



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Halloween Can Be Scary. Getting Hit by A Batted Ball Is A Nightmare

It's October and Halloween stores and decorations are everywhere. Fox News recently reported that families will spend over 7.4 billion dollars this year on Halloween. That's amazing. Kids generally love Halloween. They love to trick or treat. They love to go to Haunted Houses or corn mazes. They love to go to Halloween parties dressed up as their favorite celebrity or monster. However, families don't seem to pay the same attention to safety on the softball fields as they do to what has become a kids' holiday. One simple \$50 safety product can save months or years of suffering..... or worse.

Last week, just miles from where I am writing this article, a father was front-tossing during batting practice from behind an L-screen to his son's 11u travel baseball team before a game. One of the pitches was hit just right - a line drive back up the middle. The coach was exposed at that instant and the ball hit him in the head. He immediately dropped to the ground. A short time later he was pronounced dead at a local hospital. This story received national news coverage. Friends of ours know the family. The coach's daughter plays softball. This was a freak accident and something you hardly ever hear about.



There are more than two million girls playing softball in the United States. The older and potentially more powerful a youth softball player is, the higher the risk of serious injury to the batter's opponents. Approximately 360,000 girls play softball at the high school level. High school players (typically 16u and 18u) represent some of the strongest hitters in youth softball and theoretically result in the most dramatic injuries. Just to make sure you understand what kind of injuries we're talking about, here is a partial list of softball-related head/face injuries: death, concussion, broken nose, broken cheek bone, broken orbital bone, broken upper jaw, broken teeth (worse when orthodontics are involved), broken lower jaw, dislocated lower jaw, fractured skull, ear damage, crushed sinus cavity, ruptured eye, retinal injuries, etc.

According to the 2013 National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance System compiled by UC Denver, more than 58,000 injuries are estimated to occur in high school softball practices and games. Just over 17% of these injuries are to the head and face. This means that almost 10,000 injuries occurred in 2013 during softball practices or games affecting the head and face. Suddenly, what is a freak accident to a coach is actually a possible accident to a high school softball player. In probability terms, numbers greater than 0 and less than 50% are known as "not likely to happen." However, this type of probability is best used in weather forecasting (and we all know how accurate they typically are), not in youth safety analysis.

The end of year report from the 2013 study indicated that players were out for more than 21 days in 7% of the injuries. However, more startling is the "other" category, which is as high as 29% of



the injuries, where student athletes were medically disqualified for the season, medically disqualified for their career, the athlete quit playing, or the season ended before their return. More than 5% of all injuries required surgery. Over 2,000 injuries were recorded at the pitcher's circle alone. Third base led the infield with over 5,000 injuries. Most injuries seem to occur in the third and fourth innings and drop dramatically in the fifth inning. The numbers are similar for baseball.

Every season, we hear stories of how a player got hit in the face with a batted ball. This type of injury isn't limited to pitchers, although they are often thought of as the easiest target on the field. When a batted ball is hit back up the middle at the varsity level, it's usually a strong hit. The ball typically wasn't hit on the tapered part of the bat or the end of the bat, but right on the sweet spot. All of the infielders are subject to being hit by a line drive or a hard bouncing ground ball. However, outfielders who typically do not wear masks, can also lose a ball in the sun and get hit in the face. The topic of wearing face masks is controversial. Some players love to wear them as they feel safer and can be more aggressive wearing them. Others hate wearing a mask because they say it obstructs their vision (which it doesn't), it makes them sweat, they are uncomfortable to wear, and they don't look cool wearing one. The governing bodies of softball at all levels including: The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) do not prohibit the use of face masks, nor do they require them. Most of these governing bodies use a policy similar to the USSSA where the player can wear any protective equipment they deem necessary.



However, what's on paper is not what's always followed. Many travel/select coaches prohibit the use of face masks. They have either experienced or heard that college recruiters will not consider players who wear face masks. Some recruiters deny this is true and several head coaches have publically stated that they don't care if a player wears a mask or not. This situation leads to uncertainty and to date players typically do not wear the masks at the high school or college level unless they have a medically necessary condition such as recovering from a previous facial injury.

Governing bodies, coaches, and athletic programs need to be more vocal about this issue and let players know it's OK to wear a mask if they feel more comfortable or safer doing so. Having peer pressure and rumors dictate a player's safety is not smart or healthy. Many more players would wear face masks if they only knew it was OK to do so.

Players should also consider wearing heart guards for all the same reasons. These are usually more important at lower levels of play, but should be considered at all levels. Coaches should consider wearing face masks themselves when pitching to players and wearing coaches' helmets when coaching first and third base. We require all infielders on our 14u travel/select team to wear face masks and you should too no matter what level the team is. If you don't believe this is a common injury, please search the Internet and you will be amazed at the number of head/facial injuries that occur each year due to being hit by a batted ball at all levels of play. Have a happy and safe Halloween and remember to protect your players from serious injury.



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.

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