Volunteer Coach Training Program

Coaching Youth Softball
Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 3
CHAPTER 2: WARM-UP ..................................................................... 4
CHAPTER 3: THROWING ................................................................. 5
CHAPTER 4: INFIELD PLAY PART 1 .................................................. 6
CHAPTER 4: INFIELD PLAY PART 2 .................................................. 8
CHAPTER 5: BASERUNNING ............................................................ 9
CHAPTER 6: SLIDING PART 1 .......................................................... 11
CHAPTER 6: SLIDING PART 2 .......................................................... 12
CHAPTER 7: OUTFIELD PLAY .......................................................... 13
CHAPTER 8: PITCHING PART 1 ...................................................... 15
CHAPTER 8: PITCHING PART 2 ...................................................... 17
CHAPTER 9: CATCHING PART 1 ...................................................... 19
CHAPTER 9: CATCHING PART 2 ...................................................... 21
CHAPTER 10: HITTING PART 1 ...................................................... 22
CHAPTER 10: HITTING PART 2 ...................................................... 24
CHAPTER 11: BUNTING ................................................................. 25
CHAPTER 12: ORGANIZING PRACTICES .......................................... 26
CHAPTER 13: CONCLUSION .......................................................... 27

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

JOHN ENGH: Hey coaches, on behalf of the National Alliance for Youth Sports I’d like to welcome you to the National Youth Sports Coaches Association’s Coaching Youth Softball clinic. I’m John Engh, chief operating officer for NAYS, and I’d like to thank you for taking this time to enhance your coaching skills. We’ve utilized the expertise of the outstanding staff of the New Mexico State University women’s softball team for this video so, as you’ll soon see, there’s simply no better source for how to go about teaching the basics of this great game to children. During the next hour some key skills and techniques of the game will be covered so that you’ll be better prepared to lead your team to a fun and rewarding season. In this part or your training we will focus on drills and practice tips so that you’ll be able to use them during your practices to help your players learn and develop skills.

Of course many of the different strategies and nuances of the game simply can’t be covered in the amount of time we have with you today. While the instruction in this clinic will help you to become a better coach, some of you may be interested in obtaining additional information on different aspects of the game. If so, I encourage you to visit our website at www.nays.org because as an NYSCA member you have access to all sorts of great information that will assist with your softball coaching.

Now, I know you’re anxious to get started, so again, on behalf of NAYS, we thank you for volunteering to coach this season and we applaud your commitment to teaching this wonderful game to all your players. Have a great season, and now I’ll turn things over to New Mexico State’s Catherine Heifner.
CHAPTER 2 - WARM-UP

CATHERINE HEIFNER: A warm-up is an important way to start every practice. When you get to the field the kids are going to be anxious to play but a warm-up allows their muscles to get loose and is good for injury prevention. We’re going to go over and back here, just to loosen up their legs; it helps strengthen their ankles and both sides of their body. The next thing we are going to do is jumping jacks to get our upper body involved and get the heart beat raised. The next thing we do are called scorpions, which stretches out our torso and also stretches out our hips and increases our flexibility as well as getting them warm for the practice. We usually do these for about 45 seconds to a minute. To get their muscles and their brains firing together we do fast feet. You need to train your players to have fast feet.
CHAPTER 3 - THROWING

CATHERINE HEIFNER: With younger players, throwing is one of the most important skills and a difficult skill to master. We always start them on one knee and we start them first learning wrist flips. The things you are looking for here is that their elbows are high, and that they snap their wrist. It’s also a great way to have them do things together and learn to work with you.

The next thing we do is Round and Rounds, which we also call Figure Eights. What it does is warms up their shoulder capsules and gets their throwing mechanics down. One of the important things to do is go around and around and then shoulder high.

The next thing we do is called scarecrows. You are going to throw to your partner. You take the ball and stand sideways and take your elbow and pull it up like a scarecrow and throw to your partner. So in this we are looking for their elbows to be up, they have separation and their thumb is pointed backward on the ball.

