

COACHING Fastpitch Softball SUCCESSFULLY

Second Edition

Foreword by
Carol Hutchins

Kathy Veroni / Roanna Brazier

COACHING FASTPITCH SOFTBALL SUCCESSFULLY

Second Edition

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This book is dedicated to the youngest generation in hopes that they will be given great opportunities to learn to play fastpitch softball from teachers and coaches who love the game. It is also dedicated to my personal heroes and to the men and women who have motivated and inspired me.

Kathy Veroni

Every day in coaching has been an experiment. Like life itself, coaching is a process. Every decision made affects the future, and coaches are in constant reflection on the past to ensure a better tomorrow. This book is dedicated to all the players who have stuck with me through this process of trial and error and who have helped me learn many lessons on and off the field. I also dedicate this book to my father, who tirelessly worked with me to help me become the player I was and who taught me how to be my own best teacher. Here's to the voice behind the backstop!

Roanna Brazier

FOREWORD

Kathy Veroni has long been a mentor and a role model to young coaches, male and female. I personally have had the opportunity to compete against her teams as both a player and a coach. Her teams not only were well coached and highly competitive, but they also always noticeably played with great conviction and an obvious passion for both the sport and their team.

Coaching Fastpitch Softball Successfully provides much more than the specifics of the X's and O's of the game. It speaks to the heart and

soul of coaching. In this book, Coach Veroni presents her values of coaching young women, and she clearly demonstrates that leadership and communication are the qualities that enshrined her forever in the NFCA Hall of Fame.

Coaching Fastpitch Softball Successfully is a reflection of the ever-present inspiration and motivation in the coaching philosophy of Kathy Veroni. I enjoyed reading the book and recommend it both to aspiring young coaches as well as those who have been in the game for many years.

Carol Hutchins
University of Michigan

PREFACE

Thomas Henry Huxley wrote, “The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man’s foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher!”

Having been involved in the game of fastpitch softball for more than 40 years, I have been blessed with the opportunity to work with great athletes who have shared my commitment to enhancing performance and enjoying the game. They are the ones who have taught me how to teach. Through the trial and error, success and failure of these athletes, I have become not only a coach but also a student of the game. The knowledge they instilled in me is now shared with you in the second edition of *Coaching Fastpitch Softball Successfully*.

In coaching, both the teacher and the learner have the same goal in mind. Teaching and learning occur simultaneously, and both the coach and the athlete strive to reach the goal or objective. The athletes must learn the game and their role in it, and we as coaches must teach better. Coaching is teaching but with more focus and passion.

As teachers, our primary mission is to impress upon our athletes that they should be perfect at practice and in drills, because the

game brings challenges and anxiety. Each of us must know our part in victory and defeat as well as how to do things better.

Those of you who have read the first edition of this book will find new and better drills in the pages that follow. Also, teaching techniques have been updated, and they are presented in a more clear-cut and concise manner. Those sections are beneficial for the athlete, the teacher, and the coach. As an added bonus, this edition includes the presentation and breakdown of innovative skill development techniques.

The learning process never ends as long as there is someone willing to pass on all that she has learned. As a student of the game, I have always been interested in seeking out ideas and styles that work for other gifted coaches. Therefore, for this edition, I have asked Coach Roanna Brazier to collaborate and contribute to the book. Roanna brings her experiences as an elite pitcher and hitter as well as her knowledge of instructing athletes to be the best they can be. Roanna has a genuine love and respect for the game, as well as a sense of responsibility to share what she has learned for the benefit of others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Mindy Dessert for her knowledge, wisdom, and assistance in writing the first edition of *Coaching Fastpitch Softball Successfully* and for helping put our system of coaching and training into this book. I would also like to acknowledge the work and friendship of Jen Tyrrell, a gifted player and coach who helped guide this second edition along.

I am so happy that this book is now in the hands of teaching coaches. Writing this book was a labor of love, but unfortunately my best

teacher will not be able to read it—my mother passed away on October 21, 1997. Josephine Lillian Veroni was my hero, my teacher, and my best friend. She was a softball player in the 1940s as well as an equestrian, bowler, and super sports fan. For 28 years she watched as I coached softball teams, from Western Illinois University to the Macomb Magic. She saw many tremendous athletes play the game she loved.

