



# SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

## *College Showcases or Tournaments?*

Many managers in the 14u to 18u range must make a decision about the composition of their upcoming seasons. There are typically three types of game play to decide between: league, tournament, or college showcase. Leagues are not typically played at the higher levels simply because the competition is not there or there aren't enough teams in a local region. Tournaments are the standard format. Most of us are familiar with this one – typically play three pool games on Saturday, brackets are seeded based on Saturday performance and then teams play an initial playoff game on Sunday and keep playing if they win until the final championship round. College showcases are an entirely different format – typically play three games on Saturday and two games on Sunday. Your Saturday win-loss record does not factor in on matching up your opponents on Sunday nor does it affect how many games you play on Sunday. College coaches may visit your games and watch players who are not already committed to play at the collegiate level. Players may send letters or emails to coaches at schools they are interested in attending and they may come to specifically see these players in action during a showcase game.



College showcases sound like the “no brainer” choice. Or are they? I have witnessed firsthand and heard of many coaches not rotating eligible players into the game in favor of already committed players who may be stronger more skilled players in an attempt to win their games. Coaches quickly forget why they are there and why this format of play was selected. They give some players limited exposure because the college coaches that are watching the game are not on the benched players’ list of schools they are interested in. What? That’s right. They may only play these uncommitted players when a college coach the player wrote to is watching. Coaches also tend to play favorites with uncommitted players. They may mentally rank them in order of likelihood of the player getting a college commitment, or by how much effort the player has put into the recruiting process. The better the chance of a commitment or the more effort put into recruiting, the more playing time the player gets.

To make sure you understand the scenario, picture this - An 18u team with 14 players has 10 committed players and 4 uncommitted players. The team enters a college showcase and 5 college coaches stand behind the backstop watching the game. Each team typically prints player profile recruiting brochures and hangs a clipboard or plastic “Take One” pocket on the fence behind their respective dugouts. Coaches stop by and grab a player profile brochure which lists all players and show which players are committed and which aren’t. The coaches are looking for various types of players even though they may not have been contacted by a specific player. However they are not able to see the uncommitted players in action since the coach is playing his committed players.



Another issue with college showcases is some coaches do the right thing for their uncommitted players and try to get them as much playing time as possible. This leaves the committed players on the bench not getting many reps to keep their skills sharp. Both teams are typically very cordial to each other and certain types of play are kept limited so as not to make the other team “look bad” in front of college coaches. This has the effect of keeping competition low and the teams not performing at their highest levels.

Teams typically do not bunt very much in college showcases. They may occasionally bunt to move a player over, but I have yet to see a team destroy another team because their corners play deep or are slow to react when a batter squares. I have also not seen much in the way of slashing – for those who are not familiar with this term, it’s when a batter squares like they are going to bunt and then pulls the bat back and swings at the ball typically with the corners up. I haven’t seen many slappers at college showcases either.

As for base running, teams tend to not steal much on each other. Limited straight steals occur throughout the games, but delayed and trick steals are hardly ever seen. I believe that certain types of delayed steals are important for player development in reading the field and understanding the game. These steals are the bread and butter at the lower levels, and granted they become more difficult to execute at higher levels as the players become more skilled, but they are still possible if the coach and players practice them often. Continuous walks are also rarely seen at college showcases. Instead, rundowns are induced between first and second base with a runner on third to attract attention in an attempt to allow the runner on third time to score.



College showcases usually consist of conservative base running, players trying to hit the ball over the fence, fielders catching popups (from batters trying to launch the ball over the fence), and pitchers trying not to have their pitches taken deep. Players and parents are tense because college coaches are watching and sometimes players are fighting for playing time just “to be seen.”

Standard tournament play offers higher competition with a motivation to win, especially on Sunday to keep playing. On at least Saturday pool games, players are often fairly rotated to make sure all players stay active and get a chance to play as many innings as other substituted players. The level of play is often at the highest level, with devastating bunting, slashing, and delayed stealing. Scores are sometimes very lopsided because a superior team will keep playing hard to earn the run-rule victory. Tournaments serve to keep players’ skills sharp and improve their mental games while getting a better understanding of the game.

If you run a team, be sure to mix up your game play with a combination of tournaments and college showcases. You want to make sure your players get exposure, but you want to make sure they do so while playing at the highest level possible. Also make sure to give your uncommitted players a good amount of time playing in front of scouts and coaches, even if they are not on a player’s short list of schools. If you are a player or parent, you should get a better understanding of a team’s game schedule and make sure it includes both tournaments and college showcases. Preferably more tournaments than showcases should be played. The showcases should be in different regions to allow coaches from a wide geographic range of schools to see players in action. It doesn’t help much to play showcase after showcase in the same region, as the



same group of coaches have already seen your team play. If they weren't interested at the previous showcase, they probably aren't interested at the current showcase.

*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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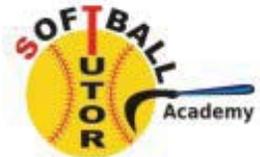
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