After we do that about 10 times we back up and start doing distance throwing. After they make two throws they take another step backward. I would do this every practice and spend about 30 minutes on throwing and catching. It’s a skill that the kids must develop and in the younger ages it’s difficult for them so you have to spend a lot of time on it.
CHAPTER 4 - INFIELD PLAY PART 1

CATHARINE HEIFNER: The key to good infield play is having a good athletic stance so that they can field the ball. The feet must be staggered, keep the knee in a little bit and the back flat. The key is to always be moving through the ball. From there we incorporate a ball and start rolling a ball. One of the keys is to replace their feet and the other key is, as they field the ball, make the exchange and get it high so it’s into a good throwing position. This is something simple that any of the age groups can do as they come up.

Forehand is an important infield skill, as is the backhand. On backhands they stagger their feet with their left foot forward and their right foot back. They give with the ball and replace their feet. They give with the ball and then their right foot replaces their left foot over the bat. It’s easy to teach with a bat or some other instrument that the kids have to get their feet over because they can really learn how to move their feet that way and not just slide them. So remember coaches, when you are teaching an infield stance, an athletic position is important; they need to have a flat back, a lot of knee flex, and they need to be able to shuffle through and underneath the ball. When working with the infield it’s really important to start with the small skills and then build to the bigger skills. Young players need a lot of repetition with fielding ground balls and catching and throwing skills. So once you are done with your forehand and backhand skills then we move into the whole infield: we do grounders to each position; we go to first base, and then second base and then third base. All of this repetition allows the kids to get comfortable moving through the ball, catching, exchanging and throwing to the base.
As they come through you want them to square up just like we did in the small drills. You want their glove to move through it. Make sure that when you are hitting ground balls to the kids that it is actually at a pace that they can handle, that it’s not too hard or too soft. Know your infield and make sure that you give them a lot of confidence in that repetition before you challenge them.

When they are going to second base they have to make sure that when they field the ball that they open up to give them a path to throw to second base. Two hands are really important and throwing to their teammate’s chest at each base is super important so they can catch and throw to the next base.
CHAPTER 4 - INFIELD PLAY PART 2

Now, the next thing we do is go to third base. Good communication among players helps players stay focused and makes sure they are in every play. One of the things we always want to do is end on a good note. Remember coaches that repetition for young players is really key for helping them get better. Make them talk and communicate with each other so they become comfortable on the ball field and always reward their best effort. Sometimes they are going to make mistakes when they are younger but their best effort is what you are looking for.

When working with your infielders it’s important to coordinate their footwork and their exchange so that they have good momentum through their throw. When you are in the infield you are looking for a short arm circle and not a big arm circle like when you are in the outfield. Remember coaches when you are working with your infielders on catching and throwing and the exchange it’s really important that their feet replace to give them momentum through it. It’s also important that they rake the ball out of their glove – that’s the term we use – and get it to a good throwing position. We like it to be one fluid motion and not choppy.
CHAPTER 5 - BASERUNNING

CATHERINE HEIFNER: When working on baserunning there are three points of emphasis we have. The first is that when we swing hard and burst out of the box that we have our feet underneath our hips; the second is to aim and try to hit the front of the bag at first base; and the last one is to run through the bag and not slow down before the base. One thing we do is have the girls touch a player’s hand beyond first base.

When the kids have an extra base hit they are going to hit the inside corner of the bag and round that a few steps and find the ball. Ninety percent of the time they can find the ball themselves. It’s really important that they think two bases instead of one base. What we tell our kids is that every ball that is hit to the outfield you are trying to stretch that to a double unless the defense stops you from doing that. The same basic principle applies that players burst out of the batter’s box the same way and maybe veer out just a hair and try to hit the inside corner of the bag. They keep their left side tight and pump their arms as they make that turn. I would prefer that players hit the inside of the bag with their right foot, but sometimes the timing doesn’t work out that way.

