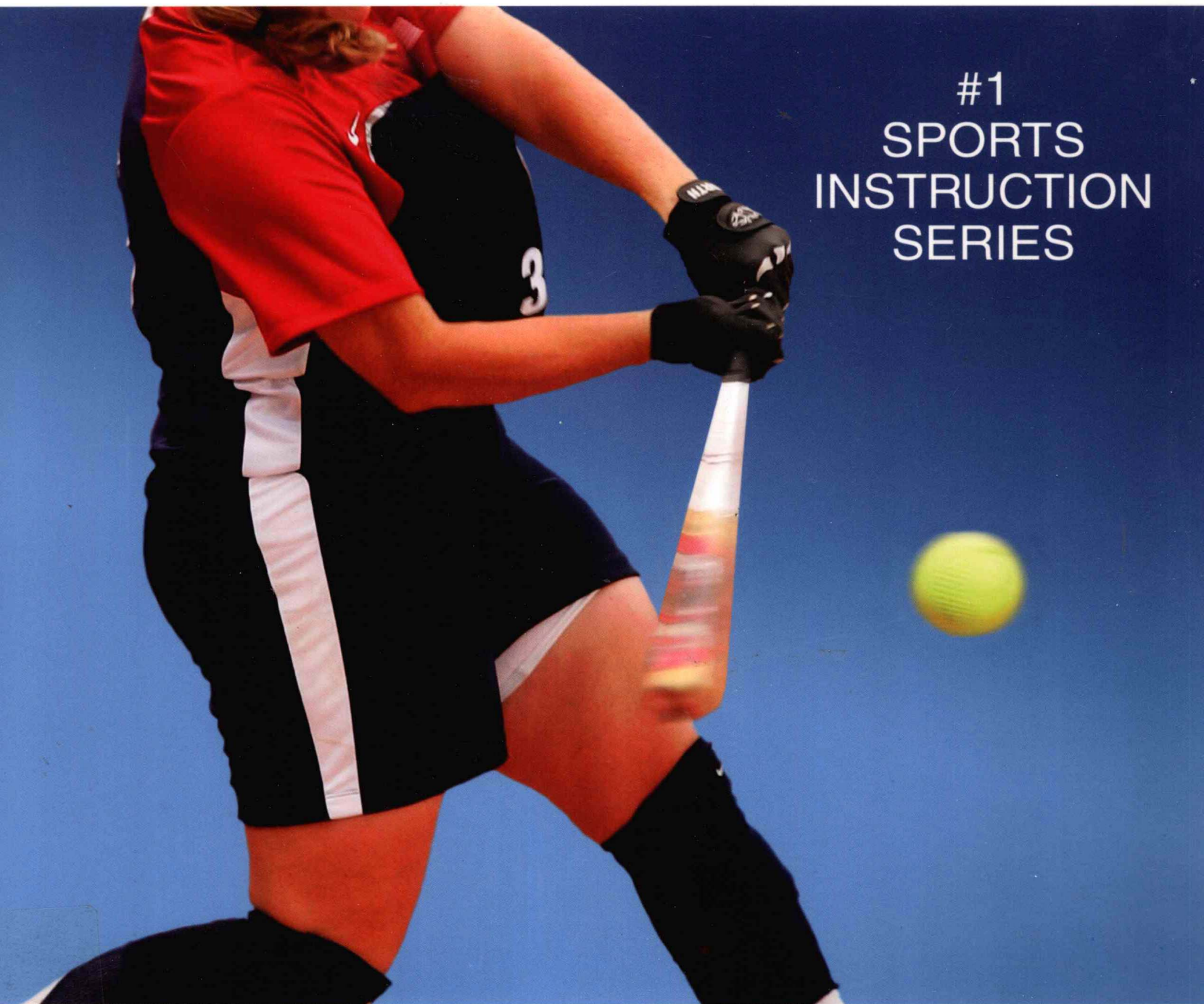


Third Edition

Softball

STEPS TO SUCCESS

#1
SPORTS
INSTRUCTION
SERIES



Diane L. Potter • Lynn V. Johnson

Third Edition

Softball

STEPS TO SUCCESS

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Human Kinetics

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Climbing the Steps to Softball Success

Softball is a game for participants of all ages. This book takes players through a progression of practice to enhance development of skills and game concepts. You will move from practicing individual skills to combining two, three, and four skills in gamelike drills, and then apply them in modified games. Finally, you will be given the opportunity to display your skills and knowledge in regulation game play.

This new edition focuses on skill development applicable to both slow-pitch and fastpitch softball. However, since fastpitch is becoming increasingly popular, new material has been added to increase the coverage of fastpitch. A new step provides more extensive coverage of the short hitting game widely used in fastpitch. Because of the emphasis on pitching in fastpitch, additional material was added to the pitching step. New steps increase the coverage of offensive and defensive tactics, especially those used in fastpitch.

Players who are new to the game are typically at a beginning skill level and have not had much experience in real-game situations. A player with more experience has likely had many opportunities to develop the skills needed to play at a more advanced skill level. This book is designed to give both less experienced and more experienced players a variety of challenging opportunities to further develop skills as they progress through the steps.

