

Off Field Training for All Fastpitch Players

by Michele Smith



It's that time of year again...the time when our seasons are finishing up and we are planning our off season training schedules. Therefore it is time for me to stress over again how important it is to get in the weight room, work on the agility ladder, hit the core hard and work on our conditioning base. Over a year ago I wrote an article to make a case for the need of 'Training' in our sport, and once again I am re-visiting how important it is to train. The 'training' I am talking about takes place off the field...we all spend hours on the field to improve our softball skills but in order to become a better softball player no matter what your level or position; you need to train hard off the field. In the past, most softball players worked hard on the field for 2 hours of practice and thought they had put in their work load for the day. Today, at many levels the competitive play is increasing and in order to stay ahead of the pack, you need to work hard not only on your game, but also on your body. The stronger your body, the less prone you are to injury

and the quicker and more explosively you'll be able to play the sport. Let's face it, everything about our game is fast and explosive, that's why it called FASTPITCH! If you can't move your body in a fast and explosive manner, it will be difficult to improve your softball skills. So when you are working on your speed and strength, you are in a way working on your 'range' as a middle infielder or your 'velocity' if you are a pitcher. Training helps you build strength, and strength helps you swing the bat faster, throw the ball further, and run down the base paths faster. Speed and strength in all parts of the game is our goal. Proper training, without a doubt is the single most important key to the success I have achieved during my long career....12 years on Team USA and 16 years of Professional ball in Japan.

I chose to revisit this subject for 3 reasons. While working for ESPN this June at the Women's College World Series, 'off camera' interviews of each team were taking place before the event started. My partner Eric Collins asked each team the same question, "Knowing what you know now as a college softball player, what would you have done differently in your High School career to better prepare for college softball?" Players from each University said the same exact thing! They all wish they would have started weight training in High School-- of those who did weight train in High School; they wish they had done it more seriously! I was amazed that 8 different teams all answered the same question the exact same way! Weight training and Speed and Agility training are what they now consider necessities to becoming the best they can be. Their teams work hard year round with Strength coaches, and time is scheduled into every day to train off the field as well as on the field. It is no coincidence they answered the same way-and it also proved to me that more Training information needs to get out to the younger athletes and their coaches. Training 'off the field' takes your 'on field' game to the next level!

The second reason I decided to revisit this subject is because I get numerous questions on my Message Board as well as at my camps and clinics about off field training as well as season specific training; in other words...Pre-season, In-season and Off-season schedules. This just proves to me that coaches and players are still learning about this area of our sport. No matter what age group you play or coach- you will have athletes who are very serious about ball and those who play for fun. Each is absolutely fine; there is a need for those who want to just play and have fun, and those who have goals and desires to be the best in the world. As a coach it is important to share some information on training with your team, it might not be for every player on the team, but present the information on training and let the kids and parents decide. If you are coaching young athletes in the range of 8-10 year olds maybe they don't need to be in the weight room--but there is nothing wrong with teaching them to do push ups and sit ups after practice.

The third reason is the off season is upon us and now is the perfect time to get your Training program in full swing. The off season is the time of the year that we can make great strides in our training that will positively impact our softball game next spring. Training programs like the one I have developed should be split into 3 seasons--Off-season, Pre-season and In-season. If you and your team want to get to the next level, read on and then start training off the field to become a superstar on the field!

But.... before we start, let's talk about two issues that cause some negative hype

when softball and weight lifting were talked about in the same sentence. First, in years past many coaches thought it was bad for baseball or softball players to lift weights. They feared that weight training tightened muscles, and tight muscles were bad for the athlete's game. Today we understand the body better and how it performs. Tight muscles should always be stretched, but only when they are warm. Stretching is a very important part of training and body maintenance. Second, the results from weight training and proper training for softball in general are very good for the body. Training is not just about lifting weights, or lifting as much weight as you can. It is not about women lifting weights and looking like men. That will never happen unless a woman is taking illegal drugs. Women naturally do not have high levels of testosterone, which is the male hormone responsible for building big muscles, so even women who weight train will not develop large muscles like men who weight train. As women we will strengthen our muscles and build some muscle which will help prevent injury and help our level of performance...but we'll never look like Arnold.....Unless you take illegal drugs!!!

So what is Training?

Training for softball should include a couple of different activities. Some of them are a dynamic warm-up, agility training, plyometrics, core training, strength or weight training, conditioning, and a proper cool down.