As coaches, we are all dream weavers, and we have the ability to make young girls sparkle as



The 1943 Roper Manufacturing softball team, with my mom, Josephine Cascio Veroni (front row, far left), and aunt, Dorothy Cascio Mahle (back row, second from right).

they realize their dreams. My mom bought me my first glove. She let me play sports whenever I wanted. She watched me throughout my playing and coaching career with the Rockford Comets and later with the Pekin Lettes. She came to Connecticut to see the Falcons win a world professional fastpitch title and saw every Western Illinois and Macomb Magic team play.

She made me laugh, and we rarely argued. If we got into a disagreement, she would soon change the subject. She taught me how to cross the street when I was very little and how to go to school by myself. She taught me to be grateful for all we have in our lives . . . and to remember not to take anything for granted, not a person or even one moment in time.

She loved to read, and she shared that gift with her twin granddaughters. My brother Jim recalled how he would sit and watch the love our mom showed Kayla and Kelly whenever he took the girls over to visit her—with the girls sitting on either side of her, she would read them the book she had bought them. As teachers and coaches, we are kindred spirits with our mothers. We must pass on a legacy from one generation to the next, and from one season

to the next. The important lessons my mother taught me, I, in turn, try to teach my young athletes. Just as we want our mothers to be proud of us, so too, do our players want us to be proud of them. Reward them with your praise.

At one of our school's basketball games, I was asked to speak with the television announcers during halftime about the upcoming softball season. I called my mom and told her I would be on TV and that I would tug on my ear, which meant "Hi, I am thinking about you." By the time I got home after the game, she had already called and left me a message on my answering machine. She told me I had done a very nice job and that she was proud of me. She said, "I saw that little ear tug you gave me." Well, Mom, I write this book in your honor and memory, as a thank-you for all you gave me and taught me. You gave me the gift of life and the support I needed. I hope that I have passed that support on to other young women who want what you and I wanted—to have fun and to play the game to the best of their ability.

Thanks, Mom, for all of the wonderful memories. Until we meet again.

Kathy Veroni

KEY TO DIAGRAMS

First baseman	1B	Pitcher	P
Second baseman	2B	Catcher	C
Third baseman	3B	Hitter	H
Shortstop	SS	Receiver	R
Left fielder	LF	Coach	CO
Center fielder	CF	Path of fielder	_____
Right fielder	RF	Path of throw	-----
Fielder	F		

CONTENTS

Foreword	vi
Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
Key to Diagrams	x

Part I Coaching Foundation

Chapter 1	Developing a Softball Coaching Philosophy	1
Chapter 2	Communicating Your Approach	9
Chapter 3	Motivating Players	17
Chapter 4	Building a Softball Program	25

Part II Coaching Plans

Chapter 5	Planning for the Season	35
Chapter 6	Preparing for Practices	47

Part III Coaching Offense

Chapter 7	Hitting Fundamentals	57
Chapter 8	Hitting Drills	71
Chapter 9	Offensive Strategies	89

Part IV Coaching Defense

Chapter 10	Defensive Fundamentals	103
Chapter 11	Defensive Drills	121
Chapter 12	Defensive Strategies	141
Chapter 13	Pitching Fundamentals	167

Part V Coaching Games

Chapter 14	Preparing for Games	185
Chapter 15	Handling Game Situations	193

Part VI Coaching Evaluation

Chapter 16	Evaluating Your Players	201
Chapter 17	Evaluating Your Program	209

Index	217
About the Authors	221

PART I COACHING FOUNDATION

CHAPTER

1

DEVELOPING A SOFTBALL COACHING PHILOSOPHY

A coaching philosophy involves your beliefs about the way your program should be run. You should have a solid, consistent philosophy. As a coach, you touch people's lives, beginning with your players and extending to their families, along with administrators, the media, and others. By being consistent, you ensure that your players understand what is expected of them.

One of the most important jobs of the coach is to bring the team together. All coaches seem to use the adage "Together we can," and this idea is best implemented through the consistent guidance and support from the coach. Consistency sends the message to the athletes that you are going to be fair in all decisions because you will base each decision on the principles and values that you have created and followed. When you are consistent, the athletes as well as the media and administrators can expect certain behaviors from you. This knowledge will enhance the athletes' performances both on the practice field and during games. A cohesive team cannot be formed if you change your philosophy and standards depending on the athlete or the situation.

