

TEACHING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SOFTBALL

Coaching Guide – by Lindsay Gardner

THROWING MECHANICS:

Throwing Progression: Working from the top → down with the goal being to work from the ground up. We will begin the throwing progression facing forward to simulate our lower half already being turned (or stretched). As we move through the progression, we will add in the lower half, piece by piece, showing the importance of the lower half in conjunction with the upper half and the sequence of creating a strong throw.

Daily Throwing Warm Up:

Have players line up with their partners about 10ft apart (3-4 big steps) down the foul line in the outfield. (Lets keep the dirt nice and groomed before we start taking ground balls on it.) Players will stand in a good athletic stance with their knees bent (feet outside of their knees, knees outside of their hips).

Check Grip – The softball should be gripped with the players three middle fingers across the seems at the “top of the C”. Have players rotate the ball in their hand until this grip is achieved every time they are warming up. As players advance, they will end up finding the C as they reach into their gloves, rather than having to look for the C. By gripping the top of the C, the player will have a better opportunity for creating backspin as they throw. The more vertical the backspin (12-→6 on a clock) the straighter the throw will be on an overhand throw. **The seems cutting through the air are what makes the ball move. If a player comes over the top outside of the ball, creating 1→7 or 2→8 spin, the ball will begin to curve. Teaching how to create good backspin will allow players to throw the ball on a straighter line as they gain the strength to make longer throws.

“Fingers in a Bucket” Drill: Wrist snaps PLUS follow through – Players stand in athletic position with their glove arm bent, elbow next to front hip, glove fingers pointed at the target, palm up. Throwing arm is bent at a 90-degree position in front of the body (palm up to the sky, wrist locked back towards target). Pull back slightly with the glove side elbow, create some momentum for the throwing side to start moving forward. The throwing side will begin moving forward because the core (abs) is tight, causing the throwing side arm to move just behind the glove side – creating whip. As the glove side pulls, the throwing arm will begin to snap forward and down, releasing the ball with the “Peace” fingers, creating 12→6 spin. The throwing arm stops in front in a straight line to the target, with the wrist completely snapped, with peace fingers *in a bucket*. ***If players are using their core (abs), they will make the sound of an exhale after the ball is released.

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Face Forward Upper Body Breakdown:

****Stay in good athletic stance – do not let players stand with their legs straight!**

“Cradle Position”: Have player start with ball in their throwing hand and place the ball in the glove, hands resting at their chest, arms relaxed - while still holding it with the other hand. (Think of it as a praying position.) ****CHECK POINT**

“Get big / “T”Position”: From cradle position (facing the target completely, as the shoulders begin to turn towards the glove side, the elbows begin to move outward. The front elbow will come up to shoulder height, pointing directly at the target with the glove beginning to move away from the ball in hand. We will use this arm to create a stretch and some momentum for our throw. The throwing side elbow will move directly away from the target, separating the ball in hand from the glove. Players stopping at this position will look like a “T” if you are standing in line with them.

****CHECK POINT**

“The Arnold”: The players throwing hand will move from their chest up and out to a 90-degree angle (palm/ ball facing away from target).

At the same time, their glove will move forward and away from their chest to a 90-degree bend (front forearm perpendicular to target) as both elbows begin to stretch away from each other (one still pointing at target, the other still pointing away from the target – think lengthen in the back and shoulders.

****CHECK POINT**

“The Stretch”: As players begin to stretch their elbows on a horizontal plane in “The Arnold”, their abdominal muscles are going to begin the process of pulling the upper half through as the lower half is already turned. When the front elbow begins to pull down toward the front hip, (and the core is tight) the upper body begins to rotate, pulling the throwing side arm around and towards the target. The ball should begin to move from the backside *because* the front side is pulling. This means the ball and the front elbow will continue to stay stretch apart as the body begin to rotate to the target.

“Snap/Follow Through”: As the core is bringing the upper body around, and the front elbow is pulling downward toward the front hip, the ball side wrist is going to stay locked as the ball begins to rotate toward the target (rather than where it started – facing away from the target). The snap of the wrist will happen once the front arm has pulled past the front hip, causing the throwing hand to fully rotate toward target, at which point we snap our wrists, releasing the ball with our “peace” fingers, continuing to snap all the way down to the front hip. ****CHECK POINT:** if the player holds their finish, their glove will be on the side of their front hip, front arm still in a strong 90-degree position, the throwing hand will be in front of their front hip, wrist snapped, chest towards the ground.

