

**SOFTBALL AS I SEE IT
WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM OVER 50 YEARS IN THE GAME**

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These materials are a compilation of what I have learned over a lifetime of baseball and softball. They are not just about me. They are about all of us. They are particularly about the world of age-group softball in which we all participate. They are about a trip we are all on together. I hope you will see some of yourself in what I report. It is not scientific. It is only my impression and opinion and is only wise to the extent that I am about softball. It contains my insights on talent evaluation, strategy and managerial philosophy and life in softball in general. Expert guest contributors have provided instruction on hitting, fielding and pitching. I hope you can identify with it, find it amusing in places and possibly even find parts of it useful. Comments are invited.

MY BACKGROUND:

I was born in Detroit in 1944 and grew up playing baseball (“America's Sport” at the time) as did every other boy I knew of. I played varsity baseball in high school and in college and transitioned to softball when baseball opportunities “expired”. I have played on competitive teams in Michigan, Ohio, Oklahoma and Florida. Florida is best. It is softball heaven for climate, facilities and competition.

I last played competitive travel ball for the Half-Century Venom 74s before I was put out to pasture. I am now age-eligible for “80s” but am no longer desirous of or willing to travel. I now confine myself to local age-group recreational ball and lower Half-Century 70s tournaments to which I can commute.

I was raised with an “old-school” perspective but hope I have been able to adjust with the times. This has always been a game of skill, strategy, determination, smarts and, for me, hustle. These values have influenced my assessments.

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WHY PLAY AGE-GROUP SOFTBALL?

There are several mainstream reasons to play age-group softball. I have identified the following:

- Camaraderie
- Competition
- Exercise
- It gives us something to do – a reason to get out of the house

Camaraderie:

I find this to be the most deeply held and enduring reason to play. There is something widely appealing about “getting together with the guys” even if it doesn't include drinking and carousing. It is definitely a form of male bonding.

Players in my well over-70 age-group typically stand around, particularly at practice and during warm-ups, talking about body parts they have had replaced, body parts they need to have replaced, recent softball experiences, old softball experiences, affairs of the world and, in my case, nature television programs and Jeopardy!. We talk surprisingly little about sex. This can't be because we are refined or have good taste. I imagine it is because of our age and condition. I find this depressing.

The form of male bonding I like best is “smack talking”, also known as trash talking. To use the vernacular, we give each other shit and revel in it, always remembering that the first rule of smack talking is that if you dish it out, you have to be able to take it yourself.

Genuine smack talking is never mean nor malicious and is never directed at anyone who is struggling. Instead, it is a positive form of connecting with another player. As someone once assured me, you only tease people you like. The ones you don't like, you don't talk to. I find this to be true.

I would like to share with you three of the most memorable and high-quality examples of smack talk ever directed at me. I cherish them all. BTW, the first two are salacious, so if you have trouble with that, please skip ahead.

In the first instance, I was playing on and managing a non-age-group team. I had a rule that we all had supposedly agreed to. It was that we would run out all of our hits. A teammate didn't and I criticized him. I asked him if he were “saving himself” for his wife. He responded, “No, Doc, I am saving myself for YOUR wife.” That is

championship smack talking! I high-fived him.

In a second incident, I was at bat and the pitcher, who was trying to throw a knuckleball, had it slip away from him. It came in so flat it never got above my waist and so fast it actually popped in the catcher's glove. The umpire called it a strike! I raised my hand, called timeout and stepped back out of the batter's box. This is very uncharacteristic of me. I pride myself on never disputing an umpire's call, but I couldn't let that go. I said, "Excuse me, Blue, but that pitch did not achieve the minimally mandated prescription for arc. I have had erections higher than that." Quick as a bunny, he said, "Doc, how recently?" Again, championship smack talk. I chest bumped him.

The third memorable response occurred when I was 75 years old. I had a satisfying run in my early 70s when I had effective gap power as a hitter. I would one-hop the fence so often people wouldn't even comment on it. Then, with age, like everyone else as they get older, the ball didn't fly as far when I hit it. One morning at batting practice at the Woodlawn Hitting Club in St. Petersburg, I one-hopped the fence again. It was the first time in maybe two years and pretty certainly the last time ever. As attendee Mike Gorham pointed out, "You know, Doc, it was a long hop." I gave him the finger.

Here's three other examples that I feel I need to report: One day at Woodlawn I was feeling sorry for myself for being in a batting slump. Admittedly, I was doing a lot of whining. Bear said to me, "Doc, shut up (actually, it was more explicit than that) and get over yourself. Everyone goes through slumps." My response? "Bear, I don't know how. Unlike you, I am unfamiliar with failure." He gave me the finger.

And recently, my teammate Ken W., stood there like a house by the side of the road and took two consecutive pitches that tumbled out of the clear blue sky and landed slap on the plate with resounding thuds for called strikes, the latter being a called third. The opposing first baseman, Big Al, yelled in at him, "Hey, Kenny! Do you spell your first name with a backwards K?" Superlative smack!

Lastly, years ago I had a first baseman teammate who complained way too often to umpires. Once he yelled at an umpire who retorted, "Hey First! I'm calling a better game than you're playing." Our team cheered the umpire. To his credit, our first baseman acknowledged, "Good one, Blue!"

I have an on-going smack statement that people who know me know how to respond to. If they get a great hit or make an exceptional play, I yell at them, "You're not that good!" Their response if they are in on my game? "Doc, I was on that one!" I grunt and acknowledge that they were. It is a form of a compliment.

Competition:

Many, but presumably not all, play because they like to do things where you compete and keep score. You get to “test yourself and see what you are made of”. Presumably, this applies in a greater amount to the more highly skilled players who participate in tournaments. For many, the goal is to compete and win. Of course, half of those doing this have to end up losing so that might not be a really good investment. It is my impression that many recreational players, on the other hand, have no standards or expectations at all and how well they performed really doesn't matter. They just played “to have fun” and may well have succeeded. In their format, it is possible to win 100% of the time. Which is “better”? You do the math.

A different motivation is to judge yourself not against the other team but by how well you played compared to your potential. Personally, I try to do this. I claim I am not so much a competitor as I am an “artist”. While I acknowledge that it is a good feeling if someone else regards me as a good player, I derive my satisfactions from the joys and beauty of good swings and good plays, regardless of their consequences. I have said it and I mean it, that unless my team is depending on it, I would rather make a hard out than get a bloop hit. I focus on inputs, which I can influence, rather than outcomes, which I cannot. I am process, rather than results, oriented. This focus can succeed for me as often as I deserve to have succeeded. It will be above the 50% of competitors and less than the 100% of recreational players.

Exercise:

Some people use this as a reason to play. Some even take it seriously, but really – think about it. Can you name any sport with less exercise? I suppose bowling, but I don't consider that a sport. Even golf played from a cart has more movement!

In softball, you typically take one swing every 15 minutes and sit on a bench close to half the time. You might get to bat five times in a game if you are lucky. You will probably get up less. If you are a .600 hitter, you will run the bases, on average, three times in an hour and a half. You will probably make it all the way around the bases two or fewer times on average. How many total feet of base running is that? Not very many.

How about fielding? If you are the pitcher, catcher, first or third baseman, you NEVER have to move more than three steps and, with the exception of the first baseman, might average three plays a game. It adds up to very little. The middle infielders and the outfielders have more ground to cover – but not that much more and many times, like their teammates at the other positions, they don't even have to move at all. Compare this to football, basketball, hockey, tennis or racquetball and see if this qualifies as exercise. Truly, our biggest effort might be jogging (or ambling) to and from our position.