DEFINE YOUR PHILOSOPHY

My philosophy is the sum of my coaching beliefs. I believe a lot of things have to combine for a team to win a conference championship or a national championship. Some are obvious factors: hard work, dedication, teamwork, discipline, and skill in the fundamentals of the game. Other factors for success are more subtle: the emergence of leaders, the development of the team's "chemistry" and confidence, and the surprise of young players growing into roles with enthusiasm and ability. And some components are intangible but no less real, such as spirit, tradition, and the will to win. My philosophy is to attempt to bring these aspects together every season in a way that is consistent with my belief that the most important part of coaching is to give athletes the opportunity to participate and to be the best they can be.

I have always stressed performance rather than winning. Through our team objectives, I ask the athletes to do only the best they can. If circumstances combine for a victory, we can



Many things must come together for a team to be successful. A team is greater than the sum of its parts.

celebrate; however, sometimes events that occur in the game are beyond the athletes' control. Performance then becomes the ingredient to team success. I believe in putting athletes first, winning the game second.

During my years of coaching, I have had my coaching philosophy tested on different occasions. I try to stress that winning is not everything and that if the athletes do the best they can, then they can be congratulated on a job well done. It is this belief that has been tested the most. After playing great softball but losing, athletes often come off the field and hang their heads. I always want them to be proud of their performance, and though I do not expect them to cheer or smile, I do expect them to respect the game. After performing at their optimal level, they should be able to applaud their efforts, congratulate their opponents, and respect the competition. They should feel the loss, but I also ask that they acknowledge the efforts in

the game—their efforts, as well as those of the coaches, umpires, fans, and opponents.

In developing my philosophy, I realize that with my position comes the power to influence those I teach—with that power I hope to elicit a positive change. My father once told me to “go for it” when I was debating whether to change softball teams. I had the option of staying home to play or moving away to play for a great traveling team. Those three little words sent me on a journey of many positive experiences. My mother taught me not to be afraid and to try new things. She taught me strength and courage and determination. My sister taught me to dream dreams and to trust in the future, and she taught me that roots are strong and that you can be anything you want. My brothers taught me kindness and sensitivity, and that nothing is impossible. My assistant coaches taught me to laugh and to give my all. All of these people have influenced me, and I try to incorporate what they taught me into my philosophy so that I can influence my players in the same way.

THE BASICS OF A COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Your coaching philosophy should not be developed overnight. You should gather different views of coaching the way you would visit a buffet—choosing and trying different methods and observing what works for others, as well as remembering certain techniques that worked (or didn't work) for you both as an athlete and a coach. Once you have gathered what you feel is right for you, then try it out. You will no doubt have to throw out some beliefs, but others will become the backbone of your coaching style and success. When putting your philosophy together, remember to look for tools that will cover what is important in a team, that is, how to lead a team to success and how to make the most of the game for everybody.

Be Yourself

Sometimes you will find yourself playing a role that fits a situation but that you cannot support in your heart. I find these situations in coaching

to be rare. The coach who follows her heart and does what she believes is right will come out ahead. Athletes are smart, and they spend a lot of their time trying to figure you out. They will test you, push you, pull you, and see what they get from you in return. If you try to respond in a way that is truly not you, they will see through your facade. They want you to be genuine, just as you want them to be genuine.

Many first-time coaches want to do a great job, and thus, they put on a serious face when they hit the field. They see coaching as strictly business. Sometimes they hesitate to let down their guard and laugh with the athletes. But it's important to show your full personality when coaching. The athletes want to see that you are real so they can relate to, trust, and confide in you. As a coach, you are their teacher, their friend, their confidant, and you sometimes serve as their parent. You must be honest with your athletes and your staff if you wish honesty in return. So when in doubt, be yourself and listen to your heart. You will not always be right, but at least you can say, "I did what I believed was the right thing to do."

You must develop and follow your own coaching style. It is good to have mentors but not to imitate them. If you look at successful coaches, you will see that each one is different. Some are quiet and use their body language, while others are more vocal. They motivate in different ways as well as teach with different tools, yet all have found success. Their diversity shows that there is no one way to coach. You must find what will work for you from within yourself. By all means, learn some coaching techniques from others, but build them into *your* style.

Be Willing to Listen

As a coach, it will benefit you to become a communicator and to recognize the needs of your team and balance those needs with yours. Open communication is critical between the coach and the athlete and among the athletes. The coach should encourage everyone to express themselves honestly about team standards, feelings, and expectations. Encourage your athletes to communicate both their compliments and complaints. An open-door policy demonstrates to everyone that you are interested in seeing how the team members are doing and feeling.

