

COACH'S GUIDE TO GAME-WINNING Softball Drills

Developing the Essential Skills in Every Player

"A great resource that every coach should have in his or her library... from one of our sport's greatest players ever."

Mike Candrea,
Olympic Gold Medal Coach
and Eight-Time NCAA Champion



Michele Smith

Two-Time Olympic Gold Medal Winner,
and **Lawrence Hsieh**

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To my parents, Barbara and Ernest Smith, for teaching me to love the game of softball as well as the importance of "giving back" in all aspects of life
Michele

To my all-star team: my wife, Janice, and my children, Jennifer and Jason, who inspire and amaze me every day, and to my parents, Mary and J. S. Hsieh, for their wonderful support
Lawrence

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Preface

As a two-time Olympic gold medalist, I firmly believe that success is the sum of one's efforts. While certainly my Olympic teammates and I were blessed with natural athletic ability, I've seen time and again how physical superiority alone does not assure success in softball at any level, whether it be international, intercollegiate, interscholastic, or even junior softball. In addition to having supportive parents and knowledgeable coaches, what set me apart was equal parts work ethic (unrelenting), thirst for knowledge (unquenchable), and practice (lots of it!). Practice still is my favorite part of softball. Habits, both good and bad, have a tendency to take over in game situations, so it's difficult during games to "work on your game." The time to get better is during practice.

We've written this book to give coaches, parents, and players the tools to use during practice to maximize every player's potential to be the best she can be. I've always been a stickler on proper mechanics, and I believe that the constant repetition of drill work is very important in establishing good habits. And we've coupled each group of drills with detailed coaching instruction to help give you the proper background for doing the drills. There's something in this book for coaches at every level—from novice junior players to advanced high school players and beyond.

Over the years, I've used, and I continue to use, many of the drills in this book to help make my game the best it can be. Having worked with young softball players for many years through my Michele Smith Gold Camps and Clinics, I realize that drilling is seen by some young athletes as boring, almost "too easy." But each drill in this book is designed to help you diagnose and then challenge your players to work on improving different parts of proper softball mechanics. As they progress, your players will start to realize that each drill they can do successfully and consistently is one more good habit seared into muscle memory—one more good habit that adds to the "sum of their efforts." I recognize that each time I step on the practice field I have the chance to work on my game—to work on my swing, to work on my rise, curve, or drop. Being a winner sometimes has little to do with the score. If your players seize the opportunity to be better today than they were yesterday in softball, in math, in music, in anything worth doing in life, regardless of natural ability, that will make them winners on and off the field.

And mastering these drills will arm your players with one of the biggest intangibles necessary to perform well—confidence. In each Olympic game in which I played, I got a boost in self-confidence because I knew I was better trained and better drilled than my opponents. One of the greatest feelings in the world is knowing that you are prepared. It frees you as an athlete to play uninhibited, and that's when hardworking athletes play to the fullest of their potential.

We truly are the sum of what we do. I am confident that our book will help you and your athletes prepare for the successes that follow. Good luck in everything you do!

Onward,
Michele Smith



**"The Team" (left to right):
Morgan Hughart, Katelyn
Perna, Michele Smith, Julia
Brakeman, Lawrence Hsieh,
Jennifer Hsieh**

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks to The JUGS Company for providing the equipment and uniforms, and Sandy Fischer for providing the Tee Stackers, used in the photos in our book. Our appreciation also goes out to Ron Radigonda, Brian McCall, Ronnie Isham, and Holly Krivokapich of USA Softball for their guidance. Kudos for a job well done to the athletes on our demonstration team: Julia Brakeman, Jennifer Hsieh, Morgan Hughart, and Katelyn Perna. Thank you also to the consummate professionals at McGraw-Hill, including Bob Holtzman and Charlie Fisher, and Mike Ramos Commercial Photography for a terrific photo shoot. It's been a pleasure to work with all of you.

Michele would also like to acknowledge Donna Exley, her high school coach; Betty Zwingraf, her first pitching coach, who taught her how to pitch the right way from the start; Joe Crookham and Jeanie Bieri of Musco Lighting for teaching her how to make a positive difference in the lives of young girls off the field; and all the other people too numerous to list who have helped Michele and made a difference in her life. Michele would also like to thank her manager, Wanda Rowland, for her amazing support, and Julie Carder, who created and has run MicheleSmith.com for as long as Michele can remember.