The best way to start any workout should always be with a proper Dynamic warm-up. A dynamic warm-up gets the body moving and increases blood flow to the muscles. This warm up should include some form of a low intensity exercise (i.e., jog, bike, jump rope, etc.) and active stretching. One form of active stretching is known as dynamic flexibility. Dynamic flexibility refers to active range of motion in a joint or joints. It is a great way to warm up because it increases flexibility in a given range of motion, increases heart rate, blood flow to the muscles, core temperature, and stimulates the neuromuscular system to get into a state of readiness, as well as allowing for more sport-specific movements. Remember, a warm up is not static stretching of cold muscles. Static stretching of cold muscles is the easiest way to injure your muscles and your body. You should only stretch as a cool down, or any tight areas of your body that have properly been warmed up.

Agilities are activities that teach fast feet and help build speed as well as strengthen the little muscles in our legs. Agility is defined as "the ability to explosively brake, change direction, and accelerate" (Plisk, 2000). This is a concept used by virtually every sport. Softball, like most team sports, is multidirectional meaning the movements involve both linear and lateral motion and changing directions on the dime. Agility drills are very easy to incorporate into your softball on field workouts.

Plyometrics help build explosive muscles for bounding type movements. This once again helps increase speed. Plyometric training, also referred to as jump training, is a method of linking strength and speed of movement to generate an explosive movement (Chu & Plummer, 1984). Plyometric training involves exercises that allow a muscle to reach its maximal force capabilities in the shortest amount of time (Baechle, 2000). The faster a muscle is able to change direction from a lengthened position to a shortened position, the greater the power output will be from that muscle (Glass, 1998). Take for example a rubber band. The more a rubber band is stretched, the further it will go when shot off your finger. Because in sport almost every movement involves a pre-stretch prior to muscular contraction (swinging a bat or pitching), plyometric training is an extremely important part of an athlete's training program.

You should have an adequate strength base before participating in a plyometric training program. Plyometric training must be performed with maximum explosiveness to be effective. Due to the nature of the sport, upper and lower body plyometrics should be performed. Just like the strength training program, the plyometric program should progress from a low level to an advanced level. The intensity of the plyometric training should be kept low through the first phase of your strength program (for example, jumping rope) and increase as the athlete gets stronger. You should only increase the difficulty of the plyometric drills if you are able to perform the exercises safely and effectively.

Core strength is also very important.

The core of the body is the midsection or better known as the abdominals and the lower back muscles. These areas are used often in throwing, swinging, and pitching. The core muscles are used in basically every movement of most sports. This signifies the importance of developing those muscles. For example, most every sport involves some form of running, no matter how minute. During running, an athlete must keep his/her core musculature tight. Relaxation in the abdominal muscles and lower back muscles results in lost energy or wasted energy (Brown, 2001). By developing the core musculature, it will help in injury prevention, as



well as increase strength and speed through improved capabilities to maintain trunk stabilization and balance during sport movements. For young teams and athletes [8-12 year olds], I recommend starting with core training and agility drills. As they develop and age, then start a weight training program. **Weight and Strength Training is very necessary in building strength for softball players.** The stronger an athlete is the faster she will run, throw, pitch and hit. Weight training is very specialized and a good program written for softball players should be followed. Never lift weights that are too heavy for you, and always lift with a partner. Lifting with a partner will promote safety and will help with motivation. Lifting programs are best when they are developed using the periodization method. Periodization is form of exercise design that varies the intensity and volume of exercise while also taking into account the seasonal demands of a particular sport (softball) and athlete. If you have never lifted before, it is very important to start slow and learn the proper

movements of the lifts. Good form in lifting is a must. This approach will help build a good foundation, and develop the connective tissue and bones along with the muscles. [I recommend 12 years old and up with slow progression and an emphasis on form and mechanics.]

Conditioning for softball is very important, as we want to be a fit and strong athlete.



Improved endurance or stamina, and weight management are the two main reasons for conditioning. I recommend conditioning away from the softball field. Jogging and cycling are great ways to build your fitness levels off the field.

Cooling Down is very important when you have finished a training program.

Many softball players grab their gear and leave the field as soon as practice is over. It is important to take 5 to 10 minutes and cool down and stretch. It is also a great time to reflect on your practice or game to improve your mental skills as well.

For more information on Training Programs, check out my website and the new **Dynamic Training DVD and year long Training Guide** that I developed with Division 1 strength coach Beth Spak. This package was developed to help all levels of softball players improve their training for softball. The DVD shows proper form in all the above mentioned categories as well as shoulder pre-hab, and motion simulation exercises. The year long Training Guide gives you workouts for everyday of the year. The year is broken down into In-season, Off-season, and Pre-season. It also includes a journal to help you keep track of your training and softball performances.



Remember you have to work hard off the field, to continue to make gains on the field. Maybe someday I'll see you and your team at the Women's College World Series and you'll be able to answer my question that the single most important thing you did to get to the Series was your Off Field Training Program! Good Luck and train hard!

Michele Smith