

## In the Circle with Michele Smith



### A Case for Training

Over a year ago I wrote an article to make a case for the need of 'Training' in our sport. The training I am talking about is training that takes place off the field. We all spend hours on the field to improve our softball skills but in order to become a better softball player no matter what your level; you need to train hard off the field. In the past, most softball players worked hard on the field for two hours of practice and thought they had put in their workload for the day. Today, at many levels the competitive play is increasing and in order to stay a head 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 are to injury and the quicker and more explosively you'll be able to play the sport. Let's face it, everything about our game is fast and explosive, that's why it called FASTPITCH! If you can not move your body in a fast and explosive manner, it will be difficult to improve your softball skills. So when you are working on your speed and strength, you are in a way working on your 'range' as a middle infielder or your 'velocity' if you are a pitcher. Training helps you build strength, and strength helps you swing the bat faster, throw the ball further, and run down the base paths faster. Speed and strength in all parts of the game is our goal. Proper training, without a doubt is the single most important key to the success I have achieved during my long career.

I chose to revisit this subject for three reasons. While working for ESPN this June at the Women's College World Series, 'off camera' interviews of each team were taking place before the event started. My partner Eric Collins asked each team the same question, "Knowing what you know now as a college softball player, what would you have done differently in your High School career to better prepare for college softball?" Players from each University said the same exact thing! They all wish they had started weight training in High School - of those who did weight train in High School; they wish they had done it more seriously! I was amazed that eight different teams all answered the same question the exact same way! **Weight training** and **Speed and Agility training** are what they now considered necessities to becoming the best that they can be. Their teams work hard year round with Strength coaches and time is scheduled into every day to train off the field as well as on the field. It is no coincidence they answered the same way-and it also proved to me that more training information needs to get out to the younger athletes and their coaches. Training 'off the field' takes your 'on field' game to the next level!

The second reason I decided to revisit this subject is because of an "old school" coach who thought I was way off base for giving advice to young softball athletes to start training off the field. This just proved to me that coaches and players are still learning and evolving in our sport. No matter what age group you play or coach, you will have athletes who are very serious about ball and those who play for fun. Each is absolutely fine; there is a need for those who want to just play and have fun, and those who have goals and desires to be the best in the

world. What disturbs me is there are coaches out there today that are limiting their teams instead of offering up information to players to be their best. Again, it might not be for every player on the team, but present the information on training and let the kids and parents decide. If you are coaching young athletes in the range of 8-10 year olds maybe they don't need to be in the weight room, but there is nothing wrong with teaching them to do push ups and sit-ups after practice.

The third reason is the off season is upon us and now is the perfect time to get your Training program in full swing. The off season is the time of the year that we can make great strides in our training that will positively impact our softball game next spring. Training programs like the one I have developed should be split into three seasons; Off-season, Pre season and In season. If you and your team want to get to the next level, read on and then start training off the field to become a superstar on the field!

But... Before we start, let's talk about two issues that cause some negative hype when softball and weight lifting were talked about 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 we understand the body better and how it performs. Tight muscles should always be stretched, but only when they are warm. Stretching is a very important part of training and body maintenance. Second, the results from weight training and proper training for softball in general are very good for the body. Training is not just about lifting weights, or lifting as much weight as you can. It is not about women lifting weights and looking like men. That will never happen unless a woman is taking illegal drugs. 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 include a couple of different activities. Some of them are a dynamic warm-up, agility training, Plyometric, core training, strength or weight training, conditioning, and a proper cool down.

The best way to start any workout should always be 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 (i.e., jog, bike, jump 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 a given range of motion, increases heart rate, blood flow to the muscles, core temperature, and stimulates the neuromuscular system to get into a state of readiness, as well as allowing for more sport-specific movements. Remember that 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 any tight areas of your body that have properly been warmed up.

**Agility's** 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 the 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 maximal 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. Plyometric training must be performed with maximum explosiveness to be effective. Due to the nature of the sport, upper and lower body plyometrics should be performed. 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 the 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 better known as the abdominals and the lower back muscles. These areas are used often in throwing, swinging, and pitching. The core muscles are used in basically every movement of most sports.