Each step is an easy transition from the one before. The first few steps provide a solid foundation of basic skills and concepts. As you progress, you will combine the single skills in ways that they are typically used in games. As you refine your skills, you will apply combinations in gamelike drills and modified games. Being able to anticipate, being ready, and becoming proficient at reading and reacting to game situations enable you to more fully and actively participate. You will learn to anticipate while

batting, running, fielding, and throwing so that you can select the proper plays and fulfill the various responsibilities of your offensive and defensive positions. As you near the top of the staircase, you'll find that you have developed confidence in your playing ability that makes further progress a real joy.

Follow this sequence each step of the way:

1. Read what is covered in the step, why the step is important, and how to execute or perform the step's focus.
2. Follow the illustrations to execute each skill successfully.
3. Read the directions and review the success checks for each drill; these are the key points to remember when performing the skill. Drills help you improve your skills through repetition and purposeful practice, so practice accordingly and record your score.
4. Based on your score, follow the "To Increase Difficulty" or "To Decrease Difficulty" variations. The drills are arranged in an easy-to-difficult progression to help you achieve continued success. Pace yourself by adjusting the drills to increase or decrease difficulty.
5. Have a qualified observer—such as your teacher, coach, or trained partner—evaluate your basic skill technique when you have completed each set of drills. The observer can use the success checks to evaluate your execution of the skill.
6. Use the chart at the end of each step to total your drill scores. Once you have achieved the recommended level of success for the step, move on to the next step.

Enjoy your step-by-step journey to enhancing your softball skills, building confidence, experiencing success, and having fun!

Acknowledgments

The preparation of this book was made possible through the assistance of many people, not all of whom can be mentioned by name. Over the years, many Springfield College and University of Vermont students and players we have taught and coached have challenged our views of softball and how it should be taught. For Diane Potter, coaching 7- to 10-year-old youngsters in the Brimfield Youth Sports softball program several years ago did much to confirm for her the importance of developing fundamental skills and game concepts, especially for young players who wish to continue to play as members of school varsity and recreational teams. We have learned from all of our students and players and thus have developed the instructional approach presented in this book. To all of you, we are forever indebted.

Once again, our sincere thanks go to five Springfield College students who were responsible for the pictures provided to the illustrator for the first edition of this book: to David Blizzard for his excellent photography; to Jody Dobkowski, Shelly Quirk, and Christopher Mayhew, who were the models for the pictures; and to Tammy Oswell, who developed film and printed photographs. Many of these illustrations continue to be used in this third edition. Our thanks to Erin Barney, Whitney Borisenok, Sara Burke, Angie Hill, and Amy Kern from the University of Vermont for serving as the model for several fastpitch technique photographs. A special thanks to two young players, Kyle and Anna Dunphey, who volunteered as subjects for some new photographs provided to the illustrator for this third edition. We especially thank colleague Diane Schumacher, Softball Hall of Famer and former Springfield College player, for her consultation and suggestions regarding pitching (which were used in the development of step 3).

One learns much as a player of the sport. Diane Potter wishes to especially acknowledge the influence of Ralph Raymond, coach of the 1996 and 2000 gold-medal-winning U.S. Olympic softball teams, as her inspiration for and essence of this book. Diane's passion for the game, emphasis on fundamentals, and pride in the execution of quality play are a direct result of his coaching years ago when she was a player on his Cochranton Corvettes team. Lynn Johnson would like to thank Diane Potter for instilling her with an undying passion for the game of softball. She would also like to thank all of her former teammates and players for making the game so special. We hope that players, teachers, and coaches of all ages who use this book will be fortunate enough to have experiences with the sport of softball that are comparable to ours.

Diane Potter thanks Sydney Stewart—and Lynn Johnson thanks Pam Childs—for their diligent work in editing our drafts before the submission of the manuscript to Human Kinetics. Lynn Johnson would also like to thank Pam Childs for sharing her softball expertise and for the many technical discussions that occurred during the writing of the manuscript.

We acknowledge with deep appreciation the contributions of Dr. Gretchen Brockmeyer, co-author of the first two editions of this book. Dr. Brockmeyer, a master teacher, was instrumental in the development of the instructional focus that is continued in this third edition.

We would like to express our appreciation to the staff at Human Kinetics—especially to Jana Hunter, acquisitions editor, and Cynthia McEntire, developmental editor of this third edition—for their encouragement, for serving as sounding boards for our ideas, and for their support throughout the preparation of the manuscript.

The Sport of Softball

The game we know today as softball was invented by George Hancock in 1887 at the Farragut Boat Club in Chicago. Hancock intended softball, then called *kittenball*, to be a game that the rich members of the boat club could play indoors. Later, however, an outdoor version of the game was developed by Lewis Rober, who introduced it to his fellow Minneapolis firemen. Currently, *softball* (as it was finally named at a 1926 YMCA convention) is played all over the world by millions of people from all walks of life.

The sport of softball has several variations, each with a unique set of rules that differentiate the games. There are official rules for men's and women's fastpitch, slow pitch, and modified pitch; coed slow pitch; and boys' and girls' (youth) fastpitch and slow pitch. The rules of men's and women's games vary only slightly; however, the rules for fastpitch and slow pitch make the games distinct from each other. The United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) has additional sets of rules for 16-inch and super slow pitch.

