard by the coach. Maybe the other players don't cheer as much as she does. As I have previously mentioned in other installments of Softball Academy, and I will say again – the grass is often NOT greener on the other team. You should be really sure you need or want to switch teams. The issues that currently



bother you about your current team may also be present on a new team – even if you specifically ask about it and receive assurances that it doesn't exist. In many areas, there are few teams to choose from and burning your bridges with one team may be a problem in the future.

There are plenty of bad situations out there that warrant a team change. Coaches who don't know how to train youth female athletes. Coaches who are abusive to their players. Coaches who cannot communicate with parents effectively. Coaches who run a team only so their daughter gets maximum playing time, etc. Some situations cannot be corrected and youth athletes should not waste their time and energy dealing with them. Once you have decided that your daughter needs to find a new team there are many factors you need to consider and questions you need to ask.

As a manager and coach of a youth Fastpitch team, I am asked many questions about my team. I am even asked these questions from parents and players who cannot join my team even if they wanted to - too old, too far away, etc. Often the questions are similar and I have tried to capture many of them so you know what to consider and ask of teams you are trying out for. I highly recommend you read my article from last September and apply the six step decision method to the following attributes. It will help you make an informed, logical, less emotional decision.

- Youth softball has an interesting and problematic attribute where two birth years play together. For example, 14u teams that are currently forming cannot have players older than a 2000 birth year and typically consist of players born in either 2000 or 2001.



You need to understand the composition of a team. If your daughter is born in 2001 and the team is primarily a 2000 team (also check what age the manager's daughter is as that usually sets the time the team will move up to the next level), your daughter will need to either move up before she has to or find a new team at the end of the year. Conversely, if your daughter is a 2000 and the team is a 2001 team, your daughter must find a new team by the end of 2015 (and maybe as soon as Fall 2015 since new teams mostly form in August).

- What does the coaching staff consist of? Is the team run by and trained by parents? Is the team run by parents but the players are trained by current or ex-college players? Is the team run by a paid coach? Each of these scenarios has pros and cons and you need to carefully consider which you want. Teams run by paid coaches sound like a great option, and sometimes they may be, but in many cases they may be problematic. Paid coaches who have a full-time job may not do a great job running a team, which many of us know IS a full time job.
- What certifications and experience do the coaches have? If the team is parent run and coached, it's important to make sure they are certified and/or have experience running a team and training youth female athletes. Mothers who have played softball typically have the experience to understand how to train young ladies as they went through the process themselves. I always recommend that at least one coach on a team be a female so that the players have someone to talk to and identify with.
- If a parent runs the team or coaches the team – what position



does their daughter play? If it's the same position your daughter plays you need to understand how they will share the position or will the coach only have their daughter play that position?

- What is the competitive nature of the team? Does the coach see the team as an "A" team, "B" team, or a recreational team? How does the rating fit with your daughter's level of play and goals?
- How often does the team RELIABLY practice? A team can advertise that they practice twice a week and then cancel one practice most weeks, meaning they reliably practice once a week. You should also consider how far away practices are held from your house. You should make sure the number of practices and distance you must travel meet your expectations.
- Does the team schedule any clinics or camps with outside trainers? Are hitting coaches brought in to supplement the training schedule? Are pitching/catching coaches provided?
- What does the team do during school ball or during Spring/Summer Town ball, including Williamsport. If your daughter doesn't play town ball and the team shuts down for local league play or Williamsport runs, your daughter will not have any softball for weeks or even months. You need to understand the team's goals and expectations around other types of play.
- What is the team's policy on guest play or pick-up play? Can your daughter help out her friend's team if they are short a player or is she not allowed to play for any other team?



- Is the team a league team or a tournament team? If your daughter wants to play in competitive tournaments and the team is primarily going to play in league play, you will be disappointed. Make sure you know what the plan is for the next year.
- Are tournaments local or do they require travel and overnight stays. Older players should expect further travel, while younger players may be able to play locally. However, you should get a good feeling what the plan is and what is included in your annual dues before getting involved.
- Is the team planning on attending a national event, like the World Series? If you aren't expecting to be away during national events (typically in July) don't sign up for a team that's going to one.
- What are the expected annual dues? Also find out exactly what is and what is not included. Are the costs pass through or marked up. Some organizations double tournament fees to build their bank account. Ask if fees are refundable should things not work out and you decide to leave or they decide to drop your daughter from their roster. Also find out if the organization requires you to "pay up" to the 18u team to support their showcase travel schedule.
- Does the organization assist in college recruiting and if so to what extent. Obviously this is more important at higher levels. How many college showcases will the team attend and does this fit with your expectations? Will the showcases benefit your daughter and include recruiters from schools in the area she is interested in? For example, if your daughter wants to attend an east coast school and



the showcases the team is attending are all on the west coast with no east coast recruiters you should consider a different team or at least understand you may need to find a showcase team in the area your daughter wants to attend college.

- Does the organization require your daughter to take lessons with organization affiliated instructors (and sometimes the organization's leader or family members)? If not, then are there any requirements or expectations for your daughter to take outside lessons for hitting, pitching, catching, agility, or fielding?
- Does the organization carry insurance and if so what kind? You should also understand what is covered. Many organizations carry what is known as secondary coverage where athletes are expected to have primary coverage and any medical assistance that is required is paid through the primary coverage first. You should also find out how deductibles are handled.
- What size roster is the team expecting to carry? Sometimes, younger teams can carry smaller rosters as players don't have many commitments or responsibilities to deal with and can make most practices and games. Older teams typically carry larger rosters as players have more things going on in their lives and they cannot always make every game or tournament. The number should meet your expectations. Small rosters offer more playing time, but sometimes have trouble fielding a team. Larger rosters offer less playing time for each player, but hardly ever have issues fielding a team.
- What fundraising activities are required? Some families prefer



organizations that include pre-arranged fundraising activities to offset the cost of annual dues. Other families dislike having to peddle cookie dough door-to-door even if it saves a few hundred dollars a year.

- What is the social aspect of the team? Some teams are more like a social club than a sports team focused on training players to compete at the highest levels. If your daughter is looking for a social club and the team is comprised of players from different counties or states, she will be disappointed that she cannot hangout with her teammates on weekends when there are no tournaments. Similarly, if your daughter is interested in improving her skills and the team is more about looking at Instagram postings, she will also be disappointed and quickly look to find a new team.
- Does the organization develop players or do they look to recruit the best players they can find? If they are a recruiting team, it may be just a matter of time before a better player is found and your daughter is dropped. Teams that develop players are usually more cohesive and less competitive internally, while recruiting teams can be cutthroat.

As you can see there are many things to consider when selecting a new travel team. I did not create an exhaustive list of all the attributes or questions to ask, but answers to these questions should form a strong foundation on what the team will be like. These questions should also get you thinking about what else you need to ask. You should also answer them with respect to your current team and see how a new team compares, the answers may surprise you.

