Oak Park Youth Baseball and Softball
(OPYBS)

Softball Coaches’ Manual

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Photos and on-line video were added for the Second Edition of this manual.

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Visit www.youtube.com/opybssoftball for the “Pitching Instruction” video
that accompanies this manual.
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Introduction -or- “Hey, you’re a coach! Now what?”
*a brief note from Brian Endless, OPYBS Softball Director of Instruction*

*Introduction to the Second Edition (April 2012):*

We were very gratified with the success of the first edition of this manual in 2011. Our goal was to provide coaches with a great tool to help them improve, and thus improve their players. And we were pleased to see that goal put into action across the OPYBS leagues. This year, we have added a variety of new materials, including a section on training catchers, pictures of many things described in the manual, and videos to accompany the manual on the OPYBS web site. We hope that our coaches will continue to find this manual valuable for a long time to come.

*Introduction to the First Edition (March 2011):*

This Coaches Manual is intended as a tool for OPYBS Softball Coaches. Our primary philosophy at OPYBS is to help the girls in our leagues develop as players in whatever time they spend on our teams. This includes improving at softball skills, developing life skills through sports and teamwork, and having fun while doing it. We also hope to increase the amount of time that each girl is interested in playing softball, giving our players good opportunities to compete as they move up through each level to the best of their abilities. If we can give the girls a good softball experience, make it fun, and help them to continue learning, we hope that an ever-increasing number of girls will stay with the OPYBS program to our highest age brackets.

From the coaching perspective, we fully realize that coaching requires a lot of hard work and dedication. But it is also supposed to be enjoyable, rewarding and fun! This manual provides suggestions that we hope will help you get more out of coaching, and make the tasks easier and more rewarding.

Over the past years, there was an increasing realization that we need to provide more resources for our volunteer coaches, leading to the idea of both an instruction committee and a Coaches’ Manual. The intent is to assist new coaches, who may need help to be a better mentor, and to provide some new or different ideas to veteran coaches. This manual will go through regular updates, and we hope that all of our coaches consider contributing to future versions.

In particular, we hope to encourage all of our coaches, whether new or experienced, T-Ball or 14U, to focus more on teaching girls the fundamentals of the game of softball. This is based on a simple philosophy, shared by many of the best coaches in sports:  

“Winning isn't the goal. Learning the fundamentals well is the goal. Winning comes from that.”

Thus this manual is intended to encourage coaches to focus on those fundamentals, and to provide them with the resources to do so. This needs to start when girls first enter our program. If we can give them the basic skills at T-Ball and 9U, then each girl can learn more and be much
more effective in later years. That being said, even college and pro players still work on the fundamentals at almost every practice, so we encourage coaches to reinforce basic skills through all levels.

If you learn nothing else from this manual, here are a few, key fundamental skills to focus on:

- **Catching**: keep your glove up, and your ball hand next to the glove to close in after the catch
- **Ground balls**: get down on the ball, with your glove touching the ground and fingers in your glove hand pointing down
- **Fielding**: always move to the ball, even when it is coming straight at you
- **Fielding**: always move on every play, even when the ball is nowhere near you - every player on the field needs to be “in” every play
- **Throwing**: always aim for the target! (usually the other player’s glove)
- **Hitting**: bat above the head, knocking knuckles aligned, punch at the ball with your hands, rotate hips, eyes on the ball until it hits the bat
- **Wasting the players’ time is one of the worst things you can do** - plan ahead before practices and games to make the best use of the limited time we have
- **Be a positive role model for the players** - politeness, positive attitude and great sportsmanship are contagious!
- **The game is supposed to be fun for all involved**, do as much as you can to help that along

More details on all of these are covered in the various sections below.

**Credits**:

This manual would not have been possible without the work of a dedicated core group. In particular this includes the members of the “Instruction Committee” who co-authored and edited what you see here, Andrew Carlin and John Metzger, along with OPYBS Vice President of Softball Bill Sullivan. Special thanks to Denis Roarty, one of the original co-authors of this manual. Coaching clinics run by Alison Haehnel at Concordia University (River Forest) and by Dick Smith at the University of St. Francis (Joliet) provided or enhanced many of the ideas presented here. And we also want to acknowledge the coaches who we have worked with in the past, many of whom introduced us to or helped to create the ideas presented here. Very little of the information here is “new,” but rather this manual is a compilation of some of the best that we have experienced while playing or coaching the game.
How to Use this Manual

If you are new to coaching, you may want to take the time to read through most of the manual, focusing especially on Coaching 101, Instructional Areas and Coaching Resources. The Skills and Drills section contains details on a lot of drills (although still a small portion of those you could do), but this is likely more than you will need to get started. You can skim through this and pick drills as you go along and plan practices. Coaching 101 covers the philosophy and many specific pointers on coaching. Instructional Areas is intended to help you think through what you may want to cover in practices. And the resources section has many links to videos and other resources that may be helpful. In the appendices, the Sample Practice Plans may be a good place to go next, and the Sample Fielding/Batting Order may be useful before games. After a read through (in detail or skimming as you prefer), this manual can then be used as needed as a reference, trying new drills or going back to review details as new situations arise.

If you are a returning coach, you may want to skim through the Coaching 101 section for any tips that you have not heard/thought of before. The Instructional Areas and Specific Skills/Drills may be more useful for you in providing ideas for new directions to help you train your players on the fundamentals. Also, returning coaches may get more immediately out of some of the appendices, like those on statistics and sample fielding/batting order. Overall the manual may be more of a reference source for experienced coaches.

For all coaches, you may want to utilize parts of this manual by passing them along to assistant coaches, parents and players. This can include having all players fill out the emergency data form, which is strongly recommended. In addition, passing out the “Suggested Equipment List” to the players may be useful, and you may want to read through the section on “how to work with parents” to decide what you personally want to communicate and what information/ideas you might want to pass along.

Finally, we hope that all coaches consider contributing to future updates of this manual. The authors of this book don’t pretend to have all the answers, and any drills or other materials that you would like to share with other OPYBS coaches are appreciated.

OPYBS also has many materials on the web, including:
- www.opybs.org – main web page for all OPYBS leagues
- www.youtube.com/user/OPYBSSoftball - OPYS Softball Video Page

Please contact us at bendles@luc.edu if you have any questions, comments, or other information that may be valuable to include in future editions of this manual.
Chapter I: Coaching 101

Being a coach
Coaching is one of those things that attracts people for many different reasons. We all know the stereotype of the overbearing coach, but without question, the vast majority of us are in it for admirable reasons. We bring many strengths as well as some weaknesses to the task. In this league, we only ask that each of us recognizes this in ourselves and in our fellow coaches, players and parents. A goal for all of us is simply to strive to bring out the best in ourselves and one another.

Positive Coaching
Motivating your team to create an environment where the girls learn softball skills and life skills is an extremely important part of coaching. Some resources are listed in the web links appendix to supplement the information below.

Competition
Competition is a key ingredient to the fun of this game. Coaches are encouraged to pump up their teams and lead an emotional charge onto the field... to a point. So what is that point?

We have all seen the emotions go from positive and appropriate to negative and inappropriate within seconds of things not going our way. This is where we can teach our girls the most important lessons of the game. In fact, this is a mantra in our league: **good sportsmanship above all else**.

When we do this, the girls will walk away with some great life long skills. They will enjoy the game and the competition more when they know how to balance it with healthy attitudes and conflict resolution skills.

Leading by Example, Planning for Success
Each of us needs to do our own mental checklist and think through what we are good at and what we need to work on. Prior to the start of the season, you and your coaching colleagues need to discuss your strengths and weaknesses and plan on supporting one another.

Bringing the Best Out of One Another:
- Be pleasant, have fun and show good sportsmanship with opposing coaches and players.
- Go into every practice and every game with an upbeat attitude towards your girls and the work you will do.
- Plan ahead - the girls always know when you are winging it.
  - Know what skills you want to work on and how you want to work on them.
  - Plan out rosters before the game.
  - Establish a warm-up routine.
- Resolving problems - establish who should lead problem resolution efforts and what to do when they breakdown. If you see an issue, address it with the other coach first, then the umpire if appropriate. If things break down, keep a perspective that it is only a game and that we place sportsmanship above all else. Advocacy is a great trait to display; anger is not.
There are many ways to be a great coach. Let your strengths shine but also find ways to shore up any weaknesses.

Things to Avoid:
- Be aware of common pitfalls that we may overlook - this applies to all levels, players, parents, and ourselves.
  - Excessive Anger - if you are someone who angers easily, have a plan to resolve any game time issues. Consider deferring to another coach on your team.
  - Anti-agitating policy - it is never funny or productive to agitate someone who is upset.
  - Foul language - this should never be accepted.
  - Ignoring problems - if a problem festers it isn’t helpful to ignore it. If you see this happening you need to find a way to constructively confront it.
- Any of the above can ruin a game for some or all of the girls. Your attitude towards these issues will be evident in your players’ behavior. Great coaches don’t tolerate these things from their colleagues, parents or players.

Development of Players
Player development is typically framed around six general categories. Most drills and practice activities in this manual will focus on:
- Defense – Throw / Catch
- Defense - Field Grounders and Fly balls
- Defense - Infield
- Defense - Outfield
- Offense - Hitting/bunting
- Offense - Baserunning
- Specialty - Pitcher
- Specialty - Catcher

Specialized Positions
In T-ball and 9U we generally take a holistic approach where we try to give every player a chance to play each position if they want it and if they are ready for it. There are very young players who may not be ready to play infield. But by second or third grade most should be ready to safely stop a hard hit ball. It is your call to keep them safe, but don’t over use the safety concern for competitive reasons. Parents and players do notice this and get perturbed. When in doubt, talk this over with the parents and your colleagues.

By 10U there is a transition to specific positions where we guide the girls into what seems to be their strength or their interest. But there should still be a general movement towards giving the girls exposure to a variety of positions. 12U and up, many girls are being groomed to know one or two positions very well.

The Importance of Developing Pitchers and Catchers
At the 9U and 10U levels, it is essential that every coach focus on developing as many pitchers and catchers as possible. This is important both for your own team, as well as for OPYBS as a league. The game of softball revolves around pitchers and catchers, who can either make or
break a game. And as pitchers improve, having a well-trained player in the other half of their “battery” at the catcher position becomes just as important.

At the 9U level, we give pitchers a chance to get their feet wet without the ultimate consequence of walking too many batters and eventually leading to runs. By 10U, the pitchers are on their own, and they have a significant effect on the quality (and fun!) of the game for everyone, both opposing hitters and their own team. Thus it is essential to develop as many players as possible into pitchers at both of these levels.

For catchers, 9U is an age to find the girls who have the personality to stay behind the plate and work with a pitcher. This is the position where a girl is most likely to be hit by a stray ball, and a good catcher personality is someone who accepts that as part of the game. At 10U, stealing is introduced into the game. At this point the catcher is both a partner to the pitcher, as well as a crucial infielder who can prevent runners from advancing. Catcher is the only defensive player who touches the ball almost as often as the pitcher, and thus this position cannot be ignored and requires some extra coaching.

Some guidelines by league are as follows:

- **At the 9U level - Pitchers:** Early in the practice season, coaches are strongly urged to find out how many girls are interested in pitching and to give everyone possible an opportunity to learn to pitch. Several suggestions include:
  - At an early practice, go through a few of the basic pitching drills with the entire team. This may encourage some girls to pitch who might not have otherwise been interested. Also, coaches may spot girls with natural talent (at 9U/10U this is typically simply the ability to get the ball over the plate for a beginner) who they want to encourage.
  - When holding pitching practices, encourage anyone interested in pitching to attend. You may require some participation in practice before pitching a player in a game situation, but try to be as open and encouraging as possible to maximize your potential number of pitchers.
  - In games, try to pitch as many girls as possible. Remember that at the 9U level, there are no walks, so this is a “safer” thing to do. This doesn’t mean that you should pitch a player who has never thrown anything near a strike in practice, but those girls will rarely continue coming to pitching practices. A good rule of thumb is, if a player at this level is willing to practice, it is good to give them at least an inning of pitching in one or two games.
  - At 9U, it is legal to pitch the same player two innings in a row, but please consider the effect that this has on development of your other pitchers. It is not uncommon to pitch 3 different players in 3 innings in a 9U game. You may pitch your best 1-2 pitchers each game, but rotating others in is a good development tool.

- **At the 9U level – Catchers:** At 9U where there is no base stealing, the catcher’s job is limited to stopping the ball, getting it back to the pitcher directly and with a good throw (thus avoiding delays as the ball rolls around the infield!), and acting as an infielder when there is a force or play at the plate.
○ Coaches are strongly encouraged to try as many girls as possible at the catcher position. Especially at 9U, this position tends to “eat up” players who may be interested in doing it, but shy away the first time a foul ball hits their helmet. Coaches can help this by being as positive as possible, reinforcing the importance of this position, and not downplaying the fact that a catcher will sometimes be hit by a ball – but that’s why we dress them in armor!

● At the 10U level - Pitchers: Coaches should still encourage any interested players to attend pitching practices, but within some limitations. At 10U, each team will draft two pitchers, and there is a reasonable expectation that they will be among the leaders on the team’s pitching staff. That being said, each 10U team needs a minimum of 3-4 pitchers in order to get through the season between possible injuries/illness, missed games for outside events, etc. So some additional pitchers will need to be developed. Things to keep in mind here:
  ○ Coaches are encouraged to keep pitching practices open to anyone who is interested. At this level though, coaches should be clear, in advance, to both potential pitchers and their parents that attending practice does not guarantee that a girl will pitch. A good rule of thumb is that the player must be throwing strikes on a regular basis in practice before she will go in to pitch during a game. Since walks are a part of the 10U game, a player who can’t throw strikes is almost automatically going to fail at pitching, which is bad both for the player and the team.
  ○ If a player is progressing but you are not quite sure if they are there yet, consider putting them into a game situation late in a game or at a point where a game is either well in-hand or out of reach. This allows a learning opportunity for the player with less game pressure.

● At the 10U/12U level – Catchers: In the older leagues, the catcher position is even more important because stealing bases now becomes a factor. The two key things to look for in a catcher at this level are players who are willing to get down on the ground to block an incoming pitch, and players who can make the throw to 2nd or 3rd bases (and potentially the pick-off throw to 1st at 12U.)

● Can anyone become a pitcher? Our answer is a qualified “yes,” IF the girl AND someone in her family are willing to put in the time and effort needed to learn to pitch. After showing interest and being taught the basic drills, the next test becomes how often the player is willing/able to practice those drills in order to get better. While some girls are natural pitchers, most take a lot of work to get better. And even natural pitchers need a lot of extra practice to improve enough to pitch at the 10U, and certainly at the 12U levels. Historically, some girls pick up pitching more quickly and others take time -- but it is worthwhile to not give up on someone who is interested, and allow them to progress at their own pace. Effort and a willingness to learn are just as important as natural ability when it comes to pitching.