Today, participation opportunities abound for softball enthusiasts of all ages and abilities. The Amateur Softball Association (ASA) is the governing body for softball in the United States. Under the sponsorship of the ASA, over 250,000 teams with a membership of more than 4 million participate each year in a wide variety of classifications of fastpitch and slow-pitch programs. In addition, a full ASA program for youth teams, known as the *Junior Olympic program*, includes over 80,000 teams and 1.3 million players. Softball is played by millions of people around the world, and international competition opportunities are growing every year. The International Softball Federation regulates rules of play in more than 113 countries, including the United States and Canada.

However, it was not always so. The women's fastpitch game is the game currently gaining the most attention. The Women's NCAA National Collegiate Softball Championships can be seen on television, and women's fastpitch softball finally became an Olympic sport at the 1996 Atlanta Games. The road to that historic event was a long and arduous one, starting in 1965 with the first International Softball Federation (ISF) World Championships held in Melbourne, Australia. Australia defeated the highly favored U.S. team to become the first world champions. The second world championship was held in Japan in 1970, and the host Japanese team defeated the United States to become the new world champions. Finally, in 1974, at the world championship held in Stratford, Connecticut, the United States, represented by the Raybestos Brakettes, won the third world championship. Softball was first played at the Pan American Games in 1979, and that event continues to provide strong international competition for the U.S. national team as it prepares for the world championships and now the Olympics. The U.S. national team won the Olympic gold medal in Atlanta in 1996, in Australia in 2000, and again in Greece in 2004. Young girls and women in the late 1990s and early 2000s had their own female role models in Olympic star pitcher and hitter Lisa Fernandez, shortstop Dot Richardson, and outfielder Laura Berg. In the 2004 Olympics, Lisa Fernandez continued her dominance of Olympic Games with a 4-0 pitching record and an Olympic record .545 batting average, as the U.S. team went undefeated (9-0)—including 8 consecutive shutouts—to win the gold medal. Three new young pitchers—Jennie Finch, Cat Osterman, and Lori Harrigan—combined for the other five victories in the 2004 Olympics. Natasha Watley,

the team's shortstop, stole five bases, setting a new Olympic record. Young players today have many outstanding women softball players as role models.

The success of the U.S. national team, the increased exposure from the Olympics, and the restructuring of the Women's Pro Softball League to National Pro Fastpitch (providing more professional playing opportunities for elite softball players) have caused a trickle-down effect to reach school and local recreation programs. The result is that more girls and women have an interest in participating in fastpitch softball. With the inclusion of softball in the National Sports Festival (now the U.S. Olympic Festival), the development of Olympic-level competitors is an ongoing process.

For those who do not aspire to Olympic-level competition, hundreds of thousands of recreational teams provide opportunities for partici-

pation at every level of ability. Softball truly is a sport for everyone:

- It can be played and enjoyed by all ages and abilities, from 10-and-under to 50-and-over leagues.
- It is an excellent coed activity with special coed rules.
- It can be played on the local sandlot as well as in an Olympic stadium.
- It requires you to participate mentally as well as physically.
- It provides a social occasion for you to enjoy old friends and make new ones.

The skills needed to play the game are few; basically, a person must be able to catch, throw, hit, and run bases with a moderate degree of skill.

Now grab a ball and take the field!

RULES OF PLAY

Official softball games are played on a field like that depicted in figure 1. The *playing field* is the area within which the ball may be legally played and fielded. The boundaries of the playing field are usually an outfield fence as well as two side fences extending from the ends of the backstop to the outfield fence and running parallel to and 25 to 30 feet (7.6 to 9.1 meters) from the foul lines. The area outside the playing field is the *out-of-play*, or *dead-ball*, *territory*. The playing field is made up of fair territory and foul territory. *Fair territory* is the part of the playing field between and including the first- and third-base foul lines and the outfield fence, including the airspace above. *Foul territory* is the part of the playing field between the first- and third-base foul lines and the out-of-play territory.

The playing field is further divided into *infield* (that portion of fair territory that includes areas normally covered by infielders) and *outfield* (that portion of fair territory that is outside the diamond formed by the baselines, or the area not normally covered by an infielder between first and third bases and the outfield fence). Most softball playing fields have a dirt infield (see the shaded area in figure 1) and a grass outfield.

Distances between bases, pitching distances, and distances from home plate to the outfield

fence vary, depending on the game being played. Unofficial games are played on all kinds of fields that have at least a home plate and three bases set out in a diamond or square configuration.

