

# SOFTBALL

## SKILLS & DRILLS

SECOND EDITION



**THE BEST-SELLING  
GUIDE ON THE BASICS  
OF THE GAME**

**JUDI GARMAN • MICHELLE GROMACKI**

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WUDI GARMAN  
MICHELLE BRODIAKI



HUMAN KINETICS



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Human Kinetics

Web site: [www.HumanKinetics.com](http://www.HumanKinetics.com)

*United States:* Human Kinetics  
P.O. Box 5076  
Champaign, IL 61825-5076  
800-747-4457  
e-mail: [humank@hkusa.com](mailto:humank@hkusa.com)

*Canada:* Human Kinetics  
475 Devonshire Road Unit 100  
Windsor, ON N8Y 2L5  
800-465-7301 (in Canada only)  
e-mail: [info@hkcanada.com](mailto:info@hkcanada.com)

*Europe:* Human Kinetics  
107 Bradford Road  
Stanningley  
Leeds LS28 6AT, United Kingdom  
+44 (0) 113 255 5665  
e-mail: [hk@hkeurope.com](mailto:hk@hkeurope.com)

*Australia:* Human Kinetics  
57A Price Avenue  
Lower Mitcham, South Australia 5062  
08 8372 0999  
e-mail: [info@hkaustralia.com](mailto:info@hkaustralia.com)

*New Zealand:* Human Kinetics  
P.O. Box 80  
Torrens Park, South Australia 5062  
0800 222 062  
e-mail: [info@hknewzealand.com](mailto:info@hknewzealand.com)

*This book is dedicated to all those who pick up a bat and ball and begin to dream—  
have fun and may your dreams come true!*

Catch the ball and throw it to a target. Hit the ball. Run the bases and score runs. Championship teams and successful players execute these fundamentals consistently and accurately. How do they do it? They understand the fundamentals and the game, and they develop their skills through practice, practice, practice. Using relevant and specific drills, they efficiently develop the necessary skills to be a winner!

Here is a book to help you reach your potential. *Softball Skills & Drills* is a comprehensive treatment of the fundamentals of softball. Regardless of the level of play, the fundamentals are the same. This book provides the skills, drills, and strategies that players and teams need in order to be the best they can be. It provides valuable information for coaches, players, and players' parents.

Each chapter starts with the basics and then progresses to advanced skills. The fundamentals are broken down and explained simply but in depth. Skill summaries and coaching tips are highlighted as keys for learning and teaching. The drills presented emphasize and teach the various components of each skill. Progressions for learning are included, as well as additional drills that can be used to provide variety and opportunities to practice and refine each skill. Coaches can use the drill finder to help organize practices. Photos and diagrams help clarify and show the skills. This book can also be used as a textbook for classes on softball coaching theory.

This second updated edition adds current theories, new drills, and expanded details. Adding their expertise to Hall-of-Fame coach Judi Garman are Cal State Fullerton coaches Michelle Gromacki and Dee Dee Weiman-Kingsbury. New topics include equipment selection, new technology, pitch recognition, and reading the pitcher. A new chapter on team offense examines game situations and strategies for scoring runs. Because pitching is the key to the game, we have expanded that section, adding more pitches and strategies as well as addressing composure on the mound.

The book starts with *offense* because the goal of the game is to score runs! The first chapter focuses on hitting, which is one of the most difficult challenges in all of sport. Topics include bat selection, basic mechanics, and corrections for common hitting problems. We also examine the mental aspects of hitting, including the advanced skills of pitch recognition and reading the pitcher (picking pitches). Drills are included for both individual and team practice. Chapter 2 covers playing small ball with bunting and slap hitting. Chapter 3 covers baserunning and techniques for stealing and sliding. Improving speed and knowing when to run are keys. Chapter 4 is new and covers team offense: game situations and strategies along with drills for situational hitting.



From chapter 5 on, the focus is *defense*. Defense involves throwing and fielding ground balls and fly balls. Chapter 5 covers how to make strong and accurate throws. Different positions and situations call for quick releases and various types of throws. The information in this chapter helps players learn how to be accurate and consistent whether throwing overhand, underhand, sidearm, or with various flips.

