



# SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

## *A Coach's Guide to Fall Tryouts*

Every fall, I write an article advising players and their families how to handle travel/select softball tryouts or find a new team. This year, I am doing something different – advising coaches what to look out for during tryouts. However, it should be useful for players and their families to know what attributes coaches may be looking for during tryouts too.

Most coaches know what skills they need to check for, but here's a basic list:

- Throwing Skills
  - Strength
  - Speed
  - Accuracy
  - Ability to throw across the field
    - First to third for infielders
    - Outfield to cut and outfield to home for outfielders
  - Flips
  - Proper Mechanics
    - Over the top on long throws
    - Specialty throws (dart, 3/4 sway, etc.)



- Footwork
- Catching Skills
  - Mechanics
  - Two hand or one hand catch
  - Foot work
- Base Running Skills
  - Time - home to first
  - Time - home to home
  - Aggressiveness on base paths vs. one base at a time mentality
  - Sliding Ability
  - Runner's jump off the bag
  - Running on any contact vs. running only on solid hits
  - Running through first base vs. turn and look scenarios
  - Staying in foul territory close to the bag when on third base
- Hitting Skills
  - Mechanics
    - Entering the box
    - Load
    - Toe-touch/plant
    - Swing plane
    - Swing style
    - Results with different types of pitches
  - Strength
  - Bat speed
  - Pitch Selection
  - Bunting
  - Overall Results
- Fielding Skills
  - Infielders



- Aggressiveness attacking the ball
- Working for the ball vs. lazy catch
- Ready Position
- Footwork
- Outfielders
  - Tracking Ability
  - Use of Drop Step
  - Footwork
  - Crow hop
- Pitcher Skills
  - Speed
  - Types of pitches
  - Accuracy
  - Mechanics
    - Crow hop
    - Straight arm circle
    - Leap out
    - Ability to field after pitch
    - Arm hitting body
- Catcher Skills
  - Basic stance
  - Ability to Block
  - Ability to pop
  - Ability to call pitches (if you allow this)
  - Pop/Throwdown time
  - Ability to frame pitches

However, there are many more things that coaches need to consider when selecting a team. Many are intangible. Many are detectable with a little extra effort and can mean the difference between a team that plays as a team or a team that plays as a group of factions or



individuals. I am very sensitive to this issue, as I have been burned more than once and it's not fun or easy to deal with the consequences down the road.

Coaches should be cautious when accepting package deals or trying out several players from the same school, town, or previous team. These players already have an established relationship and oftentimes will be the basis of a clique or will have their own clique separate from the rest of the team. I have had this occur several times and it has never worked out. My team would have been better served in the long run to have accepted only one or two of the players. Three players from the same school or prior team will almost certainly form a clique, which is never a good thing.

If you are putting together an 18u team, be careful of having too many seniors. If half your team is composed of seniors, you know you will need to recruit for at least half a team next fall! Also, seniors tend to fall off in production as their graduation date gets closer. They have proms to attend, graduation parties, and some who have scholarships or other deals to play at the college level may be mentally done with your team since they already obtained their goals. Try to stagger your roster with three or four from each year.

You can never have enough pitchers or catchers. The softball season is long, especially if you are training and playing year round. Players will get injured over the course of a year and require time to heal and rest. Players may also move to another team mid-year. You need to protect your season with backup pitchers and catchers. You may have two primary for each position, but you should also have at least two or three backup pitchers and catchers. Remember to keep them in your rotation in these positions so they get playing time.



Before you agree to take a player on your team, consider this action for 24 hours. This will give you time to make a logical decision not an emotional one. Also, during this time, try googling the player's name to see if you find any pictures or social network links. You may be surprised by what you find! We tell our players to avoid posting anything they wouldn't want their grandmothers or their teachers to see. The search results will give you some idea of what kind of player you are getting. You can also check with your coaches' daughters or other players you know are returning to your team to check their Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, or other accounts.

If you have played the prospect's previous team in the past, dig out your old scoresheets to see how she did at bat. If you are like me, you also record errors which should help give you a feeling of how she fields in real live game conditions.

Talk to player and parents. Spend some time with prospects and their families during or after the tryout. Try to get to know what kind of kid you're getting, and more importantly, try to find out what kind of parents you will be dealing with for the next year. This one can be a bit tricky. You don't want a player who is introverted, but you may not want one that is extremely loud and obnoxious either. You don't want parents who are completely uninvolved with their daughter's interests, but you don't want an over exuberant one either. As you speak with the player and her parents really try to evaluate what you are getting. Listen carefully to the stories you are being told. Many parents will try to ingratiate themselves with you by telling you of past horror stories. You may know the organization the player is coming from and may have corroborating evidence of these problems, or you may know the coach she previously played for and know the issue wasn't the coach but with the player or her family!



Don't forget to ask about grades. This is extremely important at the 16u and 18u levels. Your organization may not want to give up a roster spot for a player with bad grades since it's unlikely that player will be able to secure a scholarship. Be specific with your questions. Ask about core course grades, SAT/ACT scores, community service, etc. Ask about other sports or activities, especially Little League or other organized rec leagues. These can have a huge impact on your team. Players who play multiple sports at a competitive level will miss practices and possibly tournaments playing other sports. Players may have to attend football games if they are in the school or marching band, sometimes when you need them the most. Make sure you are up front with asking these types of questions. Better yet add them to your application. That way you will hopefully know what your prospect's time commitment looks like from the get-go. If nothing is entered in the box or they write that they are fully committed to softball, then you stand a better chance of having a player who is committed to the sport of Fastpitch Softball.

Finally, don't forget to ask about summer camp. Some kids disappear in early July for one, two, or sometimes 6 weeks during peak tournament season! This is primarily a problem at lower levels like 10u or 12u, but is not unheard of in 16u and 18u.

If you are not sure about a player, make some calls. Ask her old coach, old teammates, or anyone else that may know about her ability and character. Was she a problem player? Were her parents a problem to deal with? Were they team players, or parents who constantly complained about playing time, the tournaments that were selected, the other players, etc.

Team composition can be more important than player skills. This



means you can have a highly skilled team of individuals that don't play well together and therefore are not successful. You can also have the converse, which most coaches would prefer – a team of less skilled players with great team cohesion that “overachieves.”

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