On that note, in my youth, I once played eight games in one day in a double elimination format tournament (for you tournament players, remember those?). I played LF and we had the first base dugout every game. I calculated that I covered almost 6½ miles that day just perambulating to and from my position in addition to whatever base running and fielding I did. For the record, this was in Oklahoma and the temperature was 99 degrees that day, which is a good thing because it was the first day in 16 that it hadn't reached 100. I suppose you could also say it was a good thing because it was a “dry” heat. BTW, if you have ever been there, don't fall for that one. It will kill you in two hours without a hat. That genuinely qualified as exercise but was also clearly an anomaly.

I once read that just walking for an hour provided more exercise than playing softball for an hour. I believe it.

It's a Reason to Get Out of the House – Something to Do:

I cannot tell how often this is the reason to play but I suspect it is often, at least for recreational players. They may look outside on a nice day and say I would rather be at the ballpark than here at home. On the other hand, it is my impression that competitive players yearn to get to the ballpark and only hope the weather is good. They are going anyway. Of course, the decision may also be influenced by how you feel about staying home, period. Softball as escapism, anyone?

I am also aware of and amused by the observation that this might actually be the wife's idea. She might think it would be fun for or good for her husband, or she might also think it is good for HERSELF. It reminds me of a Playboy magazine party joke from 50 years ago: The executive asked his secretary what his wife had said when he had the secretary call her to tell her he would be working late that night. The secretary's response was, “She said, Can I count on it?”

MANAGING AN AGE-GROUP SOFTBALL TEAM

TOPIC I: TALENT ASSESSMENT

OVERVIEW:

Two factors affect success: talent and strategy. This report addresses assessing the level of player talent. Strategy will be addressed in Topic II. Obviously, these are my thoughts on the matter. Others could differ. As I see it, there are two possibilities: we are both right or I am right. (I would put a smiley face here if my format would allow it.)

ASSESSING PHYSICAL SKILLS IN GENERAL:

Everyone's assessment begins with the "classic" five tools:

- Hitting for average;
- Hitting for power;
- Fielding;
- Running; and,
- Throwing.

These are obvious and uncontroversial. Few players have them all, but the more of each, the better. To the traditional list, I would add three more. They are:

- Softball intelligence;
- Versatility; and
- Hustle.

I will examine them individually. In my second report, I will examine why some positions are more important than others, with one or two perhaps surprising insights, and address issues of defensive alignment and batting order formulation.

HITTING FOR AVERAGE:

In amateur circles, this is best measured by on-base percentage (OBP). This measure includes walks as hits, which baseball doesn't but should, and does not differentiate for errors on the rationale that the percentage of errors made is related to how well the ball was struck. It does not account at all for the fluke pieces of crap that routinely result in hits in age-group softball. (I hope those cannot be planned for.) This measure just records whether you made an out or whether you avoided making an out. BTW, can you think of any other aspect of competitive sports anywhere where merit is less rewarded

than in hitting in slow-pitch? Far too many miss-hits get on base and far too many well-hit balls are caught. I remember observing in the 1960s that a line drive is “the easiest catch in slow-pitch softball”. It doesn't get in the sun or the wind, doesn't bounce and doesn't have to be thrown successfully to someone else who then has to catch it. My mantra became, “There's no percentage in line drives!” but I still haven't learned how to avoid having them caught.

Analysts of major league baseball have derived a set of performance measurements that are an improvement over historic measures. They were developed by the Society for the Advanced Study of Baseball Research and are called colloquially “Sabermetrics”. Sabermetrics has confirmed that OBP is the most important component of run production. It matters far less whether the hits were for extra bases or the direction in which they traveled. Avoiding making outs is the key to producing runs. Hitting for on-base percentage measures this. It is the most important offensive measure.

HITTING FOR POWER:

Virtually no one in the upper age brackets (74 and up) can regularly hit it over a regulation fence. This became particularly apparent to me as I noticed that I was losing power with age and feeling sorry for myself. I began paying attention to the power of others my age. I carefully observed it went down dramatically after about age 73. It is my unscientific observation that I lost about 5 feet a year beginning about that point in my career. You can test this in your observation set. I think it will hold up. Over-the-fence home runs became so rare in that age bracket that they no longer affected strategy. In fact, few hitters can even reliably gap the outfielders. Those who can are extremely valuable. They are elite and highly valued. The more of them, the better. Gapping the outfielders both drives in more runs and puts more runners into position to score. It is a double win.

FIELDING:

There are three major components of fielding: What you can get to; what you hold on to; and how well you throw it. Of these, how well you catch it is by far the most important. In fact, if you don't catch it, it doesn't matter how much ground you covered or how you would have thrown it. So, catching is the most important part. Look for and recruit players with good hands. One definition of this is to catch reliably what you should, whether it is bouncing or flying.

Throwing is the secondary skill. It has two components: how accurate the throw is and how strong it is. Of these, accuracy is by far the more important. Only on rare occasions does the strength of a throw make a difference, although it is spectacular when it does. However, most throws are routine, which is not to say they are easily

accomplished. Run prevention is much more a function of capturing routine outs than it is about stealing them. Reliability is more valuable than flashiness. Don't be misled by players who dive and whose hats fall off. Bobbled catches and wild throws are of far greater importance in determining who will win.

Last in importance is range. When a ball is hit to a player, there are only three possibilities: Anyone who would be out there could catch it; no one who would be out there could catch it; or it matters who is out there. This is seldom the case. Most hits are either catchable by everyone who would be out there or by no one who would be out there. Again, spectacular range is overrated if the ball is not caught. In age-group, far more consequences follow from routine plays failing to be made than from great ones being made. In amateur ball, go for the most error-free option you have.

RUNNING:

Running speed is probably the least critical of the five historic tools in softball. Base running speed is of limited importance. Slow runners are customarily courtesy-run for by specialists but a real burner, if allowed to run often, can be a real asset. As noted above, speed in the field is rarely the difference in whether a play is made. Good speed is better than average speed but requiring it is a luxury.

THROWING:

Here, consistency is more important than glamour. No throw is of value unless it is caught – and caught in a useful position, like at a base. Accuracy is paramount. A spectacular strong throw is fun but can be negated by being uncatchable. You can have throws that get a runner out, fail to get a runner out or get away altogether and let runners advance. Pick accuracy and consistency over strength.

SOFTBALL INTELLIGENCE:

This is a hugely valuable commodity and certainly cannot be assumed. Dumb plays are very damaging and far too commonplace at the amateur level. This quality doesn't appear on the baseball classic tools list because if you don't have it, you won't make it to the majors and we will never see you screwing up. This is not true for ourselves.

One can observe this quality at the earliest levels of play – Little League. Watch a game of 12-year-olds and observe which ones know where and when to throw the ball and when to run while on base. Coaching seems to provide almost no explanation for the difference. The ones who know what to do stand out clearly from those that don't. We even have a name for them. They are called “heads-up ball players”. It is my observation that they are the same ones at 72 as they were at 12. It seems if you are

going to get it, you get it early and never learn after that. After all, the game is checkers, not chess. It is my recommendation to avoid boneheads at ALL costs.

A note of distinction for age-group softball players. For us, heads-up ball is significantly more complicated. We may have a flawless understanding of strategy but suffer from attention deterioration. It happens to almost everyone. If I knew the cure, I would be selling it instead of writing about it.

VERSATILITY:

This is more valuable in baseball than often is recognized (see the Tampa Bay Rays) and is even more valuable than that in age-group. In pro baseball, everyone is a highly accomplished specialist. If a player goes down, as they sometimes do, a capable replacement is brought up and inserted. If an age-group player goes down, as we often do, he virtually always has to be replaced by someone in the dugout – or out playing somewhere else on the field. Players who can competently play many positions prove extraordinarily valuable.