Catching begins with the care and selection of the glove and how to use it to make routine and desperation catches. Chapter 6 covers fielding ground balls—from gathering to scooping to executing backhands and diving with the goal of catching every ball. Chapters 7 and 8 look closely at the responsibilities and tactics of infield and outfield players.

Softball is a team game, and all nine players must work together. Chapter 9 examines how players work together to form a successful defensive team. Specific team defensive plays are covered: bunt and slap defense, double plays, pickoffs, relays, cutoffs, rundowns, and the ever challenging first-and-third play. Defensive adjustments and strategies are reviewed.

The pitcher dominates in softball, and pitching is the name of the game in chapters 10 through 13. The basics of the delivery and how to throw with accuracy and speed are explained in detail. The specific pitches covered are the fastball, drop, rise, curve, screwball, and change up. Because the pitcher must learn not only how but when to throw each pitch, guidelines for game management are included. The difference between a pitcher and a thrower is what's upstairs. How much to practice, proper warm-up, mixing pitches, maintaining control, and composure on the mound are also addressed. A pitcher must also be able to field her position, and chapter 13 details how to do so. And of course, a good pitcher needs a good catcher; because this role is so important, the last chapter is devoted to skills and drills for developing the catcher.

Use this book to develop your skills and increase your understanding of the game of softball. Whether players are participating in a local league, playing in the College World Series, or pursuing a gold medal, the consistent, proper execution of the fundamentals is the key to success. Practice hard, play smart, and have fun. A wonderful world awaits you.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some may think of softball as just a bat and a ball and believe it's only a game, but those for whom this game has opened up another world know that it is much more. Growing up playing ball on the Saskatchewan prairies, I had no inkling of the doors that softball would open for me.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to those who helped make my dreams come true:

To my mother, **Ruth Garman**, who passed on her love of sport to her daughters. She taught me how to play and was always my biggest fan. Society and the times never allowed her the opportunity to have the athletic experiences we have had, but she made sure her daughters could experience the joy of competition. She proudly tells folks she has two daughters in their respective Sports Halls of Fame. (My sister Lorraine Klippel is in the LPGA Hall of Fame as a teaching pro.)

To the **Saskatoon Imperials Fastpitch Team** and manager **Gail Hopkins**, who gave me my start as a player. We twice were Canadian Champions and played in the 1970 World Championships in Japan.

To athletic directors **Fred Owens** (Golden West College) and **Leanne Grotke** (Cal State Fullerton), who hired me and gave me the opportunity to build two programs into national champions.

To all the **colleagues** who shared their knowledge so we could grow together and improve the game.

To the superb, talented **athletes and assistants**, who really made it happen.

And to **Michelle Gromacki**, my former player, assistant coach, replacement at Cal State Fullerton, and the co-author of this edition.

To **JoAnn Zwanziger**, whose support over the years has allowed me to pursue my dreams.

Just a bat and a ball? Never. My hope is that this book helps you find success. May your journey be as blessed as mine.

*Judi Garman*



Special thanks to . . .

**Judi Garman**, for believing in me. She gave me my first coaching opportunity and continues to support my career. Judi has had a huge impact on my life and my career. Thank you for supporting my every turn as a coach and caring about me and my family.

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**Coaches and players** and all of my past and current assistant coaches, for keeping me on my toes and allowing me to grow under my own direction. Learning is continuous, therefore, many of you were at the mercy of my mistakes. Thank you all!

**My family**, who stuck by me during my playing years and supported me in every way when my future was uncertain. Thank you for the continued support in my coaching career. I love you all.

*Michelle Gromacki*





# KEY TO DIAGRAMS

F

Fielder

T

Tosser

H

Hitter

R

Runner

P

Pitcher

C

Catcher

1B

First-base player

2B

Second-base player

3B

Third-base player

SS

Shortstop

LF

Left fielder

CF

Center fielder

RF

Right fielder



Path of hit ball



Path of player



Path of throw

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# 1

CHAPTER

# HITTING



Hitting has been described as the most difficult task in all of sport. When a softball pitcher releases the ball, she is only 30 to 40 feet from the batter. The best college pitchers can throw 65 to 68 miles per hour, which is equivalent to a 90-mile-per-hour pitch in baseball. At that speed, the ball reaches the plate in .39 seconds. Factor in the various pitches that can be thrown (drop, rise, curve, screwball, changeup, and variations of those pitches), and the difficulty of hitting becomes obvious. Players aspire to a batting average of .300, which means that they fail to hit safely 7 times out of 10. Hitters find it difficult to get enough hitting practice. One estimate is that the average high school player practices hitting only 3½ hours per season. Meanwhile, the pitcher is throwing over 200 pitches a day.

