



# SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

## *World Softball Coaches Convention 2015 - Part 1*

At our house, we know when it's January, when we're planning our annual trip to the World Softball Coaches Convention (<https://www.softballcoachesclinic.com/>) held at the Mohegan Sun Casino/Resort near Norwich, Connecticut. This year was no different. We packed up the car and headed out for a great adventure. The convention format was the same as years past: three breakout rooms for the seminars, a live batting/pitching cage for demonstrations, and a dealer floor. Lots of coaches from all over the country attend this event. Some coaches bring their families, and some players bring their parents. Either way, there are lots of coaches, players, and fans of Fastpitch everywhere. As expected, the 2015 convention had lots of great seminars to attend. We actually had to split up so we could attend two seminars at the same time! There were great topics we did not want to miss. We ran into old friends and made some new ones too!

This year there were some regulars in attendance, including: Sue Enquist (NFCA Hall of Famer & Legendary UCLA Coach), Denise Davis (Planet Fastpitch), and Jen Hapanowicz (USA Elite Training). The convention also featured Jessica Mendoza (USA Softball Star Outfielder, Two-Time World Champion, & ESPN Analyst), Patrick Murphy (NFCA Hall of Famer & University of Alabama Head Coach), Andrea Duran (2014 NPF Player of the Year with the USSSA Pride, & Two-Time Na-



tional Champion), Jen McIntyre (Head Coach University of Connecticut), Kathryn Gleason (Head Coach Boston University), Jordan Taylor (USSSA Pitcher, USA National Team Member), Brandice Balschmitter (past NPF Player with the Chicago Bandits), Rob Crews (past USSSA Pride Hitting Coach & Author), and Eric Cressey (Professional Trainer).

All coaches received a Louisville Slugger string bag, and players received a Louisville Slugger Backpack. We attended two of Patrick Murphy's lectures: Aggressive Base Running: Putting the Pressure on the Defense, and How to Hit Location Pitches. Both lectures were well attended and most of the seats were occupied. Coach Murphy is a great speaker, who connects with his audience through exciting anecdotal stories, great tested advice, and some comedy to keep things light. Part 1 of this two-part series will focus on Coach Murphy's lectures, as he had lots to say!

In his Aggressive Base Running lecture, Coach Murphy talked about getting the batter out of the box ASAP. He said that he used to teach three fast, choppy steps, but has changed that to getting the girls to their longest stride as quickly as they can. He doesn't have a problem with batters seeing where the ball was hit as he wants them to know where the ball is at all times. He allows them to take a quick peak, not a long look. He has his batter/runners running through first base giving the "safe call" as they hit the bag. He described it like breaking the tape for sprinters, and said that often the umpires will give the call to the runner because it was suggested that they were safe.

Here's where it became very interesting. On a regular single, he has his runners look to the right as they pass through first base, to see if the ball was thrown away. If so, the runner takes one step and then cuts towards second base. If not, then the runner proceeds down the line. The first base coach will give the "Deep" signal, where the run-



ner keeps going down the first base foul line for about 15 steps or so. They turn towards the infield, evaluate the situation and slowly start walking towards first base. They never stop, because if they do, they are out. Runners are instructed to watch the Short Stop and Second Baseman. If they are asleep after the ball is thrown back to the pitcher, the runner will steal second base. He advised that this is within the NCAA rules and is legal so long as the runner keeps moving and has not yet touched first base.

On a single to left field, Coach Murphy teaches his players to always assume a double as this keeps them aggressive. They are instructed to take a tight circle through the base paths. The tighter the circle, the faster they can get to the next base. They hit the inside corner of the bag, go twenty feet towards second base and take a stance with their right foot forward. If the ball is bobbled, they take second.

If the ball is hit to right field, he teaches his players to look how the ball was hit. If it's hit to the gap side of the fielder, round first base with the left foot forward so the runner is facing the Right Fielder. If the ball is hit to the fielder, then treat the hit like an ordinary single.