Finally, Lawrence would like to thank coaches Shaun Squier, Rich Bergman, Dennis Whalen, and Frank Lapolla for their mentoring over the years.

Introduction

This book is designed to give fast-pitch softball coaches and parents of players from nine to eighteen years old (grade 4 through high school) all the tools needed to teach the entire range of offensive and defensive softball skills. The chapters of this book are organized as follows: defensive skills (throwing and catching, fielding footwork, infield and outfield defense); offensive skills (hitting, baserunning); and specialist-position skills (pitching, playing the catcher position). All of these skills come together in the final chapter with pregame drills that can be used during the compressed time period before your games.

Fast-Pitch Versus Slow-Pitch

Most youth softball leagues play the fast-pitch variety of softball, which places a premium on pitching and defensive skills. Novice fast-pitch pitchers sometimes don't pitch very fast and therefore create the impression of a slow-pitch contest. But the game they are being taught to play in most youth leagues is definitely fast-pitch. As young pitchers develop their mechanics, they quickly pick up quite a bit of speed, and before too long, you even begin to see some fast-pitch offensive strategies like bunting being used by youth teams to counter dominant pitching. On the other hand, slow-pitch is an offense-oriented game in which the pitcher lobs a comparatively high arc pitch over the plate, basically inviting the batter to put the ball in play.

Young athletes rarely take advantage of the opportunities offered by some youth leagues to play sanctioned slow-pitch. And as the kids get older, they find that if they want to play interscholastic or intercollegiate softball, fast-pitch is the only game in town. While the focus of this book is fast-pitch, slow-pitch players can also use some of the hitting and fielding drills to perfect their game. For example, not all "slow" pitches are the same, and slow-pitch batters, like their fast-pitch counterparts, have to work on their timing skills, making a level swing, and so on. Interestingly, once youth and high school players put their competitive playing days behind them, they often find that there are few opportunities to continue playing fast-pitch as adults, and many former fast-pitch moms and baseball dads end up playing competitive slow-pitch and have a "ball" doing so!

Skills and Drills

Each chapter contains both a skills section and a drills section. The skills section of each chapter is a coaching manual that describes the fundamental skills you need to teach your players and includes helpful coaching tips

suitable for all age groups. Movements in softball are the sum of their parts; for example, proper hitting includes both a good stride and proper rotation (among other things, of course). Therefore, the skills sections are organized into skill subcategories focusing on the proper execution of each component. The drills sections contain dozens of softball drills, from beginner to advanced, that you can use in practice so that your players can learn and reinforce the skills described in the skills sections.

Within each chapter is a Drills-Skills Matrix that matches each drill in the chapter with the applicable skills and the components of each skill. This will help you to quickly find drills that will teach specific skills or help correct problems your players are having. In addition, the applicable skill component is noted as the “purpose” of each drill. It’s a good idea to read the skills section before proceeding to the drills because many of the drills refer to specific skill sets and terminology that are discussed in the skills section. The skills sections provide all the information necessary to pinpoint and diagnose your players’ needs and problems.

Let’s look at the chapter on hitting (Chapter 4) as an example. The skills section breaks hitting down into its main components of stance, grip, swing, and follow-through and describes the proper mechanics of each of these—such as the details of the stride, how to rotate the hips, and the precise position and movements of the hands and wrists as the mechanical elements of the swing itself. Once the coach understands the details that contribute to the ideal hitting motion, she can turn to the next section, the hitting drills that will teach and reinforce all of these skills. It is not intended that the coach run through every drill in order. Rather, she should observe the players’ swings and select drills that address areas that need development or strengthening.

For example, in order to observe and evaluate your players’ hitting skills, you might start with the traditional Coach Pitch—Soft Toss or Coach Pitch—Front Toss drills (drills 76 and 80) during batting practice. If these drills reveal that some of your players are having difficulty making short, compact swings, you could select the Double Tee No Sweep drill (drill 63) or the Extension—No Sweep drill (drill 74) to help them shorten their swing. If some of your players require additional practice with off-speed pitches, you could use the Coach Pitch—Changeup Hesitation drill (drill 86) to work on their timing.