● Resources for coaches: one thing to remember is that OPYBS does not expect any coach to necessarily know how to coach pitching, and you are certainly not expected to be a great pitching coach. Just like pitching itself, coaching pitching is a very specialized skill
that not everyone will learn. That being said, it is entirely possible for every coach to
become competent as someone who can introduce pitching to their team. This manual
provides a variety of resources, and OPYBS will both provide training on teaching
pitching and link coaches up with opportunities to attend outside clinics. When the
players start to become better pitchers, they will likely seek out a private coach as they
get older -- but for the younger leagues, any coach can learn how to teach at least the
basics!

Working with Players
Every group of kids seems to have their own group personality, some easy, some difficult. And
each of us has our own skill set in terms of keeping the group motivated and positive.

Here is a list of things to keep in mind that will keep the girls’ attention and keep them
motivated.

- Less talk and more action is always a good idea... so try and limit the number of team
  meetings during a practice or game.
- When you do meet, keep your talking points limited. Plan ahead on what are the three or
  four most important issues that you need to address... even when you have ten things you
  would like to work on.
- Use email or printed notes to communicate with parents. Verbal messages via the girls
  are risky and take away from what you want them to focus on.
- Small groups work very well for getting more complex skills across. See section below
  about running practices.
- To make time for small group sessions, there are two tricks to use:
  - Establish drills and routines early in the season so that most of the girls can work
    independently of you while you run the small group session.
  - Make use of your co-coaches (or even parents who are hanging out) to engage the
    rest of the girls.... and don’t forget to tap into co-coach’s interests and strengths if
    they would rather run the small group.
- Demand attention... in a light way. If you are keeping your message focused and short,
  the girls will be more willing to give you their attention. So when you are ready to speak:
  - Ask for their attention with a cue like a call and response clapping pattern.
  - Wait for them to give you their attention before beginning to talk. This may feel
    awkward but it is an important attention getting tool.
  - Your style will dictate how long you wait or how you might intervene but here are
    a few tricks:
    - Call the names of anyone not listening and ask for them to look at you.
    - Try a few “thank yous” to girls that are giving you their attention.
    - If it is just one or two inattentive girls move on but talk to them after the
      meeting.
  - Intimidation and embarrassment are usually bad ideas. You can be persistent
    without getting negative.
  - If you lose them during your message, then cut it short, move on, and get them
    active.
- Avoid distractions... This may be a style thing and you may be great at holding the girls’
  attention by entertaining banter between you and the girls. But if the banter becomes
distracting or annoying, you need to consistently cut it off or defer questions until after you are done with your message.

- Open yourself up to critique. If you think you are struggling with any of the above, ask someone else to observe and give you feedback. Let them know what to look for.

- Try to always be positive. This includes both a positive overall attitude which the players will notice, but also being positive in critiques. When a coach tells a player to stop doing something, this tends to make the player fixate on that thing. So instead of saying “don’t push at the ball when you are trying to catch it,” you can instead say “let the ball get into your glove before closing it.” It may sometimes require an extra second of thought, but positive/constructive critiques can go a long way toward improving player performance more quickly. And girls typically shut down if they get constant negative feedback.

- Try to not criticize or correct too much during games -- practice is the time to work on fundamentals that prevent errors. Games are the time to let the girls play and use what they practiced. This isn’t to say that you may not need to remind girls to keep their heads in the game, be in the ready position, or perhaps make minor corrections (preferably before plays) to help them along the way. So for instance, if you have been working with a player in practice to keep her bat head up while swinging, it may make sense to remind her of that one thing before she goes up to the plate. Or you might remind a pitcher to keep her stride long before she goes out on the mound if you have been working on that. Giving compound instructions (i.e. trying to correct more than one thing) rarely works. Also, giving instructions during a play can be disastrous as the player is likely to be distracted -- and after a play it can seem like a very non-constructive critique, as in “why didn’t you tell me that BEFORE I made the error?” When errors are made (mental or physical), the time to bring them up is in the next practice, and let the players know that the focus is on giving them the ability to do better in the future.
  - Remember: almost all players know when they make a mistake, and most will be much harder on themselves than you could ever be on them. Critical words after a mistake often add to their own negativity, and carry-forward into later plays. As a coach you may need to build them up after a bad play, and then correct the issues at a later time for better results later.

- Beware of Extrinsic Incentives - Candy, small toys or other recognition may work for you but it often sets up winners and losers if you don’t set it up carefully. The goal of incentives is typically to bring additional excitement to the players, but in a winners/losers atmosphere the losers resent the whole incentive scheme. Here are some thoughts on this:
  - Not using extrinsic incentives is fine... it does not typically hurt anything if you tend to the intrinsic motivations with positive guidance (see last point above).
  - One common incentive that may be equitable is the game ball reward. This works if you make it clear that game balls are earned by showing growth and by doing something you never did before and then you make sure everyone gets recognized for something during the season.
  - Other incentives that have worked are based on the combination of great play and growth, but coaches need to be excessively fair in handing these out. Helmet stickers (small circles with a team logo that the players agree on) are one idea that can be useful here as you can order a lot of them pre-season. To avoid the competitive aspect, it is incumbent on the coaches to find things to reward for almost all players on a regular basis. Non-traditional examples might be growth as
a player, extra effort on a play, putting down a sacrifice bunt (i.e. giving up your at-bat for the team!), great cheering/attentiveness to the game while on the bench, or other positives that are easily accomplishable by anyone who puts in the effort to play, regardless of skill level. Things like great hits, RBIs and great fielding plays can also certainly be rewarded. It is important to keep track of rewards though, and work with players who are having a hard time to give them reasonable goals to reach, then reward those.

○ The bottom line is, if rewards aren’t seen as “fair” from the players’ perspective, typically defined as everyone has a chance to get a reward at least once in a while, then they either become too competitive or may be a disincentive for the weaker players to try hard. If you can’t find a way to give them fairly, it is better to avoid them.

○ Final note: never give money as an incentive, as this could lead to loss of the player’s amateur status -- no matter how young or how small the amount!

Fairness Issues
Besides you, there are two people in the game who have a great deal of control over fairness issues, the opposing coach and the umpire.

● Our rules are pretty clear regarding how coaches should treat our young umpires. See the section below about this.

● We don’t have specific rules for working with the opposing coach because there are rarely issues between coaches. That said, whenever there is an issue it has the potential to become heated. Typically this boils down to one team requesting an accommodation from the other such as waiting for the 9th player or schedule changes and the like. Most game time issues are the umpire’s call.

● When fairness is a judgment call and there is a competitive advantage involved, we simply ask both coaches to Lead by Example (see section above). Additionally, consider the following:
  ○ Communicate frankly about the competitive advantages at stake.
  ○ Consider the spirit of any rules involved rather than the letter of the rule.
  ○ Accept that the letter of a rule must stand or an existing schedule must remain intact if there is no agreement to accommodate.
  ○ At all times show your players and their parents a balanced view of the situation so that you are not causing undue negative feelings towards the other team or coach.

Working with Umpires
Our umpires come with a variety of experience and skills. Most do a great job, some are still learning. If you have constructive feedback for an umpire, it is always best to route it through your league president who can relay it to the umpire coordinator.

Below are a few rules to follow:
Confronting, arguing with, or intimidating an umpire during or after a game is never allowed.

During the game, a coach’s only interactions with umpires on rules or rulings can be in the form of asking the umpire the following, always in a non-confrontational manner:

- what did the umpire see?
- which rule is being applied?
- request clarification of a rule or ruling.

If the clear meaning of a rule (either USSSA or Oak Park League rules) is not followed, you may ask for a clarification on the rule, but regardless the umpires final ruling still stands.

Feel free to request a strike zone discussion before a game or before an inning starts but not during an inning. Both coaches should be present, and specific calls may never be questioned.

There will be no pre-game side agreements about rule changes. The umpires are trained in USSSA rules with OPYBS variations, and any such discussion would introduce confusion and a lack of consistency between games. Further, this is also disrespectful to the umpire.

During the pre-game meeting between umpire and coaches, rule clarifications regarding field conditions are acceptable and encouraged. The umpire should meet with both coaches and clarify out-of-bounds if there are strange fence-line issues. Also, early in the season, if pitching machine circles or base running rules are new to everyone, it makes sense to clarify these things on the field.

Coaches should avoid engaging in any activity that could be perceived as “ganging up” on the umpire. Even if both coaches agree on a ruling, the umpire’s ruling is final. Especially with high school and college aged umpires, the presence of two adult coaches disagreeing with a call (even if you don’t see it as arguing!) can be intimidating and is inappropriate.

If you feel that a rule is being interpreted differently between umpires in different games, or that an umpire makes an incorrect call or misinterprets the rules, please contact your league president who can reach out to the umpire coordinator. These situations should not be brought up directly with the umpire.

An umpire should never be told “it was called this way in our last game.”

Violation of any of these rules on interaction with umpires are sufficient grounds for ejection from the game and possible additional disciplinary action by the league.

Communicating with players/parents

There are numerous communication tasks that are recommended or required by the league. See the appendix or click on any of the links below to download the following forms.

- **Contact Information Form - Recommended**: it is an excellent idea to have every player fill out a contact information form when the season starts. The coach should then keep this contact information on hand at every practice and game in case they need to contact a missing parent (to pick up a daughter if practice ends early/runs late, in case of injury, etc.)

- **Medical Information Form - Strongly Recommended**: in addition to contact information, it is incredibly important for the coach to know some basic medical information about the players. Do they have asthma? Hypoglycemia or diabetes? Allergic to bee stings (or something else?) As the adult who may be in charge while parents are absent, it is
recommended that each coach should know the basics about the health condition of their players.

- **Rules of the game:**
  - All OPYBS softball leagues use the United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) softball rules, with a few additional rules or exceptions specific to each league. Links to full USSSA rules, along with OPYBS House Rules specific to each league, are available on the softball page of the OPYBS website (www.opybs.org/index.php/leagues/girls-overview)

- **Parents’ Code of Conduct:** This is a copy of the form they signed at registration, included as an attachment here in case you ever need to remind parents of things they committed to when signing their daughter up to play.

- **Snack Schedule:** with a greater focus on healthy eating, the traditional “snack schedule” has become a more political issue for some teams. A few general thoughts and rules to follow here:
  - Snacks are a great thing to turn over to a group of interested parents, and it is usually pretty easy to find someone willing to help coordinate this. There are often parents who have no softball knowledge at all, but still want to help out, and this is an ideal place.
  - Post-game snacks should be a team activity -- be sure to keep the team together for the post-game snack.
  - It is often a good practice to move the team away from the bench (unless you are the last game of the day) and take the opportunity to have a quick post-game meeting, with snacks as the highlight at the end of the meeting
  - There is sometimes a movement to get away from post-game snacks -- while you need to be careful here, remember that snacks are not just about the food, but they are also a bonding opportunity for the girls and a chance to unwind after the game. The fact is our players love the snacks and look forward to them! No, its not essential, but snacks are part of the fun of softball, and you may want to remind parents of this if there is a movement away from the tradition.

**Working with Parents**

- Ask parents to provide you with the best email address(es) to reach them. Many don’t provide this to the league at registration.

- Consider using a Google group if you know how. It allows members to add or remove their email address.

- Things to ask parents about:
  - Travel team and other outside activity commitments - do the players have days they cannot make a game or practice?
  - Medical issues to be aware of - make it clear you are not responsible for administering medications or treatments, but should be aware of issues so you know how and when to seek help.

- Getting them involved
  - Ask for Assistant Coaches. You should have at least two coaches between yourself, any co-coaches and assistant coaches. Three or four makes things much more manageable at practice and during game time. Especially in T-ball and perhaps 9U, emphasize that no experience is necessary and that the league is
looking for more female role models to coach. Assistant coaching is a great way to learn the game and build our league’s capacity.

- Bench managers - to help keep batters in the queue and get the catcher ready for the next inning.
- On-deck supervisor - provide instruction and a safe place to practice swinging.
- Snack coordinators (if you do snacks).
- Score keepers - good to have one that can show others how to do it. Always good to check on how a new person keeps score to be sure it is to your standard. Bad score keeping is occasionally a cause of problems during a game.

**Important note:** from a legal perspective, anyone in the dugout is an “assistant coach” and therefore **must** have a background check on file with the league. If a parent, or anyone else, is in the dugout without a background check on file, they must be asked to leave the dugout.

- Coaches are encouraged to keep copies of all completed background forms for assistant coaches in a folder or binder in their gear bag, along with blank copies for new volunteers
- It is advisable to communicate this information to all parents at the beginning of the season, and coaches may choose to ask all parents to voluntarily fill out a background check form to have on file in case they offer to fill-in or assist at a later time.

**Parents as Part of the Team**

Remember that parents are part of the team, not just to provide you with help but as important attitude builders. They can provide a lot of positive energy if you nurture it.

- Stay very open to their concerns and even occasionally ask them to let you know if anything is bothering them or their daughters. Dismissing a parent’s concern is a recipe for developing negative attitudes that will certainly spread to your players.
- If you disagree with a parent over an issue covered in this manual, feel free to share this with them in a respectful way.
- The most typical parent complaint is over getting their child playing time in key positions. So be sure that you are being fair about this before you push back. And if you push back, be clear about your reasons and your facts.
- Parents also sometimes need encouragement to stay positive toward their own daughters. They should be encouraged though to remember that their daughters are young players learning the game, and that many mistakes will be made by them and others over time. Mistakes should be viewed as learning opportunities, not negatives. Also, parents sometimes need to be encouraged to **not** coach their own daughters during a game -- this **must** be left to the coaches, as too much “good advice” is almost guaranteed to confuse the players and have the opposite result of what is intended. It is bad enough if a coach tries to fix more than one thing at a time, but even moreso if the coach gives advice, and then the parent gives two more pieces of advice, etc.
- Don’t be afraid to be proactive in talking with parents, individually or as a group, about these issues to bring them in as an integral part of the team!

**Requirements for coaches**

- **Participation in Picture Day is not optional!** This is an important event for our sponsors and ALL teams must be represented so that plaques can be provided. It’s also
important for our non-sponsored teams. If a coach cannot attend for business/family reasons, an assistant coach should lead the team.

- **Cooperation in the timely distribution/collection and submission of White Sox night ticket orders is absolutely required**, whether or not you are personally a Sox fan. This is our primary fundraiser for the organization.
- **Timely return of equipment bags is required.** This is important as we must send all equipment for cleaning, repair and assessment within a month of the end of the season. If we receive bags late, the league must pay a premium for subsequent shipment and services to the vendor.
- **Non-compliance with any of the above items may cause coaching status to be revoked or non-renewed.**
Chapter II: Game Planning

Many different aspects go into planning for each game, including making lineups (defensive and offensive), pre-game warmups, coaching during the game and post-game meetings, among others.