To be good, consistent hitters, players must find a way to work on their hitting skills every day. Players should strive to become relentless competitors who concede nothing, never give in, and have no wasted at-bats. Coaches and players should keep a new stat: a Q average. Quality at-bats and the ability to get the job done (by advancing runners and scoring runs) should be celebrated and rewarded.

## BAT SELECTION

The right bat makes it easier to hit well. Each player should choose a bat that's the right weight, length, and size for her and that fits her budget. The bat is an extension of the arms; it must feel right. It must be of a size and weight that the player can swing hard and can easily control throughout the entire swing.

As a general rule, bigger, stronger players prefer a heavier bat for maximum power. Smaller players usually benefit from a lighter bat that allows greater bat speed. Batters often use a bat that is too heavy, which leads to mechanical problems and sometimes injury. To determine whether a bat is too heavy, the player should grip it with one hand at the knob and hold it straight out parallel to the ground at shoulder height. If the bat wavers, or if the player cannot hold that position for at least a minute, the bat is too heavy. As weight increases, bat control usually decreases. In terms of length, the shorter the bat, the more control a hitter will have, but she will sacrifice power. The longer the lever, the more power the hitter will have, though with less control. The bat must also be long enough to allow full plate coverage when the player swings. Can she hit a ball hard off a tee placed low on the outside corner?

Most bats are built with a specific ratio of length and weight. Youth bats range in weight from 16 to 22 ounces (453 to 624 g) and in length from 25 to 31 inches (63 to 79 cm). College players usually swing a bat that weighs 22 to 26 ounces (624 to 737 g) and 32 or 34 inches (81 or 86 cm) long. Manufacturers use negative numbers to show the weight-to-length ratio (e.g., -9, -10, and so on). The length subtracted by the negative number is the weight of the bat. This means, for example, that a 31-inch bat with a -9 ratio weighs 22 ounces. Selecting the correct weight really depends on two critical factors: strength and hitting style.

Because the player will be swinging the bat many times, it must feel comfortable in her hands. The size of the hands will determine the thickness of the handle that a hitter can grip and manipulate comfortably.

The barrel size and location and the size of the sweet spot are other attributes to consider. The sweet spot, or "center of percussion," is the place where contact with the ball gives the hitter a good feeling rather than a sting. It is also the place that sends the ball the farthest. The bigger the barrel, the larger the hitting surface and the larger the sweet



spot. The smaller the hitting area, the more bat control required to be successful. A bottle bat provides a large hitting surface and is an excellent bat for bunting and for beginners.

The type of grip that bat manufacturers put on the handle of their bats also affects the way the bat feels when the ball is hit. Leather or synthetic leather gives a tackier feel for a surer grip. Rubber grips absorb more of the shock on impact, and cushioned grips decrease the shock even more.

The composition of the bat helps determine how far the ball goes when hit. New materials, with names that seem to change every year, allow manufacturers to make bats with very thin walls. But rules vary, so players must be sure that the bat is stamped “Approved” for use in their league. The two primary categories of materials are aluminum alloys and graphite or titanium lined. Aluminum bats come in a variety of alloys, each with a different weight, but generally aluminum alloys are thinner and more durable and have a larger sweet spot. They come in single-layer or double-layer construction. Double-layer bats offer more durability and power because the ball rebounds off the bat with more authority. Graphite and titanium are sometimes added to thinner-wall aluminum bats to decrease weight and therefore increase the batter’s hitting speed. The addition of these materials also reduces vibration and the sting a batter may feel on contact with the ball.

The thinner the wall, the greater the trampoline effect. The bat gives at contact with the ball and propels it away faster. The greater the trampoline effect, the greater distance the ball can go. And a bat with thin walls dents more easily. College players often get a new bat each year. We recommend that players save a good bat for games and use an old bat for practice. Players should use softer balls for hitting practice, if possible, and should never use their good bat on the hard plastic balls at commercial batting cages.

