



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

10 Holiday Gift Ideas for Youth Softball Players

It's that time of the year again! Fall ball is over for most teams and winter workouts are about to start. Requests for holiday gift ideas for youth softball players have already started. This is my fourth annual column of gift ideas. As always there are plenty of great gifts available for that special Fastpitch player in your life! The following are my top ten gift ideas for 2015.

GIFT # 1

Evo Shield Game Changing Protective Apparel - \$20-\$60

Evo Shield provides protective gear for many different sports. Their offerings in Fastpitch are exceptional. Their heart guards are some of the best on the market. They also have compression arm sleeves, batter elbow and leg guards, wrist guards, batting gloves, shin protectors, etc. Most of their products include custom molded inserts that start out flexible and quickly mold and harden for a perfect custom fit. These products are available from many online resellers



GIFT # 2**Louisville Slugger Xeno Plus bat - \$300**

This year, Louisville Slugger has a brand new design for their Xeno line of composite bats. The 2016 model which was recently released, is based on a “zero friction double wall design.” This two piece bat has proven to be hot right out of the wrapper. It has a large sweet spot and seems to handle off-sweet spot hits better than many other popular bats.

GIFT # 3**National Fastpitch Coaches Association Membership - \$70**

There are lots of benefits to joining the NFCA. This makes for a great gift as it keeps giving for an entire year. It includes a monthly NFCA newspaper with great articles, access to an online newsletter, access to an online database of drills, a copy of the annual NFCA calendar, an annual recruiting outlook magazine, access to the annual NFCA conference (additional charges apply), and discounts in the NFCA store.

GIFT # 4**Leadership Training for Softball Book by Aaron Weintraub - \$25**

One desired team attribute not often spoken about is leadership. The thought that leaders are born not developed has permeated many sports and business discussions for decades. This book by Coach Weintraub helps any player develop leadership skills. Every coach would love a team full of leaders and this books helps players develop mental skills via many exercises and activities. Available at many online retailers and bookstores.



GIFT # 5**Hit Zone Air Tee - \$180 plus \$40 for a dozen balls.**

Nothing improves hitting more than practice. Most hitting practice involves boring tee work. Here's a unique tool that will help your player practice their swing. The Hit Zone air powered practice tee supports the ball on a cushion of air. No more fumbling to try and place the ball on the tee. With the air tee you put the ball in the column of air and it just floats. Many hitters are afraid of hitting the tee and then don't swing through or otherwise change their mechanics. The air tee eliminates this fear. Since the ball is floating, it is moving around on the column of air. This forces the hitter to maintain eye contact with the ball the entire time. Available from many online retailers.

GIFT # 6**Jugs Small-ball Pitching Machine - \$230 plus \$25 for balls**

Tee work is great for working on correcting mechanics and building muscle memory so hitters do the right thing in game situations. However, tee work does not improve timing. That takes actual hitting from the front. The Jugs small-ball pitching machine can be used indoors in a garage or other suitable space and allows hitters to work on their timing. The balls are small 5 inch, half ounce foam balls that can be hurled at speeds up to 75mph. Since the balls are small, hitters need to hone their hand-eye coordination and timing to get the bat straight on the face of the ball. An optional battery pack is available to use this machine outside. Available from many online retailers.



GIFT # 7**Chinese Jump Ropes - \$5 per rope**

Pitchers spend untold hours perfecting their abilities to hit a corner or place a ball precisely where it will be most effective. Mostly, they guess where it needs to be. Chinese Jump Ropes are bright colored, elastic cords that can be placed indoors or outdoors in pitching lanes to setup a precise grid for the strike zone. Typically 6-8 ropes are needed to setup a full grid. A front set of ropes and a back set of ropes allows pitchers to work on precise placement of curves, drops, rise balls, and fastballs to location.

GIFT # 8**Captain U subscription \$20/month**

If you've been following my articles through the years, you know I am in favor of starting the recruiting process early and in establishing good communications with coaches. One way to do this is to join Captain U. This online subscription service allows you to identify schools you are interested in, keep the coaches up-to-date on your activities, and provide an easy mechanism to send them emails. It also allows coaches to find you via the Captain U search tools. Younger players can use the free version of the tool. Players in 9th grade and older should pay for the Varsity subscription. Players wanting more personalized assistance with the recruiting process can subscribe to the MVP or Pro level subscriptions at higher prices.

GIFT # 9**Instructional Videos \$30 and up**

Players and coaches can always learn something new by seeing how other players/coaches do it. Videos from experts including



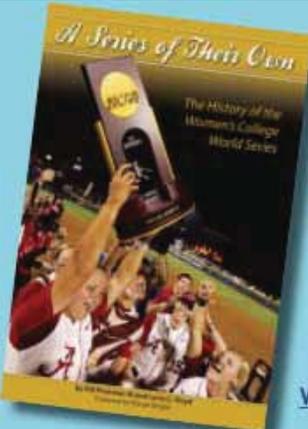
some of the top college coaches are now available for immediate viewing. Need a last minute gift for that special softball player or coach? Instructional online videos and physical DVD's are available that cover a wide variety of topics: hitting, baserunning, infield play, outfield play, catching, pitching, practice planning,

GIFT # 10

Ringor Pro-Tec-Toe Cleats and Turf Shoes \$90 and up

Pitchers are hard on their cleats. As they bring their drag leg forward, many rub the tip of their cleats on the ground. This repeated process can wear out a pair of cleats in a few weeks. The Ringor cleats with Pro-Tec-Toes has extra protection built right into the outside of the cleat to keep it from wearing out due to toe drag. Another plus is they are available in wide widths which are hard to find in many other brands.

Mitch Alexander is the creator of www.varsityfastpitch.com, a new web site to help students play softball in college. His area of focus is on youth sports and college recruiting. 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 World Series. Over the years, both have managed and coached Little League and select/travel teams at all levels and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. Mitch can be reached at mitch.varsityfastpitch@gmail.com.



'A must-read book if you were, or still are, involved in college softball or its national championship.'

– Margie Wright

www.seriesoftheirown.com

softballperiodization.com



Failing to plan is planning to fail. - Alan Lakein