

**I**n order to become a better softball player, no matter what your level, you need to train hard off the field. In years past, most softball players worked hard on the field during two hours of practice and thought they had put in their work load for the day. Today, the level of competitive play is increasing. And, in order to stay ahead of the game, you need to work hard not only on your game but also on your body. The stronger your body, the less prone you will be to injury. You will also become quicker and more explosive when you're playing the sport. Let's face it, everything about our game is fast and explosive. That is why it's called FASTPITCH!! If you cannot move your body in a fast and explosive manner, it will be difficult to improve your softball skills. Training helps you build strength and strength helps you swing the bat quicker, throw the ball farther, and run down the base paths faster. Speed and strength, in all parts of the game, is our goal.

Without a doubt, proper training has been the single most important key to the success I have achieved during my career.

Before we start, let's talk about two issues that cause some negative hype when softball and weight lifting are mentioned in the same sentence. First, in years past many coaches thought it was bad for baseball or softball players to lift weights. They feared that weight training tightened muscles and tight muscles were bad for the athlete's game. Today, after many years of research, we understand the body and how it performs much better. Tight muscles should always be stretched, BUT only when they are warm. Since stretching is a very important part of training and body maintenance, it is actually very good to lift weights (or warm the muscles) before stretching. Second, the results achieved from weight training--and proper training for softball in general--are very good for the body. While many people mistakenly believe that lifting weights will cause women to "look like men," that will never happen. Unless a woman is taking illegal drugs, she cannot bulk up the way a man would simply because women naturally do not have high levels of testosterone, which is the male hormone responsible for building big muscles.

## **So what is Training?**

Training for softball should involve a variety of activities. I recommend a program that includes a dynamic warm-up, agility training, plyometrics, core training, strength or weight training, conditioning, and a proper cool down.

The best way to start any workout is always with a proper Dynamic warm-up. A dynamic warm-up gets the body moving and increases blood flow to the muscles. This warm up should include some form of a low intensity exercise (jogging, biking, jumping rope, etc.) and active stretching. One form of active stretching is known as dynamic flexibility. Dynamic flexibility refers to active range of motion in a joint or joints. It is a great way to warm up because it increases flexibility in the joints, increases heart rate and core temperature, improves blood flow to the muscles, and stimulates the neuromuscular system to get into a state of readiness, as well as allowing for more sport-specific movements. Keep in mind, a warm up is not static stretching of cold muscles. Static stretching of cold muscles is the easiest way to injure your muscles and your body. You should only stretch as a cool down, or to loosen any tight areas of your body that have properly been warmed up.

Agilities are activities that teach fast feet and help build speed as well as strengthen the little muscles in our legs. Agility is defined as the ability to explosively brake, change direction, and accelerate (Plisk, 2000). This is a concept used by virtually every sport. Softball, like most team sports, is multidirectional, meaning the movements involve both linear and lateral motion and changing directions on a dime. Agility drills are very easy to incorporate into your softball on field workouts.

Plyometrics help build explosive muscles for bounding type movements. This, once again, helps increase speed. Plyometric training, also referred to as jump training, is a method of linking

strength and speed of movement to generate an explosive movement (Chu & Plummer, 1984). Plyometric training involves exercises that allow a muscle to reach its maximum force capabilities in the shortest amount of time (Baechle, 2000). The faster a muscle is able to change direction from a lengthened position to a shortened position, the greater the power output will be from that muscle (Glass, 1998). Take for example a rubber band. The more a rubber band is stretched, the further it will go when shot off your finger. Because in sport almost every movement involves a pre-stretch prior to muscular contraction (swinging a bat or pitching), plyometric training is an extremely important part of an athlete's training program.

You should have an adequate strength base before participating in a plyometric training program. Due to the nature of the sport, both upper and lower body plyometrics should be performed. Your objective is to start out slowly and build up maximum explosiveness. Just like the strength training program, the plyometric program should progress from a low level to an advanced level. The intensity of the plyometric training should be kept low through the first phase of your strength program (for example, jumping rope) and increase as your athlete gets stronger. You should only increase the difficulty of the plyometric drills if you are able to perform the exercises safely and effectively.

Core strength is also very important. The core of the body is the midsection--or abdominals--and the lower back muscles. These areas are used often in throwing, swinging and pitching. In fact, the core muscles are used in basically every movement of most sports; this signifies the importance of developing those muscles. Take running, for example. Just about every sport involves some form of running, no matter how minute. During running, an athlete must keep his/her core musculature tight. Relaxation in the abdominal muscles and lower back muscles results in lost energy or wasted energy (Brown, 2001). Developing your core musculature will help with injury prevention and the increased strength and speed you will acquire will help you maintain trunk stabilization and balance during sport movements.

Weight and Strength Training is very necessary for building strength in softball players. The stronger an athlete is the faster she will run, throw, pitch and hit. Weight training is very specialized so it is a good idea to use a program written specifically for softball players. You should never lift weights that are too heavy for you and you should always lift with a partner. Lifting with a partner will promote safety and help keep you motivated. Lifting programs are best when they are developed using the periodization method. Periodization is a form of exercise that varies the intensity and volume of exercise while also taking into account the seasonal demands of a particular sport (softball) and athlete. If you have never lifted before, it is very important to start slow and learn the proper movements of the lifts. Good form in lifting is a MUST. This approach will help build a good foundation for developing connective tissue and bones along with the muscles.