When working with baserunning one of the important things is leading off the bag. We teach our kids several different styles. There are several different ways you can lead off of a bag. It is really personal preference on what your kids can grasp the easiest way. But the key component here is that they have to move when the pitcher moves and they must burst off right at the time the pitcher releases the ball. If they wait to run when the pitcher releases the ball then they are too late. So we want to get them in motion prior to the release, where they are timing their foot off the bag at the release.
We’re going to show you a couple of different styles right here. You can put your foot on top of the bag and rock or you can start on the side of the bag and rock and go. Remember, that when you are baserunning one of the key components is timing with the pitcher’s motion. They can do that in the dugout. When they get to first base whatever works best for them – whether their foot is on top of the base or the side of the base and whether they are using a rocker style or track style in terms of their set up, it doesn’t really matter. The thing you are looking for is whatever each player can time the best to get an explosive lead off first that is effective.
CHAPTER 6 - SLIDING PART 1

Catherine Heifner: When teaching the skill of sliding you have to be careful that you are doing age-appropriate activities. One of the first things when you are starting with beginners is to get them comfortable in the bent-leg slide position and then progress from there. We like to work from the small skills into the large skills. For the bent-leg position you tuck one leg underneath the other leg – that’s called a Figure 4. There are a couple of things to remember. One, they want to tuck their leg as they go, almost like a curtsy. The other thing as they go into a slide they put their hands up so they don’t get their hands or shoulders caught in the dirt.

So the first thing you want to do is get them comfortable with the position. There are a lot of ways to help your players get comfortable with sliding, such as using a Slip ‘N Slide. Kids tend to sit back too much and kind of bump their rear ends so we want to keep more of the pressure on the side of their leg and on their lower leg. You want players to accelerate through their slide. Nine times out of 10 when kids get injured during sliding it’s because they slow down and get cautious and try to break so it’s really important to get them comfortable first with the skill before they actually go to the playing field. The important thing is if they have fun and they are safe they are going to get comfortable enough with it. They are not going to be perfect because this is an advanced skill. Remind players to tuck and get low to the ground as possible without trying to lift up first. Remember, there are a couple of things when it comes to sliding: One is to always put them in a safe environment. Second, they need to tuck and get as low to the ground as possible without coming up and always start with an assisted slide first so they get confident before they hit the field.
CHAPTER 6 - SLIDING PART 2

When transitioning from small drills with sliding into the field it’s important that kids slide hard and that they get their cleats up. You also must emphasize for them to get their hands up and out of the way. On the bent-leg slide you really want them to rest their weight on their upper leg and not get back too far so they get injured.

There are several different slides. With the pop-up slide what we look for on this is for them to get their feet up underneath them and use the base to pop up so their feet are on top of the base. On the hook-dive slide one of the big things on this is that players get their body out of the way and just get their hands on the bag. It’s a good move in case somebody is getting back to the base from a pickoff attempt or attempting a stolen base because they get their body out of the line of the throw and they just aim for the edge of the bag. This is an advanced move so make sure your players are comfortable with it in small skills.

So some of the important parts of the slide are to make sure that they accelerate and go hard; that they get their hands out of the way and their cleats up; and that they know the surface they are sliding on because on a fast surface they are going to want to slide early and on a slow surface they can slide a little bit later.
CHAPTER 7 - OUTFIELD PLAY

CATHERINE HEIFNER: When we are working with the outfield we start with small drills and then progress to larger drills. One of the warm-ups we do every day incorporates all of the moves that an outfielder is going to need and need to learn. We never want players to begin flat-footed so we want them in a good athletic position and a little higher than the positioning an infielder uses. When you work with your outfielders you want to make sure that their feet are moving a little bit more than the infield. When working with balls over their head they are usually going to turn and break toward their glove side. One of the key points when they do this is that they break as hard as they can and try to get behind the arc of the ball. Another move to work on is breaking one way and then crossing back over the other way. We do this since sometimes when an outfielder is judging a ball the wind takes it or they are forced to make an adjustment.

The next area we transition into is the down-and-block for fielding base hits. If she’s right-handed she sinks her right knee down in front of the ball to protect it and then exchanges her feet and makes a good throw. On a pop fly you want outfielders trying to get behind the ball, gain momentum and then burst through it with a crow hop. If she’s right-handed she lifts her right foot and then gets momentum through the ball. The key is to get behind the ball. If she gets too far underneath the ball it’s going to be over her head and she’s not going to be able to perform that move.