World Champion Venom 74s had this quality high on their recruiting list and used it to great advantage. They recruited no one inept or clumsy. In my time with the team, I played all four OF positions, pitcher, catcher and first base. Were I not left-handed, I am sure I would have been expected to be at least competent at all the other positions as well. We had players go down, just like everyone else, but we replaced them better than everyone else. It is a goal to aim for.

HUSTLE:

This one is also absent from the traditional list of baseball tools because if you didn't have it, you were cut from the team. Alas, this is far too seldom the case in age-group softball. Shucking, jiving, lollygagging and styling are all impermissible in baseball but are, unfortunately, thought to be cool by far too many softball players. Worse than affectation is what you do when you think you won't succeed. For way too many players the answer is to lose their temper, feel sorry for themselves and give up, most commonly observed by not running out batted balls. A small subcategory of this malaise is not running hard on the bases and being unable to advance when the ball gets away – as it often does in softball.

It is my experience that this dedication to task cannot be taught, encouraged or developed. The world divides into hard-nosed, old school hustlers and those who are less than that. You can't develop this commitment. You have to recruit for it. I suggest you watch a Little League game and wait 50 years to get the right ones – or just watch one of our games for 7 innings. You will know which ones they are.

**MANAGING AN AGE-GROUP SOFTBALL TEAM:
TOPIC II: STRATEGY**

This report will address batting order formulation and base running strategy to maximize run production and defensive alignment to minimize it. Successful emotional preparation to do one's best is also addressed. The skill and ability of players to accomplish these required tasks was addressed in a previous report.

BATTING ORDER

An opening observation: Batting order is a little overrated. Only in the first inning can you count on it playing out as you had planned.

The advice offered here differs significantly from classic baseball. This is because slow-pitch players are about twice as likely to reach base as baseball players. This assessment holds up remarkably well through many levels: .250 in baseball is about .500 in softball; .300 in baseball is .600 in softball; .350 in baseball is .700 in softball and .400 and .800 are equally rare.

This observation is of value when determining how many table-setters you want to put at the top of the lineup before you bring up your power dogs. In classical baseball wisdom, #s 1 and 2 have little power but have high on-base percentages. The third batter is your classic best combination of high average and power. His job is to drive in the “rabbits” and to be on base himself to score. The cleanup hitter in baseball is a true power hitter who drives in runs, ideally with home runs. The #5 hitter is the second best #4. After that, in baseball, you just hope some of the rest of the team can scratch in some runs.

For age-group softball, things are substantially different. For openers, it is hoped everyone up and down the lineup can contribute to run production. There should be no weak links on a truly good team. On the other hand, there are likely few home run hitters, either. So there are two schools of thought possible: 1) Copy baseball in strategy, with adjustments for the greater likelihood of getting on base; or, 2) Bat in order of on-base percentage. I will explore each.

In the classic model, a softball #5 hitter is the equivalent of a #3 batter in baseball. He can drive in runs and get on base himself. In an anticipated first inning scenario, #5 might get up with two runners on base and two outs. An ideal spot for your best hitter.

Having said this, I don't anticipate many age-group players clearing the bases with recurring success as is hoped for in baseball. This leads to the second alternative

strategy for batting order formulation: Hit in order of on-base percentage. There are two benefits here: Your batters most likely to reach base hit most often (that is a good thing); and, there is no real loss of bases-clearing power. This second philosophy is seldom realized and virtually never implemented.

On another side note, you may have observed that I did not address batter self-image issues. It is up to you to figure out how to deal with prima donnas, sulkers and cry babies. Remember, that might be your biggest job as a manager.

BASERUNNING:

Perhaps ironically, even though there are far more base runners in softball, base running may be less important than in baseball – or at least, the taking of an extra base. This is because with the ensuing batter in softball twice as likely to get on base compared to baseball, risk taking is less appropriate. I will begin my analysis with two observations: I don't expect anyone to slide and you can't coach speed.

Conventional baseball wisdom is generally applicable in many places. Never make the first out at home. Never make the first or third out at third. The rationale here is that trying to get to third with one out is a risk worth taking in baseball so you can score on a sacrifice fly or even a bunt. This strategy is less appropriate in softball because a batter is twice as likely to get a hit and you want to avoid making outs at all costs. Softball strategy is far less risky and far more cautious. The rule for sending a runner home with two outs remains the same: If he has a better percentage chance of making it than the batter coming up does of getting a hit, send him. In baseball, you send him even if the chances are only 50-50 and your best .300 hitter is coming up. It is still a good bet. Being out (only) half the time was worth the risk. The excellent batter would still have knocked him in only 30% of the time. You won't send him in softball with a .700 hitter on deck.

While the wisdom of base running is largely the same in both games, it is my observation that the execution is typically far inferior in softball. Good baseball base runners are coached to look for opportunity and to keep their chances of advancing alive as long as possible. Go watch a softball game and report back to me how often you see this done. A baseball base runner with the ball in play will “round the bag” and see if the relay gets away, providing an opportunity to advance further. In baseball, it seldom does; in softball it is virtually commonplace. Yet, virtually every softball player coming into a bag at which he expects to stop will slow down and come completely to rest on the bag. When the ball does get away (Who saw that coming?), he is often unable or unwilling to take off for the next base. Good base runners take all of what the other team gives them; bad ones do not. The difference can be very large. A final cautionary note: I recommended above that risky base running be reduced. I am not advocating

taking more risks. I am advocating taking more of the bases that are given to you for free.

DEFENSE:

MATCHING PLAYERS TO POSITIONS:

I will address the positions in their numerical order.

P – Throwing tough pitches to hit will be addressed later by Eric Johnson. For me, the pitcher also needs to limit the number of walks allowed. I find an average of one per game to be a reasonable standard for acceptability. Fielding the position is far less important in softball with a screen than it is in baseball or softball without a screen. The pitcher is no longer effectively a middle infielder, especially if, as I recommend, there is a rover playing in the middle of the infield. The pitcher will never have to cover second in the defensive scheme I recommend and only rarely would cover first. In my scheme, the first baseman will take care of it himself. It would be nice if the pitcher could field squibs and pop ups, but that is a bonus, not a requirement, for a pitcher who otherwise pitches and hits well.

C– Everyone either dumps their worst player here or their best hitter who isn't good enough defensively to play another position. They should. The catcher doesn't need to be able to run, throw or catch, with the exception of a throw home once a game on average and a pop foul once every other game on average. He better be able to hit.

1B - Perhaps, along with RF, the most underrated defensive position. There are multiple reasons for this. First and most obviously, the first baseman gets more touches than any other player. Second, he is an infielder who has to field not only throws but batted balls as well, including pop ups, line drives and grounders that may be smashed or squirreled – just like all the other infielders. The older the age bracket, the more batted balls he will have to field. Admittedly, he doesn't have to be able to run or to throw and a weak arm can be hidden here. But do not even think of trying to hide a weak glove here. As a bonus, it helps if your first baseman can come off the bag, catch a somewhat errant throw and still tag the batter or return to the base in time. This comes up often with amateurs.

2B - Another underrated defensive position. The older the age group, the more balls that are hit to the right side. In baseball, the second baseman is a shortstop who lacks the arm to play that position. The same should be true here. Having said this, second base is also a very demanding position for additional reasons. The second baseman also has to catch thrown balls, perhaps while running, and routinely throw them again, while distracted by base runners. Beyond that, the second baseman has to be smart and alert. Choices have to be made before a pitch is thrown about whether to cover the base,

where to throw the ball (often with multiple possibilities) and even, occasionally, whether to try to tag a runner – and all of this may change after the ball is hit and people do unexpected things. Only the shortstop and the rover are confronted with similar complexity. The second baseman has to be both physically talented and smart. A good one is a difference maker; so is a bad one.

