

## Here's Where It Catches Up to You

The season seems long at first but all of a sudden the post season tournaments are upon you. This is the moment that you have trained for all year and this determines whether you are going to any post season tournaments or not. I had the opportunity to watch and talk with a couple of teams frequently this year and watched them throughout the year. The little things caught up with each of them and their seasons came to an end before they really should have ended. Of course, the larger percentage of teams fail to go to the finals of their divisions, only one team in each division is a National Champion. However, I am talking about teams that could have gone farther into the post season, beaten the teams that they should have beaten and even some that they should not have beaten. Once teams are in the post season tournaments, I don't think anyone can predict some of the upsets that can occur. These schools should have won and gone on to the next level but they did not.

I consider the following to be extremely important to the success of a team at the end of a season.

- Number of players
- Being able to bunt for a base hit
- Positive imagery
- Mental toughness
- Learning the fundamentals

1. One of my suggestions to one of the schools at the very beginning of the school year, was to carry a large squad. The response was that they didn't want to carry anyone that they felt would not play during the season. They only had 14 people and it was the beginning of the school year. Ok, fourteen is a pretty good number in most cases but here are some reasons to carry a softball team of no less than eighteen players at the beginning of the year. And you can adapt this to the summer leagues also.

- Spring schedules-hopefully your schedule will be a tough one. I am a firm believer in playing a full, tough schedule consisting of the best teams in my division on a national level. That is the only way to get better and to hopefully win a National Championship. When you play this type of schedule, it stresses the team mentally and physically which pays off at the end of the year. You will be using a lot of players to keep everyone fresh throughout that type of a schedule.

- Injuries-they will happen and no one knows when during the season it might happen. Having more players allows time to rehab injured or sore players. Our Arizona trip at the beginning of our season was always stressful since we were coming straight from the gym to the hard fields out there. It took its toll on the legs especially. A large squad allowed anyone with a pull, strain or soreness to rest and then be ready to play the rest of the season.

- Grades-as hard as you might try to give a player all of the tools to stay eligible some just refuse to help themselves. There are tutors, academic monitoring programs, learning labs, etc. that the players can use to help them in classes but the end result is that the student/athlete has to want to get good grades and pass their classes. There is absolutely no excuse to flunk a class with the help available these days but it happens and if you lose anyone at the end of the semester, the time to find a replacement is short and the time to teach them what they need to know for the season is even shorter. Please, carry a big squad.

2. Another is to teach, teach, teach, teach. There are no players that know everything when they come to a team including those coming onto a college team as a freshman. Fundamentals are not being taught and the players need to learn them. Coaches, work hard during the off season teaching the little things about each skill involved in the game and also practicing those little techniques. It takes a lot of repetition in learning the skill so the players need to have hundreds of balls hit to them each day. They also need constructive criticism with the emphasis on constructive. You can motivate players without screaming at them, you can be tough and be

demanding without being demeaning to them. Be encouraging to them while challenging them to be better. But you must be organized during your practices and know exactly what you want them to do or mentally they will “check out” and learning then stops. Of course, coaches, make sure that you do your job and know how to teach the fundamentals to them.

3. Teach the bunt for a base hit. Everyone should learn to sacrifice a player to the next base, that’s a given. But the player’s especially with some speed need to be able to get on base safely with a bunt. I am a believer that everyone can learn to bunt for a base hit even the slower ones but how to teach the slower ones to bunt for a base hit is a whole other article. So for this article we are teaching the people with some speed especially the rabbits. Teach the players to bunt down the foul lines instead of bunting to the middle of the field where it is easier for the defense to field the ball. Wait for the last possible second to show bunt and definitely be on the run. All of this is possible with practice and feedback from the coaching staff. Drill: Use four players and a pitching machine. Keep feeding the pitching machine at a constant pace with each player taking one ball at a time. The player is on the run and they rotate constantly. Use foul lines and a home plate, put a cone half way to first and third about a foot to two feet away from the foul line. The batters are to put the ball between the foul line and the cone consistently. This takes a lot of practice and concentration but is well worth working on early and often.

Bunting is a way to beat almost every pitcher!!!! It forces the defense to make the play versus the pitcher. It forces at least two players to complete the play on the defense and to do it under pressure. That creates an opportunity for errors. If you cannot catch up to the pitcher, start bunting and make the defense around her beat you.

4. Teach mental toughness. Start at the very beginning of the practice season to set the tone for the season. The coach has the control to teach discipline to the players which in turn over the season will turn into mental toughness. Challenge your players during every practice. Practices need to be very organized with NO dead spots or time for the players to stand around and start talking. Keep them going and keep challenging them. That along with constant encouragement and positive correction will show throughout the season but you will especially see it at the end of the season when a lot of pressure is on them. Create a team full of tough competitors. Encourage them to be aggressive at the bat and on the bases. Teach them to be fearless on defense and to show it in their eyes. You can look at a player and their eyes will tell you if they are mentally tough or not. It is your job to change your player’s attitude and make them mentally tough.

5. Positive imagery works. I had a player one year that had made 22 errors at SS the first half of the season. We began doing positive imagery at every practice and before every game plus the players would individually practice this at home. As a group, I had them close their eyes and picture themselves at bat. I would then go through every scenario that could occur at bat and have them picture themselves doing it correctly: “see yourself at bat, see the ball coming in, see yourself getting your hands out with the bat and putting the perfect bunt down the third baseline”, then I would go through first baseline, hitting a line drive to the gap, etc. I would do the same thing on defense, running the bases, etc. I would go over each one a couple of times. The SS with the 22 errors could be seen going through the positive imagery motions as the pitcher warmed up every inning on offense or defense. She made one error the rest of the season and was named All-Conference, All-Region and All American.

These are five things that I would work on often all season. If the teams that I watched during the season would have done these things, they would have been tough opponents at their respective Nationals instead of sitting at home.