If the game is on the line and you are teaching kids to be aggressive and throw on the run then a good drill to use is to roll them a grounder and then they come up and throw. This is a pretty advanced skill so when you are teaching this it’s ok if the players miss. The only time kids are going to use this is if the game is on the line so if they miss it doesn’t matter because if they take their time they aren’t going to make the play and the game will be over or if they miss the ball the game is over. So you want them to go as hard as they can and really explode through it because it’s all or nothing.
There is also a long hop that players use for balls that bounce that players can gauge how hard to burst through the ball. For outfielders some of the finer points are to burst hard to the ball in the first three steps; always try to get behind a pop fly; and make sure that they are getting their body in the proper position to make a throw.
CHAPTER 8 - PITCHING PART 1

CATHERINE HEIFNER: Pitching is one of the most difficult skills to teach and perform in the sport of softball, so here are a few ideas to help you along with that process. One is to get all of your kids involved in pitching and have them pitch a little bit every day. Two is to learn some breakdown drills, and three is to be very patient with the kids as they learn pitching because it is a very difficult skill.

For some breakdown drills have your pitcher stand three feet away from the catcher and do some wrist slips. Make sure she isolates her arm and keeps her lower body still. Don’t get her legs involved yet so that she can learn the feeling of snapping the softball, because that’s important when you’re pitching.

Then, have your pitcher back up a few steps and have them do a Half K. She’ll get her legs involved a little bit more and snap the ball right to the catcher. The idea is that they stay very close to their body and snap hard at the end. Make sure they are on the inside of the right leg of the catcher, if they’re right handed, so that they can shoot for the middle of the catcher’s body.

Then have her back up a few steps more and do a Full K. She’s going to get her arms and legs really involved now and get long up top and step and throw. You can advance this by making them pitch to both sides of the plate. When the player gets older there will be different kinds of releases and grips.

Have the pitcher step back a little further and do more Full K’s. As you can see, it’s important to start with the small skills and progress to the bigger skills because it helps the kids stay successful and feel confident with doing harder skills.
Now we’re going to go from the small skills and help them transition into the big skills. One way to do that is to slow down the pitching motion so that it’s not full speed with a toss drill. This can be done with your whole team in two lines, or one-on-one.

Make sure your pitcher has loose arms and legs and tries to aim for the center of the catcher. Remind her that the ball will go wherever she aims her glove. The purpose of this drill is to keep them nice and loose and backing up until they’re at their legal distance. Once the kids are going through this loose arm motion and they’ve gotten to legal distance they’re probably ready to go from the pitching rubber confidently.
CHAPTER 8 - PITCHING PART 2

When they do that, there’s certain ways they’re going to want to grip the ball and some things they are going to want to look at. When you’re working with young kids in the beginning levels you just want to emphasize a fastball. Once they show command of a fastball (that they can hit their corners and have accuracy and velocity) then you could go into advanced stuff, like pitching grips (curveballs, screwballs), but the next thing should really be a change-up.

Have your pitcher at the pitching rubber. Have them grip the ball with four fingers on the seams. There are many ways to grip a ball, but we ask that they grip as many seams as possible because it helps their snap and helps the ball rotate. Have her throw fastballs.

Remind the pitcher to keep her legs shoulder’s width apart and arms loose. Make sure you know your league’s rules about feet. Make sure the pitcher swings her arm back and stays loose like a pendulum. That’s very important when you’re working on this skill.

There are a lot of ways to throw a change-up. The key to throwing a change-up is that you want them to get command of the fastball first. When they’re throwing a change-up you want to make sure that their body doesn’t slow down. Their body has to accelerate off the rubber so that it doesn’t show that they’re throwing a change-up.

There are many different kinds of change-ups, like knuckleballs, but the really important thing is to make sure that the ball is deep in your palm. When your players are throwing other types of pitches there may be some space between the ball and their palm, but for change-ups it should be deep in their palm so that they can slow down their arm a little bit.

It’s important to encourage your pitcher to try new things. Usually with pitchers there is no right or wrong way, just what that kid can do and what they feel comfortable doing. It’s important to know a lot of ways so that you can do a lot of things with them. Let them stay in a mindset where they’re experimenting and having fun with it, not overwhelmed or pressured.
When we’re talking about pitching, especially with beginners, the biggest thing is to get them comfortable. A lot of advanced pitchers struggle with accuracy or learning the skill early, but stay with them and stay patient. Again, one of the biggest things is to get everyone on your team pitching 20-30 minutes a day during your practice. And if you have kids that enjoy the skill, have them pick up a pitching coach or at home they can even wrap up socks and pitch into a mirror. Again, the big thing is repetition. If they repeat this and work at it, they will get better at the skill. Have your kids line up in two lines and pitch partners to each other, just underhand tosses, nice and easy. You’ll see who develops in that skill set.
CHAPTER 9 - CATCHING PART 1