Any variety of softball involves two teams alternately playing offense and defense. A team is on offense when it is at bat, attempting to score runs. The defensive team is the team in the field, attempting to prevent the team at bat

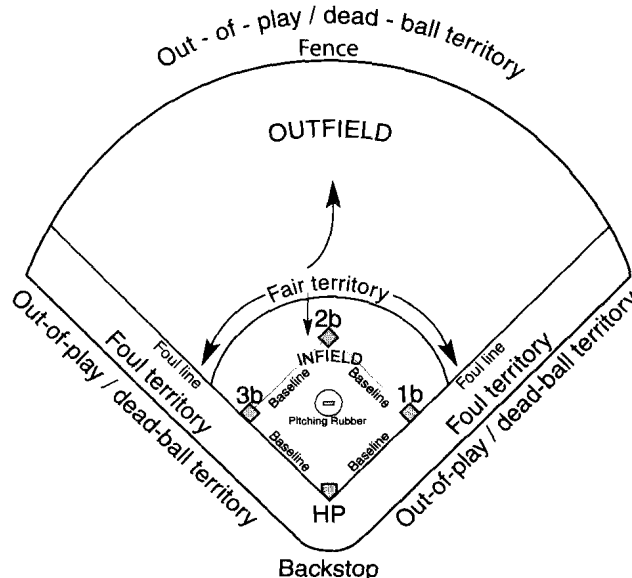


Figure 1 Softball playing field.

from scoring runs. Fastpitch and modified-pitch teams have 9 players in the field on defense, whereas all slow-pitch teams have 10 defensive players, although some allow extra players to bat. Defensive positions for fastpitch are identified by the numbers 1 through 9 as follows: pitcher (1), catcher (2), first baseman (3), second baseman (4), third baseman (5), shortstop (6), left fielder (7), center fielder (8), right fielder (9). In the slow-pitch game, 10 defensive players are used. The additional player is usually an outfielder, and for most teams, the center fielder is replaced by a left center fielder and a right center fielder. The starting positions are depicted in figure 2. The outfield, first baseman, and third baseman positions are labeled in lowercase letters for fastpitch. For slow pitch, these positions are labeled in capital letters. The starting positions for the pitcher, catcher, second baseman, and shortstop are the same for both fastpitch and slow pitch (those positions are labeled only once). The left fielder, center fielder, and right fielder—as well as the left center fielder and right center fielder for slow pitch—are called *outfielders*. *Infielders* are the first baseman, second baseman, third baseman, and shortstop. The pitcher and catcher, though playing in the infield and having some of the same kinds of responsibilities as infielders, are usually called the *battery*, rather than infielders.

A regulation softball game consists of at least seven innings. In each inning, each team bats until three batters or runners have been put out. An *out* occurs when an offensive player does not

reach a base safely. In competitive play, the choice of first or last at-bat in an inning is decided by a coin toss, unless stated differently in the rules of the organization governing the game. The *visiting team* is up to bat first in an inning; the *home team* bats last. Typically, in any kind of league play, the team whose field the game is being played on is the home team.

A *run* is scored each time a baserunner legally touches first base, second base, third base, and home plate before the defensive team makes the third out of the inning. The winner of a game is the team that scores the greater number of runs.

In addition to these basic rules of play, other rules are introduced and explained as they apply to specific skills and concepts in this book. Reference is made throughout the book to official and modified rules of play. *Official* rules are those used in an official game between two high school, college, summer league, or Olympic teams.

High schools play under the fastpitch rules of either the National Federation of State High Schools Association (NFHS) or the Amateur Softball Association (ASA). College women play under the fastpitch rules of either the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) or the ASA. Fastpitch and slow-pitch recreational teams play under the rules of the ASA or the National Softball Association (NSA). The United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) governs play in some slow-pitch leagues. International play is governed by the rules of the International Softball Federation (ISF). The majority of the official fastpitch softball rules for high schools, colleges, and for the ASA are the same because they follow the rules made by the ISF. However, these organizations do have a few rules that apply only to their own competitions. For the purposes of this book, discussion of rules as they occur in the learning progressions is based on the ASA's *Official Rules of Softball*.

Modified rules, on the other hand, are rules that the teacher or coach makes up, usually to encourage students to focus on a particular skill or combination of skills. The player rotation rules used in the modified game called Scrub (step 10, page 204), for example, are designed to ensure that every player experiences playing all the defensive field positions. Those rules are not official and would not be used during any official game.

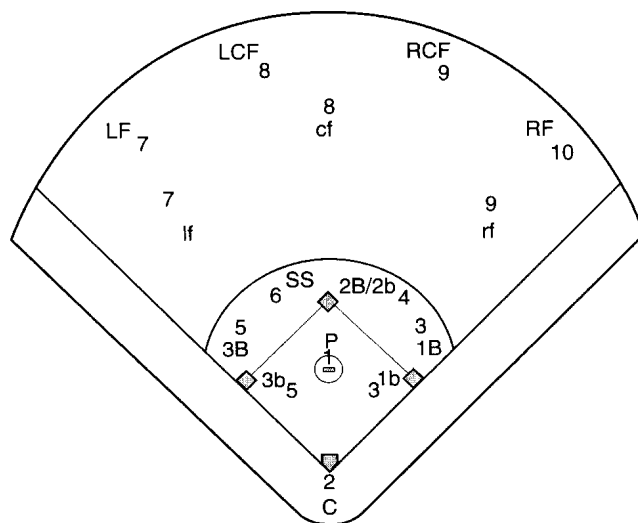


Figure 2 Starting positions shown by the numbers.

EQUIPMENT SELECTION AND SAFETY CONCERNS

To play softball safely, you need to have reliable equipment and practice facilities free from danger. Here are some suggestions for selecting personal equipment and for safety checks before practicing softball skills.

