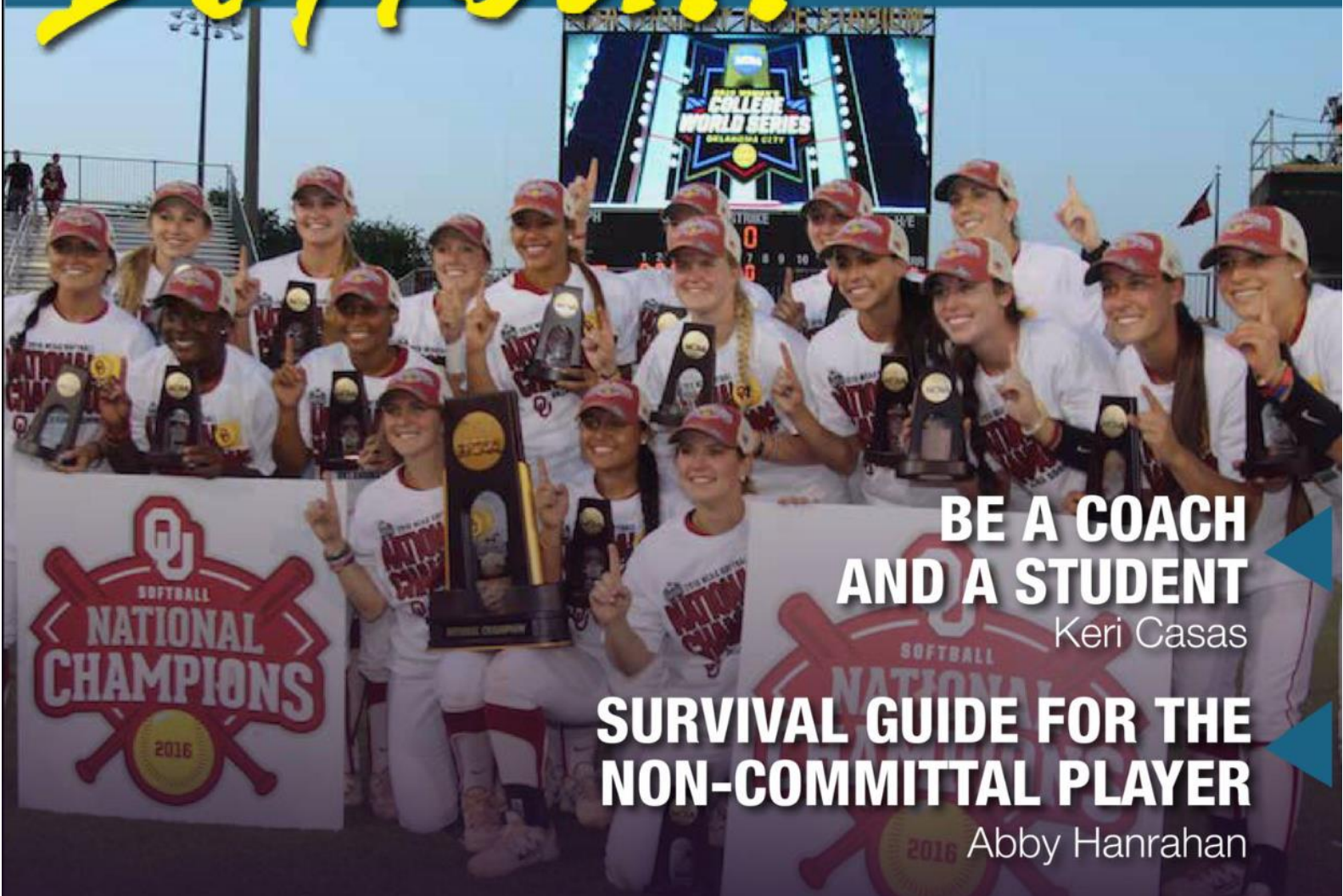


FASTPITCH

Softball

MAGAZINE



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AND A STUDENT**
Keri Casas

**SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR THE
NON-COMMITTAL PLAYER**
Abby Hanrahan

BONUS:

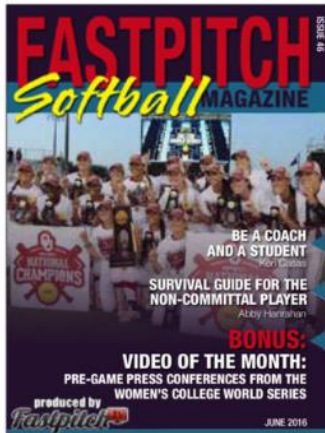
**VIDEO OF THE MONTH:
PRE-GAME PRESS CONFERENCES FROM THE
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produced by
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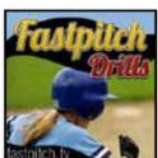
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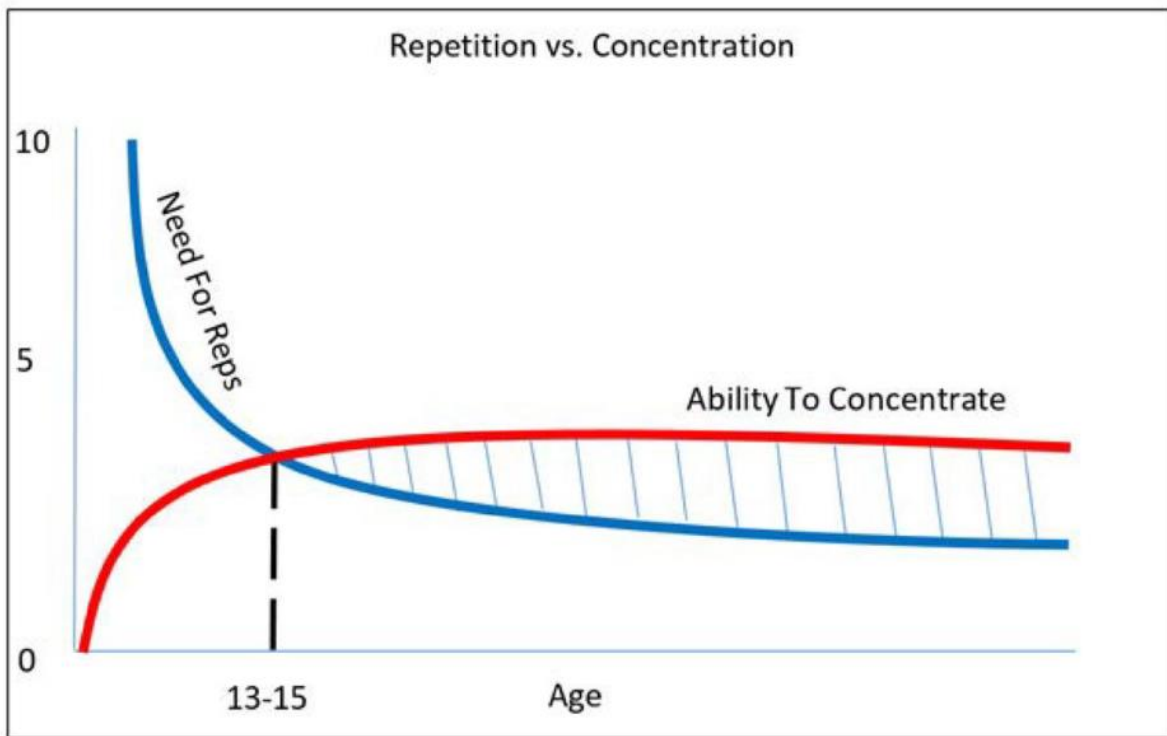
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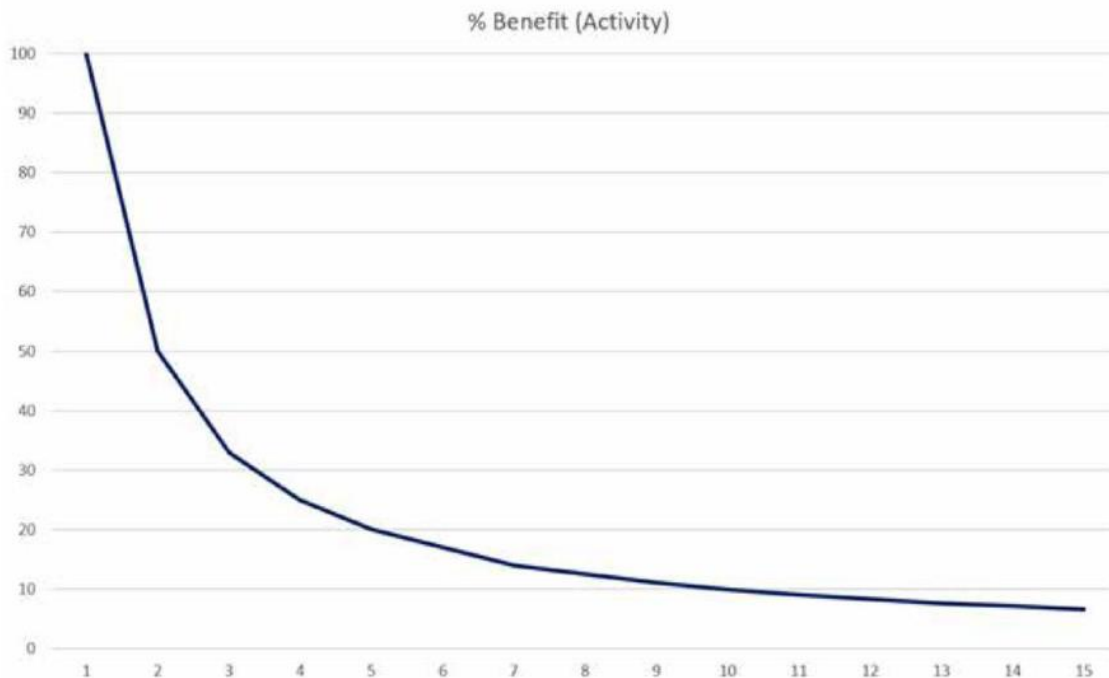
Stop Standing Around Fix Your Practices