CATHERINE HEIFNER: The first thing to consider when talking about catchers is their positioning. The proper positioning for catching is:

1. Feet slightly beyond shoulder-width apart. Make sure that their upper legs are not down. Balance on the balls of their feet.
2. Glove up.
3. Throwing hand is protected behind the body so that it doesn’t get caught on a wild pitch or a block.

Next thing we want to do with our catchers is have them block. The most important thing is that they have to wear gear, and that gear has to fit properly. Commonly with younger players the gear is too big and will hinder their movement.

On a front block, we ask them to put their knees where their feet are and to kick their heels out backwards. The idea of this is that they’re just trying to block to the middle of the plate and get their body around it; they’re not trying to catch the ball. Remind the catcher to slip their other hand behind their glove, not in front of it.

For a side block, they slide their leg out, placing that knee on the ground. Remind them to not let the other knee drop down when doing a side block. To go to the left side, the left leg slides out and that knee touches the ground. To go to the right side, the right leg slides out and that knee touches the ground.
Passed Balls

In this exercise the catcher will throw the ball to the coach at home.

1. The catcher starts at home plate.
2. Coach throws the ball past home.
3. The catcher runs after the ball; plants their throwing knee down at the side of the ball and throws it back to the coach, who is waiting for her at home plate.
4. Do this for both the left and right sides.
CHAPTER 9 - CATCHING PART 2

Pop-Ups

There are two schools of thought as to whether or not the player should remove her mask for pop-ups. We have the catcher take their mask off as soon as they see it’s a pop-up. One way to practice this is to have the coach or one of the other fielders yell that it’s a pop-up and point to where it is. The catcher will then take her mask off and throw it out of the way so they can find the ball. Make sure that they throw the mask away from their body so that they don’t trip on it. The hope is that they can get around and give themselves a lot of room, but sometimes they don’t have that much time to react.

When we’re working in our catcher progression, we’re going to work for them to catch bunts.

1. Coach stands behind the catcher. He’s going to yell “Bunt” and drop the ball in front of the catcher.
2. As soon as the catcher hears that it’s a bunt she’s going to find the ball and throw it to first. There can be another player or a catch net waiting for the ball at first.
3. When she’s finding the ball remind her to get her body around it and to pick it up with two hands.

Exchanging Footwork

Draw a T into the dirt behind home plate to serve as foot markings. Your advanced kids are going to have both feet on this T. As she receives the ball, she’s going to pull it back, making sure her hand doesn’t drop, and step up to the top line of the T and prepare her body for the throwing position. Encourage them to do this as quickly as they can.

These are most of the skills catchers need to do. We also incorporate long tosses with a football or a regular ball. Your catchers need to toss longer, up to 90 feet, which is further than to second base.
CHAPTER 10 - HITTING PART 1

CATHERINE HEIFNER: When we’re talking about hitting, there are many elements to it, but we’re going to simplify it for the kids’ benefit because they can get overwhelmed. When we start off with the younger kids, one of the greatest areas of concern is the bat weight. A lot of times the kids have a bat that is too heavy for them. If you see a big loop in their swing or that they’re having a hard time controlling it, that’s a cue for you to get a lighter or shorter bat. The other thing we’re looking at when they step up to the plate is their stance. We want their feet apart. Make sure their head is looking at the pitcher and that their weight is evenly distributed and their hips are squared to the plate.

When we’re talking about grip, we want them to hold it similarly to holding a golf club. It’s important that they grip with their fingertips, not in their palms, because they need wrist flexion and to be able to maneuver the bat.

Steps for a Good Hitting Position

1. Hold the bat downward and grip lightly like a golf club.
2. Flip the bat up from the wrists.
3. Then break the elbows to bring the bat up near the head.

There are many different stances, but when the kids are first learning, it’s good to give them a fundamental approach that they can repeat over and over again.