Gloves

A fielder's glove should be all leather, including the laces and bound edges of the hand opening. Be especially wary of plastic or synthetic materials in laces and edges. The glove should have an easily adjustable strap over the back of the hand (Velcro is nice). Size is somewhat dependent on the position you play, but the following guidelines will help you select the proper glove:

- The glove needs to be manageable. Many manufacturers provide age guidelines for youth gloves.
- A glove for a second baseman, third baseman, or shortstop should have a shorter finger length.
- Gloves should have a longer finger length for outfielders, first basemen, and catchers for slow-pitch play (if a fielder's glove rather than a mitt is used at first base or catcher).
- Fastpitch catchers should purchase a catcher's mitt designed specifically for softball.

Bats

Bat technology has advanced enormously over the past several years, and this has made selecting a bat more complicated and purchasing a bat much more expensive. Depending on your level of play and your commitment to softball, your choices can range in price from \$25 to over \$400.

The length and weight of the bat should enable you to easily swing the barrel of the bat into the contact zone. Bat selection, therefore, may depend on your bat speed, strength, and the speed of the pitch. Bat weights are identified by ounces and might be indicated with plus or minus numbers—for example, if a bat is 34 inches long and is minus 8 weight, it weighs 22 ounces. Slow-

pitch bats are typically heavier than fastpitch bats. All bats used in ASA (fastpitch or slow pitch) and NCAA competition must bear the ASA-approved certification mark.

The bat's grip should feel comfortable in your hands. Grip composition needs to ensure a secure grip for your hands on the handle. A safety grip is required on all bats and may be made of rubber, leather, or a synthetic material.

Bat composition has changed significantly in recent years. Hardwood bats are rarely seen in softball today. Bats are made of aluminum, steel, composites, metal alloys, and titanium. Manufacturers have used technology to make bats much more responsive, hoping to increase the offensive aspect of the game. The most inexpensive bats used in softball today are made from an aluminum alloy. Your bat selection may be governed more by price than by material, although those two factors are closely related. For recreational use, aluminum bats are durable and will last longer than some other bats; however, they are much less responsive and often do not give you a choice of weight. A major disadvantage of the new materials used to make today's bats is that they are not durable. Many bats costing \$200 or more will not last a season and are often not returnable. Therefore, when selecting the composition of your bat, you should take into consideration your budget, your level of play, and your commitment to the game.

Batting Gloves

The batting glove, initially worn only on the hand holding the bottom end of the bat, was first used in baseball to ensure a more secure grip on a wooden bat. Unlike wooden softball bats that by rule must have a composition grip attached to the handle area, by rule the wooden baseball bat had to be made from one solid piece of wood with the grip area free from any foreign substance. Often, sweaty bare hands on bare wood resulted in the bat flying out of the batter's hands.

The softball bat used today typically has a replaceable grip that offers a secure handhold. Although the safety need for the batting glove in

softball is not the same as for baseball, the trend is for players to mimic the major league player and wear not one but two batting gloves. For defensive players, especially the catcher and the first baseman, wearing a batting glove under the fielding glove offers additional protection for the hand catching the ball. Batting-style gloves that have extra padding are made specifically to wear under a glove or mitt to protect the hand.

Footwear

Shoes with soft or hard rubber cleats are the footwear of choice for most youth and recreational softball programs. Metal sole or heel plates are allowed in some levels of play, including college, if the cleat on the plate is not longer than three-quarters of an inch (1.9 centimeters). Round or track-type spikes are not allowed. Before selecting your footwear for softball, be sure to check the rules governing your specific level of play.

All equipment must be in compliance with the rules governing play. For example, if play is governed by ASA rules, the bat must be approved by the ASA. A bat marked “Little League”—even if it complies with ASA requirements of length, weight, maximum barrel size, and so on—could not be used by a player in a game being played under ASA rules.

For safety’s sake, before practicing or playing softball, you should check your personal equipment and the playing field.

- Check your glove for broken laces, especially in the web area.
- Check all bats for dents, loose or torn grips, or displaced end caps.
- Make sure your footwear is well fitting, has strong arch support, and has soles that provide good traction, especially on wet or damp ground. Shoes should not have holes.
- Make sure your shirt is loose fitting so that it does not restrict your movements, especially for throwing. Pants or shorts should also be loose fitting for free movement.
- If you use sunglasses, be sure that they have nonbreakable safety lenses.

Check the playing field for glass and other sharp objects, holes in the field, and dangerous obstructions, such as football blocking sleds, lacrosse or field hockey goals, and so on. Remove any loose equipment lying around, especially balls and bats.

When practicing throwing, fielding, or other skills with a partner, line up so neither player looks directly into the sun. When inside or when outside near a building, be aware of windows, lights, and people. Do not practice with a window in the ball’s line of flight. Be sympathetic to the skill abilities of partners. Do not throw the bat, and do not hit rocks with the bat.

WARM-UP AND COOL-DOWN

Before practicing, you need a 10- to 15-minute warm-up period to increase your heart rate and flexibility. After finishing practice, you should end with a 5-minute cool-down period. If you follow this sequence, you will not only help prepare your body and mind to play softball, but you’ll also help prevent injuries.

In the warm-up, your first goal is to get your blood moving. Starting at home plate, jog around the perimeter of the field and return to home plate. Next, you want to prepare yourself for activity by performing a series of dynamic stretches designed to warm up the muscles you will use in the game of softball. Dynamic stretches are stretches that are done while moving and that place less stress on the muscle being stretched.