Defensive Lineups - Notes for T-ball and 9U

Lineup making for T-ball, 9U, and 10U will be quite different than in the older leagues. In T-ball, 9U and even in 10U we expect you to provide the girls with a great deal of exposure to different positions so that they understand the game better and have an opportunity to strengthen skills in a variety of roles. There are no rules about this, not every girl will play every position during a season. Not every girl wants to play every position, and not every girl should play certain positions. The higher the level, the more specialization takes place. But at lower levels, we are interested in getting the broadest experience to the most girls in defensive positions.

The only thing we ask is that, during the regular season you remember we are a developmental league and that you make equity in the lineup a priority over winning games. The equity we are seeking is that of providing challenging opportunities for all girls, not equity in the number of times played in a particular position. Some girls will obviously play key positions like first or pitcher quite a bit more than others. But every girl should get a shot or two at every position.

Anecdotally, we know that it is not uncommon for at least one coach to play their best lineup all season long and gain the first seed in playoffs, only to find that they are outmatched in the playoffs by teams that were not playing their best lineup during the regular season. And quite possibly the best teams in the playoffs have developed a depth to their team through equitable development of their players.

Also anecdotally, we know that parents and girls often do not speak up about frustration with your lineup choices. So make it a practice to invite feedback. We lose quite a few players every year due to parents or girls feeling like they were shut out of the ‘fun’ positions because of an overly competitive coaching style.

In terms of rotating the girls through the lineup, it is a lot of work to come up with 5 or 6 defensive rosters for every game. One tip that cuts down on the work is to keep the girls in their position for two innings. This is half as much work for you and there is the advantage of the girls learning a position better with two consecutive innings in the position. The only thing you may need to tweak is who sits out (see rules about sitting out below). Alternately you can repeat a line-up in later innings, for instance use the same defensive positioning in the 1st and 4th innings.

Note that in T-ball, the rules specify that “the pitcher, 1st baseman and catcher cannot play 2 consecutive innings in the same position.” The purpose of this rule is to prevent domination by one or two of the girls, ultimately taking the emphasis off of the teaching aspect of the game.
A spreadsheet is a great way to rearrange your lineup from game to game. See the appendix on Sample Fielding/Batting for a sample spreadsheet that you can adapt or use.

Safety is also a concern with the younger players. Infield players should definitely feel comfortable stopping a hard hit ground ball. That is not to say they need to catch it but they should be able to track the ball and move in front of it in a safe manner.

Another safety issue in 9U is that your catcher needs to feel comfortable catching a machine pitched ball. In 9U, the catcher position is still not a critical defensive position as there is no stealing. So it is common to put less capable players into the catcher spot, or rotate all girls through the position. This can lead to some girls becoming nothing less than a target as they let every ball hit them. They end up resenting the position, and resenting you if you keep putting them in there. Parents may also get upset with this. And after a few injuries, a good portion of your team may be resistant to playing the position. So what to do? Here are some suggestions but none of them binding in any way:

- Make the catcher position more important when you talk about it with the players! Focus on this person as a potential run-stopper, and as a key to keeping the game moving quickly (if the catcher stops most balls, and hustles to get those that go past her, the defensive part of the game can go much faster, leading to more at-bats for your team!)
- Try to develop a few girls who really want to catch, as opposed to just putting girls in this position -- focus on the fact that the catcher touches the ball as much as the pitcher (more in Tball and 9U) and more than anyone else in the game.
- Try to avoid a reverse equity policy that forces every girl to take their turn.
- Give resistant girls a chance to catch a few balls during warmups when there is less pressure and you can concentrate on coaching them.
- Coach all the girls on how to protect themselves:
  - They should be squatting, not kneeling. If they are kneeling, even on one knee, their thigh is exposed.
  - Their non-catching hand should never be next to or behind their glove, or exposed to the pitch in any other way. This typically means placing that hand behind their back at the start of the pitch. For older leagues (10U plus where stealing is introduced), placing the throwing hand on the thigh is also a safe option, as this hand often comes out anyway if a throw is needed, and it is safer on the thigh.
  - They should be positioned far enough back so that they won’t be hit by the bat but not so far back that they have to catch every pitch in the dirt.
- They should be paying attention and concentrate on the ball as it comes in.
- See the chapter on “Teaching Specific Skills” later in this manual for more on catching skill development.

Proper catching position / form:
Defensive Lineups - 10U and Up

While most of the T-Ball through 10U suggestions still apply to older leagues, there are additional defensive issues to take into account. 10U is really the launching point for this, as this is a league where many players are moving up in skills while practicing the fundamentals, while others still need more on the basics. So both this section and the above apply to 10U

- Base running and stealing: base running becomes more important at 10U and up as stealing, bunting and better hitting all come into play. While it is possible to place a team’s best defensive players in a few key positions in younger leagues to maximize success, all positions gain more importance at this level. A few examples:
  - Pitcher and catcher as defenders: these two will need to communicate better on bunts and in steal situations. The catcher is particularly important (see below) for stealing, throw-downs to 1B or 3B, and making the proper play on bunts. Good defensive fielding on bunts is also more important for pitchers at these ages.
  - First and Third base players also become more important as fielders, both for charging bunts, and taking throws from the catcher to pick players off bases. Heads-up play is critical in these positions.
  - Second and Shortstop have new responsibilities too -- 2B will now have the need to cover first on bunts up the right side, as well as partial responsibility to cover second on some steal attempts. SS will have primary responsibility for steal coverage of 2B, as well as backing up 3B on bunts when there is a force at third. And both of these positions will need to improve at taking forces (without a SC position at 10U and up) and possibly turning double plays when the opportunity presents itself.
  - Outfielders become critical at 10U and up, and can no longer be a place to simple “dump” players when a coach doesn’t have another place to put them (not that this should ever be done, but the unfortunate reality is that the dynamic still exists.) Each outfielder is responsible for backing up the infield on every play that stays on the dirt, whether a ground ball, steal or pickoff. In addition, older hitters now put many more balls into play in the outfield, so these positions take on much more importance. Speed, arm strength and good decision making skills (where do I throw?) all come into play more at older levels.

- Depth at each position: coaches also need to continue to think about adding depth to each position in the field. Players should be able to play at least two positions knowledgeably (i.e. you will have to play them in practice to get used to the responsibilities!) for those times when another player is not available, or just having a bad day. Each team should have at least three, and preferably four pitchers ready to go as needed.

- Girls will typically play two main positions (non-pitcher) that are (usually) similar (i.e.1st and 3rd) and a third ‘emergency’ position that fit their athletic ability/skill set. This allows for deeper learning of the position by the girls and furthers the skill development.

Defensive Lineups - all leagues

First and foremost, don’t wing it! Have the roster made up ahead of time. Give it some thought.

The following positions are described in terms of the skills you are looking for or trying to develop:
Catcher - this is such an important position from 10U on up. Not only does the catcher need to be able to stop the ball and make great throws to 2nd to prevent stealing, the catcher also needs to have a strong understanding of the game to help guide the pitcher in handling batters and to help guide the infield during a play. Typically the catcher is the most aggressive and assertive player on the field, these traits are a plus - especially in the higher leagues. The catcher is very much an extension of the coach on the field and has to have a good understanding of the game and situations. In developing new catchers, see the notes above about training catchers for safety.

- **Characteristics** - commanding presence, take charge attitude; field coach
- **Abilities** - knowledge, strong and quick athlete, strong arm, quick release

**Pitcher** - especially in younger leagues fielding is important here. In older leagues, see the section below about coaching pitching.

- **Characteristics** - commanding presence, cool, competitive
- **Abilities** - good athlete, eventually command of three pitches and understand strategy against hitters

**First** - a great glove is essential.

- **Characteristics** - left handed is plus; aggressive for bunts
- **Abilities** - quick, able to react to poor throws from infield

**Second and Shortstop** - great fielding including an athletic ability to respond to the ball.

- **Characteristics** - 2nd or SS has best pure athlete. quick feet. SS has to direct infield/outfield ‘traffic’
- **Abilities** - side to side quickness. SS must have strong arm. 2B must be aggressive to stop balls in the holes

**Third** - a strong arm is essential here, as well as good fielding. Aggressive nature is a plus. Second to catcher with regard to natural aggression in position. Especially at higher levels. A lot of charging in on bunts is part of the game at the 12U+ level. Must be fearless to be an effective 3rd baseman.

- **Characteristics** - aggressive attitude (for bunts)
- **Abilities** - strong arm, forward quick movement, quick reaction

**Outfield** - Athleticism is key here. There is a lot of ground to cover and the high stakes task of stopping runs.

- In younger leagues this position gets short shrift as fewer batters hit the ball in the outfield. But in older leagues, you may put your best athletes in the outfield.
- For younger leagues, you will need to push girls in the outfield to keep their heads in every play, and to move anytime the ball is hit. Also, younger players should realize that at T-ball and 9U levels, the outfield are the “run stoppers.” This is actually an incredibly important position -- if the outfielders can get to the ball quickly when it gets past the infielders and throw it back into the infield, this will go a long way to stopping big innings.
- Right and left fielders also must backup first and third base (respectively) in case of an overthrow on a fielding play.
- Be sure that as a coach, you have a positive attitude about the outfield at younger levels and are treating it as a valuable position. This includes putting your most athletic players in the outfield to show this importance. At T-ball and 9U, it is suggested that each player is scheduled to play the outfield at least one inning in every 6 inning game.
**Batting Order**

In T-ball, the season begins with a lot of hits and a lot of slaughter rules. So you may want to spread out your weakest hitters. In every other league and by the end of the T-ball season, the calculation is usually how to string together enough hits to get some runs in. So the consistent hitters go first with your ‘extra bases’ hitter in the cleanup spot (4th batter).

For T-ball and 9U, equity is also important in batting orders. While there may be a tendency to load the “best” 4-5 hitters in the first spots in a line-up, this is a huge and noticeable thing, both for the players and parents. Those who bat first tend to get more at-bats in games, and thus more opportunities to improve. Over the course of a season, a player who is regularly at the top of the order may get 30-40% more at-bats than one who is always at the bottom! So in fact if you put all of your “weaker” hitters last, you give them very little chance to become a better hitter.

It is often good to have 1-2 slots early in the order to fill in those batters who may not be as skilled yet in order to give them a chance to improve, and then to move more skilled hitters lower in the lineup. For example, a lineup may include a fast runner who has the potential to make contact and get on base in the #2 slot; this will give that player more at-bats, and a better chance to improve and get on base more often, even if she is not producing up to her potential at the moment.

Also, when playing more than 10 players it is possible to effectively have two “orders within the order” -- i.e. have a strong 1-4 lineup, and then perhaps a strong 7-10 lineup too. This gives the team a better chance to score runs in multiple innings, and gives you a chance to move the better hitters down in the order and still produce runs in games.

**Pre-game practice**

A well practiced routine is helpful to get the girls on track. Warm ups should include a short jog, some stretching, some ball everydays and some of the position specific warmups. See the section below on warmups for details.

Just a few repetitions on fundamental skills are typically key to a good pre-game warmup. This is a good time to remind the girls of those fundamentals so they have a chance to really focus on them in the game.

Pre-game practice should also include a brief “psych-up.” While some coaches will be naturally better at this than others, anyone can do it. Bring all of the girls together in one place to get the team spirit, and remind them of two or three things that they should be thinking about during the game. An example might be: “Keep your glove up” or “keep the ball in front of you” or “be in ready position.”

Ideally you will develop a pre-game routine where the coach doesn’t need to say much, but rather have the girls repeat the standard psych-up points back to you. The more fun you can make a psych-up, the more the players will be “into” the game, so getting them to yell and scream answers is helpful. Having a pre-game cheer that you or preferably the players lead is also a great psych-up. It is also important to have fun with them, in order to show them by example that this is fun for you!
Getting down to the girls level (either sitting on a bench while they stand, or taking a knee) is also a useful way to take away the “adult/teacher” factor and show that you are just another part of the team. Young players are more likely to actively listen when you are at their level, as opposed to tuning out the adult who is talking at them.

**Coaching during the game**

- Keeping the girls focused
  - Have a *short* meeting each inning as girls come off the field -- psych up before batting
  - Don’t be negative about errors or other problems in the field -- treat them as learning opportunities and focus on them in the next practice
- Defensive adjustments, making key positions aware of batter to batter adjustments
  - Try not to coach *during* the play, especially as girls get older
  - Positioning and getting younger players into the ready position as the play starts is important
  - Keep adjustments brief, simple and positive -- don’t give complex changes as they don’t work -- focus on one thing
- Offensive coaching
  - First and Third base coaches - make sure that you have practiced base running and that your offensive coaches know the routine.

**Don’t Forget the Post-Game**

After the game it is important to get the team together briefly to talk about how things went, and to keep them as psyched up as possible. Try to leave them on a good note, whether a win or a loss. This is the time where post-game snacks come in. If you are going to do a debrief, it is generally best to hold the snacks as a “reward” (not necessarily stated that way, they’ll understand) until after the debrief is over. If you choose to give out incentives after a game (game ball, stickers, etc.) this is the time to do it. Always try to find positive things to say, both the typical (point out good hits, good defensive plays, strikeouts, etc) and the not-so-typical (be sure to point out hustle, sacrifice bunts, a player who is always in the ready position as the play starts or is vocally supportive of teammates, etc.) Be sure to thank the girls and parents for helping out.

**Skills for Game Day Overview**

- **Score keeping:** see the *score keeping appendix* for one of several standard methods of score keeping. There are two goals here
  - To keep track of the game, particularly runs and outs, in case there are any discrepancies with the umpire or the other team, and
  - To keep track of the offensive and defensive performance by your team in order to use this for later analysis (statistical or just a review.)
- **Statistics / meanings of stats:** keeping statistics is seen by many as an important part of softball, but we need to be careful to not overstate the meaning of stats over the course of a typically 16 game (or less) season. By definition, this is simply not enough time for anything to be “statistically significant.” In addition, stats that are highly meaningful to players with a long season and higher skill levels may be less important when analyzing younger players.
• We need to remember that if stats are used, the goal should be to find ways to help players improve and to give the coaches a general idea of how each player is doing. They should not be used for comparison or competition. You should also generally not let the girls know that you are keeping stats -- if they find out, they will want to know “how they are doing,” and if you give them the stats they will almost definitely interpret them incorrectly!

• That being said, things like “how often does Player A make (or not make) contact when at bat?” or “How many strikes does Player C average per inning pitched?” can be useful for helping players to improve in the future.

• As the season moves further along, stats may also help with things like batting orders and pitching rotations, but again caution must be used so as not to overstate patterns that don’t really exist because the sample size is too small.

• Just remember -- it is not that unusual for a major league hitter to not get a hit over 6 or even 10 games. To them, this is a slump. If one of our players does that, this is most of a season. But that doesn’t make them a bad hitter per se.