He described how he has his players leave the bag, and admitted that it may be slightly early, but the umpires hardly ever call his players out for leaving early using this method. He has his batter/runners looking at the Pitcher's pivot foot heel instead of the Pitcher's arm. Once they can see a gap under the heel they start their leadoff. He has his runners placing their left foot on the right side of the bag with 70% of their body weight on the front leg in a sprinter's position. He no longer uses the rocker motion as it's too complicated and does not provide an optimal launch.

Runners in between first and second base take a lead off with a bal-



anced 50/50 position. If they need to go back to first base, they face the outfield with their butts toward the catcher in case they get hit with the throw. Runners at first base, look over to the third base coach who gives the number of outs over their head. He wants his runners to be very game aware. They need to know the number of outs, the defensive scenario, and they must know the score. By knowing these three things, the runners can understand what they need to do to be successful and help their team. He has his players be very aggressive through the majority of the game, but then play “smart aggressive” which is a bit more conservative in the remainder of the game.

Coach Murphy teaches his batter/runners that with a runner at first and third with a fly caught in the outfield, if the ball is thrown home, the runner at first must tag up and take second base. He said that he considers a team to be well coached if he sees the runners on first base tag and take second base. If a runner is at second base and the ball is hit to the outfield, they are taught to take third base only if they see the outfielder’s numbers on the back of their jersey. Otherwise, they stay on second base. He also teaches his runners that if they are on second base and third base is open, take second base if the ball is hit at them or behind them. If the ball is hit in front of them, they stay put.

In his How to Hit Location Pitches lecture, Coach Murphy cautioned that coaches should not expect players to do something in a game if they haven’t worked on it in practice. Therefore, he emphasized how important it is to practice contingency plans. He spoke about hitting adjustments and how his team practices hitting contingencies at every practice in January, because they may need to use them in June. He detailed this set of drills: The first set of swings is done back of the box, as a normal at bat, the second set is done up in the box, the third set is done off the plate, the fourth set is done up tight to the plate,



and the last set is batter's choice. He insists that this way, he can adjust for the type of pitcher they are facing.

Coach Murphy wants his batters to "swing inside out, not outside in" because if the barrel is in front of their hands, they will hook the ball resulting in a foul ball down the third base line. If the batter's hands are far out front of the barrel, they will slice the ball and foul the ball off down the first base line. Like many coaches, he teaches a palm up / palm down grip and says that righties should have their contact point with their right palm towards second base. Lefties should have their contact point with their palms towards the Short Stop.

Coach said that the hardest pitch to hit is the low and away pitch which is also the softest hit pitch. He has found that it's OK for the batter to have their back leg low and parallel to the ground as it allows them to lower themselves while staying balanced. He said that many coaches instruct their players to have a level swing on a low pitch, but this isn't possible. The barrel needs to drop to meet the ball. The barrel always needs to be below the hands – even on a high pitch. He practices with low hitting tees and specifically works low tee to the opposite field.

Hitters need to know where the contact point is supposed to be. If the pitch is down the middle, the contact point is 1-2" in front of the plate. If it's an inside pitch, the contact point is 6-8" in front of the plate. Outside pitches should be hit even with the front thigh. He described how he uses different colored elastic strung from one side of a batting cage to the other to show where these three contact points are. A good way for players to learn contact points is for them to be able to hit fun-go drills.

Hitters need to work more on their lower half. He stated that if a pitch



is coming in at 65mph, the batter's hips need to move at 66mph. Most hitters don't spend enough time strengthening their lower half. Finally, Coach Murphy said that the best way to handle a rise ball is to not swing at it!

Next month, we'll look at College Recruiting with Coaches McIntyre and Gleason along with Jessica Mendoza and Hitting with Rob Crews. These were also excellent lectures. The 2016 World Softball Coaches Convention will be held at Mohegan Sun on January 23, 2016. No matter where you live, you should make it a point to reserve the date and attend this excellent convention. Nowhere else can you get so much information in such a short time. Every year we learn very important tips, tricks, and best practices. Our game is constantly evolving and this convention is an excellent way to stay current. Players will love the extensive dealer floor, the professional player autograph sessions, the live demonstrations in an actual batting/pitching cage, product demonstrations, and the ability to ask questions in the lectures or one-on-one afterwards.

*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).*

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