These stretches take the muscles to their full range of motion in a controlled manner. Do not bounce or perform jerky actions while performing dynamic stretches. Each dynamic stretch should be done in sets of 8 to 12 repetitions. Following is an example of a dynamic stretch sequence:

1. Perform slow and controlled leg swings, front to back and side to side.
2. Perform slow and controlled arm swings, up and down and in large circles.
3. Walk forward, slowly pulling your knee to your chest in a controlled manner. Alternate knees on each step.
4. Walk forward, reaching toward the ground with both hands while slowly raising a leg

behind you in a controlled manner. Alternate legs on each step.

5. Start in a medium squat position. Step sideways with one leg. Bring the other leg back so that you are back in a medium squat position. After a set, repeat, starting with the opposite leg.
6. Perform high-knee skips. Bring your knees as high as you can as you skip.

After completing the dynamic stretch sequence, you need to warm up your legs and throwing arm to get them ready for playing softball. For your arm, begin your warm-up at a medium distance from your throwing partner, exaggerating your throwing motion. Execute more of an outfield throwing motion than an infield throw. Once your arm feels warm, increase the speed of your throw or the distance from your partner.

You need to get your legs ready for the sprinting you will do in the game of softball. One way to warm up your legs and practice baserunning at the same time is to run out a series of hits on the base path. Begin with two home runs, running both at medium speed to warm up your legs. Then run out two singles, two doubles, and two triples, ending with a full-speed home run.

At the end of this, your legs will be warm and you will have worked on the skill of baserunning (see page 108).

At the end of each practice session or game, you should take a few minutes to cool down by stretching out those muscles used the most and by relaxing so that your heart rate returns to a resting rate. This routine should include a combination of dynamic (see previous description) and static-passive stretches. First, you should do light dynamic stretches until your heart rate slows down. Then complete a series of static-passive stretches, which are designed to relax your muscles to help minimize tightness and soreness after a practice or game. The shoulders, arms, torso, back, and legs will typically be used in any softball practice or game. Do your exercises in a relaxed state of mind and body. Move slowly into the stretch position and hold it for 8 to 10 seconds. Do not bounce in the stretch position. During the 8- to 10-second stretch, you should relax. At the end of 10 seconds, try to gently increase the range of the stretch. Be sure to do at least one exercise for each body part. Several books on stretching are available that can give you ideas for specific exercises.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

These resources and organizations will help you learn more about softball rules and programs in your area. (Playing rules can be downloaded from the Web sites of organizations marked with an asterisk.)

Amateur Softball Association of America (ASA)

2801 N.E. 50th Street
Oklahoma City, OK 73111-7203
Phone: 405-424-5266
www.softball.org

International Softball Federation (ISF)*

1900 S. Park Road
Plant City, FL 33563
Phone: 813-864-0100
www.internationalsoftball.com

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)*

P.O. Box 6222
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6222
Phone: 317-917-6222
www.ncaa.org


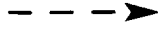




National Softball Association (NSA)*

P.O. Box 7
Nicholasville, KY 40340
www.playnsa.com

United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA)*

611 Line Drive
Kissimmee, FL 34744
Phone: 321-697-3636
www.ussa.com

Key to Diagrams

1,P	Pitcher (fastpitch, slow pitch)
2,C	Catcher (fastpitch, slow pitch)
3,1b	First baseman (fastpitch)
3,1B	First baseman (slow pitch)
4,2b	Second baseman (fastpitch)
4,2B	Second baseman (slow pitch)
5,3b	Third baseman (fastpitch)
5,3B	Third baseman (slow pitch)
6,SS	Shortstop (fastpitch, slow pitch)
7,lF	Left fielder (fastpitch)
7,LF	Left fielder (slow pitch)
8,cf	Center fielder (fastpitch)
8,LCF	Left center fielder (slow pitch)
9,rF	Right fielder (fastpitch)
9,RCF	Right center fielder (slow pitch)
10,RF	right fielder (slow pitch)
B	Baserunner
BR	Batter-runner
H	Hitter
T	Thrower
F	Fielder
	Rolled ball
	Hit ball
	Thrown ball
	Player movement
	Cone
	Bucket

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Catching and Throwing

Imagine yourself at shortstop. A hard line drive is hit to you. In one fluid motion, you catch the ball and throw it to the first baseman, getting the batter out and doubling up the runner who left first base too soon. Or imagine that you are the left fielder. You race to your right to catch a fly ball, stop, and, stepping in the direction of your throw, throw the ball to second base to prevent the runner on first from advancing.

Softball is a game of catching and throwing. These fundamental defensive skills are keys to your success as a softball player. Every softball player, regardless of position, must master these skills. The related skills of fielding (catching ground balls and fly balls while on defense) and playing catcher behind the plate are addressed in steps 2 and 7. In this step, you will learn how to catch, move the ball and your body into throwing position, and throw the ball—all in one continuous, fluid motion.

