

The “Missing Manual” for Slowpitch Softball Arrives



with Rainer and Julie Martens

Practice Makes Perfect

This exclusive excerpt from the Complete Guide to Slowpitch Softball (Human Kinetics, 2011) takes a look at the importance of practice. According to authors Rainer and Julie Martens, not only do teams seldom practice, when they do practice and play, typically there is no coaching to help players improve. “The session usually consists of a few minutes of playing catch before each player bats until his or her arms tires,” says Rainer. “The underlying assumption in such practices is that if you just keep doing the same thing, you’ll get better. Now think about the logic of that approach to practice!”

Nine Principles for Better Practice

Principle 1. Practices should be short and frequent when learning a new skill or when making major modifications to a skill. Usually in adult slowpitch softball, players are not entirely new to the game, although they may be returning to the game after years of not playing. When a player is working on relearning a skill or making a significant modification to a skill, the recommended approach is to keep the practice time relatively short, interrupt it with breaks, and then repeat practicing the skill rather than conduct the practice in one long session.

Principle 2. Practice softball skills in game-like conditions as soon as players are able to do so. This principle seems intuitively obvious, but it is often violated. For example, when taking batting practice before games, the pitching should be identical to the pitching in games. Yet we see pitchers pitching from a distance different from that used in the game and trying to groove pitches with a relatively low arc to make it easy for batters to hit. We see batters swing at any pitch they can reach without regard to the strike zone. That type of practice is not helpful, and in fact may harm the timing of hitting pitches in the game.

Principle 3. Each player should be actively involved throughout the practice session. The typical slowpitch batting practice session has a batter hitting 20, 30, 40, or more balls while 10 to 12 players shag balls, most of them just standing around visiting. There is a better way, but it requires more

work on the part of each player and the breaking of a strong tradition in slowpitch.

What is possible to do depends considerably on the facilities available to you. Ideally, two adjacent playing fields will be available. You can hold batting practice on each and thus take half the time for this part of practice, or you can have the outfielders hitting on one field and the infielders taking infield practice on the other, and then have them switch.

If you have only one playing field available, you can have the batters hit from about where the coach’s box is at first base, hitting toward right and center field. That leaves enough room on the third-base side to practice fielding ground balls and to work on double plays using the third-base bag as the second-base bag.

When outfielders are shagging balls they should work on their fielding skills, such as charging balls, going back on balls, and quickly retrieving ground balls. Then on the sidelines they can also practice fielding and throwing accurately to the cutoff or relay infielder.

Principle 4. Practice sessions should make maximum use of the available facilities and equipment. This principle is a corollary to principle 3. With regard to equipment, players usually provide their own bats, so that’s not a problem, and balls are inexpensive, so you can have plenty on hand. If the field that you practice on does not have bases, you can purchase some rubber ones or use some carpet remnants. A carpet remnant also works well as a strike mat if your league uses one.

Principle 5. Dedicate time to practicing skills that need to be improved. Of course, everyone practices hitting because it’s vital to success in the sport. But far less time is typically devoted to defensive play. Infielders may practice fielding ground balls, but how often do teams practice the following?



- Fielding fly balls hit over the heads of the outfielders and catching fly balls hit near or at the fence.
- Catching pop-ups hit over the heads of the infielders into short outfield.
- Turning double plays from the pitcher to the second baseperson or shortstop.
- Executing an out from the first baseperson to the pitcher covering first base.
- Throwing the ball in various game-like situations, such as short throws and long throws.
- Executing rundowns of players caught between the bases.
- Making tags on players sliding.
- Executing the relay to home on balls hit deep in the outfield.
- Running the bases to be in a position to advance to the next base if an error is made in the field.

Principle 6. Emphasize that the goal of practice is to improve performance. Often players come to practice and go through the motions without the intention of improving. Three things can happen to a player's performance as a result of practicing: (a) it can stay the same, (b) it can get better, or (c) it can get worse. Why practice if you don't want to improve? So if you see players who appear not to be putting effort into improving, you'll want to talk with them to change their mind-set. Otherwise, your team has little chance of getting better.

Principle 7. Provide feedback to help players improve. Players will improve their skills more rapidly with good instructions and feedback. If you're qualified to coach, by all means do so. If you are not qualified to provide feedback on hitting and defensive skills, then perhaps a player on the team is or you can find someone who has the ability to help your players improve. If the players are resistant to feedback, you need to change that mind-set. Video is a wonderful way to provide feedback to your players. Video equipment is not expensive to buy or rent and is easy to use.

Principle 8. Let your players help plan the practice sessions. At the end of each practice session or after a game and before the next practice, encourage your players to tell you what they believe they need to practice next. You can combine their suggestions with your own observations to plan the next practice. With greater involvement by your players in planning practices, you'll get greater commitment to improving skills in the practice session.

Principle 9. Make practices fun. A well-planned practice session in which everyone is active will be more fun than the typical practices that we so often see. Plan drills that have a competitive element to create interest and more enjoyment. Vary the activities in the practice and find new drills to try. Finally, an upbeat attitude on your part and that of at least a majority of your players can make practices more enjoyable.

You can learn more about practice, including specific ways to practice offense and defense, in chapter 13 of the Complete Guide to Slowpitch Softball, which is now available in bookstores everywhere, as well as online at www.HumanKinetics.com. The book is designed for players at all levels and features more than 200 photos and a 69-minute companion DVD that presents demonstrations of offensive and defensive techniques and tactics.

