

Softball



Slow-pitch softball is an activity that requires many different individual skills to play on a team. Pitchers must be able to throw strikes more than 50% of the time and players must be able to catch, throw, hit and run bases. Speed, strength, coordination and reaction time are physical elements necessary to perform these tasks.

In SO slow-pitch tournaments, it is easy to observe that most participants have low skills in many of these areas. Compared to generic softball, there are many more walks, fewer hard-hit balls, fewer balls caught in the field, many game errors and about 40% of outs are strike-outs (an indication of low hitting skills). Our conclusion is that most SO players need to concentrate on basic skill acquisition for better enjoyment and success in softball, before spending more of their time playing softball games.

Hitting, catching, throwing and pitching are not easy skills to learn and will each require a 20-hour program to be learned at the basic level. As with many other SO sports, slow-pitch softball usually runs only once a week, during which all aspects of softball are usually taught. This is necessary because coaches must prepare teams to play SO tournaments, even if skills are not completely acquired. It would seem on the surface better to proceed in this way vs. having a team that can't play softball at all.

Focused 20-hour programs divide skills in smaller parts that are practiced one at a time and will require a different approach from coaches. Practices still need to focus on having SO athletes ready to play games, but individual skills also need to be acquired. Individual home practices and adding one more SO sessions per week are required in most cases.

Throwing and catching can be learned together while longer throws, catching grounders and fly balls and hitting are skills that are best learned separately. Pitchers are a crucial part of a game and must throw strikes; this is also a separate skill to learn.

Practice is the only way to learn.

These basic softball skills are listed in the basic skill (next page). These sheets can be used as a guide, and when all skills are marked “yes”, players can consistently execute all softball basic elements and are ready for more advanced intermediate skills.

Guidelines for using the skill sheet for softball

1. Playing softball without good catching skills can be dangerous. Catching and throwing must be acquired to a very high level (10 out of 10) for safety and quality of play reasons.
2. When this is done (it can take more than 20 hours of practice and lots of home practice) start hitting skills. Always include catching and throwing in a practice.
3. Follow each step of the skill sheet (one at a time) until all basic skills are acquired. Progress will be directly related to the amount of focused practice time.

Softball Basic Skills

Basic Skills: Catching and Throwing **YES** **NO** **Comments**

Sub Skills		
Catching 10m apart 10/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Throwing precision 10m 10/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catching fly ball 9/10 Hand throws medium height	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grounder (catch and block) 8/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Throwing to 1 st from 2 nd base 9/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Basic Skills: Hitting **YES** **NO** **Comments**

Sub Skills		
T-ball hits 10/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T-ball direction 9/9 3 hits toward 1 st / 2 nd /3 rd base	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
T- ball fly balls 5/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Slow pitch contact 8/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

For Players who are also pitchers add the following skills

Basic Skill: Pitching (45') **YES** **NO** **Comments**

Sub Skills		
Pitching strikes 6/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
High arch strikes 6/10	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

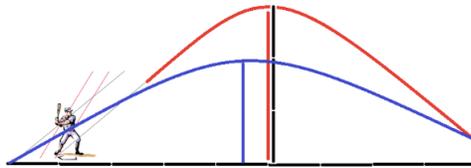
When athletes achieve all “YES”, they have acquired basic skills and can pitch. Expectations are critical to skill acquisition.

20-hour acquisition

Skill Breakdown: Examples of priority elements to focus on during practice

Spend time on each one until acquired

1. Catching and Throwing: Wrist/Elbow – One knee – Standing – One-step – Shuffle
20 feet away under arm throw and step forward catch – Grip and throw – Stationary throw and catch – Step forward throw and catch
2. Pitching (60% strikes): Grip – Arm swing – Step – Release – Arch – Speed – Long and short pitch