Although softball features three general types of throws—overhand, sidearm, and underhand—the overhand throw is the one most often used. The overhand throw is especially useful when the ball must travel a significant distance and when accuracy is important. Because of the major role the overhand throw plays in softball, it is the first throw to learn if you are new to the game and the first skill to review if you are more experienced. The overhand throw is your ticket to being a suc-

cessful defensive player and therefore receives the most attention in this step.

The fastpitch pitcher is the only player who commonly throws the ball with a full underhand motion (see step 3). However, various underhand tosses, including the pitch in slow-pitch softball and the short feed to second base to start the double play, might technically be called underhand throws. The sidearm throw (see step 8) is used for relatively short throws when the ball must travel with speed, parallel to the ground. Highly skilled infielders will occasionally use sidearm throws when, after fielding a ground ball, a quick-release throw is necessary because of the lack of time. The sidearm is the least accurate type of throw and should be used sparingly, even by more experienced players.

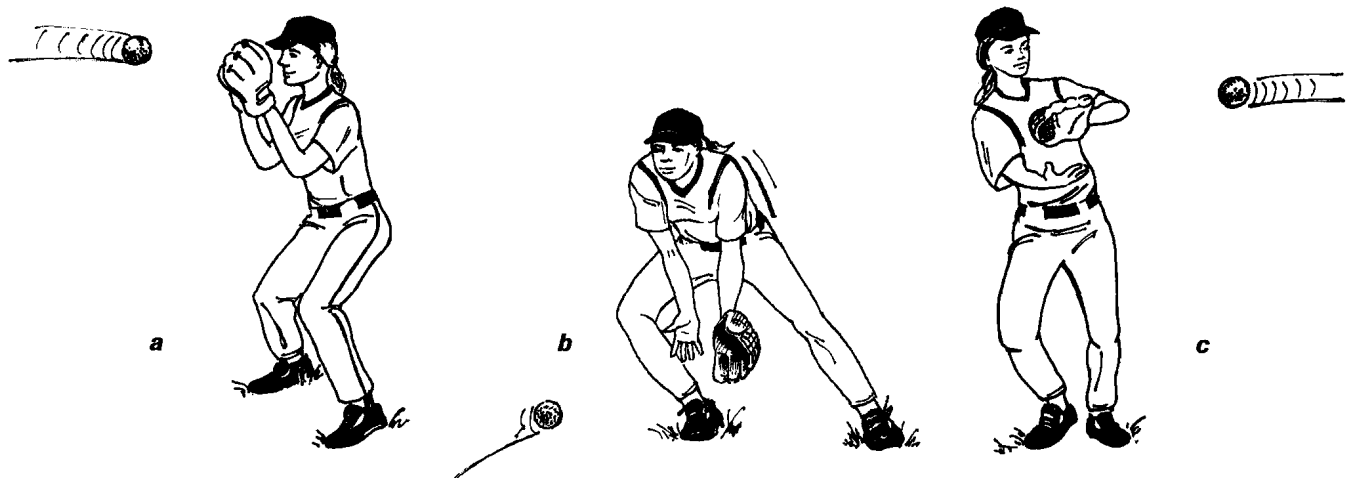
Can you imagine someone throwing the ball to you but you do not know what to do to protect yourself? Imagine yourself playing center field, catching a fly ball, and not being able to get the ball to second base—never mind all the way to home plate. For an infielder, the ability to catch and throw the ball quickly helps make plays on baserunners who are attempting to advance to the next base. Outfielders must use the overhand throw because of the great distance the ball has to travel. Throwing and catching are the fundamental defensive skills for all softball players. We begin with catching.

CATCHING THE BALL

Initially, catching a ball coming to you in the air involves tracking the ball—watching the ball and determining the path it is taking—then moving your body, glove, and throwing hand into that path in order to catch the ball. As a fielder, you have no control over the flight of the ball. Therefore, to catch a ball, you must visually pick up the flight of the ball by focusing on it while it is coming toward you and move your body in line with the oncoming ball. Once you are in line with the ball, you should stand squarely, facing the ball with your glove-side foot slightly ahead. Reach your hands out in front of your body to make contact with the ball, and simultaneously shift your weight onto your front foot.

Catching a ball also involves anticipation and a certain amount of decision making on your part. If the ball is arriving above your waist, point the fingers of your glove and of your throwing hand up, as shown in figure 1.1a. If the ball is below your waist, your fingers should point down (figure 1.1b). A ball coming directly at your waist is often the most difficult to catch; to catch it, position your glove hand with the palm facing down, fingers parallel to the ground with the thumb down, and place your throwing hand (palm facing up) under your glove hand, as shown in figure 1.1c. Correct positioning of the hands is crucial to effective catching.

Figure 1.1 Tracking and Anticipation



ABOVE WAIST

1. Point fingers up
2. Focus on ball
3. Align body to ball

BELOW WAIST

1. Point fingers down
2. Focus on ball
3. Align body to ball

AT WAIST

1. Point fingers horizontally
2. Focus on ball
3. Align body to ball

After making the tracking and anticipation decisions about the ball coming toward you, you are now ready to catch the ball. As the ball comes into your glove, squeeze the ball with the thumb and ring finger of your glove hand, and at the same time, cover the ball with your throwing hand. “Give” with the ball (also called *using soft hands*) to cushion its impact by drawing the ball and glove toward your throwing-side shoulder.