## HITTING MECHANICS

Many philosophies are used in teaching players how to hit. Hitting coaches have their own ways of saying things, and many batters have distinctive styles. Through computer and video analysis, we are able to break down the swing and study the basic elements that all successful hitters use.

### Grip

When gripping the bat, the hitter should apply pressure with the fingers, not the palms. She grips the bat where the calluses are. The bottom hand (left hand for a right-handed batter) controls the bat, and the top hand supports the bat loosely. The bottom hand grips the bat as a person would grip a golf club (see figure 1.1). The top hand is placed against the bottom hand with the door-knocking knuckles (middle knuckles) of both hands in a straight line. The arms are not crossed. The bat is gripped loosely—no white knuckles—and the wrists have flexibility. Some hitters curl the index finger of the top hand so that it only lightly touches the bat. For better bat control, the player may choke up on the bat by moving both hands several inches up from the knob. Of course, a choke grip means a shorter bat and less power.



**Figure 1.1** Hitting grip.



## Hand Position

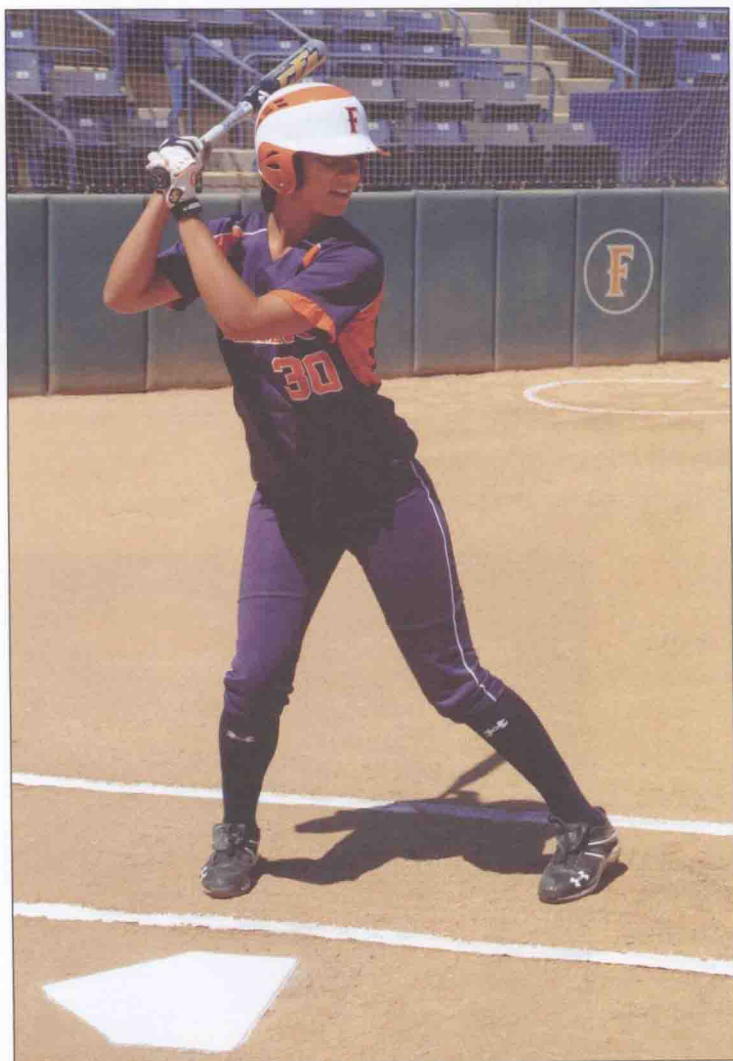
The hands start close to the body, about 3 to 4 inches (7.5 to 10 cm) in front of the chest and between the shoulders. Both elbows are down, and the shoulders are tension free. Some players prefer a little movement back and forth with the hands and shoulders to keep them loose. We call this position the power position, or power alley.