3B – Surprisingly, this IS where you hide a weak fielder. Many balls hit in this direction cannot be adjusted to – you either stab them or you don't. You don't have to go left, right, back or in to any significant extent. You just have to catch what is hit at you (and in age-group, that is a declining amount) and be able to throw it to first. Stash a good hitter who is not good enough to play another position here.

SS – The same as second base, except the throw to first is longer. It also helps to have a good arm for relays home (this is also true of the second baseman), but that is icing on the cake. Reliability at getting the outs you should get is the highest priority here – and at every other position, for that matter.

LF – Another position that becomes less involved with age – at least to the extent of the number of balls being hit here. As noted earlier, old codgers seem obsessed with hitting to right field. Range and arm may be of diminished importance but catching what you should is still crucial. Even balls that get by are typically only doubles as the throw to third is comparatively short, unlike the challenges of balls down the line in RF. However, as I will note below in “Positioning”, you may still want to put a very good outfielder here.

LC – A traditional “glamour” position that reaps its prestige from being the stepson of a baseball center fielder. In baseball, with only three outfielders to cover the same amount of ground, you put a gazelle with great lateral range in CF. This is far less necessary in softball where the demands are divided by two. As I will assert in “Positioning”, contrary to conventional wisdom, I recommend putting the best outfielders on the corners, not in the middle. The guys in the middle have help on both sides; the guys on the corners do not. Put the better players where the greater consequence is.

RC – Same as LC.

RF – The other most underrated defensive position. This position is extremely difficult to play. The lefties smash it at you and the righties slice it away from you toward the line where you have no help from a teammate coming over and the consequences of being unable to cut it off are dire. If it gets by, it is extra bases, at least a triple and perhaps an “indoor four”. Even every throw is long. Worse yet, as age increases, more balls head this direction. Bad right fielders may have cost their teams a game more often than any other position. Of course, that observation is somewhat skewed by the

fact that many teams foolishly put a lesser-skilled player in the position. Put an excellent player here! (And thank me later.)

R/MIF – This is also a key defensive spot, especially if positioned wisely (see “Positioning”). The position requires the same physical and mental skills as the other middle infielder positions.

GENERAL STRATEGY:

Before I begin specific assignments, I want to emphasize that EVERY player, before every pitch, should assume the ball will, not might, be hit to him and to be ready, knowing what he will do with it if it does come to him. There should never be a need to call out, “Heads up! Goes your way.” Always be prepared for everyone to go your way on every pitch. You shouldn't be getting “more ready” for some batters. Get completely ready for every batter.

Having gotten that off my chest, many of my upcoming recommendations are unconventional. If I didn't believe they were improvements, I wouldn't recommend them. I will begin by identifying some characteristics of softball that make “conventional wisdom” in baseball less applicable.

The first is the increased prevalence of runners on base, particularly first base. In softball, the more common possibility of a force play at second base changes not only strategy, but also positioning. The potential deployment of a rover to cover second and turn double plays further exacerbates the difference. (This will be elaborated upon in an upcoming section.) Getting force outs at second is crucial; turning them into double plays is also. Converting would-be hits into force plays is a bonus every good team needs to cash in on.

Another softball intensive recommendation is to have the outfielders realize the importance of keeping hits from getting by them. This can be achieved by having outfielders with good lateral range but also by having them play deeper than conventional wisdom decrees.

It is my perception that many (most? almost all?) managers want their outfielders to play shallower than they are inclined to. This is fool's gold. I guess the idea is to catch some bloop. Word to managers: unless bloop is hit right to you, you can't catch them anyway, even if you are playing in. They aren't in the air long and often land off to the side, as well as in front of the the outfielder. What is more assured, however, by playing in is you will get burned more often and getting burned is of greater consequence than a bloop falling in. I realize this; most managers and fellow ball players seem not to. That is partially why I am writing this report.

In short, play the outfield deep and prevent the extra-base blow. If a ball falls in front of you, most of the time it would have anyway, even if you were playing in. Let that sink in. Playing in does not mean bloop hits will be prevented. Also, if batters are taking second on singles in front of your deep outfielders, coach your outfielders to charge as soon as the ball is hit, not after it gets past the infielders. Many outfielders don't and leave themselves vulnerable but hustle can cure this. It is unarguably easier to come in than to go back and the two types of misses are not an even trade-off. Over your head or beyond you is worse. To the extent that this can be reduced or eliminated before the ball is even pitched, do it.

Conversely, for infielders, I recommend playing shallow rather than deep. This insight might be one of the most undiscovered by amateurs. Almost every infielder I see is playing too deep. I beam a smile whenever I see one who isn't. These are the reasons to play shallow:

First, the deeper you play, the longer it takes the ball to reach you. While the ball is taking extra bounces, the batter is getting closer to first and to beating it out.

Second, the deeper you are, the longer your throw becomes. The longer your throw, the harder it is to make accurately and the longer it takes to get there. Again, the batter is running all this time and increasing his chances of beating it out. This can be avoided by catching it sooner and having a throw that both takes less time to get there and can be better controlled.

Third, I believe ground balls are harder, not easier, to catch the more hops they take. Personally, I find one hop the easiest and two hops second. Third and fourth hops confuse me and I know they do others, too. Take the advice of major leaguers and charge them all. I recommend trying to get to them with your knees bent (not your back) and your glove close to the ground, trying to arrive just as the ball begins a hop. (Oops!. That was technique advice wasn't it? That is not the purpose of this report.)

Fourth, I also believe infielders are typically bad at Euclidean geometry. They think they can get to more balls the further out they are. Fool's gold, again. While this strategy allows you to run further laterally, it also makes it more necessary. Word of advice: the deeper you are, the more ground you HAVE to cover, not GET to. This will shock most infielders who think about it but they will readily realize outfielders have further to go side-to-side than they do. Pay attention here. This is because, unlike almost every other sport, the field is not some form of rectangle with equal distances to the sides no matter how far in or out you are playing. Instead, you are playing in a piece of pie (one fourth of an entire one, to be exact) who sides are getting further apart the deeper into it you go, leaving you more room you have to defend the further you get

from the plate. Companion insight: the holes get SMALLER the closer you get to the batter. You can work this to your advantage.

I don't have the computer skills to illustrate this for you but you can do it at home for yourself. Draw a field. Put an infielder on it. Move him in and out. See how much more ground he has to cover the further he gets from the plate. It is true, he may eventually get to more balls (if he can run faster than the ball is bouncing and that only happens some of the time) but he gets to it later and it makes the throw harder. Almost everyone realizes that; what they don't realize is the balls he could have gotten to had he been playing CLOSER because the slice of the pie he had to defend was narrower. Playing deep is a poor trade off. More outs will be realized by playing in than by playing back. Another way to visualize this realization is to imagine (suspending concern about safety and reflexes for the moment) that the infielders could play close enough together to hold hands. In this configuration, there would be NO holes at all! I know it sounds like a country song, but the holes do get smaller the closer you get.

For “the icing on the cake”, to prove the benefit of playing closer rather than deeper, I will reference an observation from hockey. Those of you who are hockey fans will already know this; those who are not will learn something. Sometimes in hockey a player has the puck and skates in uncontested to take a shot on the goalie. This is called a “breakaway”. The goalie wants to reduce the shooter's chances of going by him on either side. (It is presumed the goalie will stop the shot if it is right at him and within his reach.) What action does the goalie take? Does he back up like some infielders to cover a wider arc? NO!!! HE SKATES RIGHT AT THE ATTACKER, shortening the distance between them and reducing the chances of the puck going beside him! Backing up and getting deeper would have made the angles wider and given the shooter more room to get the puck by him. The professionals in hockey understand this. Not everyone else does. I hope you can translate this hockey lesson to softball.