Conditioning for softball is very important if you want to be a fit and strong athlete. Improved endurance/stamina and weight management are the two main reasons for conditioning. I recommend conditioning away from the softball field. Jogging and cycling are great ways to build your fitness levels off the field.

Cooling Down should always follow any training program. Many softball players grab their gear and leave the field as soon as practice is over. It is important to take 5 to 10 minutes to cool down and stretch. It is also a great time to reflect on your practice or game. Believe it or not, this will improve and sharpen your mental skills.

For more information on Training Programs, check out my website and the new Dynamic Training DVD and year long Training Guide that I developed with Division 1 strength coach Beth Spak. This package was developed to help all levels of softball players improve their training for softball. The DVD shows proper form in all of the above mentioned categories as well as shoulder pre-hab and motion simulation exercises. The year long Training Guide gives you workouts for every day of the year. The year is broken down into In-season, Off-season, and Pre-season. It also includes a journal to help you keep track of your training and softball performances.

Remember, you have to work hard off the field to continue to make gains on the field. Good Luck and train hard!

# Headliners

## Michele Smith Inducted

### Michele Smith inducted into ASA National Softball Hall of Fame

By Bill Plummer III

**O**KLAHOMA CITY - Growing up in Califon, N.J., Michele Smith idolized Nolan Ryan. Now she's one of the athletes that young girls playing fast pitch softball idolize.

On July 15th Smith, now retired from ASA play, put the cap on an outstanding career with her induction into the ASA Hall of Fame during the II World Cup of Softball presented by Kellogg's Frosted Flakes.

Smith was one of nine people elected to the ASA Hall of Fame at the ASA National Council Meeting in Tucson, AZ with the induction scheduled November 9th at the Council Meeting in Colorado Springs, CO. Smith, however, will be playing professional softball in Japan at that time and will miss the induction.

The others elected will be inducted November ninth during the 26th annual induction ceremonies. They include Dr. Dot Richardson, Orlando, FL (fast pitch player), Michele Granger, Granite Bay, CA (fast pitch player), Sheila Cornell Douty, Diamond Bar, CA (fast pitch player), Avon Meacham, Upper Marlboro, MD (fast pitch player), Don Brewer, Murphysboro, IL (meritorious service), Norm Davis, Auburn, ME (meritorious service), Ralph Miller, Fremont, CA (umpire) and Pat Lillian, Anchorage, AK (commissioner).

The induction followed the USA vs. Australia game with the ASA literally rolling out the red carpet for Michele. A 50-foot carpet extended from the third base dugout at the ASA Hall of Fame Stadium to the podium near home plate.

A two-time gold medalist, Smith was introduced by Bill Plummer III, Hall of Fame manager, who gave a brief profile of her career before she received her Hall of Fame plaque from Ronnie Isham, ASA National Teams Director.

Before presenting Michele her plaque, Isham called her one of the "classiest players that I've ever dealt with," and also mentioned how others described her.

Isham introduced ASA Executive Director Ron Radigonda who presented Michele her Hall of Fame ring.

Michele said, "I grew up idolizing the men who played baseball, so to see a lot of these young girls be able to idolize the Jennie Finches, the Cat Ostermans and Michele Smith and Lisa Fernandez, you know, it's great to see. As much as young boys benefit from having male role models, little girls benefit from having female role models."

Smith overcame a near-career ending auto accident on July 21, 1986 to have an



outstanding career. Ten years later to the day she made her debut in the Olympics in Atlanta, Ga.

"It (the accident) was almost like it was meant to happen, meant to challenge me," said Smith. You wonder sometimes when things happened to you in life why it happened. Once you get through it, you look back on it and you realize that maybe there some greater meaning going to happen down the road.

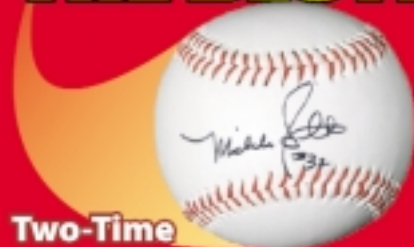
"I definitely feel like that was a big part of my career because I can look at kids that have been injured now and say, 'Just don't give up.'"

Smith, who capped her speech by thanking the ASA and the ASA staff, went on to play college softball at Oklahoma State, earning All-Academic honors in 1989 and compiling a pitching record of 82-20 and a career batting average of .343.

She started her ASA career that summer and earned 10 All-America selections and four Bertha Tickey awards (1990, 1993-1995) as the outstanding pitcher at the Women's Major Fast Pitch National Championship. She was a member of two USA gold-medal Olympic teams, three ISF World Championship teams, (.375 BA and 5-0 pitching record), two Pan American teams (7-0 record, .415 BA), and participated in five Olympic Festivals (9-8 pitching record). She was a member of three national championship teams, all with the Redding Rebels.

She follows in the footsteps of two Hall of Famers who were outstanding double threats, Donna Lopiano, executive director of the Women's Sports Foundation, and Joan Joyce, now the head softball coach at Florida Atlanta University.

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