## Stance

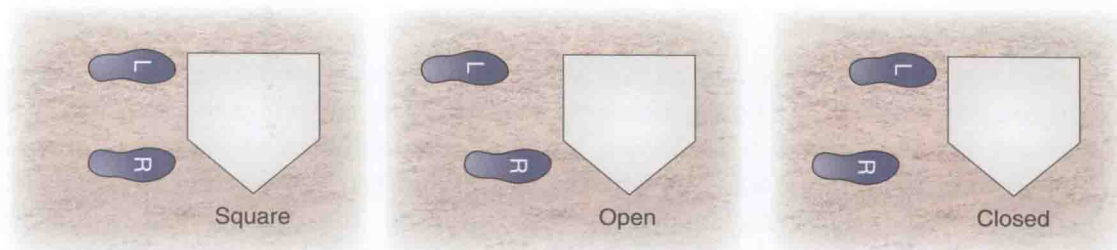
A strong and stable athletic stance is the foundation for power throughout the entire swing. Both feet are pointed straight ahead toward the plate. The body is upright, and the hips, head, and eyes are level. The shoulders are basically level; the front shoulder is aimed at the pitcher and slightly down. The batter then turns the front hip and shoulder back slightly (inward) toward the catcher as if the hands are being pulled back by a rubber band. Weight is transferred down and back into the back side of the body for power. The feet are about 4 inches (10 cm) greater than shoulder-width apart, positioned outside the hips so that most of the body weight is on the inside of the legs and the balls of the feet. The knees are inside the feet and slightly bent (see figure 1.2). The player can hold a volleyball between the knees to get a feel for the correct position. A proper stance allows the hitter to have good rhythm and to shift easily back toward the catcher and then forward to the pitcher. To feel the power from their legs, players can stand barefoot in a sand pit and swing.

Three types of stances describe the position of the feet (see figure 1.3). All other elements of the stance described earlier remain the same.

- **Square stance**—Both feet are the same distance from the plate. This stance permits the best plate coverage and does not give the pitcher a read on the hitter. This is also the most balanced athletic position.
- **Open stance**—The front foot is two to three inches farther from the plate than the back foot. This stance produces a shorter swing and poorer coverage of the outside corner, but both eyes can see the ball better, and the more compact swing may allow the batter to make better contact.
- **Closed stance**—The front foot is two to three inches closer to the plate than the back foot. The batter will have more difficulty getting around on an inside pitch but will be better able to drive an outside pitch to right field.



**Figure 1.2** Hitting stance.



**Figure 1.3** Square, open, and closed stances.

### ***Position in the Box***

The batter's position in the box depends on the skills of both the batter and the pitcher. The best position is the one that gives the hitter maximum plate coverage as she adjusts based on the type of hitter she is and the type of pitcher she is facing. The farther back the hitter is in the box, the more time she has to swing the bat. If the pitcher is very fast, the batter can move back in order to have more time to get the bat around. Against a slower pitcher, the batter should move up in the box if she is well ahead of the pitch with her swing. If the ball has a lot of movement, a hitter who stays back allows the ball to break even more, adding to the pitcher's advantage. The up position allows the batter to hit the pitch before it moves a lot and is particularly effective on drop balls. However, another strategy against a really strong drop-ball pitcher is to stay back in the box so the pitcher has to change her release point to bring the ball up to get a called strike. This may flatten out her drop ball. A team might try both to see what works best against that pitcher.

If the batter crowds the plate, she will have good outside coverage but will have to be very quick to get the bat out in front for an inside pitch. Standing too far from the plate will make the hitter vulnerable to outside pitches and curves. Against an effective pitcher who has great command of both sides of the plate, advanced players may stand in a position that takes away half of the plate. By crowding the plate, they can look for and hit the outside pitch while holding up on any inside pitch. Conversely, they can give up the outside pitch by standing back from the plate, thus going for pitches on the inside half of the plate. Batters can also set up to hit the ball where they want. If a pitcher is pitching you inside, back off the plate at the last moment and hit inside out to the right side.

### ***Focus***

The player must see the ball to hit it. Players should have their eyes checked to be sure they have the best vision possible. Both eyes are used when hitting. In the initial stance, the head drops slightly and turns enough so that the back eye can also see the pitch. Eyebrows should be level. Hitters can check if they are using the back eye by shutting the front eye and looking for the release point of the pitch with only the back eye.