In summation, I favor preventing big plays more than capturing (or failing to capture) little ones. I recommend playing deep in the outfield and shallow in the infield. I will examine next where each player should stand.

POSITIONING PLAYERS ON THE FIELD:

I believe greatly in specifically adjusting where players stand depending on the number of outs and runners on base. This may modify the general prescriptions provided above for how far in or out a player should position himself. I also have a non-conventional belief that the most important place from which to control outcomes is second base and the space around it. That is why I want a highly-skilled, smart rover and to play him on the infield dirt just deeper than the base path within a couple of steps of second base.

I realize this recommendation is atypical but I have watched it work better than any other alignment I have ever seen. I discovered it by observing a teammate, John “Johnny Mac” MacFarlane basically invent it (at least, for me) at the Huntsman World Senior Games at St. George, Utah in about the year 2000.

We were playing without a pitcher's screen. Johnny Mac positioned himself as I described above and basically took over the game. He was named MVP of the division. What he did, in short, was field all of the many ground balls hit up the middle. Because he was positioned near the bag, the ball arrived earlier. This gave him both more time to make the throw to first as well as shortening it. Double plays were remarkably easy to execute with what didn't even appear to require effort. He just picked up the ball, stepped on second and threw to first. It is remarkable how much time is saved and how much complexity is reduced by not having to throw the ball to second. He never had to rush a throw and threw runners out by wide margins without needing a particularly strong arm. In short, he substituted smarts for arm strength. I was impressed for life.

I also have specific responsibilities for the first baseman getting ready to receive a throw. As soon as the ball is hit, he should break for first base to cover. Because he is already positioned close to the bag, he will arrive before the ball gets to the infielder. The first baseman then raises both arms and presents “goalposts” as a stationary target for his teammate to throw to. When the infielder looks up, he sees his target immediately. There will be no “leading” the first baseman.

On all base hits to the outfield, the rover will cover second and the shortstop and second baseman serve as the cutoff or relay men. Ideally, they will not go out too far to get the ball because their ensuing relay must be specifically on a base. Accuracy is more important on the second throw. It is better to have the outfielder's throw “stretched”.

Below, I will provide recommendations based on situations. I am presuming we know nothing about the batters' tendencies such as to pull the ball or to go opposite field. For all situations the responsibilities of the pitcher and the catcher do not change and will not be addressed further.

No Runners on Base:

The number of outs is irrelevant if there are no runners on base. Everyone plays his “standard” position and all throws will go to first base. In this alignment, my first priority is to avoid extra-base hits. To help, the outfield plays relatively deep with the corner outfielders guarding the lines. In the infield, the corner infielders guard the lines and the other three spread out about equidistantly, about two steps deeper than the base path. All are shallow enough to get to a ground ball early and to make an unrushed, accurate throw to first. The first baseman is shallow enough that he may bobble a

grounder and still recover in time to get an unassisted out. First basemen that play near the outfield are unable to do this. Unless the batter has exceptional speed, I am very averse to having batters beat out hits that were fielded cleanly.

Runner on First, Less than Two Outs:

Obviously, the goal is to convert a double play but at the very least you want to get a force play on the lead runner. My pivot man on the double play is always the rover. All infielders play normal depth to assure receiving the ball early enough to preserve the chance of turning the double play.

Runners on First and Second or Bases Loaded:

PAY ATTENTION HERE! My preferred strategy changes dramatically from baseball or, for the matter, from unsophisticated softball. There is a huge difference between base running in softball and in baseball and, in my observation, it goes almost unnoticed. Are you aware that in softball, runners are not allowed to take LEAD OFFS? This means everyone, not just the batter, is running the full 70 feet. That is not true in baseball where the second throw is always to get the batter because he is running further and taking longer to get to his base than the others.

On the other hand, in softball, while the base runners are running equal distances, they are not equally valuable. The ones further along are more valuable to retire. Remember, unlike in baseball, all runners are all **EQUALLY VULNERABLE**, and lead runners are often closer by than trying to get the batter at first. You may be able to force a runner further along with a shorter throw. How doubly good is that! You may not be able to get lead runners in baseball because they are running the shorter distances created by lead offs. Your first force out should be the runner furthest along and the second throw goes to the next closest base.

For instance, with runners on first and second and a ground ball to shortstop, the play should be shortstop to third to rover for two, retiring the two runners furthest along and even, happily, shortening the throws thereby increasing the likelihood of beating the runner to the bag. You could even throw it to first for a triple play is time permitted, but you would at least get the two more valuable runners. At worst, if you pull this off, you will get two outs while leaving the one remaining runner on first base and preserving the force play opportunity. How often do you see it? You say you never have?

Another variation on this theme is with the bases loaded and a ground ball to third. The third baseman can step on third and throw home. You do see this occasionally and it is always pretty, unless it is against your team. And, of course, there is the obvious opportunity of a ground ball to the rover (a common occurrence) who fields it, tags the

runner going by who is forced off second, tags second to force the runner coming from first and then throws to first to complete the triple play. I had a teammate tell me he has nine of these.

My working instruction is not to think like baseball but to realize runners can't lead off in softball and are equally vulnerable everywhere. First, go after the LEAD runners. They are more valuable and the throws are likely to be shorter. It is a true win-win result.

Runner on First (and possibly Second and or Third) with Two Outs:

Here we make a significant change from conventional baseball wisdom. Now our focus is second base, not first base. It is a shorter throw than across the diamond. With only one out to get, it doesn't matter which runner you retire. Take the easiest one. (Of course, if you are a corner infielder and the ball comes to you, grab it and tag your bag.) Now we do something dramatic to help get the force at second. We move the shortstop and second baseman into the outfield where they can cover more lateral ground and perhaps corral a Texas Leaguer or grab a line drive if it is hit right to them. They will still have time to throw to second successfully, rather than to first, because the throw is so much shorter and here is no subsequent need to hurry a successive relay.

In summation, in this scheme you go after lead runners whenever you can (and that is a lot more often than in baseball), rather than assuming you will go to second for the force play.

MOTIVATING A TEAM BEFORE A GAME:

Generally speaking, this is not a big deal in softball. While football coaches may wave their arms, scream and beat on things to fire their teams up, in softball you aren't preparing for collisions. Still, some words of advice and inspiration are better than others. I believe that softball is about a process, not an emotion. I want to do things under control, not as hard as possible. Ironically, it is my impression that managers typically do more harm than good with their pregame pep talks and words of inspiration.

Here is my recommendation: Focus on process, not outcomes. This clearly isn't always the case in getting ready to play. I played for years for a manager I believe did more to hurt us than to help us. He was well-intentioned but virtually counterproductive. We had a talented team playing in state-level competition. We would start a four-game weekend tournament by winning a couple of games because we were good, we were playing "loose" and were doing our natural best. This was, if fact, the best we could be. Then he would give us a speech and foul it up. He would tell us, "OK guys, get ready. This is the game that matters. We've got to beat these guys to win the tournament."

The result? We promptly played worse and lost more often than we won. Basically, we choked. We choked because we changed our focus from just playing instead to the consequences of the results. In a sense we got ahead of ourselves and lost concentration on what mattered. We messed up by diverting our attention from what we were doing, such as catching and throwing, to what we wanted to result from it. That doesn't work nearly as well. Instead of concentrating on the process (routing the barrel of the bat to the middle of the ball), we were worried about how many runs our opponent had. That doesn't help US play.

