



**G**reat teams win Championships. Great athletes can contribute to winning championships, but they cannot win them on their own. Team atmosphere and team relationships are very important to the overall success of your program. That is why I have decided to write on Team Bonding. Managing your athletes, or getting them to be the best team possible, is just as important as teaching them all the right skills to use on the field.

I love the concept of team bonding and think it is something that can make a HUGE difference in a very positive way to each and every team that works on it! But, building a close-knit team does not just happen

by itself; it takes some effort and some skill. My philosophy on team bonding and the concept of building a tight-knit team has to do with the basic principles of human nature. Every person has some basic needs in life besides the obvious air, food and water. Most people excel in environments in which they feel needed and have a sense of belonging. It is also important that they be happy. Happy people tend to be magnetic and that 'happiness' can manifest itself into other characteristics that are contagious within groups--or teams. This is the atmosphere we aim to build. And, once it gets started, it will grow within the team and become stronger and stronger as the season builds. Near the end of the season, the team's atmosphere and overall strength should be at its pinnacle.

So, right now you are probably asking the question, "exactly how do you build this great team attitude and atmosphere?" Here are some suggestions and actual events that I facilitate and participate in to help build a winning program.

**•A pizza party!** In fact, I have at least two every year for the Pro Team I play for in Japan, one before the season starts and another before our Championships! Have the team gather in a room that fits everyone comfortably, but is not too big. You want the team to be together and not too spread out. Once the pizza arrives, serve it and let the fun begin. After everyone is full, if there is any left over, play party games to decide who has to eat the last few pieces. It is lots of fun and definitely creates a team atmosphere.

**•Create a team slogan for the year.** Have the team vote on a slogan and use that slogan before every practice and at the start of every game. For example, a couple of slogans that my team has used are: 'Do you want it? We want it!' and 'Can we do it? Yes we can!' The team should get into a huddle and the captain, or one member of the team, should yell out 'Do you want it?' and then the rest of the team would yell 'We want it!' It's a great way to get the team fired up.

**•An ice cream sundae party!** [Can you tell I like food! YUM YUM!] Cut up lots of fresh fruit and bananas. Serve the ice cream, fruit and toppings in a buffet style line and let everyone build their own sundae's or banana splits. Once again, play party games and have cheers. Get everyone screaming and yelling--and bonding together.

**•Relay races during practice.** Have the infielders, the outfielders, and the pitchers and catchers compete against each other. These types of relay drills help the team to learn to be more competitive as well. Learning to work together and be more competitive in practices are very good things for teams. Keep track of who wins, and then the losing teams have to do silly animal walks while the winners get to joke and have fun with them. Good examples of funny animal walks are the crab walk, the elephant walk, and the bear walk.

**•A coach's challenge.** It can be anything from trivia questions to a specific task. It can be individual or group challenges--maybe a project that will get the whole team working together so they can experience the feeling of accomplishing something important together. If the team is going to be traveling to Nationals in a certain state, ask trivia questions about that state so it will become useful information for the team. It will also raise their curiosity about the state, which will make them more excited to go there. Anything that will motivate the athletes and make them really want to get to Nationals, will result in them playing better during the season so they can reach their goal--making it to Nationals!

**•Team cheers!!** ALWAYS cheer for yourself and your team in a positive way and NEVER cheer against another team in a negative way. Create team cheers that are specific to a teammate or an event of the season. If your team came from behind in a game, make a cheer about the comeback. When your team cheers it during upcoming games, it will remind them of what they are capable of. This is a great way to mentally get the team believing that anything is possible!

**•Slip 'n' slide practice.** On a warm day, put out some slip 'n' slides so the team can cool off and practice their sliding at the same time. This is great team fun!! Working on skills in softball can sometimes become routine. Find new ways to make the routines fun and exciting. Another great example is to work on soft hands by learning to catch water balloons or doing an egg toss. Both of these games are much more fun than the everyday task of 'playing catch.'

**•And lastly, create positive pages.** This one is my favorite and a good one to help build an emotionally strong team. Every player gets a sheet of paper and a pen and should write her number and name at the top of the paper. The team sits in a circle and everyone passes their paper to the left. When you get the new paper from the person on your right, you look at the number and name of your teammate at the top and you write something you like and admire about her softball game on the paper. When you are finished writing, pass the paper to the left. If you have 10 teammates, you should do this 10 times, until you have written something about each one of them. When the team is finished, every player should have her own paper back with 10 great things written on it about her softball game! I recommend you keep that paper in your game bag and reread it from time to time during the season. What you will find is that your teammates admire certain skills and abilities that you might not have even known you have or how good you are at them. Use this sheet of paper to help you get through those times when you are not as confident as you should be--or need to be.

I hope this helps you, your team and your season. Good Luck and believe in yourself and each other. But most of all, get together and do some bonding so that you will be a winning team and the strongest team possible!!