



# SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

## *BACK to Basics*

I really wanted to title this article **BACK**, but what kind of a title would that be? But that's been our softball theme for the past couple of months. Sometimes you need to take a step **BACK** to move forward. Lately, I've been surrounded by this concept. Marie and I agreed to take a Little League Farms Softball team including our seven year old twins and their friends. So in a real sense we are taking a step **BACK** and starting at the beginning of the training process! Do you coaches out there remember what it was like coaching kids this young? Try to remember. They are like sponges with very few pre-conceived notions. They want to learn. They want to improve. They have boundless energy. They want to understand the game. Most of all they want to have fun. If you're a player, do you remember what it was like learning softball or other sport at seven years old? How did playing sports and being part of a team make you feel? I'll bet that it was a big deal to you if you're still playing.

In preparation for our first practice with our new team, I had to search through the garage for some equipment we haven't used in a long time. First I had to find 11" safety balls, tennis balls for their small hands to hold, a couple of small softball bats, a hit stick, the old indestructible rubber tee, and the throw down bases. Then I started to think about what we need to accomplish at practices. We need to make sure we cover the basics: throwing, catching, and swinging a bat. **BACK** to basics. It's not enough to just let these kids throw,



catch, and hit. They need to be shown the correct way to do them from the start. We also want to make sure they don't develop any bad habits. Kids this age can be small and not able to grip even an 11" softball. That's why we use small tennis balls. If they don't have to struggle with the grip and the weight of a softball, they have a better chance of developing muscle memory using good throwing mechanics. We line them all up with their tennis balls in their little hands. Then we break down a two-step throw and finally have them launch the ball as far as they can. Then we work on getting the ball as high as they can to make sure they are throwing over the top. Yep, a season of the basics will help to develop good mechanics they will use throughout their softball careers.

Little League practice was on Monday afternoon. It was so much fun. Tuesday night, we had practice with our 14u travel team. It was our last indoor practice of our winter workouts. We did two hour sessions twice a week for 12 weeks. During these sessions we concentrated on....guess what.....going BACK to the basics. At the last practice, we ran some infield simulations like thousands of teams do. We ended the practice with a half squad scrimmage. All throughout the practice, Marie and I commented to each other how much improved our players are after we worked on the basics during our winter workouts. Their throwing was sharp: on target, quick release, most were clothes-line throws across the field, they used various types of throws in different situations: bow and arrow, sways, darts, flips. Their fielding looked great: it included that "softball swagger" of being in rhythm with the game, quick transition from fielding to throwing, throwing while staying in motion, confident scoops, accurate drop steps, and ready position to forehand or backhand plays. Even their hitting looked great. Because we were in an indoor facility, we instituted a rule for these scrimmages where the batter is out if the ball hits the ceiling netting before it passes the pitching screen. This forces the hitting to be line drives and



grounders not pop ups.

What did we do during our winter workouts to focus on going **BACK** to the basics?

### THROWING:

The only way to improve throwing mechanics is for players to throw and coaches to observe, correct, and repeat. To this end we spent a lot of time on throwing warmups and throwing drills with lots of coaching.

1. Overhand wrist snaps 6-8 feet apart (look for proper rotation)
2. Short over the top light throws 10-15 feet apart (warmup)
3. Medium over the top throws 25 feet apart (no sidearm)
4. Long over the top throws 40 feet apart (two-step throws)
5. Box throws (throw around the diamond) clockwise, emphasizing accuracy of throws, quick transfer from catch, footwork used, type of throw used.
6. Box throws counterclockwise
7. Box throws diagonally across the diamond
8. Bucket drill (stack two buckets on home plate, create two teams, players alternate throwing from behind second base base-paths to knock the top bucket off) usually at the end of practice

### FIELDING:

During the early sessions we spent a lot of time working on basic footwork needed in different situations. We followed some of the “ball everydays” we learned from Coach Bill Edwards from Hofstra University. We had one of his top students, Olivia Galati teach these to our players.



1. Grounders – straight on with lateral step
2. Grounders – forehand side
3. Grounders – backhand side with dropping inside knee
4. Grounders – backhand side with dropping outside knee
5. Shuffle Step
6. Instep Kick
7. Power Step
8. Jam Step
9. Jump Turn Inside
10. Jump Turn Outside

We also run a drill we call the quick reaction drill. Players line up at shortstop. A coach near the pitching rubber hits or throws balls out very quickly to the players who need to field the ball, stay in motion, and make a clean throw to a coach at first base. The balls caught at first base are placed in a bucket. The interval between balls is very short – about 2 seconds, so the players are running and the coach at first base really works hard to keep up. On all forehand and backhand drills we make sure to include balls that require maximum effort catches. We included:

1. Forehand grounders with front and backspin
2. Backhand grounders with front and backspin
3. Line drives to forehand
4. Line drives to backhand
5. Choppy bouncers to forehand
6. Choppy bouncers to backhand
7. Popups
8. Weak hits that must be charged



## HITTING:

This year we felt we needed to spend a lot of time on basic hitting. Many of our players had minor flaws in their hitting mechanics that were preventing them from being awesome hitters. By the conclusion of our winter workouts most of these flaws have been resolved or minimized. We included:

1. Group mechanics instruction – Players spread out with their bats and mimic the hitting motion being broken down by a coach in front of them. Slow and super slow motion is used to emphasize correct mechanics.
2. Hitting disks or similar exercise to ensure the hands are staying in the zone and pushing forward.
3. Lots of tee work – basic swing to contact only, with coach observation and correction
4. Lots of tee work – full swings with coach observation and correction
5. Hitting basketballs off of tees to build up endurance and strength while maintaining proper mechanics
6. One-handed hitting off of tees
7. Front toss from reduced distance (with other tees or cones used to keep the swing compact)
8. Front toss at 75% speed from full distance
9. Front toss via machine at 75% speed, 90% speed, 100% speed, 105% speed, 110% speed (speed is determined by the average ball speed your players can hit)
10. Pitch Selection drill – Players line up with their batting helmets on. A coach pitches from a reduced distance behind a screen. Players are out of the competition when they either swing at a ball, or don't swing at a strike. The quality of the hit can be added after the players master pitch selection.
11. Indoor hitting for distance during our scrimmages forces players to



hit line drives and grounders instead of popups. They quickly learn not to get under the ball.

Coaches and players should consider taking a step BACK to the basics and working on correcting and improving their basic mechanics. The time and effort spent will be worthwhile. It was for our players. We have heard from many high school, 18u travel, and even college level coaches that the players they are working with have poor basic mechanics. Players with good mechanics stand out like shining beacons!

Working with the young Little League players is a privilege and one we take seriously. We have been entrusted by both the league and the players' parents to teach these young athletes so many things. Right now it's pretty simple: throwing, catching, hitting, the basics of the game, and to have fun. Hopefully, these players will be working on these same skills for years to come. That's why you still see players at all levels doing wrist snaps, long toss, basic fielding drills, and of course tee work!

*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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