Special Features

Because hitting is so different from pitching, which is so different from position play, etc., we do not take a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, we’ve tailored each chapter to present issues unique to the skill sets discussed in

an efficient and easy-to-follow format. For example, the chapter on pitching (Chapter 6) not only contains drills that neatly break down the mechanics of pitching into component parts but also features a “pitch menu” of drills for advanced pitchers to practice a wide variety of advanced pitches such as changeups, rise balls, drop balls, curveballs, and screwballs. The chapter on infield and outfield defense (Chapter 3) builds on the skills learned in the building-blocks chapters on throwing and catching (Chapter 1) and fielding footwork (Chapter 2) and contains drills that teach and reinforce a variety of skills, including advanced infield and outfield footwork.

Softball defense involves cognitive skills as well as physical ones. Players have to know what to do if the ball is hit to them and what to do if the ball isn't hit to them. They have to know which base to cover depending on where the ball is hit. Infielders have to know who the cutoff is if the ball is hit into the outfield, and outfielders have to know who has priority when fielding balls hit into the gap between two outfielders. Therefore, we've included drills designed to reinforce the mental aspect of the game, including situation drills and our signature Which Way? drills. These are mental drills that help infielders memorize what to do in a variety of defensive situations. If your players prepare both physically and mentally, then they will play in an uninhibited manner, and their play will flourish!

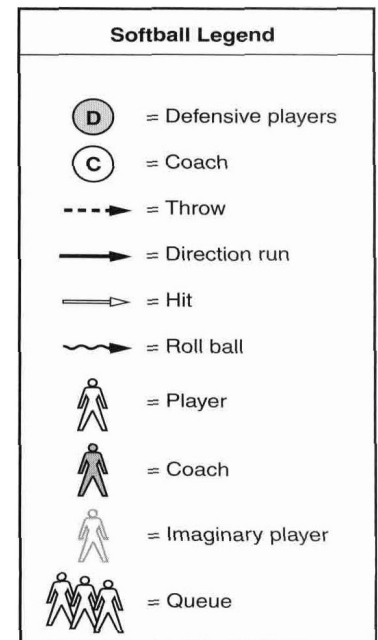
User-Friendly Drill Format

Diagrams

Accompanied by user-friendly player position diagrams, the steps for each drill take you through one repetition of the drill. Instead of adding a lot of confusing verbiage just to tell you how to rotate your players, we get right to the point and take you through the drill itself. We go straight to the essence of the drill, highlight the skill the drill is supposed to teach, and focus on proper mechanics.

Skill Levels

While even the most advanced players can use all of the drills in this book to revisit and reinforce fundamental skills, we indicate following the title of each drill whether the drill is appropriate for beginner, intermediate, or advanced players. Beginner players are those playing their first year or who are in fourth or fifth grade. Intermediate players have played at least one year and are typically in middle school (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade). We believe that most players in high school (and some middle schoolers) have at least the cognitive ability to understand all the skills discussed in this book. On the other hand, the rate of physical development



during adolescence varies widely among children, so it will be up to you as a coach and/or parent to determine at what point your player is ready for some of the advanced drills. You should also consider the level of league play. Look to see if the other teams are bunting, or check if the league allows stealing. If many of the kids on other teams in your league have some of the advanced skills discussed in this book, that's a good indicator that the skills are not too advanced, and you should consider teaching your players those skills in order to keep them competitive and progressing at an appropriate rate.

Here are some guidelines to help you determine if a player is ready to do a particular drill.

- Some younger players are simply not physically ready to do an advanced pop-up slide. It's better to first teach them how to do a basic bent-leg slide before they graduate to the more advanced slides.
- Younger pitchers need to learn how to throw a good straight fastball before they should be taught how to throw the more advanced curveball or rise ball. It's not a good idea to teach young pitchers how to throw curveballs or screwballs because the required movements may cause undue stress on the elbow and shoulder and lead to overuse injuries. The soft growth plates in the arm bones typically do not harden until puberty. So first work on proper fastball mechanics, and then the changeup. There will be plenty of time later to work on the breaking balls.
- On the hitting side, it's best for young players to focus on developing strong regular batting skills before they attempt to learn some of the advanced slap hitting skills taught in this book.
- On defense, most young fielders won't throw the ball to a bag until the player covering the bag gets there and sets up (a *static defense*). This is adequate for novice players, but unfortunately many athletes play this way until high school, where all of a sudden they may be expected on day one to already know the advanced fielding footwork to allow them to catch and land on the bag at the same time and throw in the next motion for the double play (a *motion defense*). Our book contains a progression of drills starting in the chapter on fielding footwork (Chapter 2) and moving into the chapter on infield and outfield defense (Chapter 3) to enable you to teach your novice and intermediate-level players how to progress from static defense to advanced motion defense so that eventually they are able to execute advanced infield footwork like the rocker pivot (which is used by second-base players to turn double plays).