• A few notes if you choose to keep stats:
  o It will be very important to have a score keeper who keeps the score book in a way that is compatible with the stats you want to keep. Communication before games on your goals will be key here.
  o Traditional stats that may be valuable include:
    • At-bats, hits, runs, strikeouts (Ks), doubles, triples, home runs, RBIs and batting average
  o Some additional stats that may be helpful, especially with younger players, include:
    • Contact / put out (used anytime the player makes contact with the ball but is out on the play -- for younger players, making contact is often just as important/significant as getting a hit. For the very detailed, making a distinction between “soft” contact (a dribbler back to the pitcher) and good contact may also be useful.
    • Contact average -- the combination of hits and contact divided by at-bats. This may be a very useful stat when combined with traditional batting average to see how a young player is doing against live pitching
    • Hit-by-pitch (HBP) -- when the pitchers are young and a bit wild, this can be useful to track
    • On Base Average (OBA): adding in walks and HBP
  o Some stats that may be helpful with older players (12U and up, possibly at 10U) include:
    • 1st pitch strikes – getting a strike on the first pitch is closely related statistically to getting that particular batter out
    • Lead off out/on – getting a lead-off hitter on in any given inning is closely linked statistically to scoring runs in that inning
    • WHIP (Walks and hits per inning pitched) – useful for more advanced pitchers to track how many runners get on base
  o While it takes extra work, it can also be very useful to track pitcher stats. Again, there are some typical areas to track, and some that are useful but don’t usually show up on pro-stats.
  o Traditional stats may include:
- Innings pitched, batters, hits, Ks, total pitches, hit batters and pitches per inning
  - Other stats that may be useful include:
    - Put-outs, 2 strike counts, total strikes thrown, strikes/pitch, K/inning
    - A sample stats worksheet is available in the addendum as one example of what this can look like.

- Finally, **please protect the score book from prying eyes!** This is a tool for the coaches, not an item for the parents or players to use in potentially comparing Player A vs. Player B.
Chapter III: Instructional Areas

NOTE: Appendix 11 includes a chart of skills to develop by age level/league, along with the drills that can help in developing those skills. It is recommended that you look at this appendix while reviewing the skills/drills in the next two chapters.

Overview

Expectations for each level (in a perfect scenario)

- **T-Ball**
  - Introduction to basic fundamentals, rules, roles and skills
  - Focus on correct skills for
    - Catching a ball - hands up!
    - Throwing a ball - proper grip
    - Correct stance / proper grip / hitting off of a tee
      - Avoid taking bat to ball several times prior to final swing
    - Base running -- running through 1st base (and touching the base!) versus making the turn to 2nd base are key fundamental skills
      - Focus on watching and listening to 1st/3rd base coaches when running
  - Teach the basics with each player keeping a positive attitude about the game
  - Suggested practice length < 90 min

- **9U**
  - Continue teaching basic fundamentals, rules, roles & skills
  - Reinforce basic throwing, catching and hitting skills from T-Ball
  - Introduce:
    - pitched ball hitting & bunting
      - While bunting is not allowed in games, teaching the skill is a great way to enhance hand/eye coordination and “watching the ball hit the bat”
    - game attitude - hussle and paying attention to the game
    - baserunning & sliding
    - Infield strategy
      - ‘proper’ play decision
        - Think about what to do if the ball comes to you
        - Always think about the next play -- the play doesn’t stop unless there are no runners on base
      - Use the “3 second rule” – players only need to be alert and in the ready position for three seconds, starting at the time the pitcher begins her wind-up. This can be helpful for focusing players who tend to mentally wander during games.
    - pitching & catching skills: intro and basics
  - Practice time 90 - 120 min

- **10U**
  - Reinforcement of fundamentals
o Continuation to command of all skills above in 9u
o Introduction of game strategy
  ▪ Defense against bunting and stealing
o Hitting
  ▪ proficiency at bunting
  ▪ introduce signals from coach
  ▪ introduction of basic hitting/pitching strategy
  ▪ introduction of switch hitting (Rt to Lt) for good contact hitters with speed
    • possible introduction of slap hitting for good contact hitters
o Base running
  ▪ lead-offs & stealing
  ▪ signals
  ▪ command of efficient base-to-base running
o Pitcher
  ▪ proficient command of strike zone
    • Inside / outside pitches
    • Introduce ‘spotting’ pitches (zones 1-5)
  ▪ pitch multiple innings
  ▪ understand basic strategy against batter
  ▪ work on 2nd or 3rd pitch upon command of fastball
    • typically start with changeup
  ▪ introduce ‘mental’ aspect of pitching
o Catcher
  ▪ Introduction of ‘calling’ a game
    • May be discussed, but hard to accomplish at this age
      o Usually limited to when to throw inside/outside, and off-speed pitches
    • Signals may be relayed from the coach through the catcher to facilitate learning
  ▪ Stealing & pick-offs
  ▪ Command of blocking and stopping

o Practice time 120 min
  • 12U
  o Total command of fundamentals - throwing, catching, hitting, baserunning
  o continuation of game strategy instruction
  o Pitchers
    ▪ Command of strike zone with spotting
    ▪ 2nd pitch mastery, 3rd + active
    ▪ pitch 3+ innings
    ▪ develop strategy independently for each hitter.
  o Catchers
    ▪ work on 2 second throw to 2nd base
    ▪ mastery of blocking/stopping
    ▪ call a game independently
  o Infield
    ▪ Middle infield coverage (2B and SS)
    ▪ Bunt coverage for corners (1B and 3B), P and C
Planning a Practice

Regardless of the age group, you should have a plan for each practice session. It does not have to be elaborate, but a guide for the time. See appendix for examples of practice plans.

General practice outline will include:
- Meetings (optional - but helpful)
- Warm-up
- Individual Skill Work
- Team Drills
- Batting Practice
- Conditioning (more for older groups)
- Alternatives for Bad Weather

Meetings
- Address issues regarding the team - uniforms, game times, discipline, announcements, etc...
- Recognize a player(s) for outstanding performance or other achievements/announcements

Warm-ups
Depending upon level and time available for practice will determine how much time here, but there should be warm-ups at all levels.
- Long distance jog - help get the girls ‘head’ in the game. “now its time to practice”. Use as a team drill and the length time dependant upon the age group. (try not to use running as punishment)
- Stretches & Agility
  - Get to all muscle groups used in the game - arms, shoulders, hips, back, and legs.
  - 60’ and 120’ sprints - combine with base running drills.
  - Other agility drills - many examples available
- Throwing
  - Address the four areas (sample drills & exercises below)
  - Shoulder
○ Throwing Technique Improvement/mastery
○ Increasing arm strength
○ Improving throwing accuracy

Always have the girls throw to a target. Accuracy is key and starts at the very lowest levels. Emphasize the accuracy of the throw. “an accurate throw late is always better than a wild throw early or on time.”

**Individual Skill Work**

During individual skill work all players should be involved in some type of drill. One of the most important things to plan for in a practice is how to avoid having girls standing around in lines, waiting for their turn.

For example, let’s say your team has 12 players. You could do a drill where 6 line up at SS and 6 at 1B. The coach then hits a grounder to the first SS, who picks it up and throws to 1B. While this is a good simulation, it means that most of the team (10 out of 12 girls) is standing around at any given time. Even if you have the girls run to a new position after completing their task (SS runs to the back of the 1B line, and vice versa), you still have 8 out of 12 girls standing around. Thus dividing up the girls and doing multiple drills/exercises at one time, or having drills driven by the girls and involving all of them at once, is often the best way to keep everyone involved.

Typically the use of a circuit is the most efficient way to accomplish this with a team of 12+ girls. The size of the groups and number of stations will vary due to coaches available. Keep the number of girls in each group as small as possible, typically 2-4 work best. When not performing the drill, the other girls should be watching and help with critique/correction of technique. Even at lower levels this is helpful in developing an ‘eye’ for proper form and visualization of the skill.

**Exercises & drills - some shown below, but this will depend upon needs of the team.**

**Example of a hitting circuit:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Drill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Live hitting and field shag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Soft Toss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tee Drills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bunting Drills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Strength Drills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Pitching Machine hitting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Split girls and start each group at a different station. Moving on from one to another at a set time.

**Team Drills**

These drills should focus on game situations. Rotate starters and substitutes into the situation in positions. Goal is all players have the knowledge, practice and experience regardless of being 1st or 2nd team.

Drills examples are below. Typical are
1st & 3rd drills - bunting, base-running, delay steal, defense against.
Scrimmage (using pitchers or machine) - 6 on 6 infield only game for 2 -3 innings.
Situations with live runners batting practice (machine or live)
Cut-offs and outfield play with live runners, SS/2B and Catcher.

Conditioning

A quick well run practice will keep the girls moving and help with conditioning. Suggest end
the practice with game type drills that are running centered. Some examples are below.

Alternatives for Bad Weather

- Indoor facilities – school gyms? others?
- Indoor batting cages
- Sliding practice (immediately after a rain storm is a great time to do this in clothes that
can get muddy!)
- Have a small party/gathering at someone’s house -- team bonding time

Games at End of Practices

Players love anything that involves competition, and whenever possible you should add a
competitive element into training drills. In addition to making the drills more fun, this allows
opportunities to teach and/or reinforce good sportsmanship when someone “wins” a drill. High
fives, fist bumps, etc. should be encouraged among the girls to recognize the winner.

In particular, it is a good idea to set aside 5-10 minutes at the end of every practice for a
competitive game that allows the players to break into teams and utilize the skills they have been
learning in something that doesn’t “feel” like a drill. Competitive games can and should be used
MANY times during a practice (for most drills if you can find a way to do it!), but at the end of
the day this is a good way to send the players home on a fun, exciting note.

There are many possible drills you can do, a few of which include:
- **The bucket game:**
  - This game emphasizes fielding and throwing skills for both infielders and
    outfielders.
  - Set-up: two buckets are needed, one stacked on top of the other at home plate.
    Break the girls randomly into two teams (if you can find a way to do it fairly, split
    up your better arms) and line one team up along the 1B line and one along the 3B
    line. Younger girls may start about 20-25’ from the plate -- older girls may start as
    far back as the actual base. The coach should have a supply of balls and a bat (if
    hitting) at the plate.
  - A coach throws or bats ground balls to the first player in line, one at a time. The
    player must field the ball, stop wherever they pick it up, and throw to the plate
    with the top bucket as their target.
    - Alternately, the coach can throw/hit fly balls.
○ Hitting either bucket without knocking off the top one is worth 1 point. Knocking off the top bucket is worth 3 points. Alternately, you can add an extra point if both buckets are knocked down.
  ■ Reset any buckets that are knocked down before the next play
○ To encourage quick throws, the coach may want to give a 2-count after the ball is picked up -- younger players have a tendency to try to hold the ball and aim after picking it up, which is both counter-productive (this never really helps to make a better throw!) and is not the proper form we are trying to practice!
○ Play progresses with the coach throwing/hitting grounders to alternating sides until all girls have thrown one ball.
○ Each team should keep count of their score -- go through the line 1-3 times depending on the amount of time available.
○ The winning team should get to pick a “prize” -- feel free to be creative here, but a prize that works is for the winner to choose between “running the bases” and “cleaning up the balls.” For some reason, the winners always seem to choose running!

● Thunderball (this is one of many names for this game that has apparently been around forever):
  ○ This game emphasizes moving when the ball is hit, along with proper base running techniques and rounding the bases.
  ○ Set-up: break the players into two teams, one in the field and one at home plate. Batter should have helmets and bats. Fielders should NOT have gloves. The team in the field should split themselves evenly between 1B and 3B (behind the bases, not playing the positions). Place a bucket of balls at home plate, and a tee if at the T-ball level (this may be used for higher levels, but is typically not needed).
  ○ The fielding team has one player ready at 1B and one at 3B
  ○ The first batter for the hitting team stands up to bat -- all others stay along the fence behind the plate. A coach puts the ball on the tee, or throws a side-toss pitch to the batter from about 3-4 feet away.
  ○ When the batter hits the ball fair, she runs the bases and continues until both defenders (1B and 3B) have touched the ball. The batter gets one point for each base touched before both defenders touch the ball. When both defenders have touched the ball, the batter goes to the end of the offensive line (does not stay on base)
  ○ 3 strikes and a batter is out. Each team goes through all players once and then the other team is up to bat. If teams are uneven, the offense may select one player (or randomly select one player) to bat twice.
  ○ On defense, the 1B and 3B players should be moving for the ball as soon as contact is made. The defenders should NOT pick the ball up when they get to it -- simply touch the ball and get out of the way so their teammate can touch the ball. When both have touched the ball, the play is dead. If a defender picks a ball up and hands/tosses it to the other defender, one point can be added to the offense’s score.
  ○ This game can run for one or two “innings,” depending on time available.
  ○ Alternative: if you have girls who throw their bats, you can give an extra point for laying the bat down when running to 1B, or if you have an extra coach, put that person along the 1B line and give an extra point for handing the bat to the coach.
The winning team should get to pick a prize, as above.

**Pepper**
- Set-up: break into 2-3 groups (no more than 5-6 in a group), all girls should have a glove and each group needs one bat (preferably a lighter one for easy control)
- One player is the batter, placing her glove on the grounds as the “plate” -- all other girls in that group fan out in an arc about 7-10 feet in front of the plate
- One player starts by throwing a soft toss/lob pitch, underhanded, to the batter -- this should be an easy-to-hit pitch in or near the strike zone. Bad pitches should be done over, but need to be avoided to keep things moving.
- The batter bunts the pitch back to the defensive players. Whoever fields the bunt then throws another soft toss. This continues until the batter misses a pitch, at which time the player who threw that pitch steps in to bat.
- The previous batter should quickly put on her glove and switch positions; the new hitter should use the same bat (be clear that there is no switching bats to get your “favorite” as this takes too much time) and drop her glove as the new plate
- If the player who throws a missed pitch has already hit, the next girl to her right who has not yet hit is up. This continues until all have had a chance to be at-bat once. If time permits, you can go through a second round.
- Don’t switch batters if a ball is hit foul (typically backwards), but this should not count as a “hit” -- also, it is helpful to have a coach on the side with extra balls if this happens to throw in a new ball and keep the game moving.
- One alternate game for older players (with more bat control) is to choke up as if bunting, but instead take a very short swing and hit the ball into the ground to create a short-hop grounder. Players should stand back to 12-15 feet for this variant.
- Each hitter should keep count of her own hits -- the most hits (contact that goes fair, not behind the hitter) wins -- if multiple groups, the top 2-3 can be matched up for a “championship round” if time permits

**Fly ball game**
- Set-up: a coach with several balls lines up 5-6 players with gloves in an arc about 10 feet away; if there are more players, it is ideal to have multiple coaches throwing to different groups.
- The coach throws an easy fly ball to each girl in the arc, who catches the ball using good form and calling for the ball (“I got it” or “mine, mine” are typical ways to do this)
- When a player misses a catch, she is out and moves off to the side, but should continue to cheer the others on.
- After one round, back up 5 feet and make the throws harder (higher, not directly to the player, etc.) for any players still in the game.
- Move back 5 feet after each round with the remaining players.
- Alternate: if the player does not say “I got it” or “mine” (or similar) before catching, it is not a catch
- The last player to not drop a ball is the winner -- be sure to finish the final round to keep it fair (if the last 2 players both drop balls, do another round!)
- A tie can be called if time runs out
Chapter IV: Teaching Specific Skills and Drills

Warm Ups

Goal: Warming up is essential for all athletes, including young softball players. Younger girls will rarely see the “need” to warm up, which is why coaches will need to encourage this and include it in every practice and pre-game routine. Arms, legs, shoulders and backs should all be stretched and warmed up, at least for a few minutes. The overall goal is both to enhance every girl’s ability to perform well, and to minimize any chance of injury that might come from tight muscles. Also remember that muscles should be warmed up (typically by light jogging exercises) before stretching. Players should never stretch a “cold” muscle.