Coaches expect the athlete to listen to all directives, but a coach must also possess a keen ability to listen. Listening shows that you care what your team members are saying and that their thoughts and feelings are important. The athletes should feel comfortable expressing their opinion when asked. I try to make it clear that there are appropriate times and places to address issues on which an athlete does not agree with the coach. If an athlete disagrees with something I have done, or wants to question a coaching decision I have made, I prefer that she comes to me to discuss her concern on a one-on-one basis. Because this discussion is about my thoughts and hers, it should occur away from the team.

Athletes often find it difficult to approach their coaches with questions that require a clear yes or no answer. I'm not sure why this happens, but it may be the result of an intimidation factor combined with the obvious fear of hearing the dreaded "no." It is my philosophy to say yes whenever I can. If an athlete comes to me with a legitimate question and is passionate about something that she is proposing, then I will back her by saying yes. As a coach, I know the athlete has certain wants and needs, and by working together, listening, and asking, a win-win situation is created.

Touch People's Lives

As I look back at the players I have coached, I am rewarded by their success in coaching and in life. Many of my players have gone on to coach teams of all ages and are sharing their love of the sport. I know these women are making a positive imprint on the young lives they touch because I know the kind of athletes they were when they played for me.

Coaches need to use the influence they have on their athletes to help them make good life decisions. I try to influence the athletes in a way that helps them increase all positives in their lives. I want our team to be filled with women of character; the ideal athlete for our program is one who is caring, dedicated, and a team player. I want our program to be highly professional and a class operation. I want the team to play the game the way it should be played, graceful in victory and defeat. If your athletes can walk away from your program feeling they have learned

important life tools that will help them in the future, then you have done your job.

On the field, I stress leadership and responsibility. These two characteristics are critical not only in sports but also throughout life. If I demand these things from my athletes, they will take these values with them out onto the field and also into life situations. They will all leave having learned some valuable lessons and with some newly found strength to face future challenges.

Our mission as coaches is simple: We will challenge the athlete to be a winner in all that she does, because we're not just teaching her lessons for softball . . . we're teaching her lessons for life.

1. Keep in mind that it doesn't matter that much who's on the other side of the field. We have to control what we can do, and if we play up to our full potential and do our best, then the results will take care of themselves.
2. Do not overlook an opponent. Our goal is to play at our full potential all of the time.
3. Try to earn respect from your opponent and in rankings and on a national level. (I want our players to know that we will teach them how to compete at the very highest level.)
4. Know that we are going to play to win and we will back it up with performance.
5. Be mentally and physically tough, cool under fire, and make great decisions. We must have a killer instinct, an instinct of putting people away.
6. Be a leader, be committed to the game, and don't overlook any opponents. Have a very businesslike approach.

I guarantee that my players will work harder than they ever have, but I also promise that the coaches will all work hard to make the game of softball fun for them. I assure the players that they will be treated with respect and dignity at all times, and that we will place a high priority on character. As coaches, we never know how and when we will make an impact on our players' lives, but if we give them every opportunity to grow and develop life skills, we have touched their lives in a positive way.

It's Never Too Late

I once had an athlete call me and leave the message that she had finally gotten her degree. She had left school five years earlier, and the only thing keeping her from graduating was an Illinois constitution test for the out-of-state student. That athlete was Jenn Jackson. She had told me several times she was going to come up and take it, but things never seemed to work out. She had earned a job as a St. Louis police officer without the official degree and had been doing well. It was not until she came up for our fall tournament that a friend talked her into taking the test. She did and she passed! She would receive her diploma and a considerable raise in salary. She was excited and really proud. It felt good that she wanted to share the accomplishment with me even after being gone for five years. I called her back and congratulated her on a job well done! She told me that she knew I would want to know and that I had always been there for her, encouraging her along the way.

Have Fun

Martha Ewing and Vern Seefeldt of the Youth Sports Institute of Michigan State University conducted a study with the cooperation of school systems in 11 cities. Questionnaires were filled out by more than 10,000 young people, aged 10 to 18. The study underlined a number of truths about children and sports:

1. Fun is pivotal; if it is not "fun," young people won't play a sport.
2. Skill development is a crucial aspect of fun and is more important than winning, even among the best athletes.
3. The most rewarding challenges of sports are those that lead to self-knowledge.
4. Intrinsic rewards are more important in creating lifetime athletes than are extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards include the self-knowledge that develops out of self-competition, and extrinsic rewards include victory or attention from others.