On the other hand, players often advance in the sport while missing some of the basics. It is never too late to correct bad habits and instill the

proper mechanics of bedrock skills. Therefore, any drill, even one labeled as beginner, should be considered appropriate for any player who lacks the skill that it addresses.

Most of the drills have one or more advanced variations. These are high-octane versions of the basic drill designed to challenge your more advanced players. Sometimes the advanced variations involve live defenders or base runners to infuse the drill with some pressure and make it more gamelike. In some drills, a competitive or contest element is used to create an advanced variation, and in others a stopwatch component is added to encourage more experienced players to execute the skill more quickly. We've named most of the advanced variations to make it easier for you to locate them using the book's index.

Planning

Each drill contains the following information to help you plan your practices:

- **Approximate number of repetitions per player and the approximate time the drill will take.** These are guidelines, and you should feel free to modify based on the number of players and how well your players execute the drill. If a player doesn't "get it," then by all means encourage her to do additional reps. If a player does the drill perfectly, then you can move on to something else. Limit your pitchers to no more than the number of repetitions listed. You don't want your pitchers to overstrain or injure themselves, especially on the advanced pitches that require whiplike movements. If space allows and you have a sufficient number of coaches who can supervise, you can make the drills more efficient by having multiple stations where players are executing the drill or different drills simultaneously. For example, if you have multiple tees, you can have multiple players executing the tee drills if you position the tees a safe distance apart (at least 25 feet apart).
- **Cardio index indicating the relative workout value of the drill.** Each drill has a rating of one to three hearts. One heart is the least strenuous; three hearts the most. Obviously, any drill with a lot of running around will have more workout value. It's important on hot, humid days to watch out for signs of heat exhaustion and dehydration. Familiarize yourself with your local league health and safety guidelines.
- **Number of players.** We list the minimum number of players required to do the drill. You will have the flexibility to form queues of players waiting their turn to do the drill or to run several of the drills simultaneously at stations.
- **Parent-friendly drill indicator.** Very often the most accomplished players are the ones whose parents take a strong proactive role in

their child's development. Thus, we indicate whether the drill can be practiced one-on-one by a child with a parent's supervision or involvement. You'll need to use common sense to make sure your backyard has sufficient space to execute the drill.

All of this information will help you to allocate resources, run simultaneous station drills, and plan your practices. The majority of the drills are designed to be run with one coach present, but some of them require an assistant coach or a motivated, if not knowledgeable, parent to help out.

Hints

Most of the drills contain value-added hints that are based on Michele's years of playing and teaching elite softball. These usually reemphasize key points from the skills section or provide additional player guidance specific to the skill being taught.

A Word on Coaching

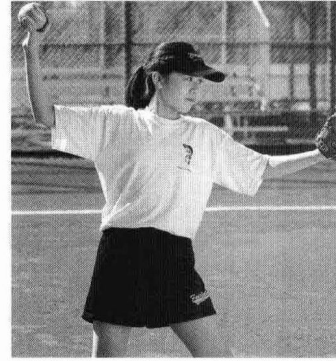
Softball mechanics used for skills like hitting and pitching are complex, and if properly executed, happen lightning-quick. So it helps to be able to explain concepts clearly in a way that players understand. This is especially challenging when coaching young players. A fourth grader and a high schooler may interpret the same instruction differently. How often have you heard a coach shout out "too early" or "too late" at a batter? But some junior players will confuse bat *speed* with the real issue—timing (or when to start the swing). Sometimes batters who are too early will compensate by swinging more slowly during their next at bat (and of course still miss the ball) rather than waiting for a millisecond longer before starting the swing. Summon all of your coaching knowledge and try to tailor your explanation to the age and understanding of the player. In this example, you might want to show a fourth grader that the best place to hit the ball is in front of the plate. Then, holding the ball (don't actually throw it), simulate a fast versus a slow pitch by walking at different speeds toward the plate, and explain that the slow pitch takes a little bit longer to get to the front of the plate. At the same time, explain that she's not necessarily going to see results right away; it's going to take some time before the mental part of understanding the concept translates into the hand-eye coordination needed to execute. After all, that's what the drills are for.

