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SURVIVAL GUIDE



COACHING YOUTH SOFTBALL

*Only the essential drills, practice plans,
plays, and coaching tips!*

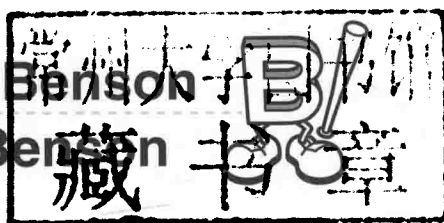
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Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Softball



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Tammy Benson



Human Kinetics

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To our three daughters—Emily, Gabrielle, and McKenna—we dedicate this book with all our love. Without your patience, support, and willingness to be our “test subjects” for new drills and ideas, we would not be where we are today. Thank you for your unconditional love.

We also dedicate this book to our late nephew, Daniel, who passed during the writing of this book. For us, the best part of coaching is the relationships we develop and the lives we touch; we remind our readers not to take these precious gifts for granted.



Drill Finder

Drill title	Skill level			Skills								Page no.	
	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Batting	Bunting	Baserunning	Throwing	Receiving	Fielding ground balls	Fielding fly balls	Pitching		Catching
Setup progression	✓			✓									52
Batting progression	✓			✓									53
Tee stations	✓			✓									54
Soft-toss stations		✓		✓									56
Batting simulation stations		✓		✓									58
Bunting progression	✓				✓								59
Bunting to targets			✓		✓								60
Running game	✓					✓							61
Two-line baserunning		✓				✓							62
Infield fly baserunning			✓			✓							64
Zigzag	✓							✓					80
Scarecrow rhyme	✓						✓	✓					81
Wrist snaps	✓						✓	✓					82
Figure eight		✓					✓	✓					83
Rocking fire		✓					✓	✓					84
Three step		✓					✓	✓					85
Relays			✓				✓	✓					86
Around the horn— counterclockwise			✓				✓	✓					87
Around the horn— clockwise			✓				✓	✓					88
Around the horn—star			✓				✓	✓					90

Drill title	Skill level			Skills									Page no.
	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Batting	Bunting	Baserunning	Throwing	Receiving	Fielding ground balls	Fielding fly balls	Pitching	Catching	
First-step quickness	✓								✓				103
Glove work	✓								✓				104
MCPC cadence	✓								✓	✓			105
Feeds	✓								✓				106
Cross lines		✓							✓				108
Shortstop hole			✓						✓				110
Self-toss	✓									✓			112
Quick five	✓									✓			113
Outfield feeds		✓								✓			114
Defensive back			✓							✓			116
Quick start cadence	✓										✓		132
Loading	✓										✓		133
Kneeling K	✓										✓		134
Arm circles	✓										✓		136
Standing circles		✓									✓		138
Walk-through		✓									✓		140
One up, one down			✓								✓		141
Tennis ball catch	✓											✓	142
Block 10-10-10		✓										✓	143
Quick throw down		✓										✓	144



Preface

You may not have planned on being the head coach of a softball team, but here you are. It's your job to somehow organize a group of enthusiastic but inexperienced seven- and eight-year-old girls into a team. You may be wondering what you've gotten yourself into and whether it's too late to get out of it. But relax, Coach, this book provides the help you need. If you're feeling overwhelmed, underprepared, or maybe a little panicked, that's okay. Most coaches have shared your experience and lived to discover the joys of coaching youth players.

Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Softball is for anyone who has generously volunteered his or her time to work with young players. Whether you know little about the game or you have vast knowledge of it, this book has something for you. Teaching a seven-year-old to bat, pitch, and throw for the first time can be a challenge no matter what your background. This book provides the tools and knowledge you need to survive the first day of practice, to get your team up to speed, and to carry you through to the end of the season. Armed with this book, your sense of humor, and lots of patience, you can ensure that the youngsters on your team are having fun and learning something new.

Chapter 1 walks you through the basics of equipment and rules and how to start the season off right with a parent–player meeting. In chapter 2, you'll learn how to make the most of your practices and how to keep them fun for the kids. Chapters 3 through 6 tell you everything you need to know to teach the essential skills, such as batting, baserunning, throwing, fielding, pitching, and catching. Each of these skill chapters includes 10 drills that will make learning basic skills fun for your players. In each of these chapters, you will find beginner, intermediate, and advanced drills so you can choose the ones that are appropriate for your players' skill level. Chapter 7 covers specific offensive and defensive strategies for effective on-field execution, and chapter 8 provides everything you need to prepare for games and to manage them with confidence.

Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Softball can help you plan every detail of your season. You can also bring this book to the field with you and use it to find some drills just before practice. The book works with your schedule and provides you with the knowledge and support you need to turn your gaggle of girls into a real softball team. It can also help ensure that you and your players have fun along the way.

Acknowledgments

Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Softball is a product of years spent coaching our three daughters and their teammates. Experiencing the differences and the constants involved in coaching our oldest daughter's competitive 12U team and our youngest daughter's T-Ball team has provided us with valuable insight. Along the way, a number of individuals have provided their support and shared their knowledge; we thank them all for contributing, in various ways, to this book.

We thank our coaching mentor, the founding coach of the Washington Angels, Tammy Hutchison, for trusting us with the name "Washington Angels" and for encouraging and supporting us in our role as head coaches. Your words of encouragement, your wisdom, and your insight into life's true priorities have kept us on the road to success and helped us to create memories we'll cherish forever.

We thank the coaching staff, Traye Radach and Calvin Nash, and the young ladies who make up the Washington Angels 96 team for providing many wonderful learning and teaching opportunities. And we thank the young models who posed for the book for enduring the first 100-degree day of the year so that we could get the right shots.

We thank the coaching colleagues who not only supported us from the beginning, but also helped us to break down and simplify many of the skills and drills and to refine the progressions contained in *Survival Guide for Coaching Youth Softball*, including Kelly Richards, Larry Lozier, Greg Gott, Terry Storm, Pete Steiner, Mark Weber, and many others.

Thanks to the BCERT Class 08-01, who listened painfully and with attentive ears to drafts of parts of this book. Thank you for your patience and understanding during those hard five weeks.

And lastly we thank the Tri-Cities Girls Fastpitch Softball Association (TCGFSA) for their support over the years, for the equipment, and for the use of the facilities. You have helped to make dreams come true for countless players.

Key to Diagrams

-  Any player
-  Any player who starts with ball
-  Any player relocates to this position
-  Batter
-  Batter who starts with ball
-  Runner
-  Pitcher who starts with ball
-  Catcher
-  Shortstop
-  First-base player
-  Second-base player
-  Third-base player
-  Left fielder
-  Center fielder
-  Right fielder
-  Coach (or assistant coach or parent)

 Softball

 Cone

 Empty bucket

 Bucket of balls

 Batting tee

 Backstop

 Path of runner or fielder

 Path of hit

 Path of pitch, throw, or toss

Contents

Drill Finder vi

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

Key to Diagrams xiii

1	Help! Where Do I Start?	1
2	Organizing Your Team Practices	21
3	Teaching Offensive Skills With 10 Simple Drills	33
4	Teaching Receiving and Throwing Skills With 10 Simple Drills	67

5	Teaching Fielding Skills With 10 Simple Drills	93
6	Teaching Pitching and Catching Skills With 10 Simple Drills	119
7	On-Field Execution	147
8	Game Time! What's My Role Again?	161

About the Authors 175



Help!

Where Do I Start?

Maybe you walked into the local parks and recreation department intending to sign your young daughter up to play softball, but you walked out with a title: Coach. Afterward, as you sat in your car with a roster of unfamiliar names, a rule book, and a confused look on your face, you may have been wondering, *What just happened?* Or maybe you decided that you should do some volunteer work in your community, so you answered an ad in the local newspaper for volunteer youth softball coaches. However you became a coach—by choice or by coercion—you were probably thinking, *How difficult could it be? Doesn't everyone know how to play ball?*

On the first day of practice, though, your sense of calm may evaporate when you realize that one player doesn't know which hand her glove goes on and that another player doesn't know which side of the plate she should bat from! No matter what the situation looks like on the first day of practice, the team needs someone to rise above it all and implement positive learning experiences. That someone is you—the coach. As you watch your players chasing butterflies in the outfield and making sand castles in the infield, you must have confidence that you can help these girls become a team. You are responsible for helping the players develop their individual physical skills, teaching them good sporting behavior, and making sure they have fun every step of the way.

Coach's Equipment

Your league's rules and the age group of the players you are coaching will determine how much and what type of equipment you need. The first thing you should do as a coach is to see what equipment is provided by your local league. The following list identifies equipment that is usually required as well as some equipment that is nice to have.

- **Softballs.** Your league will probably give you a few balls to start out with. However, most coaches discover that they can never have too many softballs. In addition to throwing and hitting, you can use softballs as markers on the field in place of cones. The younger the players, the fewer softballs you will need. One bucket of balls (one to two dozen balls) will be enough if your players are under 8 years old. For players older than 8 years, you should have two to three buckets of balls because you may need to set up more batting stations.