Remember, we can control our process but not outcomes. Good teams focus on how to play well, not on winning. Don't give pep talks that cause your team to choke. Try to keep things loose, if not light. I recommend trying to get your team to focus on the most important play in sports – the next one – rather than how we are doing and “We really need this!” As a last word, I favor, “Remember how you practiced this and what works well for you.”

MANAGING AN AGE-GROUP SOFTBALL TEAM

TOPIC III: RECREATIONAL EMPHASIS

My previous reports were addressed to “competitive” teams. By that, I mean they are made up of the best players they can get and trying their hardest to do their best. A “recreational” team, on the other hand, may be made up of a natural grouping such as a common employer, church or neighborhood, or just a group of guys who know each other and want to play together. Commitment to playing one's best is seldom demanded and may not even be expected. A lot of slack is commonly tolerated in recreational softball.

Things you can't demand or even expect in recreational softball is for batters to run out their hits, take extra bases when relays get away or to hustle in any form. In fact, you can't even expect players to know when it is their turn to bat. Effort and attention cannot be asked for or expected. You can immediately see why this can be more fun.

A common form of recreational team is one where players join an existing league, often under the aegis of a municipality, and are dispersed as equally as possible through a player draft. Teams formed in this manner customarily have a mixture of good players, average players and poor players and tend to be about as good or as bad as the other teams in their league. This report is addressed specifically to managers of teams composed this way. But before we begin, please note that it is highly probable that the only difference between teams formed this way and “scrappy” teams is likely to be the letter “s”.

My foremost instruction is always to remember the purpose of the team is to have fun, not to win. This begs the question, what DOES it take to make the game fun for recreational players? Apparently, the first criterion is that it is not to be taken seriously. Some people may have trouble wrapping their heads around that notion but its acceptance among recreational players seems widespread. Derivatives of this thinking require one not getting angry, not criticizing and not yelling. Learn to say, “Nice try” after every catastrophic screw-up. You will have lots of practice. Soon it will come naturally. And, of course, everyone has to treat all others with respect. While this is good advice for life in general, it is certainly not always the case in competitive ball.

Another corollary of this perspective is it might be required to let players play positions they want, even if they are not good at them. In the “drafted player model” I am addressing, there will always be some bad players who can't play ANY position adequately. How you manage this situation will likely affect both your team happiness quotient and your won-lost record. It might even affect your job security.

There are two major adjustments to expect to have to make in recreational age-group softball: 1) Many players may never had received coaching or training and, essentially, do not “know how to play the game”; and, 2) They may suffer disproportionately from “Information Deficit Disorder’ (IDD), the most common manifestation of which is not knowing how many outs there are. This may affect even good players and is certainly exacerbated by age. The second most common manifestation of IDD is not understanding why it matters how many outs there are. In very advanced cases, batters with IDD may struggle to remember where their turn in the batting order is. This could drive you nuts if you let it. Don't. Instead, remember to laugh. It may take some practice, but you will get plenty of it.

To overcome IDD it is necessary to coach EVERY base runner for EVERY batter, before the ball is pitched, what to do on a ground ball, line drive and fly ball. Then, after the ball is hit, when they STILL do the wrong thing despite clear instruction within the previous 5 seconds, remember to laugh. I do not perceive there is any cure for this. Perhaps hearing tests? After all, the problem is widespread in age-group. To emphasize a point, forgiveness is always the order of the day in recreational ball. Do not expect or even hope for improvement.

In a previous section, I made a general observation I abide by for players learning what to do for strategy. It was to go to a Little League game. Watch the 12-year-old boys play. Most haven't got a clue about when they should run or where they should throw the ball. A few do. There is a name for these boys. They are called “heads-up ball players”. Unfortunately, it appears to me they are the same ones in age-group. If you haven't learned it by 12, you probably still won't know it at 72.

On the positive side, however, it IS possible for lesser players to improve their physical skills despite their advancing age if, in fact, they are basically learning the game for the first time. Improvement is easy when you start at ground zero and have only two ways you can go: straight up or sideways. On the downside for the good players, very few improve in their 70s. But it is a joy to see a lesser-skilled player dedicate himself and develop abilities he missed acquiring as a boy. For them, this game must really be fun. I even enjoy it for and with them.

OK, presuming you still have vestiges of wanting to win, what can you do to help make that happen? I see only one tactic beyond improving the skill of your players. It is to try to limit the damage done by the weak players.

Let's look at this both offensively and defensively. Offensively, runs are generated by bunching hits, not spacing them out. Group your best batters at the beginning of the lineup. Of course, this results in grouping your bad hitters at the bottom. I have concluded this is the only strategy that makes sense. If the weak hitters get lucky and

produce something, good for them and good for you!

Defensive application is marginally more sophisticated. Generally, your opponents may already know who your weak players are – or find out very quickly – and try to hit at them. I have three “remedies” for this: 1) Put your weak players where their unavoidable failures will result in the least damage; 2) Put them where it is harder to aim at them; and 3) Protect them with nearby good players.

To make this happen, do NOT put a weak player in right field! Everyone can and will aim at him and the consequences of his inadequacies will be disastrous. Most right-handed hitters can hit to right on request. With an awful player in RF, a hit out there doesn't even have to be terribly accurate. On the other hand, if the weak player is hiding in RC and has help on both sides, ideally from a good RF, he presents a far less inviting and more difficult-to-hit target. Another place that requires protecting is first base. Avoid putting someone there who can't catch! After these recommendations, good luck. The goal is to take away any part of the field that looks like a “sure hit”. Try to make the opponents' slightly miss aimed hits go to your good players. And, of course, always remember, “It's just for fun!”

MANAGING AN AGE-GROUP SOFTBALL TEAM

TOPIC IV: TECHNIQUE

Previous sections of this manual have addressed analytical and strategic aspects of the game. This portion will address how to play. It will identify techniques used by skilled players to succeed.

How well one can play depends on at least two physical factors: the body you have and the skills you have acquired. It is basically difficult to change the body you have to any great extent. Height, speed, arm strength, reflexes, balance, and coordination vary greatly among players and basically cannot be altered. On the other hand, how well you use the body you were given also varies greatly but unlike physical traits, these can be altered greatly. In short, they can be learned to a significant degree by virtually anyone.

I have asked three of the most developed skill players I know to serve as guest contributors. I have asked them to share with readers what they have found are the physical and mechanical components of performing their skill well. These are things you can learn to do. There are three skills addressed: 1) Hitting; 2) Fielding; and 3) Pitching.

I have asked Bill Gaffney to share his insights for hitting for high average and extra-base power to all fields. Paul Gawel will present his tips on the fundamentals of fielding ground balls, covering a bag and getting rid of a throw quickly and accurately. Eric Johnson will contribute his thoughts on pitch selection, strategy and delivery, both for location and spin qualities.

I thank them for their contributions and hope you find their insights informative and useful.

Bill Gaffney on Hitting:

You have to wonder how hard this can be. The ball is the size of a grapefruit and the speed of a pedestrian, yet I anticipate this will be one of the most widely read sections. Bill gave me his comments and insights through an interview. I have reported his inputs under broad topics.

Physical Preparation:

Q. You are a results oriented kind of guy. I presume your goal when you go to the plate is to get a hit, perhaps a particular kind based on the situation. In contrast, I am process oriented. My goal would be to try to direct the sweet spot of the bat to the middle of the

ball. I am interested in what you think and do to get a hit. Let's start way back at the beginning. What weight bat do you swing and why?

A. I swing the lightest bat possible. I believe that bat speed is of crucial importance and the lighter the bat, the faster it can be swung. This becomes more important the older we get as our swings slow down naturally. There is also a choice between balanced and end-loaded. Pick the type you like but I would advise against mixing them – that is, swinging a balanced bat one time and an end-loaded the other.

