

Mediocrity—Is That Good Enough?

By Celeste Knierim

I hear comments being made by college coaches that players do not know how to play in a tough game situation. That they are not tested most of the time in a do or die game in the seventh inning. Are we settling for the players not knowing how to play in those tough situations?

Seldom do games now go seven innings or end in a Championship of a tournament. There are so many games now played in a season or in showcases where they stop on a time limit. Has the attitude now become that it is ok to lose since there will always be another game? If they don't make it to one National Tournament, it is not a big deal since there are many more for teams to attend. Is this really what we want to teach them?

Let's be honest and look at the fundamentals of the players now.

Lots say the game is better now than before and players are better than before. Really? Are kids growing bigger than before? Yes. Are they stronger and in better shape? Probably since the equipment/programs are more available than years earlier. Are there more opportunities than before? Of course there are more. There are a lot more non-school teams and schools that have programs, etc. Are there more scholarships than the early days? By leaps and bounds there are more. Fields are better, equipment is way better, the uniforms each team has now are better and on and on. But that doesn't make the players better than years past.

Let's talk about the larger percentage of players of all ages:

Do the players really know the fundamentals of the game?

Do the players really understand the strategy of the game of fastpitch?

Do the coaches know the strategy of the game???

If coaches do know the strategy of the game, a lot of them do not show it. Games are lost that could have been won if some kind of strategy was used. It is in every sport. I am a big Cardinal baseball fan but it is very frustrating to watch opportunities wasted. According to way baseball is played, the short game is seldom used, runs are allowed to score because the outfielder catches the ball on the wrong side of their body before throwing, base runners are out because they slide right into the tag and so on. The part that bothers me the most is that most players/coaches just accept that the run scored or the game was lost. Are they thinking, oh well, we did what we could and there will be another game?

We worry about players today getting hurt so we are constantly selling new products and changing rules to protect them. I agree the ball is flying off the bat. But I also feel that the protective gear is being worn more now because coaches are not teaching fundamentals. When I see a third baseman on her heels with her throwing hand holding the top of her glove, I worry about that player's safety. Teaching her the fundamentals of getting off her heels and taking the hand off the glove should be taught first before relying on a mask. Watch games and you will see a lot of players are flatfooted, toes are out which makes reaction time slower, body and glove positioning in their ready position is incorrect, pitcher's lack spin on the ball, the bases are covered incorrectly and on and on. Having slower reaction time leads to a lot of injuries alone and the above habits listed cause slower reaction time.

We have settled for mediocre skills in every sport and we keep trying to reinvent the game to make up for it.

Skills are learned in practices not during games. Skills are learned when the coaches correct poor mechanics. Skills are learned with repetition not when they play games and get one or two balls a game. Players should be taught the skills in practices and then they perform those skills in games.

Corrections should also be made in games but there is little time to teach during a showcase. So, the bad habits are being reinforced.

There is no doubt that it is easier to play a game instead of practice. Practices can be boring if done incorrectly. Hitting practice where everyone is just standing around waiting for a ball to occasionally be hit to them is boring. Infield/outfield practice when you wait and wait for a ball to come to you is boring. But a practice that is quick paced with lots of balls going to each player is not boring. You can easily hit to more than one fielder who then throws to a different base than the others. So the coach is hitting to another while the previous fielder is throwing. Can go really quickly and get three times the practice in than hitting to one at a time.

Teaching defensive strategy while practicing the offense is not boring. Keeping the players involved during the whole practice is not boring. Using your runners during infield/outfield practice is not boring and works on a lot of different skills and strategies.

We, as a sport, do not have to settle for things being just ok, just mediocre. The sad part is that some players and even some coaches /parents really do not realize what excellence looks like. They think they are as good as they can get. Mediocre has become the new excellent. Is that ok?

Please, let's stop the overabundance of games played. Let's practice more than we play. Let's teach the fundamental skills and the strategy of the game and practice them over and over so that all players are very sound in those areas. Please leave the egos at the door and seek out how to teach the skills correctly and how to run fun, efficient practices. That is ok to do.

Everyone has a chosen profession. Mine was strictly teaching and coaching since I started my college years. So, I grew up in this business. Many have not and that's ok, but the little things about the game/job need to be learned. I appreciate when someone loves the game of softball but this isn't slo-pitch or baseball. It would be the same thing if I started doing something out of my profession like plumbing or selling real estate or being

an accountant. I could pick up a book and read all about it or go to seminars but I doubt if I would know all the little tricks of the trade. That takes a lot of experience or takes a lot of time to really watch and learn from the professionals who have had more experience.

My suggestion is this. Seek out the older coaches who “majored in the sport” not just those who talk a good game. It takes books and seminars but also watching games played by good teams and watching games coached by really experienced coaches who know the game. There is casual watching and then there is watching and taking notes on how the players look and act, how they use strategy on offense and defense and how the coaches teach and control the game.

Since there are so many retired experienced coaches, seek them out and talk to them about the game, the fundamentals and the strategy of the game. You will learn so much from them about the game and the “little things” to use or teach the players.

It would be great if you could sit and watch a game with them so they can point things out. A taped game is even better so you are able to replay what you want to see over again and play things in slow motion. Doing this with the whole team is very beneficial also.

Please do not settle for mediocrity, learn the game within the game and teach the players to be as good as they can be.

Make the goal to be about playing it the way it should be played.

Do not play the game just to try and show off the talents of a player to get a scholarship. All though that may be a noble goal, we are settling for teaching players to play for the people in the stands instead of playing to win, instead of playing to be the best player they can be and instead of playing because we love the game of softball.