General Notes: These drills do not all have to be done at each practice, and most teams will not have time to do them all. 5-10 minutes is a good amount of time for warm-up exercises before a practice or game. These should be done BEFORE players start throwing warm-ups.

In each drill category there are dozens (hundreds?) of warm-up/stretching drills available on the web and in books. A few of the more common softball drills are listed here, but coaches should feel free to explore more options and use the drills they are most comfortable using/teaching. Drills can be mixed up to keep them fresh and interesting, but there is also value in regularly repeating warm-ups so players can become accustomed to these and eventually lead the exercises themselves.

Warm-ups are a great place to encourage responsibility and leadership. Each time a new drill is introduced, the coach should lead the drill. Once players understand the drill, volunteers among the girls can be used as leaders. It can be useful to pick a different leader for each type of drill, and then rotate through the entire team to give everyone a chance to lead. Alternately, if the team has selected a captain(s), those girls can lead the warm-ups. Finally, players should be encouraged to arrive early and begin warming up before the formal practice time starts. This can be difficult with younger girls, and with the packed schedules of many families, so it is typical that the coach will need to build time into the beginning of each practice for warm-ups.

Walking/Running drills - Goal: loosen legs, back and help endurance

1. Point to point (or line to line) drills
   - *Set up:* this can be done between lines in a gym, or between two points on a field (base lines, pre-set cones or other markers, etc.) Distances should typically be 40-50 feet apart
   - Starting on one line/point, do the following to the next line/point (these can be varied -- no need to do every stretch every day):
     - Jog (repeat 2-4 times depending on time available)
     - Jogging backwards (repeat once)
     - Hop on one foot (land on balls of feet with a slight bend to the knee)
     - Hop on the other foot (ditto landing)
High kicks -- walk with both hands stretched straight out, with each step (or every other step) kick up to try to touch your hands. Alternate feet as you progress to the next line.

Knee-to-chest -- walk quickly from line-to-line with knees going up as high as possible on each step.

“Crack the whip” -- the first player in line sprints to the next line/point, with the next player taking off on a “one count” (about one second) after, and then each successive player leaving one count later -- this creates a whip-like motion in the line.

2. Team running - pass the ball back

Set up: team lines up in a random order in one or two lines (about 9-10 max/players per line), with the first player in line holding a softball (no gloves needed)

The first player starts jogging at a slow pace -- everyone else follows and stays in line

The ball is passed over the shoulder, from one girl to the next, as quickly as possible -- players should focus on good pass-offs and not dropping the ball!

If the ball is dropped, the player it was passed to has to pick it up -- the line should keep moving slowly, and the player must get back into her previous position and pass the ball back to the next player.

When the last girl in line gets the ball, she sprints to the front of the line and starts over

Jogging around an entire field is a good distance for this drill.

Arm and back stretching drills - Goal: loosen arms, shoulders and back

- There are dozens of stretching exercises that can help loosen the arms. Instead of describing all of these, the following link is a free video on the web that walks through some of the more common exercises:

- Some other common stretches are:
  - Bicep/tricep stretch: Stand up straight and bring one arm across the upper body. Cross the other arm over in a “T” and gently push the first arm into the chest. Do the stretch on each arm for about 10 seconds, repeating 2-3 times each arm.
  - Behind the back: put one arm over the head and behind the back, grasp elbow with other arm and pull down to stretch the arm/shoulder/back muscles
  - Jumping jacks (works arms and legs)
  - Bending, arms back (works full back and shoulders)
**Leg stretching drills - Goal: loosen legs and back**

- As with arms, there are dozens of leg-stretching exercises available. Not all of these need to be done at every practice, and they can be combined with running/walking drills for additional stretching. A few of these include:
  - Heel-to-hamstring (hammy): standing on one leg, pull the other leg up and back until the heel touches the hamstring. Hold for 8-10 seconds, then switch legs, repeating 2-3 times.
  - Heel-to-butt: standing on one leg, pull the other leg up until the heel touches the butt or lower back. Hold, then switch legs
○ Leg lunges: move into a “riding horse” position with back straight, one leg stretched out completely and the other knee bent 90 degrees. Hold this position for 8-10 seconds, switch sides, repeating 2-3 times.
○ This can be followed with the same exercise, but bend down to touch the bent knee with your chest, arms dangling to the ankles.
○ Side-to-side bends: spread legs to a 90 degree angle, hands on hips, bend over slowly as far as you comfortably can, hold for 5 seconds, switch to the other side, repeat 2-3 times.
○ Toe touchers: stand up straight, legs together, slowly bend over and touch your toes with legs still. Hold for 5 seconds, then gently rise back up and lift both hands straight up into the air. Hold for 5 seconds, then repeat 2-3 times.
○ Stretching splits: get into a sitting split position (legs as wide as comfortable), alternate between touching knees/toes and nose to the ground.
○ The following link is a free video to some additional leg stretches. The video is made by a martial artist, but these are basic stretches that apply just as well to softball. If anyone knows of a leg stretching video featuring softball players, please pass it along!
○ [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYJy_bsCJqo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYJy_bsCJqo)
○ The Santa Monica Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Research Foundation’s “PEP Program” also has some excellent leg stretching exercises, located at [http://smsmf.org/files/PEPExercises.pdf](http://smsmf.org/files/PEPExercises.pdf)
Stretching Splits

Fielding:

**Grounders - the fundamentals of fielding grounders include the following:**

- Square off and bend down at the knees to get your butt closer to the ground
- Feet should be approximately shoulder length apart, leaning forward slightly on the balls of the feet
- Always move when the ball is hit! This is a key training point for most young players, who want to stay in one place and wait for the ball to come to them. Players should be taught to *always* move when fielding a ball, even if only to take a stutter-step in the direction of the ball if it is coming straight at you. This allows players to field the ball better, to be in a better throwing position, and gets them used to moving for the more frequent times when the ball is *not* hit straight at them!
- Have your glove in proper position
  - There is an open debate on proper glove position to field a grounder, and we will present both here:
    - The traditional position is with the glove out and open on the ground such that the fielder can scoop the ball up and draw it into the stomach area
    - A more recent variation is with the fingers in the glove hand pointing down, such that the glove is almost perpendicular to the ground. From this position the fielder pushes the glove slightly toward the ball as it approaches, increasing the chance of keeping it in front of them.
  - Either of these positions is fundamentally sound, but there is some movement among college coaches toward the second method
Think about where your first play is, and if you have a potential second play on every at bat. This is especially important for younger players, who tend to focus on just one out. Even in T-ball and 9U, players need to think about the runners on base, and especially remember the lead runner who might score if she is ignored.

Think about where the ball could go and what you have to do before every at bat. Every player on the field should be encouraged (especially in practice) to think about where they have to be if a ball is hit. This includes considering what to do with the ball if it is hit to you, and where to move if the ball is hit somewhere else -- and both of these may vary based on the situation in the game (runners on base, etc.) It is never too early to help girls develop mental game skills to support their physical skills.

Basic drills are listed below for younger players or those with form problems.

- Note, however, that most college programs still use the very basic/fundamental “ball everydays” drill or something similar at every practice!

Move to the ball – center body on the ball whenever possible
Throwing - the fundamentals of throwing include the following:

- Proper position, set up and form
- Proper “C” grip on the ball
  - Younger players (T-Ball and 9U) should take their time and focus on this EVERY time they take the ball out of their glove to throw in practice until it becomes second nature
- Elbow above shoulder, step forward toward target
  - Ways to describe throwing motion:
    - "Scratch the eyes" of the person you are throwing at
    - "Pull the light cord"
    - See “Ready / break / throw” drills below for example of form

**Drills:**

- Flips – several kinds – arm above shoulder, elbow on glove, on one knee
  - Flip drills are intended to promote good arm movement when throwing by isolating the arm only. They can be done with the arm raised in an “L” shape (make sure the player doesn’t drop the elbow too far below the shoulder) or with the elbow placed on the players glove, held in front of the body on the throwing side at chest height. Either of these positions can also be utilized on one knee to further isolate the upper body.
- Ready / break / throw – can also be done on one knee
  - This is typically the second throwing position for warm-ups.
  - “Ready” position is standing with an “open” face (sideways to the person who will catch the ball), legs shoulder width apart and ball in the glove at the player’s chest. The player should check her grip while in this position.
  - “Break” position involves pulling the throwing hand back, elbow bent, hand with ball facing 2nd base (behind the thrower -- a tactic here is to ask the players “can you see your finger nail polish?” Is so, they are holding the ball correctly), and the glove hand extended toward the target.
  - “Throw” position executes a proper throw, but without closing and turning toward the target (player should still be in “open” position at the end)
  - The coach can start by saying “Ready, Break, Throw” with a 1-2 second pause between each word to allow the players to set. Once they understand this exercise, players can do it at their own pace.
- Kneeling practice focuses on top of body movement, work in bottom later – useful for those who don't have good arm mechanics
  - Most throwing positions can be done while kneeling to focus on proper upper body fundamentals. This is particularly useful not only for younger players, but also for anyone who doesn’t have a correct arm motion, or who develops throwing problems.
- Throwing from increasing distances (flips, back up 5 feet, ready/break/throw, back up 5 feet, etc.)
- 3x drill -- start with player standing sideways, throwing hand and ball in glove, glove near the ear.
  - Player goes through a full arm motion, ending with the ball back in the glove
  - Do this twice, and throw to the target on the third rotation.
- Speed throwing – quick catch and throw to focus on quick release and reflex throwing instead of thinking.
  - This is often better when throwing to a coach instead of between 2 players, as players tend to be inaccurate when rushed and the drill takes much more time. Also, many players will be willing to throw harder when they know a coach is on the other end.
  - One coach can do this exercise with 3-4 players at a time, fanned out in an arc in front of the coach and about 20 feet away
- Around the horn drill
  - Similar to the star drill, but with 4 players standing at each base. The throws then go as follows:
    - C to 3B; 3B to 2B; 2B to 1B; 1B to C; C to 2B (simulating a throw down).
    - Alternately, the 2B player can take the first throw at 2B, and the SS can take the last throw from the catcher
    - This can also be one for time or against a runner (often called “Chase the runner”)

*Around the Horn Drill Pattern*
Star Drill – with and without runners
- 5 players take the field at standard C, 1B, 2B, SS and 3B positions
- They then throw the ball in a star formation as follows:
  - C to 2B; 2B to 3B; 3B to 1B; 1B to SS; SS to C
- Encourage accurate throwing combined with quick release of the ball.
- This drill can be timed, with a competition either between groups or within a group to decrease their “best time” on each attempt
- Add in a runner going around the bases while this drill is happening to make it a more game-like situation -- the goal is to get the ball back to the catcher before the runner gets home, and the catcher then tags the runner on arrival
- For younger players, or those who are new to this drill, it can first be done at a shorter distance by placing cones (or temporary bases) ½ or ¾ the distance from the bases, and then having the defenders play standard positions based on these new locations. The runner then runs the shortened base path too.
- Players will very quickly learn from this drill that the best way to either improve time or catch the runner is to make accurate throws, as quickly as possible. The focus turns more to good throws over rushing here.
• Coach hits grounders to 2nd and SS – throw to 3rd and 1st
  ○ Line girls up at each of the 4 positions
  ○ Hit to 2B, player throws to 3B and then sprints to the back of the 3B line
    ■ After catching the ball, 3B sprints to the back of the 2B line
  ○ Hit to SS, player throws to 1B and then sprints to the back of the 1B line
    ■ After catching the ball, 1B sprints to the back of the SS line
• Relay drill -- 3 or 4 players line up, throw relays, players at each end apply a tag when they get the ball, rotate players to the end after 2-3 times through the line. Quick catch/turn/throw to the next player in line.

Catching the ball - balls above the mid-thigh (all position except catcher)

• The “ready position” is hands up, fingers pointing toward the sky, throwing hand next to glove hand to close in and control the ball when caught
• Legs slightly bent, shoulder length apart
• Always keep the glove pointing up when the ball is above mid-thigh!!! Turning the glove down when above mid-thigh level is both dangerous (there is a chance of the ball bouncing out and hitting the player in the face) and gives less control, thus leading to more errors
  ○ if a ball is coming in at waist level or below, the player should bend at the knees to catch the ball on a better level, but still keep the glove up
• Turn the glove down for lower line drives or bouncing balls that come off the ground when the ball is below mid-thigh
• Always move to the ball -- don’t wait for it to come to you, even if it is coming straight at you!
• Basic drills are listed below for younger players or those with form problems
**Drills**

- Ball everydays – rolling ball on ground
  - No glove / glove
  - Up the middle / forehand side / backhand side
  - Catch ball with fingers in a claw pointed toward the ground, push hand out to the ball
  - Players can be broken into groups of 3-5 and ball thrown by coach at younger age levels; players can pair off and do this exercise together at older ages (10U? 12u?)

  *Time permitting, “ball everydays” are a great way to start a practice.*

- Bucket drill - have a player sit on a bucket and coach rolls grounders to her
  - Player must get off the bucket and field the grounder without standing up
  - This teaches players to stay low, which many younger players don’t like to do (they typically bend at the waist)
  - Unless many buckets are available, this is best used as one station in a group of drills

- Coach throws to different places (line drive, bouncing, grounder, left, right) – adjust glove based on location
  - Always start with both hands up at about chest level, throwing hand about a foot away from the glove hand
  - Can be done with coach hitting if the coach has sufficient bat control to move the ball to different places

- Soft hands / open glove – let the ball hit the glove in proper position instead of trying to catch it, do not close the glove (for those who try to push at the ball or close the glove before the ball is in it)
  - There are specialty gloves that do not close for this exercise, but these are typically not worth the cost since an open glove does the same thing and is a more realistic feel.
Two different “soft hands” pads – these pads require players to catch with the “glove” facing up, and to use two hands when catching the ball (either in the air or a grounder)

- Soft hands with wiffle balls -- no glove, throw wiffle balls at the players from a short distance -- this will encourage two hand catching and soft hands (cradling the ball in instead of reaching out for it and batting at it)
- Backhand drill -- build up from blocking techniques to catching backhanded
  - Start with a coach soft-tossing a ball to a player’s backhand side, about chest high. The player should put out their closed glove to “block” the ball in the air, such that it falls to the ground in front of the glove. Be sure the player doesn’t bat at the ball, but moves the glove in position first to block it
  - When the player can block these throws, switch to throwing ground balls to the backhand side, again with the player blocking with a closed glove
  - When this becomes more natural, have the player open her glove and catch the soft-tossed ground balls backhanded.

