

Have You Checked Your Players Schedules?

There is no doubt in my mind that kids are playing too much of the same sport and spending too much time traveling on that one sport. It is not only softball but in all sports. We are losing good players in every sport because of burnout.

I would tell my players that I had in college that I did not really care if they played serious summer ball since we practiced and played a lot during our season. I wanted them to have a life and have some fun during the summer.

But what about the middle and high school players who are playing and traveling so much? Do we really think that the amount of time spent playing and traveling in the summer is good for them or the game of softball?

I would suggest that sometime during your practice time, talk to them about their time management skills and have them fill out their schedules for two weeks. They will have to take that part home for a couple of weeks to do correctly. Give them the handout that has a timeline for each day with 24 hours marked off by hour and space for them to write in their activities. Their task is to fill out the timeline completely within each hour slot with what they do each day.

I think you will be amazed how much time is spent on the sport and how much time they are on the road traveling. We all know that during the season, the teams are playing a lot and traveling a lot. Games use to start Memorial Day weekend and end after Labor Day. When that was the norm, practices were more plentiful but the players still had longer breaks especially between Thanksgiving through the New Year and into winter.

Now there are fewer practices and more games. Players should be learning the game in practices and performing them in games. They do not learn the skills in a game especially when so many games are now shortened for Showcases. There is no time to stop and teach during those games. Watching a game today is hard for me because of the lack of fundamentals being shown and strategy being used. The college coaches talk about the same thing.

But checking their timeline/schedules will also show you, how little time they actually spend with their family and friends learning about life or just having one. We found that the team we did this exercise with went to school, then straight to some type of practice (hitting, pitching, conditioning, team workouts). Most of them were not getting back home until the time that they should be going to bed on a school night. Some were driving a couple of hours each way. The underage drivers were doing their homework in the car rides going to those activities but obviously not the ones old enough to drive themselves.

That also meant that dinner was on the road leaving the only meal being eaten at home was breakfast. Which we know is probably not a normal family time together. Lunch is at school and dinner on the road so there was not a lot of family time listed. Also, look at the nutrition the player is getting (not getting) when they eat on the road. In most cases, they were bringing a sandwich from home or stopping at a fast food restaurant. No nutritional value in that meal probably.

The timeline also showed that some of the players played another sport in high school which is a good thing but their time interacting with their high schools friends was very limited, some did belong to a few clubs which is another good thing but also limited. Few played a musical instrument, sang in the choir and participated in school plays, etc.

It also showed that because of so many games and weekend travel, church activities were slim to none. We learned a lot of this not only from the actual timeline but also from our talks after the exercise was finished.

The players love softball but they are tired of the grind. Just like probably a lot of the college coaches, summer coaches and parents. Everyone especially the parents believe that it is the only way to get a scholarship. In a lot of cases, the parents/players don't even care if the scholarship is to their dream school. They travel extensively just to be seen by a lot of schools in hopes of getting that full ride to play softball anywhere. Notice how many then quit or transfer to a different school. You hear and see it every year.

That's why we need to correct what is happening in our sport. It is not only hectic for the parents and players but the college coaches are inundated with contacts from kids who just want a scholarship anywhere, some know nothing about the coaches nor schools they are writing to in hopes of a scholarship.

We have a lot of kids still playing the game but how many really have their heart into every aspect of the sport, how many cannot leave the field fast enough to get away from the grind, how many switch schools and how many quit the game totally.

They need a life outside of the game of softball. They need to play other sports especially when they are younger if they want to play them. I think most coaches believe a versatile player makes a better athlete. They can still be great at the game of softball if they play another sport, they can still play at the highest level, they can still have a lot of fun doing it and probably will be a lot happier. Happy players make better players. Everyone needs balance in their lives and kids are only kids once. How many are losing their childhood?

we will ruin the sport as will all of the other sports. Back when, there were Khoury Leagues, smaller leagues and teams and the advanced teams. Now, Khoury leagues are dwindling, as are the recreational leagues. High school programs may be at risk also since “Select” coaches are telling their players not to play for their HS so they can spend more time with their Select team.

So why are players not playing in HS or lower level teams/leagues? Here are some ideas or thoughts on that.

- Maybe it is because from 1996-2008, players had a chance to go to the Olympics.
- Maybe it is because more colleges are offering scholarships.
- Maybe it is that major colleges are now on TV.
- Maybe it is because some families need the scholarship in order to go to college.
- Maybe it is because coaches have figured out that there may be money to be made now in softball. Before coaches were usually teachers who coached and summer ball was for fun. Now every team is select or elite or gold or some other “impressive” name and recruiting tournaments outnumber plain old fun championship tournaments. The number of softball camps have also increased as well as the hitting, pitching, fielding, conditioning businesses that are inundating the market now.
- Maybe egos enter into it also when a coach or parents can have bragging rights when one of their players/daughters sign with a successful college.
- Maybe it is because the summer programs that use to start on the Memorial Day Weekend and end at Labor Day are now going year round. It isn’t just the players that are of an

age that is recruited but players who are 10 and up maybe younger.

Kids 10 and under are playing most weekends and playing 9 games a weekend. I wouldn't let my college teams play 9 games in a weekend and continue through the season doing more of that.

On top of that these players are going to pitching lessons, hitting lessons, fielding lessons and conditioning times and who knows what else.

If you really care about your players and their wellbeing and the sport of softball, **have your players do a time management study**. Have them track everything they do for at least two weeks hour by hour. You can make a daily chart with times on it so they just have to fill it in. Also have them include travel time.

It is eye opening. I was helping a summer team mentoring the coaches and players on the college way. One of our exercises for them was to keep a log on their activities for two weeks.

When I read them, it told me exactly what I had feared and why kids are burned out. Besides their classes at school, very few had time to do any other activities but softball. Here are some of the things we found out:

—Most were on the road far too much. Since there are all playing on summer teams and those teams are practicing year round, they are not playing in their own town. Some are driving 2-3 hours to practice even on a school night.

—Besides their team practice which could be one or two times a week, they are traveling to the private lessons which are seldom back to back (pitching then go to hitting) so that may mean sit

around for hours waiting for the other lesson or driving in again on a different day.

—Then there are team meetings, fundraising events, chalk talks with the team, conditioning sessions that are rarely on the same days.

Imagine getting out of school, driving 2 hours, working out and driving two more hours. That gets a kid home late to do homework. Then the day starts over again the next day.

- How many years can a kid do this?
- What happened to making the well-rounded athlete by them playing 2-3 different sports, what happened to starting Memorial Day Weekend and ending Labor Day Weekend?
- What happened to limiting the number of games played or at least having the sense not to have kids playing 9 games in one weekend?
- What happened to practicing? Playing a ridiculous amount of games does not equate to being good, they are just practicing the same mistakes. Practice, practice, practice.
- What happened to the coach who could actually coach numerous skills and handle conditioning, etc.?
- Does everyone have to have a specialized coach?
- Why can't most kids play more than one sport in middle school and high school?

If you are answering that they cannot do these things because they won't be as good of a player unless they do. Then I say, maybe in some case, however, how many players have quit because of burnout and never reach their potential because they no longer play. And how can a player be their best when the games become so routine that it is just another game.

If you are saying they need specialized coaches then my question is why can't their summer coach and staff provide the same teaching ability in order to teach their own players?