

# THE KEY TO SOFTBALL...

with Jim Ramsey

**Quick quiz:** Complete this sentence: "The key to softball is..."

Where does your mind go first? Something about batting? Something about how you play? How your team plays? Is it what it takes to win, or something else? That's the beauty of an open-ended question: it can accommodate a wide range of interpretations.

In the New York Times #1 best-seller, "The Book of Basketball" by Bill Simmons (ESPN Books), one of the topics covered is "The Secret." It stems from a comment Isiah Thomas made to reporters about his 1989 NBA Champion Detroit Pistons team. Simmons partially re-quoted from Thomas in the book "The Franchise" by Cameron Stauth, then asked him to explain it in greater detail several years later. Since basketball and softball are both team sports, some insight transfers over. Here's a portion of that discussion about "The Secret."

"It's hard not to be selfish. The art of winning is complicated by statistics. You gotta fight that, find a way around it, and I think we have... lots of times, on our team, you can't tell who the best player in the game was. 'Cause everybody did something good. That's what made us so good. The other team has to worry about stopping eight or nine people instead of two or three. It's the only way to win. That's the way the game was invented.... Year after year, the championship team prevailed because it got along and everyone committed themselves to their roles... The secret of basketball is that it's not about basketball."

Until that last sentence, this quote could have been about softball. All championship teams do two things... win games, and enjoy the experience.

Maybe the same way the secret of basketball is that it's not about basketball, the key to softball is that it's not about softball. That got the wheels turning. In the dead of winter, I hopped to a message board on the very popular and well-respected website softballfans.com and asked people to reply to the open-ended question: "The key to softball is..." For about three weeks in December and January, the thread collected about 100 replies and 2,000 views, not bad for the winter holiday season. Anyone who is reading and posting on a softball site between Christmas and New Year's must be really into the sport. Given that level of passion, and the variety of players represented on such boards, this created an appropriate statistical sample and cross-section.

Forty-nine board members authored more than 100 responses. Some guys posted more than once and listed more than one key. Those answers were generated by players from 22 states, blanketing the country from New York to Florida, South Dakota to Texas, and Washington to California. Some of those who replied had been on the board for just a few months with a couple dozen posts under their belts. Fourteen of the 49 had more than 2,500 posts. Two guys, both board members since 2003, were well past 11,000 and 18,000 posts. We'll hear from them later. Those statistics bear out the conventional wisdom that message boards have great reach and depth,

and on this site, quite a dedicated following.

Cataloging the serious answers, what did we learn? As to be expected, people love hitting. Various forms of "good hitting" combined 30 percent of the time for the most popular answer. Two out hits, timely hitting, solid hitting, and the astute "having good hitters at the bottom of your order" were among the answers here.

A close second with 25 percent was various forms of having fun, enjoying friends, and enjoying, ahem, beverages. Many cited the escape. One person wrote, "An hour a day or several on a weekend to leave work behind and hang out."

The third most popular answer with 13 percent, was defense. Playing solid defense, making as few errors as possible, hustling. Just behind defense was fundamentals, mentioned 11 percent of the time. That answer included variations of dedication, and "playing the right way." Also receiving votes: practice, preparation and team chemistry took six percent of the replies, followed by entries such as technology, pitching, "do what you do best," and the insightful comment, "having an understanding wife."

Let's go back to the top of the list, the big keys. More than two thirds of all responses fell into the categories of hitting, fun/friends, and fielding, in that order. One new board member, Mark1980 from Indiana, clicked on all three. He wrote... "Playing solid fundamental defense. For example, OFs not chasing runners at 3rd and holding the batter to 1b to always keep the easy force at 2nd. Consistent and smart offense, which means players knowing their roles. If you don't have power, hit the ball hard and

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low and find a gap. Team chemistry and attitude. Keeping the same group of guys year to year helps tremendously. That guy you play beside on defense- knowing where he will be, knowing his range, etc., helps when you can't practice much. And a player with a crappy attitude brings down everyone and causes drama." Mark1980 is Mark Shelly. He lives and plays in Tipton, Indiana, and plays in Kokomo. He coaches an E-level team that plays in leagues and a few tournaments. Shelly wrote in an email, "The core group of guys have been together 5-6 years. Nearly half of the team is my wife's family, so we all generally have the same philosophy."

A 2,500 post veteran named "Backspin" from California was more succinct and colorful in his post answering the question. "Not taking it too seriously and just enjoying escaping the 'real' world for a bit. Also, having 10 guys who can hit the ever-loving piss out of the ball helps too." "Backspin" in the real world is 31-year-old Cody Walz. In a follow-up email he wrote that he plays rec leagues in Santa Cruz, California. He doesn't play tournaments because of family obligations. As for the makeup of his team, he wrote, "We just want to relax and have a good time, win or lose."