As you move the ball and glove to the throwing position, take a two-finger grip on the ball by placing your index and middle fingers on one seam, your thumb on a seam on the opposite side of the ball from your fingers, and your ring finger on the side of the ball (figure 1.2a). If you have a small hand, you can use a three-finger grip (figure 1.2b) by placing your ring finger on the seam with your other two fingers and placing

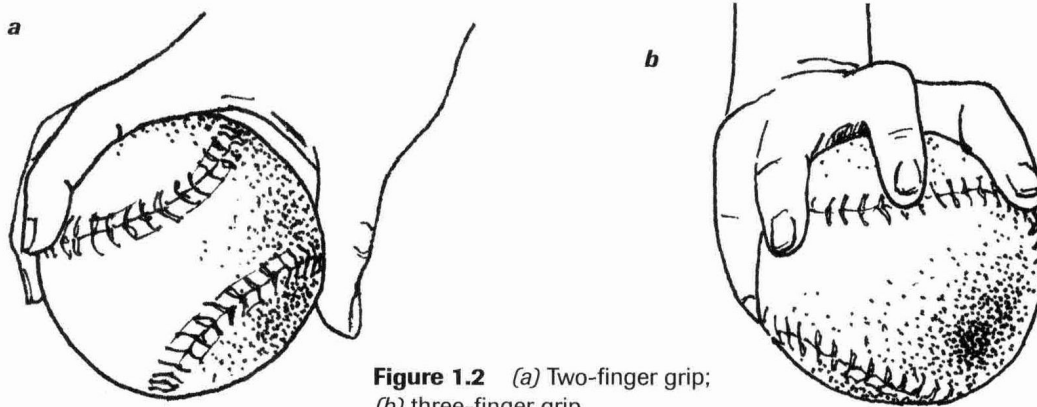


Figure 1.2 (a) Two-finger grip;
(b) three-finger grip.

your pinkie on the side of the ball. At the same time, shift your weight onto your back foot and turn your body so that your glove side is toward the throwing target. With your weight on your back foot, separate your hands and bring the ball in your throwing hand to the throwing position. Your glove-side elbow should point at the throwing target.

This ending position for catching a ball is the same as the ready position for the overhand throw. Ending the catch in this way makes it possible for you to make the transition from the catch to the throw in one continuous motion. Figure 1.3, a through c shows the catch-to-throw transition leading into the preparation phase for the throw when the ball arrives above your waist.

Figure 1.3 Catching



READY TO CATCH

1. Feet are in forward stride, glove-side foot ahead
2. Focus on ball
3. Fingers are up (for ball arriving above waist)
4. Shift weight forward
5. Meet ball out front

CATCHING

1. Use two hands; squeeze ball
2. Start shifting weight back; begin pivot
3. Give with the ball
4. Use two- or three- finger grip on ball in glove

READY TO THROW

1. Continue to shift weight back
2. Glove side is toward target
3. Glove points to target
4. Weight is on back foot
5. Arms extend; move ball to throwing position
6. Throwing wrist extends

Misstep

You miss the ball, or the ball drops out of your glove.

Correction

Watch the ball. Use two hands and cover the ball in your glove with your throwing hand.

Misstep

The ball stings your hand when you catch it.

Correction

Reach out in front to meet the ball, and give with the ball as you make contact. Draw the ball and glove to your throwing shoulder.

Using two hands to catch the ball not only makes for a surer catch but also makes it easier for you to throw the ball quickly, because you already have the ball in your throwing hand as soon as you catch the ball. Catching the ball one-handed with the glove only makes for a more time-consuming

transition from catch to throw and results in a much slower release time. One-handed catches should be used only when the ball is out of your two-hand reach. These types of catches will be discussed later in this step.

Catching Drill 1. Self-Toss

For players who are just learning the game or who don't have much experience, this drill will help fine-tune the fundamentals of proper catching.

Without wearing a glove, gently toss a ball up into the air in front of your body so that it goes just above head height. Using both hands, reach up and out to catch the ball, draw it into your throwing shoulder, and then drop your hands and toss it again. You can increase the challenge during the self-toss by tossing the ball ahead so you have to move to catch it. Toss and catch the ball 10 times.

Now, toss the ball onto a high, slanted surface, such as the roof of a shed or garage, so that it will roll off for you to catch. Again, don't wear a glove. Focus on the cue "reach and give" as you concentrate on the catching action. You can increase the challenge on the roof toss by moving back before

tossing the ball so you have to move in farther to catch it. Toss and catch the ball 10 times.

Have a coach or an experienced player observe your catching technique and award you points based on the criteria in the success check. For each toss and catch, earn 1 point for each of the three criteria you meet, for a total of 3 points per toss and catch (on 10 self-tosses and 10 roof tosses).

Success Check

- Reach up to meet the ball, and watch it go into your hands.
- Give with the ball as it comes into your hands. Remember, use *soft* hands.
- Bring the ball and hands to the throwing position.

Score Your Success

Self-Toss

25 to 30 points = 5 points
20 to 24 points = 3 points
19 points or fewer = 1 point
Your score _____

Roof Toss

25 to 30 points = 5 points
20 to 24 points = 3 points
19 points or fewer = 1 point
Your score _____