This signifies the importance of developing those muscles. For example, most 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). By developing the core musculature, it will help in injury prevention, as well as increase strength and speed through improved capabilities to maintain trunk stabilization and balance during sport movements. For



young teams and athletes [8-12 year olds], I recommend starting with core training and agility's. As they develop and age, then start a weight training program.

**Weight and Strength Training** is very necessary in building strength for softball players. The stronger an athlete is the faster she will run, throw, pitch and hit. Weight training is very specialized and a good program written for softball players should be followed. Never lift weights that are too heavy for you, and always lift with a partner. Lifting with a partner will promote safety and will help with motivation. Lifting programs are best when they are developed using the periodization method. Periodization is form of exercise design 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, so to develop the connective tissue and bones along with the muscles. [I recommend 12 years old and up with slow progression and an emphasis on form and mechanics.]



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## In The Circle With Michele Smith: A Case for Training

**Conditioning** for softball is very important, as we want to be a fit and strong athlete. Improved endurance or 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** is very important when you have finished a 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 and cool down and stretch. It is also a great time to reflect on your practice or game to improve your mental skills as well.

For more information on **Training Programs**, check out my website ([www.michelesmith.com](http://www.michelesmith.com)) and the new **Dynamic Training DVD**



and year long **Training Guide** that I developed with Division I 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 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. Maybe someday I'll

see you and your team at the Women's College World Series and you'll be able to answer my question that the single most important thing you did to get to the Series was your Off Field Training Program!

Good Luck and train hard!  
Michele Smith

## Diamond Faces

### Team Spotlight: The Louisville Stunners 14U

The Louisville Stunners (14U) showed teams how to get it done when fifty-eight teams from across the nation came together at Disney's Wide World of Sports® for the USSSA World Series. This team played almost flawless defense as they soundly defeated teams from Pennsylvania, Kansas City and Florida in pool play to advance as the number one seed in their pool to the double elimination tournament.

The Stunners were successful in reaching their goal in 2007, making it through bracket play undefeated. Only three teams scored against them, the Ohio Wave, the Richmond Elite and High Intensity. In the games played during the tournament, the Stunners scored sixty-four runs and allowed only nine. The team

had a batting average of .398, an on base percentage of .405 and a slugging percentage of .458, which actually was slightly down in all three categories from the full season stats. The 2007 year ended with a record of thirty-nine wins, eight losses, scoring 301 runs and allowing 81.

"Our team is comprised of twelve individually talented girls that played as one cohesive unit throughout the Disney tournament. Every individual girl had her starring moments throughout the week, and some awesome offensive and defensive plays were made! Talent is one aspect of what is required to win a tournament of this magnitude, but an inner drive to succeed and support your teammates is also required," said Coach Carl Grant. "The girls on this team have all of these traits and they deserve all of the praise for their accomplishment in winning the 14U division!"

The Louisville Stunners 14U is part of an organization of elite fastpitch softball teams covering ages 10U to 18U and is based out of Louisville, Kentucky. The organization was started in 2000 by Kevin Johnson, who still heads the organization today, and the late John "Nub" Murrell. The Louisville Stunners organization is

well known for its success at preparing young ladies for competitive high school and college careers, as well as promoting teamwork, competition, and character building. To date, twenty-two Stunner girls have



### Louisville Stunners 14U

earned college scholarships in NAIA through Division I.

Team Members: Tournament MVP: Taner Fowler; Outstanding Pitcher: Lauren Grant; Defensive Player Award: Megan Cureton; All Tournament Team: Jerilyn Meeks, Rebecca Jackowitz, Wendy Vincent, Hannah Abbott, and Jordan Nolley Hannah Stucker, Krista Adams, Ashley Dickerson, Whitney Eldridge; Manager: Carl Grant; Coaches: Wendell Vincent, Alan Cureton.