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Power Position Throwing Drill: Have your players turn their feet sideways to where their glove side is closest to the target, throwing side furthest from the target. Make sure they begin in a strong athletic position with their knees bent. Beginning at the cradle position, the player will shift their weight from even to the back leg, which is the leg we will push with. When they load back, have them tighten their core and keep it tight for the rest of the throw until they release the ball and naturally exhales as this happens. As the player begins to move from cradle to the get big/ “T” position, their hips are going to begin to turn to face the target, creating a stretch from the hall in hand and the front hip/ front elbow. As their body begins to turn, the player will follow the same sequence as they did when their hips were already facing their target. Their goal is to get their hips completely turned, use their abs to create stretch and momentum before the ball is pulled forward and snapped out of our hand, back foot rotating and pushing through. The back foot pushing through will allow the player’s chest to continue its forward and downward momentum, creating a stronger throw.

The Goofy Step: It is important for players to be able to get into the Power Position where their body is completely in line with their target. The goofy step is what will get them there! Note, sometimes, the goofy step will not be as drastic because the player might already be kind of in line. But, taking small goofy steps are important as well. The entire point of the goofy step is to get the player’s body turned perpendicular to their target. So, have the player stand facing their target in the cradle position. Have them step forward with their throwing side foot towards their target - with the inside of their foot directly facing their target and toe pointing sideways. The glove side foot will then step forward into a strong athletic power position as the arms being to “get big and into the “T” position”. The back leg should push through as the body stretches, rotates and releases the ball.

FIELDING

Fielding at the Top of a Triangle – Fielders should have a nice wide base with good bend in their knees and at their hips. Their weight should be on the balls of their feet, not on their heels, ready to field with their glove out in front of their feet. If the player froze where they were catching the ball, they should be able to make a triangle from glove back to their feet. Player’s nose should stay behind the ball all the way into the glove.

Key words: *Stay low, field the ball in front, nose it in!

Nose It In: This is important with EVERYTHING we do in softball. The idea is simple – glue your nose to the ball, all the way to the glove (or bat if you are hitting). Players will tend to keep their head facing forward and try using their eyes to watch the ball all the way in. But, once the ball passes our nose, we begin to lose that sharp focus on the ball. Have players be dramatic about watching the ball all the way to their glove. It is easiest to catch it when in front of the body. NOSE IT IN should be at the top of your vocabulary when teaching how to catch, field, bunt or hit!

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DRILLS:

Beginner/ Daily Exercise: Have players partner up, standing 6-8ft away from each other. Players get in a wide stance, bend at the knees and at the hips and reach out in front of them with their throwing hand and draw a circle. Then have them draw 2 lines, one from the circle to their left toe and the other from the circle to their right toe. (And they can draw a line from toe to toe to complete the triangle if you wish. Partners will roll the ball back and forth 5-10 times, staying low and fielding the ball with the glove (back of the pocket) against the ground at the top of the triangle. If done correctly, their circle will no longer exist at the end of the drill.

Beginner/ Daily Exercise: All players get in one or two lines (if you have 2 coaches to roll balls). Coach rolls a ball directly at the player who is about 15ft away. Player works on picking their hop and getting low and into position to field the ball at the top of the triangle. The player will move through the ball and work on staying low to make a short throw back to coach.

Intermediate/ Daily Exercise: *Stationary short hops – Players partner up and throw ball overhand at a downward angle just in front of their partner's circle (at the top of the triangle). Fielder stays low and moves with the hop, getting the pocket under the backside of the ball, scooping forward through the catch.

*Make sure the fielder's weight stays slightly forward and on the balls of their feet.

****Chopper Short Hops** – Put players in a line. Coaches bounce a ball with topspin and the player reads the hop, choosing to run through and catch the short hop at the right time – right after the next hop.

**If you have bouncy/ squishy balls for this drill, it will create a more consistent drill for beginners – hard softballs will not work if the field is too sandy. Tennis balls may also be used as an advanced drill, using no glove.

Key words: Keep your feet moving, pick your short hop, time your catch, nose it in, move through the catch.

Drop Step – *****VERY HIGH FOCUS***** A drop step is the first step fielders with take to put themselves in a good position to field balls not hit directly at them. Drop steps should be taken with a player turning in the direction the ball is hit (opening up with the shoulders and the hips) driving the first step backwards at least a 45-degree angle. This can be seen by having the player freeze after the first step is taken and seeing if the player's toe and knee are pointed back (their hips should be opened up to be able to do this – the entire body will need to open up while the head stays on the ball).

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Drop Step Drills:

Team drill: Have your team line up 4 or 5 across and 3 or 4 deep starting on the foul line in the outfield. Make sure players are all about 5 feet away from each other (on all sides) making a rectangle. Stand in front of the group about 10ft away where everyone can see you. Have players get in ready position. When you are ready say, “GO!” Players will stay low and begin quick feet. Very quickly after saying go, point your hand to either over their shoulder to either the right or left side. Its good to stick to one side until everyone gets it down, then you can begin switching without them knowing which side they are going to. As quickly as the players can, they should open up their hips and shoulders to the side you pointed, and drop step back at a 45-degree angle (or deeper), and run three steps in that direction (keeping their nose on the coach) before returning to their starting spot. Repeat on the other side, then alternate as you please so their reaction time gets better.