Fly balls
- Proper position / set-up / form
  - Glove above forehead, both hands up
  - Do not block your vision of the ball!!
- For older players (10U or 12U and up) -- start with a drop step when running backward for the ball, then turn and run with glove tucked in until the last minute to reach out and catch the ball
- Never run directly under a fly ball -- always try to approach it from a rounded angle to allow for an easier catch and throw when the ball is caught
  - when possible, get behind the ball and move in to catch it so the player is facing the infield
Drills:
- Toss up to self – encourage this to be done at home -- competition
  - keep count of how many in a row you can catch and continually try to improve
  - when counting – ball MUST be caught with glove above head, pointing up – catching underhand doesn't count
- Coach throws/hits pop-ups
  - can be done with competition – start with easy fly balls and harder each round
  - round robin, if you miss a ball you are out – last one standing wins
- Going back for a fly ball
  - Drop step drills
- Running in for a fly ball

Hitting:
- Proper hand and bat position
  - Inverted ‘V’ on with arms/elbows
  - Front shoulder lower than back shoulder
  - Bat at 45 degrees - not past center line
  - 50/50 even stance
  - Knees inside feet
  - Hands together on bat
  - Bat on knuckles in hand - not palms
    - Knocking knuckles should be lined up
  - Proper Bunt hand position
    - Sacrifice / Bunt for hit
Phases in Batting

1. Hands high, weight back, bat at a slight angle above head

2. Hands/arms in tight, “shine flashlight” at the pitcher with knob of bat

3. Swing level, end of bat slightly up – top palm up, bottom palm faces down

4. Make contact just in front of the plate

5. Finish swing around, only turn wrists after contact
• Proper swing
  ○ Chopping / punching analogies -- keep hands in tight to the body (don’t extend hands out until after contact!), push hands toward the ball
  ○ Maintain front shoulder lower than back shoulder
  ○ Negative action - load by going back from an even 50/50 stance to 60/40
    ■ Get on toe/ball of front foot, maintain balance even with load at 60/40.
  ○ Don’t over-extend arms - Keep elbows in, hands ahead of barrel.
    ■ “Hands ahead of barrel” can also be described as using the bat like a flashlight to shine a light from the bottom of the bat at the pitcher
  ○ Palms up and palm down - Back hand should follow through contact
    ■ motion of back hand is like trying to skip a stone
    ■ motion of front hand is like throwing a Frisbee
  ○ Knob of bat ‘hits’ ball first.
  ○ Pivot & Drive with back leg, lift heal on back foot, bring down front foot.
  ○ Follow through

• Bunting Technique (‘11’ position)
  ○ Choke up top hand on bat, holding hand either behind bat (traditional grip) or with hand just above the grip (newer alternative that provides better bat control, but slightly more exposure to the pitched ball)
    ■ Keep bat at the top of the strike zone (around the letters), with the knob near the center of the players chest
    ■ Bat should be held level and angled slightly toward 1B (about 10 degrees).
  ○ Make sure players do not lunge at balls or change the angle of the bat -- movement for lower pitched balls should always be done by bending the knees to get down to the ball, not by moving the bat
    ■ lunging correction / bat droop correction
  ○ If a ball is pitched out of the strike zone, pull the bat back to the shoulder as soon as this is recognized. Putting the bat initially at the top of the strike zone means that any pitch above the bat is automatically a ball.
Drills:

- Dry swings (about 10)
- Tee work
  - bottom hand only -- choke up on bat, palm down
  - top hand only -- choke up on bat, palm up
  - full swing
    - stop on contact (check palm up/down)
    - swing all the way through

**Bottom hand only**

**Top hand only**

- Side toss -- wiffle balls or regular softballs
- Front toss (behind a screen or with very soft balls)
- Full pitch and/or machine
  - coach pitch
  - player pitch -- from 9/K position or full pitch as players get more control
- Bunting practice
  - Practice first with wiffle balls thrown from a short distance (about 5’) to promote recognition of strike zone and reaction time.
  - Do not move to regular softballs until player can execute proper form with wiffle balls
  - Note that bunting practice is an excellent way to promote hand-eye coordination and “watching the ball in.” If a player can consistently make contact with a ball thrown from 5’ while bunting, they should become much better at making contact with a pitched ball. Bunting drills with pitched balls (at any speed) also serve this purpose.
- All batting exercises can be done as dry swings (no ball, or use an “imaginary” ball), with wiffle balls (smaller balls are good; if a player can hit that, they can hit a larger softball!), with soft practice balls, or with regulation softballs.

Running:

- How to run
  - Head down, body low to the ground, dig in, longer stride as you move
- Running through first base versus rounding or going to 2nd
○ Look toward the fence for overthrow when running through 1st

● Always think about where you are going next
  ○ First to third / second to home

● When / how to pick up the coach when running

● Lead offs (when applicable by league)

● Stealing (when applicable by league)

Drills

● Home to 1st
  ○ Timing speed to first
  ○ Run through / go to 2nd / round the base drills

● Run around bases -- how to make the turn
  ○ more important for younger players, especially T-ball

Sliding:

● Proper position -- legs in a figure four, slide on both “cheeks” (not on one side!), arms bent and up above the head (next to the ears/helmet) to protect the head

● Strongly recommend sliding pants and pads for sliding practice and games -- these help to prevent “strawberries,” which can be a huge disincentive for players who might already be hesitant to slide

● Start in outfield grass for drills - move to well raked infield later.

● When to slide -- anytime a play is close, especially when going into a base other than 1B.

Drills:

● Step through / jog through / run through
  ○ Basic sliding position - both ‘cheeks’ on ground, one foot out, one across below other (‘4’ position). Hands up at ears. Just sitting on ground.
  ○ Start with ‘crab walk’ drill for basic fall position
  ○ Bear crawl for forward thrust position
  ○ 2 man ‘helping’ slide - two coaches hold players hand while she is running to slide. This helps with building confidence as it can be done full speed.
  ○ Slip’n slide - wet outfield will substitute 1st level of full sliding.
  ○ Full hands sliding - keeps hands from hitting dirt
  ○ Limbo - help player to slide ‘flat’ by using tape for them to slide under. (streamers around two dowels work well)

● Pop up slides (when older/more advanced)
Pitcher:

Goal: Our overall goal for pitching is simple: to improve pitching across all player-pitch leagues (9U and up) with the intent of making those leagues more competitive. In order to do this, we need to encourage as many players as possible to try pitching, thus giving each league a bigger pool of pitchers to work with.

General Notes: While some girls may have more natural skill than others at pitching, this is a position that absolutely can be learned. It is actually unlikely that any player will be a good, “natural” pitcher without being taught the basics of the pitching motion, as this is not a natural way to throw the ball. More importantly, practice is the key to becoming a better pitcher, and eventually a great pitcher over time. Someone with natural talent who rarely practices will quickly be eclipsed by a player with average talent who practices daily.

About practicing: For a young pitcher to be able to get the ball into or around the strike zone on a regular basis, she will likely need to practice pitching at least four days a week for 30-60 minutes a day, and five or six days a week is even better. This includes formal practices and pre-game warm-ups, but it will also require a lot of time and commitment at home. It is frequently said that for every great college pitcher, there is a parent or relative who spent many hours outside of practice acting as her catcher and supplementing her formal coaching. Throwing a ball against a wall or into a net (assuming good mechanics are used) can help, but throwing to a human being is much better practice, and a much better way to critique good mechanics.

One thing that is consistent with the mechanics of young pitchers is that nothing is consistent with the mechanics of young pitchers.

Getting the form right, or throwing strikes? The end goal in training pitchers is for them to “throw strikes,” but in pitching there is a clear and definite link between good pitching form, and getting the ball into or near the strike zone. While a pitcher can certainly focus mentally on “hitting the catcher’s glove,” the best way to do this is to learn, practice and exercise proper mechanics.

During practices, coaches and players (along with parents when involved) should focus more on form than on hitting the strike zone. If you have proper form, strikes will follow. That being said, one of the easiest ways to tell if a pitcher is throwing with good form is that the ball goes into or near the strike zone! Is it possible to hit a strike with bad form? Absolutely, but not on a regular basis. When a pitcher is in or near the strike zone multiple times in a group of 10 or so pitches, it is both a confidence builder, and a good sign that her form is good (or at least improving.)

Some pitching drills are more likely to generate balls thrown in or near the strike zone (e.g. 9:00 and K drills), and others are more focused on one part of the fundamentals, which may or may not lead to a “strike” (e.g. balance point and walk through drills).

For the earliest drills with beginning pitchers, it is critical to get the form right before moving on. That being said, this is usually a fairly quick and easy process with any girl who really wants to pitch. While it may take years to have a perfect wrist flip and spin, many girls can learn this
quickly enough to throw the ball straight at the catcher’s glove from a short distance in one lesson. The 9:00 and 12:00 drills are similar. If it takes 2-3 lessons to do these drills without being completely erratic, that is fine. But as soon as the girls are comfortable with the early arm-only drills, the other drills can be quickly incorporated.

It can be useful to focus on throwing strikes in some situations, but this should not be the sole focus, and coaches should always remember that form is key. That being said, particularly at the end of a series of drills a coach might want to challenge the pitcher(s) to throw as many consecutive “strikes” as possible, or to get as many strikes out of 5 or 10 throws as possible. So if the drill is to do 5 minutes (or 10-15 throws) from the 9:00 position, once a player begins to get comfortable with that drill, you can add at the end something like:

“Ok, you are done with 9:00 -- before going on to K drills, let’s see how many strikes you can hit in a row from the 9:00 position.”

This can be done with many drills, and is a particularly good “challenge” at the end of a pitching session.

“Let’s finish with 5 full pitches and challenge yourself to see how many strikes you can get.”

This type of game/challenge gives the pitcher a mental focus similar to game situations. Also, if coached properly the pitcher will realize that she needs to focus on good form, not necessarily on throwing strikes. So while some pitchers may think “just hit the catcher’s glove,” others may focus on “release at the hip.” Pitchers can then drive themselves with these drills, and with practice see definable improvement over time.

One final point -- in practice there is rarely a batter to determine a “strike zone,” and in fact this isn’t really needed. For the purposes of the above, anything near the strike zone should be considered a strike. This is especially true for younger pitchers, where a broader “strike zone” can easily be used in practices to inspire confidence. Then as the pitcher improves, she can be challenged more to hit specific points in more advanced drills that focus on pitch placement.

**How to coach pitching: breaking it down:** The drills below will break the pitching motion down into its component parts. When taught this way, these fundamentals can be learned and practiced one at a time and then put together into the full windmill motion. If practicing each piece is done with good mechanics, the full motion will come much more easily.

A lot of pitching is simply retraining the body to move in a certain way and these drills are intended to help in that training. Also, at early levels throwing the ball straight at the catcher is more important than speed, so focus on accuracy first. Speed will improve with time. Drills the focus on arm motion, balance and release help the most with accuracy. In addition to arm speed and strength (which vary greatly by pitcher), a hard leg thrust and push off are the things that most improve speed. In fact, when a pitcher combines good upper and lower body form, improvements will be seen in both accuracy and speed.

It is important to realize that a house-league coach or parent does NOT need to be a professional pitching coach, but rather just pick up the basics to start the players on a good track. If a player is
developing into a potentially good pitcher, they will likely need outside coaching to continue improving and moving up through the skill levels.

What a house-league coach and parent can do is learn the fundamentals and watch to be sure that the player(s) are following those. It is usually very easy to tell if someone is pitching wrong from any given position -- when the motion/mechanic is off, the ball doesn’t go near the strike zone! Helping the player correct this is a matter of time, patience and practice -- both by the player and the coach/parent.

One piece of advice: The worst words that any coach, player or parent can say to a pitcher are “just throw strikes!” When a player is on the mound, they understand that this is the goal. So a proper response from the pitcher might be either “don’t you think I know that?” or perhaps a more polite “ok, how do I DO that?” Thus it is always better to ask the player to focus on one thing at a time that can help her fundamental form. Perhaps “release at the hip” or “remember to finish up after you release.” Trying to fix more than one thing at a time is also a problem, so as much as you can focus on one thing, and then move to another later, the better off the coach and pitcher will be. Also remember that communication is important here -- in addition to telling the pitcher what you want, you may need to show her the proper form to put the words into action.

Pitching mechanics: Softball rules and standard pitching practices dictate a number of mechanics that most pitchers follow. While there is some variation (a given pitching coach may teach some of these differently), especially when more advanced pitchers throw pitches other than a fastball, there is also broad agreement on basic mechanics for pitching. The basic mechanics are as follows:

- **Proper grip and spin:** when holding the ball in front of her, the player should be looking at the “C” or reverse “C” formed by the laces. Four fingers (three for players with larger hands) should be placed along the “C”, with the thumb on the opposite side. This will ensure the proper spin when releasing the ball. Note that this grip and release will change for pitches other than the fastball, but those are more advanced skills that won’t be discussed here. Command of the fastball grip, delivery, release and mechanics is the base upon which all other pitches are learned.

- **Proper delivery position and mechanics:** softball rules require that both feet begin on the pitching rubber. (see diagram)
  - This typically involves the heel of the foot on your throwing hand side on the front of the rubber toward the middle (so that it can pivot around easily - position at 45 degree angle), and the toe of the foot on your glove hand side touching the back of the rubber. Feet should be about one foot length apart.
  - While standing on the rubber, the rules require that the pitcher “present” the ball. This is often as simple as the pitcher bringing her hands together and putting the ball in the glove, with hands at waist or chest high.
  - Once in this position, the pitcher must move through a pitching motion. This typically involves rocking back to get momentum, and then exploding forward with the thrust leg (glove hand side) while pivoting on the pivot foot (throwing hand side) and moving through a “windmill” pitching motion. The ball is released by snapping the wrist forward when the throwing arm comes around to the hip (often described as when the throwing hand is at the belly-button, but hip is more
accurate and descriptive for most pitchers), and the throwing hand continues up to the center of the chest or the opposite shoulder as a follow-through.