Most of us have attended or at least seen practices where players are mostly sitting around waiting for their turn to do something. The truth is, in these practices the athletes are usually only active 10-25% of the time. When players are acquiring new skills, they need to perform the skills over and over. Repetition correctly performing a skill is a big part of athletic success. This applies to athletes of all ages but is especially important to the youngest athletes. The theoretical chart below illustrates this relationship. The hatched area between the two curves can be thought of as a sweet spot. It represents the time when an athlete's ability to concentrate exceeds their need for repetitions. This is when an athlete can start spending a lot of time focusing on reps and making lots of progress. I have found that the two curves cross between the ages of 13 and 15 for softball players. Sometimes it can start a bit earlier or a bit later. Other than stating this somewhat mathematically, the concepts are ones you probably already know. However, seeing the relationship in the chart may help some coaches visualize the importance of the relationship.





Another relationship exists between the number of players per station and the benefit to the player. Let's say you have a roster of 15 players and a single coach is pitching a bucket of balls to each batter on the team. In its worst (and purest) form, no players are shagging balls. When they are waiting in line or done hitting, they are socializing and not practicing – sound familiar?



In this example, each player is only seeing 6% of activity during the hitting drill! Think about it, most of your players are standing around not doing very much! You can easily see from the chart above that the magic number to have for players per station is 2 or 3 at most, and certainly no more than 4. The benefit really starts to drop off with 4 or more players.