**Many players will run more sideways, rather than at least a 45-degree angle back. Make sure to walk them through the drill (go slow, stop and have them check their drop step, then “run” in slow motion (walk) in the direction they are going to be running at full speed. Show them what it looks like to point your toe back behind you.

Key words: first step needs to get you somewhere, open up, point your knee and toe in direction you want to run, keep your head on a swivel (body can be running back, and head can still be on coach)

Rounding the Ball – When the ball is hit to the right or left of the fielder, the first step is going to be a drop step. The goal for rounding the ball is to get behind the spot where you will field the ball, square up to where the ball is coming from (home plate), and field the ball in front at the top of the triangle. The drop step will also help put them into a position to take a great angle for a backhand or forehand – most forehands and backhands should happen because the fielder doesn’t have a chance to get behind the ball, not because they took a poor angle. Poor angles (beginning with poor drop steps) puts the body in a fielding position that makes the play harder than needed. When the drop step is implemented and angles become automatic, the chance for fielding errors dramatically decreases, and confidence in making the easy plays [and the very tough plays] increases.

Rounding the Ball Drill: Have player stand in front of you about 30 feet away (1/2 the length of the bases (which are 60 feet apart). Pick a spot about 6ft to the right or left of her and roll ball slowly to that spot. The player will drop step back to that side, staying low and keeping their head on a swivel (nose on the ball) as their body completely turns at the angle of their drop step (about 45 degrees back). The goal is to get around the ball path, deep enough to be able to get behind the ball, square up and catch it at the top of the triangle.

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*Its important that you roll the ball slow enough for them to get this move down. The player's initial reaction is to move forward and across. Its not about whether they can stop the ball, its how they are putting themselves into position to stop the ball to be able to improve their fielding success with harder hit balls. The deeper the angle, the more balls we can stop.

**Remember, this is the basis of how we will begin to attack ground balls. On a slow roller hit in the game, you wont see as drastic of a drop step (you might not see a drop step at all if its a chopper or slow roller hit right at them) on slow rollers or choppers as the player may easily be able to get behind the ball. The harder the hit to the right or left of a player, the deeper the player continues on the angle. By doing this drop step on every normal or hard hit ground ball to the right or left of a player, it gives the player the opportunity to get around the ball, make a good backhand or forehand play at a good angle, and allows them to attack slower hit balls by getting behind it. The batted ball dictates how the player will move after their first drop step.

HITTING MECHANICS

Grip: Door knocking knuckles lined up, wrists in line with each other, creating a triangle (probably close to an equilateral triangle) from the wrists, down to the elbows.

Stance: Feet should be spread apart to a wide base with good bend in the knees and at the waist. It is important that the player's head starts over their body, not bent over the plate. You will see players bend over the plate if they don't bend their knees enough and bend over way more at the waist. Think: equal bend in knees and waist. This stance should be a good athletic position... the player should be able to hold their ground if you were to push them a little to see if they are balanced.

Hand position: With the door knocking knuckles lined up, have the player rest the bat on her back shoulder, with hands about 3-4 inches away from their chest (elbows will most likely be resting on front/side of ribcage... keeping her wrists locked, lift the bat 2-3 inches off the shoulder and rotate the hands around the back elbow – pointing the knob towards the catcher's head, making the barrel of their bat angle back behind their head at about a 45-degree angle. *The back elbow shouldn't be tucked behind their side, nor should it be pointing straight back. It is easiest for players to get their hands behind the ball if their back elbow can get in front of their body when their hips begin to turn. When the back elbow hits the side of their body (or gets stuck on their side) the player will likely roll their hands over the ball at contact.

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Load: Once the player has a nice athletic ready position with their wrists locked, knees and waist bent, head in the middle of their stance, we now begin the swing. The load is an important part of the swing. It not only creates some rhythm, more importantly, it puts the batter in position to see the back of the ball at contact. A load happens when the batter uses her front foot to push her head towards the back foot. The back of the player's helmet should move back to the inside of the back foot. Back knee staying bent and front side angled back, the front leg should stay strong, but not be locked straight. (A completely straight front leg will hinder the batter's ability to fully turn their hips.) It is also important that the player's upper body does not rotate away from the pitcher when they load to the backside. The player's chest should mostly start and stay facing the plate or a slight bit away from the pitcher. The load should pull them straight back, not back and away with their chest and hands. The position the player's head gets to on their load is position they want to keep it at throughout their swing. **Watching the ball (nosing it in) and keeping a strong front side will help this happen.

Activate the core: Have the player tighten their abs – if they don't know how to do that, have them blow all their air out and feel how their abs begin to tighten as they reach the end of the exhale, then have them tighten that feeling. It's like tightening your core if you knew someone was going to punch your stomach.

