



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

World Softball Coaches Convention 2015 - Part 2

Last month I reported on some very interesting seminars we attended featuring Coach Patrick Murphy from the University of Alabama at the World Softball Coaches Convention (<https://www.softballcoaches-clinic.com/>) held at the Mohegan Sun Casino/Resort near Norwich, Connecticut. 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. The 2015 convention had lots of great seminars to attend. 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 National Champion), Jen McIntyre (Head Coach University of Connecticut), Kathryn Gleason (Head Coach Boston University), Jordan Taylor (USSSA Pitcher, USA National Team Member), Brandice Balschmiter (past NPF Player with the Chicago Bandits), Rob Crews (past USSSA Pride Hitting Coach & Author), and Eric Cressey (Professional Trainer).



This month, we'll look at College Recruiting with Coaches McIntyre (UConn) and Gleason (BU) along with Jessica Mendoza and Hitting with Rob Crews. These were also excellent lectures. First up is a review of the open and frank discussion about college recruiting from two Division 1 coaches. These two ladies along with Jessica Mendoza held a very interesting seminar that was enjoyable to attend. The seminar was jam packed with recruiting information from a head coach's perspective. Since there are strict rules about coaches talking to candidate players, the softball community rarely gets to hear this level of candid discussion. This seminar alone was worth the trip to Mohegan Sun!

The two coaches started off by pretending to field a call from a prospective player. It was quite comical and pointed out that players need to have a plan when calling a coach. Players need to know what they want to say before they dial the phone, and what their goal is for the phone call. Just calling up and chatting with a busy coach doesn't win prospects any points. The two coaches reminded the audience that they are always recruiting as Division I coaches. Whether they are holding a clinic or watching a travel ball game, they are always taking notes about the players they see. They reminded players that when emailing coaches, to keep the email short and to the point. The subject line should include your position, graduating year, and your location. Students need to ask if the program is recruiting for the desired position in their graduating year.

Players need to register at the NCAA Clearing House (also known as the NCAA Eligibility Center and located at: <http://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/future/eligibility-center>) before they can take an official college visit. In addition to official visits, you can take an unofficial visit to schools you are interested in. On an unofficial visit, the school pays for the student's flight, meals, and hotel. Parents that attend the unof-



ficial visit must pay their own way.

The coaches also dispelled the myth about full ride scholarships. Even though many students claim to have received a full ride scholarship. Very few are given as pure athletic scholarships. Softball is considered an equivalency sport and as such teams have 12 full ride scholarships available. However, many of these full rides are split up so that money can be given to more student athletes on a team. For example, most softball rosters at the Division I level carry 16-20 players. If there are 20 players on a roster, each player may receive a scholarship that covers 60% (12 scholarships divided by 20 roster spots) of the annual tuition cost. Less than 10% of all student athlete softball players attend Division I programs. Only 1% of all Division I athletes get a full ride. Scholarships are given as 1 year contracts that are renewable the following year. Other scholarship money is available for academics. Students holding very good averages may be able to get close to or the equivalency of a full ride between athletic and academic scholarships. Additionally, there are literally thousands of college scholarships that are granted by non-university sources. The coaches encouraged student athletes to research what other types of scholarships are available and to apply for every scholarship they can, as millions of dollars of scholarship money is never awarded as students just don't apply for them.

Players should consider what program they want to study, how far away they want to be from home (some want to be close, others want to be as far away as possible), and how important softball is to the student athlete.

The coaches divulged some information about how they recruit players. They said they don't get out to see a lot of high school games as the high school season runs at the same time as their college season, so they just don't have the free time to watch games. They recruit



mostly at travel ball tournaments and showcases. Players need to be on a competitive team if they are trying to play at the Division I level. The coaches commented that there are many different ways to get recruited, but the most successful and most common way is via a skills video. They said that they prefer to receive Internet links to videos instead of physical DVD's as they are always on the go and can use their tablet or smartphone to watch a skills video while they are on the road – it allows them to be more productive. They were very specific about what they wanted to see in a skills video. The video should not be longer than 5 minutes and should not contain music. It should also not contain game footage, as it's sometimes confusing for them to know which player is the person they are supposed to be watching! The video should include the player taking a couple of good batting swings including from a tee and via front toss. Also include some video of fielding ground balls and then throwing the ball. They also said it was important for them to see where the player is throwing to.

