



SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

10 Mistakes Novice (and Sometimes Experienced) Coaches Make

It's almost springtime. Some teams are just starting, including school, recreation, and some club teams. Some coaches will take to the field for the first time in a few weeks. Following is a collection of ten mistakes that novice coaches often make. Sometimes experienced coaches make them too. Whether you are a first time coach or a salty veteran of the fields, consider these topics. You may find they provide you with some ways to fine-tune your coaching style and program.

1. Don't expect youth athletes to understand the terminology you are using. Phrases like "keep your hands inside the ball" are meaningless to most youth players. They often do not understand what you want them/don't want them to do. Make sure you use plain words, not buzzwords and show them the right way to perform an action as well as the incorrect way to perform the action so they can visually see the difference. Many times you will get a response like, "Ohhhh, that's what that means?!" Other often misunderstood phrases are, "hands to the pitcher," "squish/don't squish the bug," "don't swing your head out," "drop step," "play the ball, don't let it play you," and many others. Best practice is to explain the meaning

of these phrases.

2. Don't teach using one learning method. Use multiple teaching techniques. Not all people learn new things the same way or the way you do. Some learn by seeing or reading. Some learn by listening. Some learn by doing. Some require a combination. Make sure you cover multiple ways to ensure that all of your players can understand what you are teaching them. Most athletes are of course physical people and they tend to be physical learners as well. Most coaches have figured this out so they physically demonstrate the topic and then have their players physically repeat what they are being taught. However, make sure you show your players what you want in addition to verbally describing what you want. Combination learners will hear your words in their head and envision your physical demonstration while performing the drill. A printed sheet or email with a description of the task will further drive the lesson home.

3. Don't try or think you can control every aspect of the game. Some coaches believe players should only steal bases when told to do so. Others believe that their pitchers must throw the pitch they are being told to pitch without question. Trying to control every aspect of the game is a big mistake. You aren't trying to develop a fleet of softball-playing robots. You need to allow your player a certain amount of autonomy. The older the players are, the more experienced they should be. This means they have a greater sense of strategy and what the coach is trying to accomplish. However, it seems like the higher the age group, the more control coaches try to place on the players. If a player sees an opening to steal a base, they should be allowed to take it without receiving the steal signal. Similarly, if a pitcher doesn't like the pitch selected for her, she should be able to shake it off and throw the pitch she feels is best.



4. **Don't scream at your players after making a mistake.**

When a player commits an error, whether simple or gross, you can bet they understand they made a mistake. Typically, the mistake was caused due to a mental lapse. Other times, it was caused by not understanding the best way to make the play. Some coaches choose to handle errors by berating and yelling at the players as if this will somehow provide them with spontaneous knowledge and realization of what they did. Well, it won't. Best practice is to calmly and usually privately talk to the player that made a mistake and tell them what they should have done to handle the play correctly. Some coaches even allow their players a certain amount of leeway here – if a player makes a mistake they let it go the first time, as the player is probably beating herself up over the mistake and doesn't need the coach in her face telling her she did something wrong. If the same player makes a second or third similar mistake, it's time for an assistant coach not involved in running the game to pull the player aside, spend a few minutes, and physically demonstrate what the player needs to do to correct their mechanics or decision making.

5. Don't always play to win. The truth is none of us like to lose.....often at anything. Most of the people involved in sports are very competitive. However, you need to temper that reptilian drive with some sense, fairness and compassion. In the standard tournament format, Saturdays usually consist of seeding games and Sunday is single elimination playoffs. Some coaches view seeding placement as extremely important. Others don't care where they seed. My theory is although you may always want to win, put your starters out in one game, a game that you stand a good chance of winning. For the other two or more games you may play on Saturday, rotate all of your players to have a fair distribution of playing time. If the format is



a college showcase, winning is not as important as providing exposure for all of your players.

6. Don't contradict private coaches. If you have players taking private hitting lessons, pitching lessons, or catching lessons, don't try to change the methods being taught by their privately paid instructors. If you truly feel the instructor is ripping off or doing a disservice to the family, discuss it with the parents and then drop it. If they still believe in their private instructor, that is their right. It is however, a mistake to alter mechanics that another coach is actively working on and being paid to do so. Don't forget, the private coach is providing one-on-one instruction for an extended period of time – something you typically cannot do.

7. Don't focus coaching on your star players. Your star players are the ones who are already doing well. Statistically, they are the top outliers. You will also have a couple of players at the bottom of the talent pool. They are the bottom outliers. Don't focus on them either. Who you do need to focus on is the average player. You can greatly improve your team by raising the average skill level of your squad. You do this by improving the mediocre/average players. You can prove this works both mathematically and in reality by trying it. If you have a team of 12 players. Maybe 2 are stars, 2 are lower-skilled, and 8 are about the same or average. Work towards improving these 8. The lower-end players will also improve from the drills and training and hopefully will be where the average players were at the beginning of the season.

8. Don't be disrespectful to umpires or opposing coaches. Some coaches feel that it's a strategy to be disrespectful to umpires and opposing coaches from the opening handshake until some-



times hours after the game is over. Umpires usually don't get every call right. Sometimes, umpires don't get many calls right. Either way, deal with it like a professional; like an adult. Opposing coaches may say things to their players specifically meant to intimidate or harass you. They may question every play, every call, etc. Whatever the other coach does is on him/her. Again, deal with it like a professional; like an adult. Do not be tempted to curse under your breath, say things your team or team families. In fact, don't negatively comment about these types of situations at all. Treat them as life lessons and lessons in sportsmanship. Your team and team families will applaud you for it and recognize that they are associated with a class act.

9. Don't step on the practice field without a plan. Many first time coaches are those who remember their past experiences playing rec ball, high school, or even some college ball. These experiences may be 10, 20, 30, or more years ago. Techniques have changed. Times have changed. Make sure you hit the field with a written plan on how you are going to train the kids in front of you. Remember to minimize time standing around for each player. Also remember to give each player adequate touch time on each drill or skill building station. If you don't have a plan, you will be standing around just winging it and hoping for inspiration on what to do next. Sometimes this works, but it is certainly not optimal. Consider what your goals are for each practice. Are you just holding practices to get the kids moving or are you trying to accomplish something specific? There are many good practice plans available on the Internet.

10. Don't forget softball is a game and is supposed to be fun. Some coaches lose sight of these facts. They become overbearing. They feel winning is vitally important. They believe that every batter must be a strike out. Every at bat must result in a line drive. Don't be



one of these coaches. Remember your players are still children. They want and need to have fun. Softball for them is optional and something they want to do because they love it. Don't be THAT coach that causes a long time player to give up on a sport they grew up playing.

When you hit the fields this spring, keep these 10 mistakes in mind and try your best to provide a quality, meaningful, goal-oriented program while making sure that each player on your roster is still having fun. Chances are if you avoid these 10 mistakes, you will have a solid softball program.

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.

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