Softballs used in youth leagues are normally one of two sizes: 11 inches or 12 inches. The 11-inch softballs are for players 10 years old and under, and the 12-inch balls are for players older than 10. However, most leagues for players who are 8 years old and under will require 11-inch rubber balls, which are called spongy or softie balls. You should probably get some softie balls even if your league doesn't require them. These balls are more expensive, but the safety factor makes them well worth the cost. Softie balls are especially useful when kids are first learning to play the game. Using softie balls enables the players to build confidence in their skills before you put them out there with hard balls.

- **Wiffle balls.** Leagues normally do not provide Wiffle balls. However, these balls are relatively inexpensive, easy to transport, and well worth the purchase. Wiffle balls come in many sizes (golf ball size, baseball size, and softball size). You may want to have up to a dozen of each size. During live pitching drills, you can use the Wiffle balls at random. This helps the players improve their eye-hand coordination and makes them focus harder on the ball. Wiffle balls are also useful because they allow young players to get lots of swings without the risk of serious injury. However, keep in mind that the sting left from getting hit with a Wiffle ball on bare skin or other sensitive parts can be quite surprising and painful—and the players may find it quite humorous when it happens to the coach.

- **Bats.** In most local leagues, bats will be provided by the league. If you are coaching a team in the eight-and-under age group, the most critical factor you must consider is this: The bats must be light enough for the players to swing. Because of the size and weight differences of the players, the bats provided by the league may not be suitable for all players. If the bats provided by the league are not the appropriate size for your players, ask the league for some additional bats. You may also speak to the players' parents to see if this is an investment that they are willing to make. Generally, six bats of various sizes and weights should be enough to get your team through the season.
- **Batting tee.** Most leagues provide each team with at least one tee, but if your league has extras, see if you can get at least one more. If you need to purchase a tee, you should be able to get one at a sporting goods store or at discount stores for around \$20. The more you spend, the better the equipment will be. However, kids can destroy a \$20 tee as fast as they can destroy a \$120 tee, so opting for a less expensive model makes sense when you are coaching the younger age groups. For older players—who can regularly hit the ball on top of the tee instead of hitting the tee—you may want to buy a more expensive tee that includes different position options (such as inside and outside).
- **Helmets.** Most leagues will provide helmets, but they may provide only a limited number of helmets for each team (e.g., six helmets per team). Helmets are required for each offensive player who is not in the dugout. This includes the batter, the player warming up in the batting circle (on-deck batter), and all base runners. So, in the worst-case scenario—or best case if your team is up to bat—you will have the bases loaded, a batter up, and a batter on deck, which means you'll have one extra helmet (if your team has a total of six helmets). You may want to let the parents know where they can purchase a helmet for their daughters. Helmets can cost as little as \$20 at your local Walmart or sporting goods store. The best scenario is for each player to have her own helmet (for sizing as well as hygiene reasons). Each league has requirements on what types of helmets are authorized, so check with your league to make sure you are purchasing the correct type. Generally, if the helmet has a NOCSAE (National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment) stamp on it, then the helmet will meet the league's requirements.

- **Rubber bases.** Most softball games are played on a field that already has bases. However, if your league does not have access to enough softball fields, you may be required to play some of your games on a universal field where no bases are provided. If that is the case, the league should provide the coach with portable throw-down bases. The availability of softball fields for your practices may be limited as well, leaving you with the option of practicing on a universal field or at a park. If you are playing in a grassy park, you will need something to designate the bases. This could be rubber bases or cardboard cutouts painted white. If the league does not provide rubber bases, you should purchase them on your own. They usually come in a set with a throw-down pitching rubber. You can find a complete set at most sporting goods stores for around \$10.
- **Backstops.** You may need some backstops, or pop-up protective nets. Backstops are primarily used for hitting balls into but can also be used to pitch and throw into. Portable backstops can cost up to \$100, but are well worth the price when considering most field officials discourage hitting into fences. Backstops are not essential, but they do give players a chance to practice hitting without having to chase balls all over the field.
- **Coaching supplies.** You will need a folder or planner to hold your lineup sheets, practice plans, contact information, medical releases, and notes. Dry-erase boards work great in the dugout. Many of the boards sold at sporting goods stores are two sided: One side is for the lineup, and the other side has a template of a softball diamond. This can be used to show the players where they need to be on defense. You will also need a score book to keep track of games. Any score book will work, as long as it has enough room for you to list 15 players in the batting lineup. Again, the local sporting goods store should carry these books. If possible, designate one person (someone who will attend every game) to keep the book at all of your games. This person should read the instructions in the score book to learn how to keep accurate stats.
- **First aid kit.** Most injuries on the field can be taken care of by using the acronym RICE (rest, ice, compression, and elevation). Remember that you are not a medic, only a first responder. If a player sustains an injury that cannot be taken care of with the RICE method, you *must* notify emergency medical services immediately. Because softball is played outdoors, you may not have easy access

to a phone. Therefore, you should always have a mobile phone with you during practices and games.