Q. I know of a swing doctor who goes by the name of Bogey who suggests older players could compensate for slower swings by going to a heavier bat. They would lose speed but more than compensate for it with additional mass, thereby developing more power. Your thoughts?

A. I am unfamiliar with the concept but am happy with the results I am getting for myself as I add years and drop bat weight. The lighter bat helps allow me to control my balance through the completion of the swing. Finishing the swing not balanced is an indicator that the bat is too heavy or you are fatigued.

Emotional Preparation:

Q. When do you start your preparation? In the on-deck circle? Earlier? Later? Why?

A. I like to “think outside the box”. By that I mean, before I get to the batter's box, not in it. The thought process is from the on-deck circle to the batter's box. Physically, I do take a deep breath both to relax and to help focus.

Q. OK, so you have done your thinking before you get to the plate. What have you thought about?

A. Well, pretty much everything that might affect the outcome. There are strategic considerations like the score, number of outs, runners on base and how the pitcher is pitching. I also consider the physical situation: which way the wind is blowing, how far the fence is and how the defense is deployed for depth and possible shifts. I have confidence in my ability to hit where I want to.

Strategic Preparation:

Q. How do you decide where you want to hit and what type of pitch you want to swing at and why? What do you want to avoid and why? What difference does the count make?

A. I first look to see if there are any obvious gaps or opportunities presented by where

the fielders are positioned. Generally, I want to aim at the most open opportunity I can see. With runners on first or first and second, like everyone else, I would prefer to hit to right and advance the runner on first to third. That is harder to do if the ball is hit to left. If a fly ball, even a caught one, is better than a grounder that might result in a double play, I will swing slightly upward to assure the ball gets over the infield. I would look for a pitch waist high or higher to help make sure I elevate it. This all goes out the window if I have two strikes. Then I just get aggressive and protect the plate and drive the ball. I will swing at anything that might be a strike and just try to hit it as hard as I can wherever I can.

Taking Your Stance:

Q. Your stance appears completely conventional. There doesn't appear to be anything uncomfortable or exaggerated about it. How do you set up and why?

A. I actually stand almost in the exact middle of the batter's box, both from front to back and distance from the plate. My feet are about shoulders' width apart and my weight is on my back foot. I set up where I can take a good swing at any pitch that enters the strike zone. I don't have to move up if the pitcher is throwing short. I am able to cover the top and bottom of the strike zone and the inside and outside corners of the plate from this position. I find that if I move around in the box, I do not have as much confidence in my pitch recognition and understanding of the strike zone if I am in an unfamiliar position.

Mechanics of the Swing:

Q. Take us through the mechanics of your swing. Where is your weight? Why? How do you shift it? What is the order in the movement of the parts? How would you describe your timing mechanism?

A. I lift my lead leg as the pitch is thrown and drive forward. I turn my hips first so that they face the pitcher at contact. I then rotate my shoulders before I start to swing the bat. My weight is still on my back foot. The bat remains back. It is the last part of the swing. I want to pull it through, not push it through. I then begin the swing by leading with my hands while keeping the barrel of the bat back. It is the last thing to start forward. This is what creates "lag". You don't want to lead with the barrel; you want to finish with it. I place my foot down before the ball arrives, transferring my weight onto the front. This allows me to pull, not push, the bat through the ball. I try to meet the ball between my shoulders. This is the maximum moment of impact in the swing. If I am early, the barrel has begun to decelerate; if I am late I don't reach full power. A common flaw I see is "casting", that is, batters who begin to turn the barrel at the beginning of their swings, rather than at the end. They may hit the ball squarely but they

will never hit it as hard as they could if they were lagging, rather than casting.

Aiming the Ball:

Q. Much of your success results from your ability, not just to hit the ball squarely but also to aim it with precision. How do you aim it?

A. I have only one variable. I step in the direction I want to hit. I step toward third base to hit to left, I step toward the pitcher to hit up the middle and I step toward the plate to hit it to right, connecting more towards the back shoulder.

[A note from Doc: That is actually what he said and actually what he does. He does it effortlessly, repeatedly and effectively. Speaking for the rest of the world, this is not as easy as he makes it sound or look, but I guess it is the correct answer.]

Q. Any final thoughts or recommendations?

A. Yes. Keep your eye on the ball and remember ALL pitches are under-handed and slow.

Paul Gawel on Fielding Ground Balls:

Basic practice:

As the pitch is being made, BALANCE on both feet.

Ready Position:

Balance – ready to move left or right

Knees bent; butt down; back straight, not bent over

When ball is hit:

Charge the ball

Take small steps and try to get to the ball on a good hop

Glove down

Use both hands

Stay low

Fielding Ground Ball:

Move to the ball in small steps

Glove on the ground when you reach the ball

(easier to come up as the ball approaches)

Field the ball between your feet, slightly to your glove side – this helps get to the throwing position quicker

After you catch the ball, bring your glove, ball and throwing hand to your chest
Take 1 or 2 steps toward your target
Aim at your teammate's chest.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Other notes for infielders:

- Communication:

As a shortstop or second baseman, you need to take charge and let everyone know the number of outs and, if there are runners on base, where the play is.

Situation:

As an infielder, always let the player that you are going to throw to know that he needs to cover the base. Make sure they acknowledge!

GOOD BALL PLAYERS ALWAYS KNOW WHAT TO DO BEFORE THE PLAY HAPPENS

Talking to your teammates ahead of time is CRITICAL.

You CANNOT be guessing about where to throw the ball as you field it.

Ask yourself before every pitch, “IF THE BALL IS HIT TO ME, WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?”

Eric Johnson on Pitching:

Doc's note: For coaching how to throw various types of pitches, Eric recommends Google for as good a source as any. Here are his thoughts on the planning aspects of pitching:

- Factors affecting where to stand on the rubber:

If rules require that one foot must be in contact with the rubber at the time of release (not all of them do), these are factors to consider in choosing where to stand:

Choosing whether to stand with your front foot on the rubber or your back foot makes a difference of about 4 feet in how far the pitch has to travel. This affects how long it takes to reach the batter. Differing arrival times add complexity for batters and reduces their ability to “lock in”. Variety is a pitcher's friend; predictability and consistency are

not. Mixing the length of the pitch is helpful.

The rubber is two feet wide. You can stand anywhere along it. Putting your right foot on the left end vs. your left foot on the right end can change your release point by 5 to 6 feet. This changes the angle at which the pitch arrives and can add complexity for the batter, particularly if it is varied.

Some national organizations allow you to pitch from as much as 10 feet behind the rubber. Moving back behind the rubber, particularly in varying distances, makes timing more difficult for the batter and pitches that are in flight longer have more time to take spin that you may have imparted. If this variability is permitted, it is well worth learning to utilize.

- Issues regarding using a protective screen:

It is my impression that using a protective screen is now required in most local age-group associations. The rules for their use may vary locally. Typically, if the use of a screen is mandatory, the pitcher is obligated to be behind it at the moment the ball is hit. This means stepping behind it as the pitch is traveling to the batter, not after the ball is hit. If some local affiliation requires the provision of a screen but doesn't obligate the pitcher to be behind it (who would make such a rule? - it wouldn't accomplish its purpose), you can stand beside it and cover a wider section of "up the middle" - at your own peril.

In national tournaments where a screen is not required, always check the alignment of your infielders behind you. If a "rover" or "middle infielder" is playing on one side of second, move to the opposite side after releasing the pitch to reduce the open space in the middle.

- Arc considerations:

The rules are fairly standardized at 6-12 feet of arc, measured from the ground. Generally, most batters find a high arc (11-12 feet) harder to hit. Since the estimation of pitch height is an issue for the umpire as well as the batter, it is best to test the limits of the umpire's zone early in the game. This, of course, presumes he calls it consistently. Most pitchers believe you can't always count on that.