Are you a coach that likes to lecture a lot or have big talks with your players during practice? Do you describe in detail what your players need to do in a particular drill? If so, you should rethink this and stop it. Researchers at Stanford found that when they compared a traditional class environment of lecture (listening) and independent homework vs. an environment of students working on solving problems (doing) with graduate assistants, test scores nearly doubled! Recent advice is to skip the big lectures, demonstrate once how to do the drill, and then work with each athlete to perfect their skills to correctly perform the drill.

Another important area to consider is that you should practice whatever you expect your players to perform during games. Perhaps select an area to concentrate in each practice and then come back to it a few practices later for a refresher. Some areas that many coaches do not spend much time in practice on include:

- Basic bunting skills, including directing bunts to first base and third base sides.
- Suicide Squeeze plays for both bunters and baserunners
- Slap hitting
- Batting for placement (right side or left side of field)
- Slashing (show bunt to draw corners in and then pull bat



- back to perform a half swing)
- Unplanned pickles (not running into an out)
- Deliberate pickles (first base to second base)
- Pitch outs to pick off runner stealing second (pitcher, catcher, and short stop)
- Pick offs on first base
- Tagging up
- Directing cut throws and throwing past cutoff to directly reach the catcher
- Delayed steals
- Continuous walks
- Double plays
- Backup positioning (especially, pitcher, catcher, and OF)
- Adjusting hitting positioning for different pitchers (front/back of box, up tight to plate, away from plate)
- Dealing with nonstandard strike zones (umpire variation)
- Dealing with rain (pitchers / catchers especially)

Practices are very important for player development as well as team development. However, there is a world of difference between having a practice and having a well-run practice. In a well-run practice, players should be almost always doing something. They should not be standing around. They should leave practice sweaty! If you have a roster of 15 players make sure you are running at least 5 simultaneous stations to ensure high benefit to each player. Many stations do not require a coach once the players understand what they need to do and how to do it correctly. One option, especially for younger players is to place a laminated card with pictures and directions of what players need to accomplish at each station. An example of a 5-station practice we regularly use is:



1. Tee work into net or backstop with two tees (stay through the zone and hit both balls)
2. Front toss with golf whiffle balls and players swinging different weight stick bats
3. Front toss with Total Control heavy balls
4. Side toss, hitting out to field
5. Front toss behind screen from 15 feet with standard 12" softball

Alternative stations include:

- Bunting with 12" softballs or whiffle balls
- Using hitting discs
- Tee work with soccer ball or basketball
- Slashing
- One-handed tee (you can have two stations for this, one for top hand, the other for bottom hand)
- Use a Strike-Tec stick
- Front toss with a bean bag or heavy ball to identify strike zone (earn a point for swinging on a strike and holding on a ball, lose a point for swinging at a ball or not swinging at a strike)
- Hit balls on a rope attached between a fence and a tree. Google this if you don't know how to make one.

As you can see, there are many ways to have multiple hitting stations. The same is true for most other drills. Other than equipment limitations, there should be no excuses for having players standing around.

John Kessel from Team USA Volleyball put it this way – if you have



a line of players waiting to do something, you should consider how long it would take all of them to learn how to ride a bicycle, with only one bike for them to practice with. It would take a really long time. An unacceptably long time. That's the same as having players standing around waiting to do something. He found that in many cases, the coach touches the ball up to TEN times more than any player does!

Coaches need to be aware of player activity and design well-run practices to maximize the benefit to players. Vary the intensity of the drills from station to station to insure that players aren't being asked to work too hard via consecutive drills. Swinging a heavy stick is tiring on a hot, humid day. The next or previous station should be low intensity like practicing bunting.

If you really want to get an idea of player activity, have an assistant coach spend his or her time during a practice doing nothing but tracking the activities of a single player. This will give you an idea of how effective your practices are. If you determine the benefit is too low, do something about it like adding more stations and then measure the results again. Keep improving your practices (continuous improvement). Make sure you plan out your practices ahead of time. Your players will appreciate your efforts.

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.