When you’re teaching hitting, you practice some dry swings. You would want to do that in a group so that the kids can get some repetition without the ball coming at them. We’re going to start with small drills and progress into the larger ones.
Dry Swing Drills

1. Have the hitter prepare their stance and get into hitting position.
2. Load Up – make sure they put the weight on their back side.
3. Pull the String – make sure some of their weight moves forward with them and that they drop their heel down.
4. Swing.

At first you’ll want to break down these steps, but the goal should be to complete them in a smooth motion with no pauses.
CHAPTER 10 - HITTING PART 2

Once you go over the basics of hitting and the kids have a chance to warm up and have got that fresh in their minds, you are then ready to go to some live hitting. One way to augment your three stages of hitting would be off of a tee so that the young players can actually start incorporating what they’re learning with a ball that’s not moving so they don’t have the stress of a ball moving. Have them practice hitting the ball off of the tee using what they’ve learned from “Load, Pull the String, Swing.”

One of the things that is important to remember when you’re working off the tee is that often the tee will be in the middle of a plate. That’s really an improper place to contact the ball. Remember to have a plate with the tee in front, or wherever the contact point is going to be. On the inside it’s going to be further out and on the outside it’s going to be closer to the plate. That’s important when you’re working tee work, no matter what their age is.

Key Hitting Tips

1. Make sure that the tee is at the correct contact point.
2. Hips are square to the plate.
3. Check for proper bat position and that the bat isn’t dropping or wrapping around their heads because that will cause problems with their swing later.
CHAPTER 11 - BUNTING

Catherine Heifner: One of the key aspects of hitting, or team offense, is bunting. A sacrifice bunt is a necessary component of offense. The front toe will be pointed to the pitcher, but the key to this is the knee. The back knee must go down a little bit and the hands must be at the top of the strike zone to have control of the whole strike zone. Start high and work low in terms of sacrifice. Another thing in working with young bunters is that when you tell them to bunt, they will bunt everything! Remind them to only bunt strikes.

One of the other kinds of bunts that you use in the development of your team offense is called a drag bunt. It’s used from the left side of the plate. It can be used as a sacrifice or as a base hit. It’s a deceptive move. She’s going to come through and show that she’s swinging and as the ball is being released she’s going to crossover and try to catch it on her way to first.

Another bat control move is the slap and we can do that in numerous ways. In a soft slap, the objective is to hit it between the pitcher and the third baseman, soft to the shortstop. The key to this is that she waits for the pitcher’s release and then she bursts through to time it and keeps her bat flat into the area she’s going. Those are some ideas about how to incorporate the short game into your practices and help your team fundamentals.
CHAPTER 12 - ORGANIZING PRACTICES

CATHERINE HEIFNER: How your practices are organized can get live hitting and a lot of repetition for your team. One of the really important things about coaching young softball, or any level of softball, is practice organization and incorporating all the kids in the drills that you do. In at least one part of your practice segment you should have some sort of drill that keeps everybody busy and gives everybody a job.

One way you can do that is through a three-part batting practice. Have one group that works in hitting skills, like bunting; one group plays infield or outfield defense; and the last group runs bases. We try to keep everything live and it’s a great way to incorporate all of your players into practice. You want to have a coach pitch this so that you can control the accuracy and help move the practice along. But you can also have a few kids working on their pitching on the side with a parent or coach at this time. A lot of repetition is key for young player development.

After a couple of rounds for each hitter, switch up the roles. Send hitters to base running, base running to defense, and part of the defense will come in to hit. The points that you can emphasize here include making sure your infield defense is getting ready every time and making sure they’re talking and being cohesive. Also, have your base coaches help the runners to read the ball. It’s a great way to get a lot of skills done at one time because you don’t have to trust the arm of a 10-year-old to be accurate. The more live situations they see, the better they’ll do.
CHAPTER 13 - CONCLUSION

JOHN ENGH: Alright coaches, we hope you enjoyed this clinic and we’d like to thank you once again for your participation. We’d also like to remind you about all the great member benefits that are available to you simply by visiting www.nays.org and logging in. These resources are there to help you become the best coach you can be for the benefit of all your players so we hope you take full advantage of them – you’ll be glad you did. Thanks again for your involvement in youth sports – we applaud your efforts and look forward to having you as an NYSCA member. Best of luck this season.
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