- **What upper and lower body should do at each stage:**
  - **Upper body:** Each girl will develop their own ‘style’ of windup and start, as long as the windup is legal, she should do whatever feels most comfortable to start. Pitchers may rock back standing straight up or bend while rocking to start the motion, but once in the wind-up they should be standing up straight, often with a slight tilt back toward second base when they reach the top of the windmill.
    - As the thrust leg starts forward, the pitcher rotates her body so that the upper body is in the “open” position (facing 90 degrees from home plate), which for a right hand pitcher means facing third base (or first base for a left hander). The ball should be delivered from this open position.
    - The windmill motion of the arm should be as close to a perfect circle as possible, following the imaginary plane/line from the center of the pitching rubber to home plate.
      - If the pitching arm goes off of this plane (behind the back or out too far away from the body), this will effect the placement of the ball and likely lead to an errant pitch (high, way outside or way behind the batter.)
  - **Lower body:** - the thrust leg (glove side) should explosively leap forward along the “power line” as the pitcher begins her motion. This leap is directly related to pitch speed -- the longer and stronger the leap is, the faster the pitch will travel.
    - As this begins, the pivot foot pivots on the rubber 90 degrees, allowing the upper body to open as described above.
      - Note that this foot MUST stay in contact with the pitching rubber until the ball is released.
    - The entire motion should be timed such that the ball is released when the thrust leg lands -- this landing should be as far down the power line as possible (a typical distance is around the height of the pitcher to 4” less, for advanced pitchers a stride of 50% greater than the pitchers height is not uncommon). The foot should be 45-60 degrees to the line when it lands.
    - As this foot touches down, the ball is released in the proper position, and the pivot foot/leg should push off hard and drag along the ground toward the front/thrust leg.
      - Note that this foot may not leave the ground or the pitch is technically illegal and a ball may be called.
    - When the motion is finished, the knees of both legs should be near each other, with the pivot foot just behind the forward foot in back of the body.
    - The player can then rotate to be in a ready position to make a play if the ball is hit.
  - **NOTE:** The **power line** is an imaginary line (often drawn in the dirt or marked with tape to make it clear) that is drawn straight from the center of the pitching rubber to the center of home plate. Both the forward leg and the pitching arm move straight along this line (or in the imaginary plane made when this line extends up into the air in the case of the pitching arm) to allow the ball to travel straight to the plate and into the strike zone.
Footings diagram for a right handed pitcher. For left handed pitchers, reverse diagram.

**Drills:**

- **The following drills are for all levels, starting with beginners**
- All drills can be done with a catcher or if alone using a ball and solid wall to throw against. Non-adult catchers should always wear full gear when catching drills or full motion pitching
  
  - **Warm ups** - pitchers should always start with light jogging and stretching exercises before throwing, whether in practice or in a game. See above for sample warm-ups

  - **Overhand throws** - pitchers should always start with 10-15 overhand throws to stretch out the throwing arm before practice or a game.

  - **Flip throws** - work on a straight, flat pitch with proper spin
    - start a short distance apart (4-6’) standing sideways to the catcher
    - start with the pitching hand even with the front of back leg
      - note that there can be a designated catcher for this exercise, or pitchers can throw to each other
    - snap the wrist and fingers forward, releasing the ball and following through.
    - do not swing the arm back -- the ball should be thrown first with the wrist snap and then the hand/arm follow through
    - the legs do not move during this drill
  
  - There are a variety of ways to do flip throws:
    - Standing (as above)
    - On one knee (knee opposite pitching arm is up) -- this works on upper body mechanics with no need to worry about the lower body
    - can be done with a hockey puck (preferably painted white on one side) to work on proper release/spin
○ a hockey puck is similar in diameter to an 11” ball
○ the puck should spin end over end to simulate a proper ball spin
○ hockey puck version of the drill can also be done standing or on one knee
○ using a hockey puck is especially useful for younger players/new pitchers, as it is very easy to see when the puck spins correctly -- more experienced pitchers are more likely to develop good spin as a natural part of their throw, but a puck can be used to correct spin problems if they arise at any time.

■ some coaches/book call this drill a “wrist snap”
○ **9 O’clock drill**
  - Take a few steps back from the flip throw distance (to about 10-15’ depending on the speed of the pitcher), standing sideways to the catcher. Wrist should be relaxed and not cocked back.
  - The legs should be about shoulder width apart, and do not move during this drill.
  - Start with the pitching hand in the 9:00 position, lifted on the plane of the throw (straight back) and at about shoulder level. Point the glove hand at the catcher.
    - Make sure the catcher can see the ball -- it should not be hidden by the pitcher’s body. This is one of the more common reasons why a ball does not go where the pitcher is aiming!
    - Throw the ball at about ½ speed, release at the hip (same release point as above) and follow through.
    - As above, this drill can be done on one knee to work on upper body mechanics, and can be done with a hockey puck to practice proper spin.
  - Some coaches/books call this drill a “power snap”

![9 O’clock starting position](image)

○ **12 O’clock drill**
  - Take a few steps back from the 9:00 position (to about 15-25’ depending on the speed of the pitcher). All other set up is the same as above.
  - Start with the pitching hand in the 12:00 position, almost straight over the pitchers head on the plane of the throw. The hand should be pointing back, with the ball facing 2nd base.
  - The legs should be about shoulder width apart, and do not move during this drill.
  - The ball can be thrown at ½ to ¾ speed in this drill.
As above, this drill can be done on one knee to work on upper body mechanics.

This drill is often cut out of a practice sequence once the pitcher is past the beginner level.

“K” drill

- Take a few steps back from the 12:00 position (to about 25-30’ depending on the speed of the pitcher), standing sideways to the catcher. Wrist should be relaxed and not cocked back.
- Set up as the 12:00, with the ball straight up and facing backwards. Point the glove hand at the catcher.
- Once the ball is above the head, lift the front leg up at about a 45 degree angle -- the pitcher should look like she is in a “K” position
- Pause in the K position and then throw the ball.
  - If balance is an issue for a pitcher, she can hold the pause for 2-3 seconds in the K position
- The throwing sequence here is as follows:
  - Start the arm circle toward the throwing position with the front leg extending out and moving down to the ground
  - As the ball is released (with a proper wrist snap), the rear leg should drag forward, with the back knee nearly touching the front knee when finished.
  - The throwing hand should continue on and follow-through after the ball is released.
  - The glove hand should slap down against the lead leg as the throwing arm moves through its circle.
- The ball is usually thrown at or near full speed in a K drill

Starting position for a K Drill
● **For beginners -- do each of the above drills 8-10 times:** each drill builds upon the prior, so do not move on until the pitcher has reasonably good form and can satisfactorily completed the exercise.
  ○ pitcher should be able to regularly hit near strike zone 50%+ from each of these drills before moving on to intermediate drills
    ■if a pitcher doesn’t hit the target at least 5-6 out of 10 times, keep doing this drill until she can reach that level
    ■Note that the “strike zone” is a relative term. You should use a very large (even double sized) strike zone for beginners to allow for and reward early success. At 10U and 12U levels, the strike zone can be made smaller, with a standard strike zone for 12U pitchers.
    ■See the above section on fundamental form versus throwing strikes for more on this.
  ○ work up through the basics
    ■each of the first 3 drills adds one step in breaking down the pitching process before going to full motion
    ■if someone can’t get a step right and throw strikes in that drill, they have no real chance of doing later steps correctly
  ○ Focus more on drills that break the motion down and less on the full windmill. In many one hour lessons, full motion pitching is left to the last 10 minutes or so, especially for beginner pitchers. Spending more time on the earlier drills to break down the motion, especially if the pitcher is not regularly throwing in/near the strike zone is the key to successful practicing and improved pitching.
  ○ At practices, if there are not enough catchers the pitchers can pair up and throw to each other. This can be done through the K drill for most pitchers. When pitchers get faster, catching for K drills may become more dangerous for younger pitchers without proper gear.
    ■Pitchers should not catch for each other in full motion drills. In this case, a coach or parent can catch for 2-4 pitchers, rotating each girl through for several pitches before moving on to the next.
  ○ Use games to challenge pitchers during practice
    ■After 8 or 10 reps at any given drill, ask the pitcher to hit 3 straight strikes to finish the drill. When this gets relatively easy, increase the number to 5 straight strikes, or perhaps 5 out of 6. Give a reasonably large strike zone to allow success here, and it doesn’t hurt to give one “freebie” if a pitch gets loose. But making the pitcher start over if she misses two strikes teaches valuable lessons too.
    ■For full pitch, another game is to simulate a batter, or even an inning. So “batter is up, nobody out and nobody on, count is 0-0.” Then continue either until the batter is struck out/walked, or run a full inning to see if the pitcher can get 3 strike outs before allowing 4 or 5 runs to score.

● **Intermediate drills:** start as soon as possible, potentially even in a first lesson if time permits and the pitcher(s) picks up the beginner drills quickly.
  ○ **Rock back**
    ■Start as in full motion/windmill drills, with hands at waist, pitching hand holding glove in ball
Start the motion by rocking back, pulling the hands back together on the pitching hand side until they are at about 8’oclock
Then move forward into the motion
This will give a visual of “rocking back” on the pitching hand side
This drill adds momentum, and forces the player to work more on upper body balance

1. Start by rocking ball hand and glove forward
2. Then rock both ball and glove back
3. Move into windmill motion, driving front leg out
4. Push off with back leg and complete windmill

Balance point
Start as in full motion/windmill, but standing on the pitching hand foot, with the glove hand leg held up in front of the body and the knee bent at a 90 degree angle
Be sure the pitcher is balanced (not wobbling) before throwing
Move into the full motion from this position, but do NOT rock back -- just pivot and push the lifted/thrust leg forward
This drill works on both lower and upper body balance, forcing the pitcher to think more about balancing properly instead of just throwing
Balance on ball hand leg (right leg for righties), with glove in front of chest

Move arms back to gain momentum into windmill motion

Turn 90 degrees, pivoting on back/pivot foot while moving through windmill motion – glove arm points at catcher
○ **Balance point, starting in bowing position**
  ■ Same set-up as above, but in addition to lifting the leg, the pitcher should bend at the waste until the top of the body is at a 45+ degree angle
    ● Face/eyes should always be looking at the catcher -- do not look down!
  ■ From this position, move into the full motion
  ■ This drill works on both lower and upper body balance, forcing the pitcher to think more about balancing properly instead of just throwing

○ **Standing windmill**
  ■ Start in an open position, turned 90 degrees from the catcher
  ■ Move the pitching arm through the full windmill motion three times, stepping forward into the full motion and pitching on the third rotation
  ■ Be sure all three rotations are as close to the plane formed by the power line as possible, and that the arm is not going behind the pitchers back or too far out away from the body
  ■ This drill works on keeping the windmill motion on the proper alignment, and is especially good for pitchers who move their arm too far behind the back or away from the body

○ **Walk through**
  ■ Start approximately 5-6 feet behind the rubber in full motion starting position
  ■ Starting with the glove hand foot, walk forward three steps
  ■ On the third step, go into the full motion as usual -- this should be approximately at the pitching rubber
  ■ This drill works on speed and natural rhythm of lower/upper body mechanics, since the pitcher will have to concentrate more on walking to the proper point

○ **Full motion (or “full windmill”) pitching**
  ■ Start the pitcher at the appropriate distance for that league (30’ for 9U, 35’ for 10U, 40’ for 12U/14U). Use a pitching rubber or draw one with chalk if on concrete.
    ● It can also help to draw a “power line” with chalk, or lightly dig/sketch it out if on a field.
    ● Add foot positions (at lower levels) and stride landing target to the diagram. Give the pitcher a target to hit with stride foot. Move as necessary depending upon situation.
  ■ Start in the proper pitching stance, described above.
  ■ Rock or step back with the lead foot.
  ■ Bring the ball in motion in a full windmill, pivoting into an open position while the lead foot pushes forward and through on a straight line to the plate, rotating the hand around to release in the proper position at the hip.
    ● For beginners, this can be done several times in slow motion, picking up speed when the form is correct to full speed.
  ■ Follow through correctly with the pitching arm and pivot leg (rear leg).
  ■ Do not turn to face the catcher in ready position for fielding a hit ball until AFTER the ball is released.
• **More advanced pitching drills** -- once a pitcher has reasonable control over her fastball, the next skill typically taught are inside and outside pitches, high and low pitches, and the change up.
  ○ Placement within the strike-zone - four corners are 'up & in', 'down & in', 'up & out' and 'down & out'.
  ▪ Inside / outside pitches
  ▪ High/Low
  ○ Change up – flip and windmill drills
  ○ Simulated batter/innings with strategy for each ‘type’ of hitter or situation.

• **A standard pitching practice**: once a pitcher is beyond the absolute basics (i.e. she can do the first 3 drills with reasonable form), she should quickly move on to incorporate other drills. This can take as little as a one hour practice session, or 2-3 sessions at most for a typical young pitcher. Once the fundamental arm motions are taught, legs should be added in all drills can be practiced. Some will be easier to master than others, but the idea is to focus on improving fundamental form each time out.

  A “typical” practice might consist of the following (45-60 mins):
  ○ Warm-up (jogging/stretching)
  ○ Overhand throws (about 10-20 throws)
  ○ Wrist flips (10+ throws)
  ○ 9:00 drill (15-20 throws)
  ○ K drill (15-20 throws -- once a pitcher can do this with reasonable form, the 12:00 drill can be dropped)
  ○ Rock back drill (10-15 throws)
  ○ Balance point drill (10-15 throws)
  ○ Walk through drill (10-15 throws)
  ○ Full pitching motion (10-20 throws)

• **Variations**: the above drills can be changed based on time available and individual pitcher’s needs. One hour is normally the upper limit for a pitching practice to be productive. Some possible variations:
  ○ For beginners, the earlier drills can be done on one knee to work exclusively on upper body motion. Also, a hockey puck can be used for the early drills to focus on proper spin. The 12:00 drill should be included for beginners (before the K drill) until they are comfortable with that half of the arm motion -- after that point, this can be dropped as the K practices the same motion, but with legs added in.
  ○ As pitchers advance, different drills or variations can be worked in to focus on specific fundamentals. So if a pitcher’s arm regularly goes “off plane,” (ball hides behind the back, etc.), a windmill drill can be added. For pitchers who have problems with balance, the bowing balance point can be added. Most of the intermediate drills can also add a “pause” in at a variety of points -- for example “do a windmill, but pause with the ball in the 9:00 position” -- this focuses separately on getting the arm to the right place, and then on finishing properly.

See the “Pitching Instruction” video at youtube.com/opybssoftball for a full video breakdown of these drills and the full pitching motion.
Catcher:

Goal: There are many things a catcher can become good at, but they all start with one simple goal: whenever possible, keep every pitched ball in front of you. While it is always desirable to catch every pitched ball, this is not always feasible or reasonable. Sometimes there are wild pitches that are uncatchable, and then other skills apply. But when a ball is within a good catcher’s range, she should always try to stop it and keep it in front of her.

General Notes: Catching is arguably the most physically and mentally demanding job on the softball field. While pitchers need to spend more hours practicing to improve over time, catchers are involved in every play of the game, wear several pounds of protective gear (sometimes in very hot weather), and must move from standing to squatting on every play. The Catcher acts as the leader of the defense, coordinating the players in the field at the direction of the Manager. The higher the level of play, the larger the role of the Catcher.