Hip turn and the slot: Once the player gets to their load position, they will come to a slight pause in movement and activate their core, locking their head into position to stay behind the ball. At the same time, the hips and elbows are going to begin working together. When the back hip begins to turn, the hands are going to stay locked at the shoulder, while the back elbow is going to move into the slot in front of the back hip and under the hands. Because the wrists are locked, the elbows will move together to keep their triangle. So, when the back elbow moves in front of the hip and below the hands, the front elbow simply moves up at the same time, creating a 90-degree angle in front of the body. (At this point, the hands will still be locked at the shoulder in a palm up/ palm down position). As the hips begin to turn, the fact that the core is tight is going to start bringing the upper body to the ball as well. Because the hips are starting the movement to the ball, the upper body should follow right behind. This is called separation. Once the hips reach full turn (facing the pitcher), the core will act like a slingshot, whipping the upper body towards the ball. The batter wants to keep their hands locked as their upper body begins turning to the ball. The knob of the bat will be brought inside the line of the ball because the upper body is rotating, NOT because the hands are moving by themselves to get inside the ball. This will result in pushing through the ball, rather than whipping the bat.

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Hammer/ Contact/ Extension: As the upper body brings the hands (which are locked at the shoulder in the palm up/palm down position) inside the ball, the hands will then begin to snap into and through the ball in a hammer-like movement, keeping the back palm facing the sky and the front palm facing the ground until the bat has hammered fully through the ball. Eventually, about a foot or so in front of where they hit the ball, the hands will begin to roll over, bat finishing at opposite angle above the front shoulder. Think of the swing like a perfect circle that always begins at the back shoulder – the higher the pitch, the more horizontal the swing plane (or circle) will be because our front elbow starts at that position when we get into the slot. The high pitch will be our flattest swing. The lower the pitch, the more vertical the swing plane will be since our front elbow is starting above the ball, the front arm will angle down to get behind the ball rather than dropping the hands down to the ball and swinging flat or lifting. The low pitch will be our most up and down swing (think more like the angle of a golf swing, except we are hitting the pitch in front, and turning our hips to be able to do so).

**** Contact points:** It is important that a player knows where they should be hitting the ball.

In general the inside pitch is the pitch we need to hit the furthest in front of our body. Because the ball is closer to our hands on an inside pitch, we have to turn our hips the hardest and use our abs to get our hands inside the ball out in front where we can not only see it, but attack it (rather than fight it off).

As the pitch gets thrown further towards the outside part of the plate, it gets further away from our hands which requires the batter to let the ball get a little deeper so that we can still reach it with the same power we had on the inside pitch.

The trick is to hit it in front of your body (in front of your face) not too far out in front, and not too close to your body. I have found that if you practice certain contact points on a tee over and over, the body begins to learn where that pitch needs to be hit. If the player hits the ball off the tee, I would like for them to keep their head where the ball was all the way through the swing, rather than watching the ball fly off their bat.

Nosing It In: So let's just say the player has a mechanically sound swing, where on a tee or on side toss, they look great, but on front toss or live pitching it looks out of sequence and sloppy. I can almost guarantee that the reason is because they are not tracking the ball all the way to their bat with their **head**. Many players will keep their head towards the pitcher, barely turning their head with the pitch, and expecting their eyes to move quickly alone. Our eyes don't work very quickly side to side, and even if they do, the focus isn't that great. Think about how you would watch a car drive by if you were standing on the side of the road. Our head would move with the car (keeping our nose on it) the whole way. We aren't even trying to hit that big car

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with a bat, but we watch it better than we watch the little yellow ball being thrown towards us. So it does not matter how pretty the swing is if we don't watch the ball all the way to the bat.

I have found that more times than not, the batter is going to make contact where their nose is pointing. If the ball is too far out in front and the batter does not turn her head with the pitch, it will cause the player to lean forward and swing down at the ball. Having the player move their nose with the pitch all the way to their contact point, and then keeping it there as they finish their swing is the best way to create a consistent swing. Consistent contact points = stronger hits regardless of how a player swings the bat.

Follow through: I feel it is best to practice having two hands on the bat throughout the entire swing. We are strongest with two hands, and for young females learning to play the game, gaining strength in their body as they grow, I feel as if teaching them to keep their hands on the bat, rather than let go of the bat with their back hand after extension will help them get through the ball longer on a more consistent basis. As stated above in the hammer/ contact/ extension section, the follow through will change with the height of the pitch. Think about it like airplane wings. If one wing goes down, the wing on the other side goes up. If one wing is horizontal to the ground, so is the other one – they always move together. So if a batter is hitting a pitch at a 45-degree angle towards the ground near the plate, the swing will finish on the other side of the body at a 45-degree angle the opposite way.