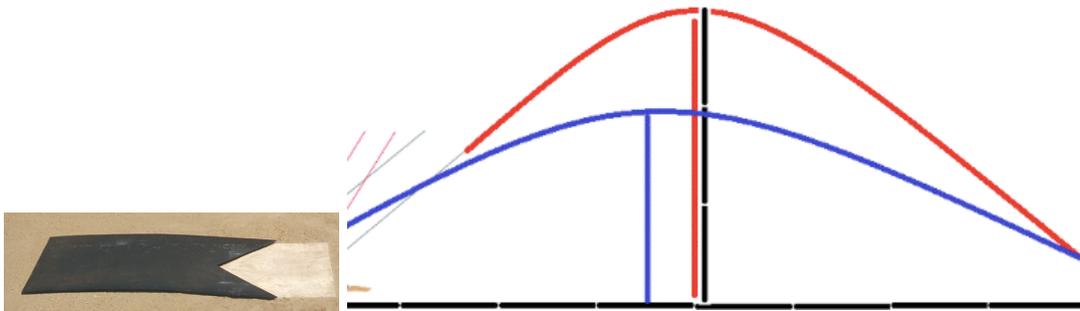


3. Hitting (80% contact): Grip – Eye on ball with contact (no swing) – Hand position – Swing without ball, with tee ball with slow pitch – Contact area on bat – Follow through
4. Catching (grounders/Fly balls): Short fly throws (using tennis balls) – Short fly throws using softballs – 20 feet away small fly throws with tennis ball – followed by softballs – 20 feet fly with tennis racquet
5. Same process for grounders
6. Team skills: Running bases one at a time – Running double, triple and home run – Outs from different positions

Practice one skill at a time until it is acquired, starting with catching and throwing.

Home training: A must to acquire softball skills

Catching, throwing and hitting (plastic balls) can easily be done at home with a parent or a caregiver. 20' per day (three times or more per week) at a minimum is recommended. Players' skills will improve according to the amount of time spent practicing.



Pitching practices are crucial to be done at home. Throw a set of 30 with the aim of hitting the strike zone with **60% of pitches**. Measure correct distance (45 feet) and draw a strike zone (36 x 18 inches).

Home Catching and Throwing Practice example (20 minutes)

(5' = 5 minutes)

20 feet apart 5' slow throw and catch with tennis ball (under arm throw and catch with a glove down)

20 feet apart 5' slow throw and catch with tennis ball (over shoulder throw and catch with a step toward the ball with glove facing ball)

20 feet apart 5' slow throw and catch with softball (under arm throw and catch with glove down)

20 feet apart 5' slow throw and catch with softball (over shoulder throw and catch with a step toward the ball with glove up)

Keep your eyes on the ball and always make sure your partner is watching before a ball is thrown. Repeat this practice as often as you can. The number of times you practice each exercise is very important. The more the better!

Hitting skills will start when catching and throwing is acquired.

Softball practice example: Focus SO skill Hitting (1hour and 15 minutes)

Use SO softball practices to focus on one main skill for a session and review the other skills more quickly.

Warm Up 10 minutes

Throwing and catching (20 feet apart)

Teaching Skills 40 minutes (Hitting)

Objectives is contact with ball 80% of swings

Demonstrations are required for SO players as they are visual learners. Repetition is more important than perfect technique for basic skill acquisition. Slow down demonstrations when introducing a new skill and use hands to guide movements when necessary.

Hitting (with groups based on ability)

1. Step drill (swing without a ball)
2. Swing at a target
3. Change target location (high – low)
4. Step drill to target
5. Hitting with slow pitch

Game skills 25 minutes

Infield

6. Grounders and throws
7. Out strategies

Outfield

8. Fly balls and grounders
9. Out strategies

Pitching

10. Step - release
11. Strike zone
12. Flight path

Conclusion:

Practice, Practice, Practice

Softball requires team members to have basic skills to be enjoyed and to be successful. Many of the better players have parents and coaches helping them learn by practicing catching, throwing and hitting on their own. Practice is the

Changing Expectations in Special Olympics

only way to learn these difficult elements. Using the skill sheet is an excellent way to learn basic softball skills and encourage athletes to practice. The more time spent on focused training, the better each SO athlete will become.

SO softball programs must not only teach skills but also review rules and teach players what to do in the many different situations encountered during a game. Practicing once a week, for a few months, falls far short of the necessary basic acquisition (20 hours) for all these elements.

Home practice and training individual skills as often as possible is necessary to improve individual players. The more practice the better athletes will become. When players have acquired basic skills, softball becomes a much easier game to play.

Time on the field should be spent on specific softball skills. This is why it is so important to use Club Fit sessions to develop strength, agility, flexibility and endurance instead of taking skill acquisition time from practices to do so.

Lesson Plan
Basic Skill Acquisition Program
(weekly or monthly)

Sport _____ Athlete Name: _____

Program Expectations

1- Weekly Practice (attend all practices)

Day (S) _____ Time _____

Location _____

“What the group is working on”:

2- Club Fit 100% attendance (Including Functional Testing exercises)

Day _____ Time _____

Location _____

“What you need to concentrate on”:

3- Basic Skill Development Homework (4 times per week - 1 hour per day)

Skill _____

“Individual Home Practice Objectives”