Remember these "truths," and plan activities with them in mind. Try to keep the fun in all



Players will work hard for their performances, and the coach must work hard to make the game fun for them. Nothing brings smiles like a little salsa dancing, for example.

practices, and encourage laughter and smiles. When the coach laughs and smiles, the team relaxes and executes with less stress. Laughter is a great reliever of pressure. Give your players a reason to smile at practice, during warm-up, and in games. If the team plays hard and smart and yet loses, the athletes may not be satisfied with the ending, but somewhere within the game they will have experienced enjoyment. If athletes play hard and smart, they will have more fun than if they do not.

ESTABLISH OBJECTIVES

Your objectives come after you establish your philosophy. You should have objectives for yourself, your staff, the athletes, and the team. These objectives will surface from what you believe is important in the game and will be in your mind at every softball hour: during practice, pregame, games, and the off-season. The athletes will have the most objectives because they play the game. Many of those objectives are set to help the athletes reach their optimal performance. Team objectives help you decide

if you have really won or lost the game, beyond the scoreboard. If the team accomplishes the majority of its objectives, you will often feel victorious even when the scoreboard reads defeat. I believe it is the coach's goal to help the athletes reach their goals.

Player Objectives

I have several objectives that I expect players to meet, although I also want them to develop objectives on their own. Here are some possible objectives for players:

- Treat other players, officials, and coaches with courtesy and respect.
- Represent your team and school with pride and respect.
- Always cheer for and support your teammates.
- Arrive everywhere early.
- Run if you arrive late.
- Always be honest.
- Work hard and give your all.

I want the players to be the best they can be as athletes, as students, and as people. They should use our program and coaching staff to add to their talents and strengths, and to minimize their weaknesses. I want them to be team players in life, to be worthy employees in the future as they are worthy athletes now, and to find happiness in all they have accomplished and in what they strive to conquer tomorrow.

A Losing Effort?

Sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. In a recent game, I felt like a spectator with a passionate interest in the events but who was not truly concerned with the outcome. When the game began, there was an overwhelming sense of calm, and it seemed that everyone was totally connected and on the same page. A very special aura was present.

I watched our hitters. They were totally focused. They looked so athletic and confident in the batter's box and seemed to swing at every good pitch. Our outs were crushed, and all of our hits went to the opposite field. I watched and marveled in a deeply connected sort of way. As the hitters looked at me from the outside of the batter's box, their faces were "poised" and awash with promise. No fear. No concern. No press. I looked back at them and wondered what they saw in me.

Every defensive play was made. Every catch and throw was precise. There was no hurry, no wonder if the out would be recorded. There was a feeling of defensive "connection." The game just flowed. And I watched. Absorbing. Soaking it all in. I watched our pitcher rock and fire. Perfect timing. Thoughtful, yet gathered. Working with her catcher and me and all those around her. In the center of her universe. Owning and trusting her intuition and her talent. Shooting the ball to all corners of the zone. Precise. Powerful. The game went too fast, like a great concert. I was drawn in to the tempo and pace, drawn in to the talent and energy. I watched as a privileged observer. It was awe inspiring. We may have lost the game, but the scoreboard did not tell the whole truth.

Team Objectives

Team objectives will develop from what the team wants from the season. The most important objective is for the players to work as a team and support each other. Members of the team are not all going to be best friends. Although friendships are important, the most critical element of a successful team is respect. Players can earn the respect of their teammates through the attitudes and actions they display both on and off the field.

Softball is like an assembly line—if everyone is doing her job at the highest level, the end product is quality. For a softball team, the desired end product of all its efforts is quality team play. A team's players will set their sights on a goal in hopes that, with each team member giving her best, the goal will be reached. Some common team objectives follow:

- Be completely focused as a team at practice and games.
- Support and respect each other.
- Represent the team first and yourself second.
- Play one pitch at a time.
- Give a winning effort.

In addition to the objectives listed here, the following three sections describe my three main messages to each team I coach.

Play Hard A coach should never have to speak these two words: "Play hard." As coaches, we need to instill in our athletes the concept of playing hard, but then it should be something every athlete does without being told. That is what sports are all about. If a player is out on the field and does not play hard or give it her all, someone else eager for the moment will give what it takes to be "out there" and will pass her by.

What does it take to be out there? What is playing hard? It is giving 100 percent of what you've got. That is what I tell my players I want from them. I ask this not only from my starting nine but from the whole team. You never know when a smart pinch runner is going to score the winning run or when a pinch hitter is going