Players also get good exposure at the coach's camps and clinics. They admitted that they also recruit players just by having a great camp. Recruiting is happening at a faster pace. However, since players cannot sign until November of their senior year coaches make use of verbal commitments. This is a verbal contract where both the player and the school commit to an agreement of the student playing for that school and the school providing a scholarship. The agreement should be honored, but since it's not a written contract, they are sometimes broken. The coaches urged players and their parents to open their minds and consider Division II and III programs. Finally, the coaches cautioned the audience about using third party recruiting services unless they are reputable services with a history of success.

Rob Crews, inventor of the "Complete Game" mindset gave two excellent seminars on hitting. He started off by stating that the process



of hitting is 70% mental and 30% physical. To be a good hitter, the eyes need to be level with the head rotated enough so that the back eye is even with the front eye providing good binocular vision. It's important for both eyes to track the ball. Many softball players cannot rotate their necks adequately to get their eyes even. These hitters should perform neck exercises to increase the range of motion in their necks. This is especially important for righty hitters that are right eye dominant.

Coach Crews then talked about the batting stance. The weight shouldn't be on the heels, but on the toes. Stability is key to developing good hitters. They need to have a strong base – that is, strong legs and core to stabilize the cameras (eyes) to eliminate or at least reduce wobble. The more stable the cameras are, the better look they have at the incoming pitch. The foot has to be down and the heel planted early to stabilize the head. Players won't be successful with both moving eyes and a moving ball.

He advised that when doing tee work, players should look far off in the distance like looking at the pitcher before looking up close. This approximates the game situation. With live pitching, really good hitters see some of the ball and some of where the ball is going. Elite hitters stretch that gap further and see more of where the ball is going. Bad hitters see some of the ball and some of where the ball has been. Hitters need to pick up the pitch and make a judgment about what kind of pitch it is by approximately 21.5 feet (half way between pitching rubber and home plate) and know where contact is going to happen. Coach Crews said that scientists have proven that hitters have a blind spot from about 8 feet out to the point of contact as the eyes and the brain can't work together fast enough. Hitters under 13 years old are typically reactive, while older hitters anticipate where the ball is going.



Coach Crews detailed information about using a technique called “open focus.” This is where hitters need to see the pitcher, the second baseman, the short stop, the foul ball poles, and other objects in the distance. Then when the pitcher starts her delivery, return focus to the pitcher. If eyes look at something for a long time they fatigue. He told of how former Olympian and pro softball player, Kelly Kretschman uses the open focus technique by looking at the second baseman and then looking back to the pitcher on delivery.

He then talked about timing sequences during hitting. He explained how the brain doesn't really multitask – instead it time slices. This is a computer concept where the computer appears to do many things at once, but in reality, it's really only doing one thing at a time, just switching between tasks very quickly to give the appearance of multitasking. Hitting is all about timing. Hitters cannot recognize a pitch and move to their timing simultaneously. First, they need to get their heel plant down early. Then, the brain can concentrate on pitch recognition. These two processes (heel plant and pitch recognition) need to be separated.

As players progress through softball, the game speeds up. By the time that a player is 14 or 15, the game takes a tremendous jump in speed. Hitters need to make fast decisions and better decisions. They need to determine: what kind of pitch was thrown, where was it thrown (high, low, inside, outside), where is the pitch going to be, and what they (the hitter) are going to do with it (pull it, take it oppo). Therefore, hitting is more about anticipation and less about reaction. This is why it's so important for players who are not at bat to watch what the pitcher is throwing and to be able to predict what pitches she will be throwing.

Coach Crews said he likes his first player at bat to go to the back of



the box and rub out the chalk line forming the back of the box. This way he can get his hitters to be very far back from the plate. An additional 10" can make all the difference in being able to see the ball and anticipate it. It's harder for pitchers to make a pitch break later than sooner. He also reminded the audience that the way to hit a rise ball is to not swing at it, just take it.

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. No-where 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.