The survey seemed to match conventional wisdom that the

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keys to softball are hitting, fun/friends, and defense. Could it be that simple? I turned to two of the board veterans who answered the original question.

"Big Shep" has been on softballfans.com since 2003 and has authored more than 11,000 posts. Dick Shepherd is a 63-year-old who still plays about 200 games a year on virtually every diamond between Baltimore and Washington. Three years ago, he was a member of a 60+ team that won a gold medal in the Maryland Senior Olympics and he won a bronze in the National Senior Olympics in Louisville. A widower for five years, Shep is enjoying softball for as long as his body allows it. "I'm living the song 'Centerfield' by John Fogerty. Softball has provided me with both a fitness goal and a social group. I hit the gym for three-hour workouts a couple of times a week to keep in shape, and know many of the guys on the teams I play against," Shep wrote. Further along in his email, he wrote about how he keeps the game in perspective. "I've been invited to play senior tournament ball by several teams, but I've been content to play competitive league ball with friends and teammates. I'm a very competitive guy, but senior ball has provided me the insight that the will to win starts with the first pitch and ends with the last out. The more enduring feeling is the spirit of friendship of teammates and opponents, because of our mutual love of the game. We have gained a perspective that being able to play our best is the key to enjoying our sport. To do that, we have learned to respect our teammates, our opponents, and the game. Winning is merely icing on the cake."

The other veteran who responded is "Swingmiss" from California. He also joined the site in 2003 and has written more than 18,000 posts. Behind the keyboard, George Burke is a 43-year-old who lives in Kettle Falls, Washington. He plays about 100-120 games a year, mostly at C-level. Burke said softball "is the thing I love the most out of everything I've ever done." Burke said he applies lessons from softball to other aspects of his life. In an email, he wrote, "If you're going to compete, respect yourself enough to give yourself the best shot at playing at a high level. Train, practice and show up to play in a state of readiness and awareness. Doing that only adds to the spirit of competition. Respecting the game is playing in the correct manner consistent with competition. You stand out with your execution of the fine points of the game, not with your antics. You excel because you respect the game enough to train, and you show class to your opponents because you do not want to detract from the game. The example we show as athletes should serve the game. It's like my coach for Navy Hawaii Marty O'Brien said, 'Do you want to be remembered for your great play, or that you were one of the 'jerks' who won?'"

When you read "Swingmiss's" posts on softballfans.com, his automated signature includes this: "Respect yourself. Respect the game. Respect your opponents, and most of all, respect the swing." Likewise, every one of "Big Shep's" posts includes an automated signature which says "Respect your teammates. Respect your opponents. Respect the Game."

Those two board super-vets promote respect in every single one of some 30,000 posts they have authored. Let's blend their two messages together and take a closer look.

"Respect the swing." Players talk about hitting more than any other topic and it dominates softball DVD titles. To respect the swing, players keep their muscle memory honed all year 'round, as much as various restrictions allow. Players stay in shape and do swing-specific exercises. They do drills to strengthen parts of their swings. They work on hitting skills during batting practice instead of just cranking long balls. Players learn which strikes they hit the best, which ones cause them problems, and adjust accordingly. They learn situational hitting: how to hit to the opposite field, pop a basic base hit, hit a deep fly. They do more than just pound the same sliver of the 90 degrees available. Being a good batter, not just a good hitter, is the culmination of efforts to respect the swing.

"Respect your teammates" and "respect your opponents" go hand-in-hand. It's about how you treat other people, and being a good "citizen of softball." Show up early to minimize the stress on "the guy with the score book." Use your pregame time wisely to warm up thoroughly. Be mentally prepared as

soon as the game starts. During the game, make an effort to do the "little things." Take a turn coaching the base across the infield from your dugout. If you are a catcher, pick up the opponent's bat after a long foul ball or a third out. Be liberal with shouts of "nice play, short," when deserved. Show concern when -anyone- gets injured. You can be a competitor and still show good sportsmanship. Remembering you are playing -with- your opponents while you are playing -against- them is the proper mindset toward this goal.

"Respect the game." That includes everything we just discussed and more, and moves to the next level. There are fans, umpires, tournament directors, vendors, sponsors, officials, park employees who all deserve your respect. On the field, run out every batted ball. Know when to tag up, when to go halfway, when to take off. A smart baserunner can be better than a fast baserunner. Meanwhile, can you tell the difference between playing with style and being a hot dog? Can you keep your emotions in check? Are your responses proper for the situation? Younger players can improve dramatically by seeking and heeding the advice of more experienced players. Older players can "give something back to the game" by sharing their wisdom with younger players.

Softball is a simple yet complicated game, a game of diverse challenges and opportunities. It is a game that can be enjoyed for a lifetime. To get the most out of it, the key to softball is respect. To paraphrase Bill Simmons, "The key to softball is that it's not about softball."

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