At a minimum, you need to have three instant ice packs (the kind you break and shake) and two rolls of athletic tape and gauze in your first aid kit. If you can't find the instant ice packs (or in case you run out), keep some Ziploc bags in your kit so you can add ice to them for a makeshift ice pack. Ice packs can be used for a twisted ankle or for a bruise that results when a player gets hit with a ball. The gauze and tape can be used for those nasty sliding burns or minor cuts. You will also need some Band-Aids to cover small scrapes. Band-Aids with famous characters from kids' shows are usually a hit. Of course, once the girls know that you have cool Band-Aids in the first aid kit, you may see an increase in the number of boo-boos that need Band-Aids. Your kit should also include Wet Ones or some type of cleaning solution to remove dirt and bacteria from open sores and cuts. You'll also want a bottle of sunscreen in the kit.

- **Catching gear.** Most leagues will supply catcher's gear for the younger ages; however, this gear may be old, and some of the straps may be missing. If you must purchase catcher's gear, go down to your local sporting goods store and bring along the girl who will be playing catcher for your team. This will ensure that you get her the proper size. Catching gear consists of a set of leg protectors, a chest protector, and a mask that has a throat protector. The connecting buckles of the leg protectors connect on the outside of the leg. Knee savers, which are pads that go behind the calves of the catcher, are another recommended piece of equipment.
- **Gear bags.** You will need a duffle bag to carry the catcher's equipment and the first aid kit. You will also need a mesh bag to carry the other equipment. A bucket can be used to carry the balls; the bucket is also useful when you need something to sit on so you can catch your breath.
- **Water cooler and ice chest.** During the spring and summer, hot days and blazing sun can cause rapid dehydration. Some fields have water fountains; however, most do not. You should have a cooler filled with ice water for drinking. You will also need an ice chest that can be filled with water and ice and at least a dozen cloths. The wet cloths can be placed over the head or neck of players to cool them down. Because the cloths will be dunked back into the ice chest, make sure that each cooler is clearly marked so the cloths don't end up in the drinking water.

Kids' Equipment

In general, the kids' equipment is purchased by the parents; however, you should check to see if your local league provides any personal equipment before you tell the parents to run out and purchase new equipment. The only required piece of equipment is a softball glove. Any other items described in this section are optional, but some are nice to have for safety reasons. You will want to go over the items at your first parent–player meeting. This will prevent players from showing up for practice wearing their dads' old first-base mitts that are four sizes too big. To help keep the kids and the dugout organized, ask your players to put their names on their equipment.

- **Uniforms and practice clothes.** Game uniforms, which usually consist of matching T-shirts, are usually provided by the league. If your league does not provide uniforms, you should talk to the players' parents at your first meeting (see "Parent–Player Meeting" section near the end of this chapter) and determine what type of uniform everyone can afford. The uniform top should be tucked in at all times. "Dress for success" is more than just words. The way players present themselves has a direct impact on how well they play. Depending on the weather, shorts or sweatpants can be worn as the uniform bottoms. You will also want the players to be dressed appropriately for practices. If possible, have the players wear the same type of clothing for practices that they wear for the games—that is, T-shirts and shorts, or long-sleeved shirts and sweatpants. Players should avoid wearing tank tops or spaghetti-strap tops. This will help prevent sunburn and scrapes and cuts to the upper body when sliding.
- **Accessories.** Every player needs a visor. Not only do visors keep the sun out of players' eyes, but they can also keep the body cooler during sunny days. Players also need to keep their hair out of their face. This can be done with a visor or hair bands. Players should not wear any jewelry (earrings, bracelets, necklaces, watches, rings, or metal hair clips) during practice or games. Most rule books state that players cannot have any jewelry exposed while playing. The only exception is a medical alert bracelet. In this case, the best option is to have the player (or parent) attach the alert to a necklace. The necklace can then be tucked and secured under the shirt, minimizing the chance of the necklace getting caught on anything.