It is extremely important that coaches, especially at lower levels, encourage as many girls as possible to try the catcher position. There is no one physical description that best fits a catcher. Some players are bigger, which may help to block more balls. But that being said, a smaller, highly athletic player may do the job just as well. At younger ages, girls who are afraid of the ball should probably avoid this position, but that personality type will rarely volunteer for it regardless. As the players get older and move up in leagues, catching becomes much more important. At the 10U levels and up, pitchers are in for the entire game, and stealing bases is added into the mix.

The key elements of catching success are a good arm, and a willingness on the part of the catcher to move her body in front of the ball no matter where it goes. At older age levels, a good catcher may very well be one of the (if not the) best athletes on the team. While we stereotypically think about the shortstop or center fielder as a great athlete, the catcher is actually involved in more plays, and has more opportunities to affect the game than anyone other than the pitcher. If a catcher can keep low pitches in front of her, less stolen bases are attempted. And if a catcher can throw out runners stealing at 2nd and 3rd, or possibly pick off runners in the older age groups, this role is even more valuable to the team.

Also as catchers get older and more experienced (usually by the 12U level), they become more important as a partner to the pitchers on the team. A catcher can encourage her pitcher in ways a coach can’t, as the partner on the field who sees the same things. Also, once a pitcher is throwing more than just a fastball, the best catchers may start to call pitches during games, either with input from the coach or on her own. This is another skill set that goes well beyond most players on the field, and requires a different mental outlook on the game – not just thinking about the ball that is coming at you and what to do next, but strategizing about what pitch is most likely to get a strike on any given batter at a specific time.

The Catching Mindset: While pitchers need to be comfortable as the center of attention, catchers need to be able to take on the role of the important partner who does work behind the scenes. Catchers also need to be mentally and physically tough! They should be outspoken and aspire to a leadership role on the team. This does not mean that the biggest, strongest girl on the team should always catch – while that is a typical stereotype, it is really not accurate. Catchers
need to be athletic, able to make the required plays, and most importantly not afraid to absorb minor injuries during the course of a game. We all hope that no one ever endures a collision at any base, and we work hard to prevent this from occurring. Similarly, while no player wants to be hit by a ball anywhere outside of the glove, this does occasionally happen. And it happens more often to catchers. Standing behind the batter, where stray foul balls and errant pitches are common, is a position that can lead to more random encounters with the ball, and thus more bumps. At the younger ages (especially 9U and 10U when pitching starts), you may have many girls interested in catching until they realize that “catching can hurt!”

As coaches, we need to both understand this, as well as reassure our players and build confidence. The catchers role is incredibly important. Catchers do take an occasional bump, but in large part that’s because they are involved in a lot more plays, which can be FUN! And when it comes right down to it, everyone knows that catchers can take more stray hits, but that’s why we give them all that armor -- to protect them better!

**Catching Basics:** Catch the pitch or stop it from getting past you. Get to the ball fast if it does get behind you. Make good throws back to the pitcher so she doesn’t have to work harder. Make good, hard throw downs to the bases for stealing or pick offs. And every once in a while act as every other fielder does for bunts, short pop-ups, put-outs at the plate and backing-up your teammates. Specifics on each are as follows:

**Stance / Set-up:** The catcher should set up in a balanced, athletic crouch on the balls of her feet. Feet should be about shoulder length apart, and the knees should be spread out wide beyond the feet. This position gives maximum coverage to stop pitched balls, and flexibility to move up, down, sideways, or to pop-up quickly to go after a stray ball, make a throw, or make a fielding play.

The catcher should be in a comfortable position and should be able to maintain this squat almost indefinitely. It is easy to tell if a catcher is in a comfortable, balanced position – the coach (telling the catcher in advance what they plan to do) can walk up behind the catcher and give a gentle shove in the back, or in front and give a gentle shove in the shoulder. The player should either not move, or should only rock a bit, or easily rearrange her feet to rebalance. If the player falls forward/back and has to make a dramatic move to recover, or topples over, then she is *not* balanced!

*What is the best way to teach a balanced stance?* Teach your catchers how to do a proper exercise squat, either with arms at her sides or arms extended. Then send them home to do 50 squats/deep knee bends a day for 1-2 weeks. If they actually do this at home, by the end of a week (and certainly 2 weeks), most players will be able to squat as if they’ve been doing it their entire lives.
**Important note:** don’t let a young catcher catch with one or both knees on the ground! Dropping into something close to a catching position, and then putting one or both knees on the ground, is an “obvious” way for many young players to keep their balance. The problem is, this is not an athletic position at all, and makes it very hard to do anything other than stop balls that come directly at you. In addition, this position can be dangerous to the catcher. Knee pads stop at the top of the knee for a reason – in a normal squat, the thighs are almost never exposed to an incoming pitch or foul ball. But when kneeling, the thigh is completely exposed, and players will often take a hard pitch or foul in the thigh that takes them out of the game for a short while, and possibly out of catching forever! If you teach your catchers the squatting position from the beginning, and expect that they do it, this can be easily avoided.

**Positioning the glove and throwing hand:** To save on arm strain, the catcher’s mitt only needs to go up when the pitcher is about to enter into her motion. The arm should be slightly bent and in a relaxed position, with the mitt centered on the target. This is usually centered on the catcher’s body, and the catcher can move slightly inside or outside if calling those pitches.

The glove should be held in a “natural” position – this is not wide open, but rather with the wrist slightly bent and glove pointed slightly toward the pitcher. If the glove is completely open, it becomes harder to turn it over and move it down for a low ball.

There is some contention on where a catcher’s throwing hand should rest during a pitch. Traditional practice suggests that the hand should be behind the back in order to protect it. It is now also not uncommon to have the throwing hand resting on the thigh. This is a very natural position, and actually also provides significant protection; there is no padding on a catcher’s thigh because it is not typically exposed to a pitched or hit ball. Also, particularly in a stealing situation a catcher is likely to pull their hand out from the “behind the back” position before the ball is received, and a hand that is outside of the body can be in a dangerous/vulnerable position. Catchers should not be taught to keep their hand on the side of their leg (next to/behind the shin guard) or behind their mitt – both of these positions offer more exposure than behind the back or on the thigh.

**Blocking:** While many pitches will be catchable just with the catcher’s mitt, a key skill is the ability to block the ball when it is low or off to one side. The most important first lesson for a catcher to learn is the
need to move her body to the ball, not just her mitt. If a ball is low, the catcher should drop to her knees to be sure that it does not get past her. If it is off to one side, the catcher should move to that side first, and then drop to her knees.

General blocking rules are as follows: when dropping down to block, the catcher should first move her body to the ball (left or right as needed) unless it is coming directly at her. Then she moves her glove to the ground (first) followed almost immediately by dropping to her knees. Dropping down is not just falling forward. The catcher should kick her feet back, and effectively replace her feet with her knees (with her feet now behind her.) The player should think of the position as if she is forming the letter “C” with her body, making the space she takes up from knees to shoulders as big as possible. As stated above, when a ball is low or far outside/inside, blocking the ball and keeping it in front of the player is the top priority, catching the ball is good, but secondary.

Throwing Down / Stealing: Throw downs, whether to catch a runner stealing or to try to pick a runner off base, must be done quickly and smoothly. There should be one smooth, efficient motion from a crouch, to standing in a solid throwing position and throwing the ball. Speed is the key here. Not only must the throw be hard and long (especially if throwing to 2nd base), but it must be done quickly. The average runner can make it from 1B to 2B (or 2B to 3B) in 3-4 seconds, less if they get a good lead off. Since the ball takes about .75 – 1.0 seconds to get from the pitcher’s hand to the catcher, this leaves less than 2 seconds for a throw. Thus it is important to practice moving as efficiently as possible to set-up for the throw and throw the ball. Extra steps, shuffling feet and repositioning need to be avoided at all costs, as they take too much time away from the throw!

Form for a throw down is as follows: From the catching crouch, after catching the ball the player should plant her rear foot and pop up to throw, turning her body sideways to the direction she will throw. She should quickly/smoothly bring her glove up to her ear/shoulder on the throwing hand side, meeting the glove with her throwing hand along the way. When setting up, the catcher’s glove hand elbow and shoulder must be pointing at the target – these are the most important things in determining the direction that the ball will go. The catcher then releases the ball with a quick, hard throw, done from the ear/shoulder without pulling the hand back. Ideally this throw should be “on a line” – meaning that on a throw to 2B, if the pitcher doesn’t duck it could go just above that player’s head. For younger catchers, it may be necessary to have some arc in the throw to make the distance, but this should be overcome as quickly as the catcher’s arm strength allows. Straight line throws are faster than an arc.
When throwing, the catcher should aim for the bottom, inside corner of the base (i.e. if throwing to catch a runner at 2B, the catcher should aim for the corner of the base closest to the pitcher’s mound. It is important to train young catchers that this is one throw that must often be made to the base, not to another player. New catchers will have a tendency to wait until the SS or 2B player is at the base to throw, but this wastes valuable time. A throw on a steal must often be made while the other defensive player is still running to the base, so the catcher should think of it as throwing to the base, not to a player.

**Bunts:** When a ball is bunted, the pitcher, catcher, 1B and 3B players need to be taught their “zones of control.” For the catcher, this is an arc about 4-5 feet in front of the plate – anything in this arc is the catcher’s responsibility. When a bunt is laid down, the catcher must get out of her crouch quickly and move to the ball. If she is going to get the ball, it is extremely important to call for it (“mine!”) – collisions between a catcher and another defender can be bad with all of the equipment involved.

When approaching the ball, the catcher should not run directly at it. Rather she should circle it, such that when the player picks up the ball she is immediately in a position to throw to the appropriate base (1B unless a force is possible). In addition, the catcher should always field a bunt bare handed to minimize the time needed to throw. As with throw downs, the catcher should plant her rear foot, bring the ball up to her ear, point her glove elbow/shoulder at the base, and throw quickly.

Throwing a runner out at 1B is often challenging for a young catcher, as the runner can be in the path of the ball. In these cases, the catcher may need to take a step or two away from the line toward the infield before throwing, in order to get a straight line to the first baseman. The 1B player should also stand on the infield side during bunts to make throwing easier.

**Drop 3rd Strikes:** At the 12U level and above, the Catcher must ‘complete’ the strike-out by successfully catching the ball. If dropped or trapped, the batter may advance to 1st base if it is not occupied, or if there are two outs. Whenever possible, the catcher should try to tag the runner before she leaves the batter’s box. If not, making a throw to first, like the bunt up the 1st base line, can be a difficult throw for a young catcher. The key again is to step away from the line and get an angle to 1st base to throw. Two or three steps to the inside or outside of the line will create the necessary throwing angle. The 1st Basemen should mirror the movement by giving a target on the same side of the foul line as the incoming throw. The catcher never wants to throw down the line and ‘over’ the baserunner to 1st base.

**Pop-Ups:** Catcher’s must react very quickly to pop-fly balls, as they typically lose sight of the ball immediately off the bat and have little time to react. The catcher should be trained to look up first and find the ball, then turn quickly in the direction she needs to move and sprint to the ball if needed.

Should the catcher take off and throw her helmet? This depends on two things: how quickly she needs to field the ball (if there is no time, leave the helmet on!), and whether the catcher has good vision with the helmet on. Hockey style helmets tend to make this easier, but can sometimes still block vision. If the catcher is going to take the helmet off, she should do it immediately as she jumps up from her crouch, but should not throw the helmet away until she
has picked up the ball. At that point, she can lightly toss the helmet in the opposite direction, away from the ball.

**Framing:** Framing pitches in an attempt to get close strike calls is an advanced skill for catchers. The best catchers may pick this up at the 12U level. The key here is that the catcher should *only* try to frame a pitch when it is just outside the strike zone, and framing must be done with small adjustments, not jerky movements. The catcher should only turn her glove in, out, up or down when framing – if she has to move her arm to get the ball into the strike zone, the player should not try to frame the pitch! Framing is usually done by only turning the wrist to move the glove into the strike zone. Any more movement is likely to be noticed by the umpire, with the result of a ball being called.

**Tags at the plate:** Tags at the plate are not common at younger levels, but players should be taught proper form when they start catching, and practice it more as they get older. The key issue here is safety. If a catcher blocks the plate, she may be committing an “obstruction” under the rules, unless she has clear control of the ball before the player is close to the plate. Regardless, collisions should be avoided at all costs – *safety first please!*

To safely make a play at the plate, the catcher should stand just in front of the plate, and not directly in the baseline. The player’s left foot should be just touching the infield corner of the plate on the third base side, and she should receive the throw on a slight angle from the thrower (wherever that person may be.) She can then perform a sweep tag (one handed tag, sweeping down toward the runner) from that position to tag any runner coming directly into the base. If a runner moves toward the back of the plate, the catcher may have to move more to tag her. Tags at the plate should always be made one-handed, and this should be practiced, unless the catcher has clear control and is waiting for the runner. Two-handed tags take too much time to execute on a close play.

**Catching Drills:**

**Drills:**

- **The following drills are for all levels, starting with beginners**
- Show how to put on gear and what it looks like when applied correctly
- Distance from batter (not too close, not too far)
- Catchers should always wear full gear when catching drills or catching for a pitcher, even in pitching drills
- Receive ball – different positions
- Distance throwing – increase distance
- Blocking
- Framing (10U and up)
- Bunts (even at levels where bunting is not permitted, soft hits need to be fielded like bunts)
- Pop-ups
- Throw to 2b / 1b / 3b (10U and up)
- Tags at the plate
Coaching resources

Recommended Books:
There are literally hundreds of books on coaching and playing softball that are available. A few that we recommend for coaches include:

- *Coach’s Guide to Game-Winning Softball Drills: Developing the Essential Skills in Every Player*, by Michelle Smith -- this is a great book of drills that goes far beyond what is provided here, with detailed drills for every facet of softball play.

- *Fast Pitch Softball Fundamentals*, by Dick Smith -- while this book doesn’t provide drills, Smith (the coach at University of St. Francis) runs through his philosophy on teaching the fundamentals of the game, with many excellent examples and lessons for coaches.

- *Coaching Softball: Technical and Tactical Skills*, by the American Sport Education Program -- this book provides an in-depth focus on the various skills needed to play softball well, with photos and descriptions of how to accomplish (and teach) each skill.

- *Softball Skills and Drills*, by Judi Garman -- this book has excellent information and drills, many of which useful for upper levels (10U and up) and can be easily modified for younger players (T-Ball or 9U).

Web sites / videos:
See the appendix page of web links
Appendices (see separate documents):

- Appendix 1: Suggested equipment for coaches
- Appendix 2: Suggested equipment for players
- Appendix 3: League rules (all leagues)
- Appendix 4: Emergency Data Form
- Appendix 5: Sample fielding / batting order
- Appendix 6: Sample practice plans
- Appendix 7: Score keeping outline
- Appendix 8: Softball web links
- Appendix 9: Parents’ Code of Ethics
- Appendix 10: Sample Stats Worksheet
- Appendix 11: Skills to Develop by League and Suggested Drills