Most kids are eager learners; it's truly amazing to see what they can learn and master in just one season. Good luck in all you do, and have a great season!

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Throwing and Catching



Great defense starts with good catching and throwing mechanics. When these are executed with speed, precision, and confidence, plus proper fielding footwork (Chapter 2), the defense stands a reasonable chance of making the play. When these skills are executed with improper mechanics and in pedestrian fashion, the defense will be more likely to commit errors and cede extra bases.

Catching Mechanics

Catching is proactive, not passive. Not every ball thrown, and very few hit, will be delivered straight to the fielder's glove. In game situations, players must use proper fielding footwork to hustle to a hit ball or to *get off the bag* to reach errant throws. Assuming the player has gone as far as she can using her feet, then she must be able to move her glove properly into position to catch the ball.

Once her glove is in position, she should do the following:

- Watch the ball into her glove. She should not turn away.
- Keep her glove fingers pointing to the ball. When the ball is thrown above the waist, this means the fingers of the glove will be pointing up, and when the throw is below the waist this means the fingers will be pointing down.
- Catch the ball using two hands—meaning with her glove, of course, but also with her throwing hand right next to or just behind the webbing of her glove.
- Cover the ball with her throwing hand to keep it from popping out of her glove.

- Bring both arms in to her body as she catches the ball. This cushioning action is called *soft hands*. Soft hands will help prevent fumbles and put the fielder in position to make the throw.
- Bring both her glove and throwing hand to her throwing-side ear and transfer the ball to her throwing hand.
- Find the proper grip on the ball (as described later in this section) and make the throw to her target.

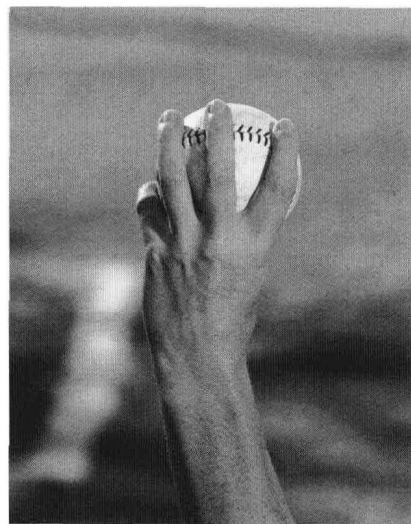
Kids' Corner

It is a common tendency for young players to stab at the ball or hold out their gloves stiffly. This will cause them to swat the ball away rather than catch it. On the other hand, soft hands does not mean that a player should let the ball control her. Some young players have a tendency to let the force of the ball fling back their gloves, and this too will result in dropped balls.

If a player's fingers are being hit as she covers the caught ball with her throwing hand because her timing is off, teach her to squeeze the thumb and pinky sides of her glove together after the ball is in the glove.

Throwing Mechanics

Proper *throwing mechanics* are designed to harness the energy needed to quickly and efficiently deliver a fast throw that is on target. When throwing, the player's movements should be quick, smooth, and confident. In a game situation, a player typically throws after catching or fielding the ball. After a smooth transfer of the ball from her glove to her throwing hand, she must execute the proper grip, lower-body movement, arm action, hip and trunk rotation, and release and follow-through as described in the following sections.



Throwing grip

Grip

The player should hold the ball with her fingertips, not her palm. She should grip the ball along its horizontal seams (look for the C—that is, across the “smile” of the ball), with her middle fingertip at about 12 o'clock on the C and her other fingertips on the

upper part of the C, and place her thumb on the opposite side of the ball. With practice, this reliable grip will become second nature.

Lower-Body Movement

As she begins her throw, the player should keep her back foot perpendicular to her target and stride forward with her *nondominant* foot, landing it at a 45-degree angle a comfortable distance toward her target. The nondominant foot is the foot opposite the throwing side (the left foot for right-handed throwers, and the right foot for left-handed throwers). The stride will cause her body to turn sideways to the target, in position to make the powerful hip and trunk rotation used to whip her throwing arm forward.