The eyes can focus intently on an object for only a few seconds before the image becomes less clear. Using an eye shift helps the batter see the ball more clearly as the pitcher releases it. In the initial stance, the batter uses a soft focus with the eyes relaxed. She focuses on the pitcher's chest or shoulders with a soft, or general, focus. As the pitcher's hands separate, the batter shifts the eyes to the release point and goes from a soft focus to a hard focus while waiting to pick up the ball. The batter uses a look or glare that says she is going to attack the ball. She then tracks the ball all the way from the release to the contact point.



## Stride

The stride is a step toward the pitcher with the front foot as the pitch is delivered (see figure 1.4). It serves as a timing mechanism for the swing and brings the body to a balanced foundation to hit from. During the stride, the batter must maintain balance. Therefore, the step is short—only 3 to 4 inches (7.5 to 10 cm)! The hitter does not want

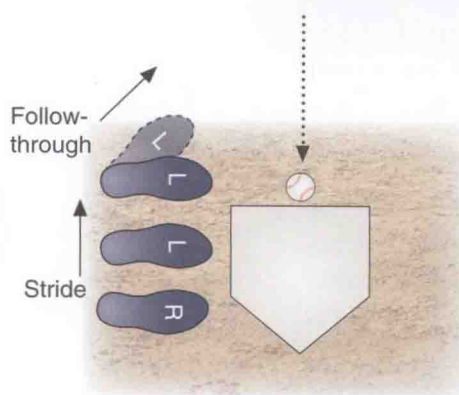
her center of gravity or head to move. The stride should be a glide or slide forward toward the pitcher. Key words for the stride are *stay centered, short, soft, and eyebrows level*. The front toe stays closed, with soft pressure on the inside ball of the foot, and the head moves little or not at all. During the stride, the hips are cocked slightly; the front shoulder, hip, and knee are turned slightly toward the catcher. The player can think of her belly button as the lens of a camera that is pointed at the catcher. Weight remains on the inside of the back foot. Have batters hold the bat on their belly button to check their turn back.

On the stride, the weight stays on the back leg. The knee is over the back foot and does not turn. The player can practice the correct form by placing a chair against the back side of the back knee. She strides while making sure that the back leg stays in contact with the chair. The

batter must focus on the release point during the stride. The stride must be consistent and to the same spot on every pitch, regardless of pitch location, because the player starts the stride before she can identify what pitch is coming.

Timing determines when the batter steps. The step should be initiated early enough to be slow and deliberate, not jerky. As the pitcher goes forward (or the front knee goes up), the hitter lifts the front heel, the front knee turns in, and the weight and hands go back. The stepping foot should be down right before the pitch is released, allowing enough time for the batter to feel balanced and to complete the swing. The front heel must be down before the ball is within 10 feet (3 m) of the batter. The batter can still hit the ball if she steps too early, but she cannot hit it if she steps too late. Beginners often commit during the windup. As players practice and develop quicker hands, they learn to delay their commitment to the stride until they can clearly see the ball. Remember that once the batter strides forward and plants the front toe, the toe will start to open up on its own when the batter starts her swing. It is natural then for the hips, knees, and toe to follow each other. Coaches should videotape their players and show them the timing element and what it means to be late or early. The coach may ask a batter, “Where are you getting late?” and “How can you get on time?”

On the stride, the hands go back to the launch position so that the bat is behind the back leg (see figure 1.5). As when using a hammer, golf club, or tennis racket, the player must first go back in order to generate the stretch (referred to as loading) and power needed to go forward (think of winding a rubber band to create torque). The torso, hands, and arms go back as one unit. In softball, the hands go back only 3 to 4 inches (7.5 to 10 cm). The farther the hands go from center, the longer and slower the swing. The batter cannot hit a ball above the hands, so the hands stay at the top of the strike zone. (If hitters drop their hands, they can never hit a rise ball.) As the hands go back, they cock as if preparing to hammer a nail with the top hand. Cocking is *not* a hitch (i.e., a drop of the hands). The end of the bat will come close to the head, but the player must be careful not to wrap the bat around behind her. If the hitter takes the bat back too far, her body will twist, and her shoulders will come off line. The arms are bent in a 90-degree position with both elbows pointed down. The head does not move, and



**Figure 1.4** Hitting stride.