In national tournaments, where over-the-fence power is still a factor, it has been my experience that a 6-7 foot arc is a bit more difficult for the big bombers to lift over the fence. Of course, this runs the risk of a resultant line drive coming back at you.

- Pitch location considerations:

In the simplest of terms, try not to put the pitch either where the batter expects it or where he wants it. Really good hitters adjust their swings to where the pitch is thrown. They don't try to pull a deep pitch and they don't try to hit an inside pitch to the opposite field. If you don't know the batter, look where he is standing in the box. A batter who crowds the plate and stands deep in the box is likely to pull it down the line. Conversely, one who is up front and far away from the plate may well go to the opposite field. Also, stance open, pull; stance closed, up the middle or away.

Where you want to put your pitch and what spin you use can also be affected by the count. Your team will, to a man, say, "Get the first one in." Not a bad strategy as many batters (particularly in national tournaments where there is a 0-0 count) let the first pitch go. But don't make it your best pitch. Go for the edges and maybe less arc. Get the batter thinking and if it misses, not a big deal. You still have two or three more balls before he walks. If it is a called strike, most batters will concentrate more on the next pitch. This is a good time to throw you highest allowable arc.

As a side note, it is my observation, perhaps biased by the fact that I am a pitcher, that many umpires lower the arc limit in this situation. I believe they call more 0-1 pitches balls than they should. Expect it and get used to it. Use it to your advantage. Throw a pitch slightly outside the strike zone and maybe only 10 feet high. If the batter swings, he is less likely to make solid contact. If he doesn't and it is called a ball, no big deal. You still have a 1-1 count and can now use your best pitch for this particular batter.

- Spacing:

Another variable resource for the pitcher is the spacing between pitches. A batter who has a routine and has gone through it in the box is more likely to get a solid hit than one who is not prepared on his own terms. Vary your pace between pitches. Hold the ball annoying long occasionally. Note that on the downside, this may also affect your ability to throw an accurate pitch. Practice this in pick-up games before putting it in your repertoire.

I hope you have found some of this useful.

PARTING OBSERVATIONS FROM DOC

I have occasionally been asked what changes I have seen (and others should expect to see) as I moved along through the age categories. Interestingly, it is my observation that skill does not necessarily diminish greatly with age but the speed at which things happen does. It takes a while to get genuinely clumsy but everything slows down for everyone the older you get. Foot speed, arm speed, reflex and recognition speed and, most importantly, bat speed can be expected to diminish. Another obvious change is there are fewer active players in advancing age groups. At the most extreme level, some have passed away, more have become disabled and many more have become caregivers, limiting their desire and availability to travel.

What does not diminish at all is the banter among players. The smack talk remains top flight. Funny stuff just seems to happen unendingly. That is an absolute blessing. On that note, I would like to share an incident and a written response that was constructed because of it. I am confident you will enjoy it. The incident happened at the Woodlawn Hitting Club in St. Pete and has been slightly embellished for reporting purposes. As I was taught when I lived in Oklahoma, “Never let the facts get in the way of a good story”.

A participant at the practice, Mike “Bear” Storer, came sputtering back to the dugout, spewing a string of expletives. Those of you who know Bear will find that credible. It was certainly not unexpected nor out of character. He was holding his cap in his hand by the brim and vowing terrible things about the future. He described in clear detail what had happened to him to participant Jim Crook and me. We listened attentively.

It is fortunate that Jim is one of the people Bear told his story to. It happens that Jim is a very smart guy. He holds a master's degree in Mechanical Engineering with a specialization in fluid dynamics. Now retired, he had spent his professional life designing and servicing nuclear powered submarines for the U.S. Navy in Connecticut. Jim said to me, “Doc, you have got to write this up. Tell it as a story but make it into a math and engineering “story problem” with lots of superfluous details. That is what we do in engineering education to make the students figure out what is relevant and what is not.” The two of us got together and generated this story problem. I hope you like it. (Head's up: It is a little rude in places. It was originally meant for dugout consumption.)

STORY PROBLEM
FROM DOC BALFOUR AND JIM CROOK
“The Osprey and the Fan”

THE SITUATION: (Doc Balfour)

An osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) is a raptor indigenous to west central Florida. It is also commonly referred to as a fish hawk. It typically weighs about three pounds, is 20-26 inches long, and has a wingspread of about five feet. It bears a physical resemblance to a bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), only smaller. It eats primarily fish which it plucks from fresh water ponds, lakes, and streams with its talons. Uncommon among hawks, it has a reversible outer toe that helps to grasp fish.

Ospreys build large nests on high trees or man-made objects such as telephone poles or light towers. They are commonly found in this area at athletic complexes that have light towers for night games. In fact, some sites actually provide platforms on top of their towers to encourage ospreys to nest. One of these sites, Woodlawn Park in St. Petersburg, has a nest atop a 50' tower adjacent to a softball playing field. It is occupied by a mated pair of adults and two chicks. The adults catch fish at distant locations and carry them back to the nest where they are ingested. The young are then fed regurgitated scraps from the adults' crops. To keep their nests clean, ospreys typically defecate moments before landing or shortly after taking off from the nest.

On a Tuesday morning, just before 10:00AM, the male osprey returned to the nest carrying a crappie of approximately one pound. He proceeded to ingest the fish and regurgitate portions for the chicks. Upon leaving for his next fishing foray, he defecated just after becoming airborne. Below, a fan of the softball team was standing near the tower. He is 6' tall and weighs 230 pounds. He was wearing canvas sneakers (size 12), cargo shorts, a white tee shirt, and a blue and orange baseball cap with the logo of an alligator on it. At the time, there was a gentle breeze of 4 mph out of the northwest.

QUERY:

How long did it take the shit to hit the fan?

THE SOLUTION PROCESS:

- Presuming the feces are freely falling and had not been accelerated by a burst of flatulence, Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation provides a formula that can be used to determine the answer. Since the only relevant facts in the case are the height of the platform (50') and the height of the fan (6'), it is necessary only to

solve for the duration of time it takes a freely falling object to descend 44' (50'-6'). Because the time and distance are minimal, the Coriolis Effect of the Earth's rotation may be ignored as can the density of the atmosphere. Also, perhaps counter-intuitively, the weight of the feces also does not matter. A ten pound turd excreted from a hippo 44' above the fan would hit his hat at exactly the same instant, albeit with greater effect. Luckily for all, hippopotamuses can't climb poles.

CALCULATING TIME TO SPLAT: (from Jim Crook)

The simplistic solution for "time to splat" is to divide the distance (44') by the velocity (feet/seconds). However, because of gravitational force ($g=32.2$ ft. per second squared), our particle's velocity is not constant but increasing with time. Hence, the actual splat will occur sooner than the simplistic calculation.

The standard formula from Newtonian physics to calculate splat time for a body falling from rest is the square root of (2 times the height divided by g). It is the square root because the descent of particles is accelerated the longer they fall, up to terminal velocity, which is not achieved in this example.

THE ANSWER: (from Doc Balfour)

I don't know. I don't know how to calculate square roots. I do know it is less time than you have to move, unless you were already looking up. However, I do not recommend this defense mechanism.

LAST PARTING THOUGHT

For my final parting observation, I have several times been asked what is the greatest difference in age group play that I have observed as players grow older? This is my answer:

- In the 50's age bracket, the fans in the stands are better.
- In the 70's age bracket, the cars in the parking lot are better.

If there are some politically correct among the readers, you have my blessing to substitute "players" for "fans", although it won't be nearly so profound.

I hope you enjoyed the trip.