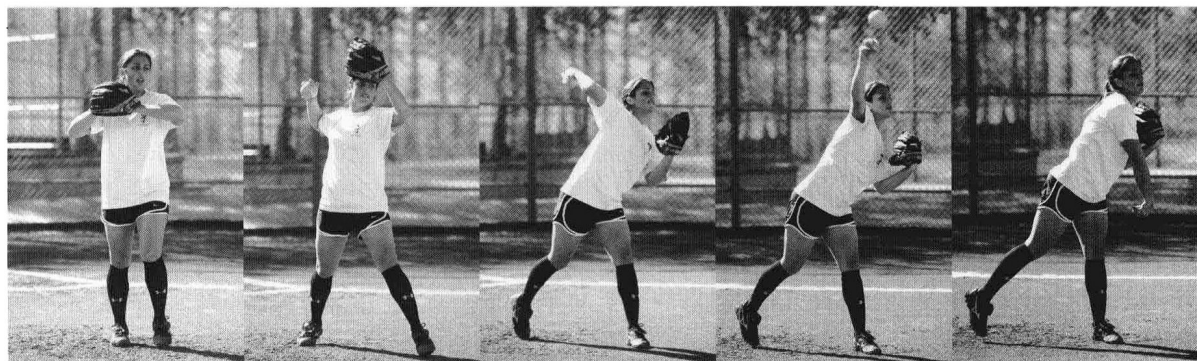
Arm Action/Hip and Trunk Rotation

Simultaneously with her stride, the player should draw her throwing arm back and point her glove arm toward her target. She should keep her throwing-arm elbow high so that her elbow and armpit both form 90-degree angles. She should make sure when the ball is behind her that her hand is on top of the ball (if she looks back, she should see her hand and not the ball). At this point her entire body and extremities should be on a vertical plane in line with her target.

Release

To execute the throw, the player must rotate her hips and trunk while whipping her throwing arm forward. Her back foot will naturally pivot from the original perpendicular position. She must take care not to push the ball like a shot put, but rather use her elbow as a pivot to smoothly fling the ball. The motion should be smooth; some kids have the tendency to “wind up” the arm and then freeze for a split second before throwing—these throws usually end up being overthrown or off target. She will then release the ball and follow through by pointing to her target. Her hands should naturally exchange positions.

Katelyn shows good hip rotation in her throw. Instead of pushing the ball like a shot put, she whips her arm forward using her elbow as a pivot. Note Katelyn's downward follow-through (not a sidearm).



Fielding Mechanics: Ground Balls and Fly Balls

As the ball is pitched, each defensive player should get into an *athletic stance*—with knees flexed and weight slightly forward on the balls of her feet, which are slightly more than shoulder-width apart, **with a slight lean at the waist**. She should position her hands close together in front of her body. She is now in her *ready stance*.

If a *ground ball* is hit, she should do the following:

- Hustle into position using proper fielding footwork (see Chapter 2).
- Resume her athletic stance.
- Put her glove down between her legs, but in front of her body.
- Play the roll, and not the bounce. The default position should be glove on the ground; keeping the glove up in anticipation of a bounce will result in too many balls rolling between her legs.
- Watch the ball into her glove. She should not turn away.
- Cover the ball with her throwing hand to keep it from popping out of her glove.
- Bring both arms in to her body up toward her belly button (another soft hands technique).
- Bring both her glove and throwing hand to her throwing-side ear and transfer the ball to her throwing hand.
- Find the proper grip on the ball as described in the preceding section and make the throw to her target.

If, despite best efforts, she is not able to hustle in front of the ball with proper footwork, she will need to resort to making a *forehand* or *backhand grab*. Forehand and backhand grabs are methods of fielding ground balls to be used when there is no longer enough time to get the body completely in front of and square to the path of the ball. The mechanics of making these grabs are described below.

To make a backhand grab, she should do the following:

- Approach the ball with the glove side of her body so that she will field the ball with her glove-side leg closest to the ball; this will allow her to reach farther, if necessary.
- As she approaches the ball, drop her throwing-side knee toward the ground (her glove-side leg is in front). At the same time, she should rotate her glove-side knee, pointing at the throwing-side foot, which will allow her body and glove to rotate better.
- As she approaches the ball, drop her glove to the ground (thumb and webbing down) and remember to keep the glove open.
- Field the ball in front of her glove-side foot.