

krauses' korner

with Ken Krause • Sponsored by Louisville Slugger

Scaring up Commitment



BOO! Right about now, if all goes right in the publishing world,

Halloween should be on the horizon. It's a big holiday at the Krause household, on a par with the release of the latest season of *Two and a Half Men* on DVD.

While the neighbors put up a few token light strings or window decorations, and maybe carve a pumpkin or two, our house is decked out with a graveyard (complete with coffin), creepy lighting, a "floating" ghost, cobwebs, skulls, posts with runes and whatever other junk we can find.

Much of it is homemade, although I have to admit to getting lazy in my old age and buying more stuff from those Halloween stores that pop up at the beginning of October and disappear as if by magic on November 1 so you can't take back all the items that don't work nearly like they did in the picture on the box.

On the actual night of Halloween it gets even better, with multiple fog machines, sound effects, loud, creepy organ music piped through a 1500 watt sound system, painstakingly carved, candle-lit jack-o-lanterns and full make-up. (Yes, the neighbors hate us.)

For me the night isn't complete until some little kid is too scared to come up the driveway. We've had people tell us their child saw coming to the door as a challenge, and a sign of being a big kid.

So what does all that have to do with softball? It's called commitment. We love Halloween, so we go well beyond what other people are willing to do to make sure our house is a destination for trick or treaters and their parents. As a result, people love coming by our house in the weeks leading up to holiday, and especially the day of.

As a player, if you really want to get somewhere in this game, you have to make more of a commitment than other players. Sure, it's great to be born with talent. It's certainly an advantage. Yet talent alone is not enough to carry you – at least not once you start playing against others who also have talent. At that point, it will be your level of commitment that determines whether you continue to dominate and advance or find yourself passed up, not only by those with equal or better talent, but even by those who have less talent.

Commitment is not something you can buy at your local sporting goods store. It's nothing you can ask for as a birthday present. It's a decision you must make, and then act on. The good thing is, unlike talent (which you have to be born with by definition), anyone can develop a sense of commitment.

I remember seeing a saying that went something like "Winners do things that other players are unwilling to do." (That may not be the exact quote, but give me a break. I'm old.) That's really a good definition of commitment.

What sorts of things do they do? One is they work hard in the off-season. It is definitely a good thing to take some time off after the summer season, both to let your body heal from all those nagging little injuries and to recharge the ol' batteries. Being away from the game for a little while should get that longing to start playing again going.

But by now, you should be back at it. This time of year is great for really breaking things down and reinventing yourself as a new and better player.

Pitchers can be working on adding speed or learning a new pitch without that nagging need to throw strikes, as advised by all the people in the stands and the coaches who have never actually tried to throw a pitch. Pitchers should be chucking the ball all over the place as they learn, in fact. Nothing great ever happened by being careful. If you are committed, you're willing to look bad for a little while in order to be better when you come out the other side.

Hitters can be developing their swing technique. Maybe last season you hit the ball consistently, but not very hard. You can be working on getting more of your body into the ball so when you make contact it really flies. The sanctioning bodies are really starting to crack down on all the "super

bats" that have come out in the last few years. You know the ones – you stick them out on a checked swing and the ball goes to mid-center. Soon hitters will actually have to know how to hit again, so you might as well get a head start on it.

Or perhaps you're a slapper, but everything you hit goes to the right side, where you're an easier out, instead of the 5-6 hole. Now's a good time to work on it so you're ready come spring. (Here's a hint for you: Make sure your shoulders stay in toward the plate instead of turning with your hips when you run.) If you are a converted right-hander who can slap and bunt successfully, start learning to hit for power from the left side too. Nothing drives a defense crazier than not knowing whether to play you up, back, or somewhere in-between. The more weapons you have, the tougher you are to defend.

It's a good time for defensive work as well. Start by looking at how you throw – and how hard. As I've said before, throwing is one of the first skills players learn, which means it's also one of the first they quit working on once they get the general idea. That's a mistake.

Statistically, 80 percent of all errors are throwing errors. If you can throw better and more reliably, you'll help cut that percentage dramatically. In addition, the harder you throw the longer you can take to throw the ball in the infield – or the better chance you have of throwing out one of those maddening slapper rabbits.

If you're an outfielder, nothing gets you slaps on the back and the love and admiration of your teammates faster than nailing a runner trying to score by making a perfect throw home. And if you're a catcher, throwing out runners is your bread and butter. The stronger your arm, and the quicker your release, the more you earn the designation "stud."

Right now is a great time to work on other fielding skills as well. If you're an infielder with a weak backhand, spend time making it stronger. You can do that outside on a field if you live in a nice weather area, or inside in a cage if you don't. If you have a tendency to pull your head out on a ground ball, put your batting helmet on and start taking ground balls until you build your confidence. Again, you can use a field or a cage. If you're an outfielder you'll need an outdoor field or at least a dome to work on fly balls – nothing substitutes for learning to read a ball off a bat – but you can work on your do-or-die scoops, fielding slow and fast rollers, and long throws in a cage.

That's just some of the things you can do. The big question is will you do them? It's easy to get all fired up and say "I ought to be doing this." Believe me, I know. I say that about eating healthy, exercising more, and losing weight all the time. But when that Dairy Queen Peanut Buster Parfait starts calling, all my great plans to improve myself go by the wayside. I have good intentions, but unfortunately I lack commitment.

Yes, it can be a pain to get out and practice or take lessons while your friends are hanging out, playing video games, listening to music or watching TV. But remember, none of those things will help you become a better softball player.

For me, the beginning of October means spending the better part of the weekend pulling out Halloween decorations and putting them up. It's a pain in some ways, but come Halloween night the reward is worth the effort. Of course, the day after, when it's time to clean up is no picnic but such is the price of excellence.

Make a commitment to do the things you need to do, and become the player you're meant to be. Despite the frost on the pumpkins, spring isn't that far away.

Looking for more little tricks or tips? Email me at kkrause342@aol.com, or check out my blog at <http://fast-pitchlane.softballsuccess.com>.