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THE SOFTBALL TRYOUT SYSTEM

How To Run a Stress-Free
Tryout At Any Competitive Level

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
BUILDING YOUR TEAM	5
DOCUMENTATION	6
TEAM SELECTION MATRIX	7
PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS	8-13
SAMPLE TEAM SELECTION MATRIX	14
BLANK TEAM SELECTION MATRIX	15
RESOURCES	18

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has coached a competitive team will understand the inherent pressure of tryouts. Regardless of sport, age, grade, or skill level, choosing a select few players to make up your roster for the season will be one of the most difficult (and most stressful) decisions you have to make as a coach.

This is for all of the marbles. You may not get a chance to change your roster until next season. That's why it is important to do it properly now!

The Softball Tryout System is designed to help take some of the gamble and guesswork out of selecting players for your team.

To help you along in the selection of your team, we have provided the following resources:

- A strategy on choosing the right players for your team and the characteristics that make great team players.
- A Selection Matrix that is going to help you decide which players have to go and which players to keep.
- And more

Coaching isn't easy – especially at tryout time. You have to end up crushing a few dreams while making others come true. This system is going to aid you in making the best overall decision for your team.

Best of Luck!

BUILDING YOUR TEAM

Opinions vary on the ideal number of players for a team, but most people believe that 12 to 15 is optimal.

To prepare a team effectively, you'll need at least 10 players attending every practice. You can always expect 1 or 2 players to be absent, whether it be due to homework, family commitments, sickness, or some other reason.

As a general rule, choose more players if you expect a high rate of absenteeism.

However, be aware that there are only so many game time minutes to distribute amongst your team. Many coaches fall into the trap of selecting too many players, only to have them become disgruntled over lack of playing time. It is inevitable that some players will see the floor more than others, but be wary of bringing several players onto the team who have little or no chance of playing in the games.

For this reason, I would recommend a team size of 12 players for most teams at the high school level or below. More advanced, competitive teams may select up to 15, but it is important to manage the playing time expectations for those players who will be at the end of the bench.

DOCUMENTATION

Many teams have attempted to equalize the playing field and have adopted a strict 'documentation' process for the coaches to follow.

This attempts to ensure that everyone gets a fair shake on the field during tryouts, and forces the coaches to be accountable. Why did you make the choice to cut one player and keep another? It will all be down in the documentation.

That's why we have come up with the **Selection Matrix** – it provides a great opportunity **for you** to evaluate the players that have come out for tryouts – and it provides you with the necessary documentation to make sure you are selecting the right players.

TEAM SELECTION MATRIX

We have put together a system that allows the coach to make fact-based decisions on their team. Here's how this system works:

- List all of the tryout players from top to bottom on the Matrix.
- Decide on the 3 or 5 most important selection criteria for your team
- Apply a different weighting to the selection criteria, based on what you think are the most important traits.
- Each criteria is scored between one and 10. These scores are multiplied by the weighting percentage.
- The scores after the weighting will be added together to come up with a final tally that is used to choose the team.

You may come up with different selection criteria on your own, but here are three areas you can start with:

- Player skills and positions
- Attitude and coachability
- Athleticism and potential

PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS

You may want to group players by position, with each area having the weighting different. For example: You may not need your first baseman to have the same fielding skills as your shortstop – but you want them to be the good batters in your lineup. So, for first baseman, you choose to weight your score a little differently.

We have also included a short piece on what you might want to look for in each position player on your team. This is just a guideline and may not apply to your coaching philosophy.

First Base

Your first baseman doesn't necessarily need to have great range to shag ground balls through the holes, but he or she must have a great anticipation of where the ball is going to go when it is thrown to them.

Often times players (especially at younger levels) will errantly throw the ball, or their arms aren't quite strong enough to reach first. The first baseman needs to be able to anticipate the bounce of the ball, and must not be afraid to knock it down.

The first baseman is traditionally one of the stronger hitters on the team, because what they may lack in outstanding range and speed, they usually make up for in hitting power. This isn't always the case, however.

Keys to a good first baseman:

- Good glove (on throws)
- Good bat

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PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS CONT.

Second Base

Aside from your shortstop, the second baseman needs to be the best infielder on the team. They need to be able to track the ball through large holes – especially when the first baseman is holding a runner.

They don't necessarily need to hit for power, but consistency in getting on base is a good trait for a second baseman to have.

Good fielding awareness is also important – meaning they need to know what is going on, and where to throw the ball. It isn't just about reeling in grounders and making throws to first base. There are double plays, being the cutoff man, etc, that a good second baseman knows how to do.

Keys to a good second baseman:

- Good fielding range and awareness
- Consistent bat

Shortstop

Should be your best infielder. They should have a combination of speed, intuition, and ability to make the right play. The shortstop also needs to have a strong arm in the infield, because many throws will be made on the run, and when the infield plays deep.

Like the second baseman, the shortstop doesn't need to be a power hitter, but to utilize their speed, they should be good percentage hitters. Further, they should have excellent field awareness, knowing where the ball should be every time it is hit.

Keys to a good shortstop:

- Great range, glove and awareness
- Consistent on base hitter
- Strong arm to make longer throws

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PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS CONT.

Third Baseman

A strong arm is a must on the hot corner in softball. The best third baseman can throw the fastest players out with a powerful and accurate arm. Precision is also a must, because the third baseman has the longest distance to throw, and the most room for error.

Because many players are right-handed hitters, and many players hit the ball naturally to the left side of the field, the third baseman needs to be brave when the ball is hit hard to them. They will see their fair share of hot grounders and line drives. You need to have someone on third base who isn't afraid of the ball. A third baseman is also usually a strong hitter, with a great deal of powering the batting order.

Keys to a good third baseman:

- Strong arm
- Fearless ball handler
- Good power hitter

Catcher

A good catcher is one that can stop the balls from getting by him or her – not necessarily the one with the golden arm from behind the plate. Far more runs are going to be scored and bases stolen on past balls than stolen bases in youth softball.

Stopping the ball is important. With that said, a strong arm is also imperative. If a team does steal, the catcher should be able to get the ball to second base instantly. What both of these come down to is reaction. A good catcher has good reaction time. Most catchers are the best hitters on the team, so you should focus on the defensive talent, and if they can hit, then it is a bonus to your team.

Keys to a good catcher:

- Good reaction time (for throws and stopping the ball)
- Fearless of the ball and the bat

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PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS CONT.

Fielders

Fielders have a lot of ground to cover in the outfield, so it's a good idea if they are speedy. Some managers will make their rangiest player the centerfielder – because of the potential amount of ground to cover. A strong arm is also a good trait in a fielder – especially if you are asking them to make long throws from deep in the outfield. It can save you a lot of runs on advanced bases from sac flies.

As far as the bats, this is maybe where you want to make sure you have a few good ones. While many fielders have good speed and fielding skills, it is always nice to have good bats in the outfield as well.

Keys to a good fielder:

- Strong, accurate arm
- Fast in the outfield
- Good judge of the ball in the air
- Good hitter

Pitchers

Well, this can vary from one team to the next. Not many teams that are below high school level will have a dedicated pitching staff. In order to keep number appropriate, the pitchers are pulled from different position on the field to come in and play. Some teams may have a small pitching staff, but it isn't always likely.

Finding any pitchers who exhibits a good power and control combination are the most valuable pitchers, but they don't always come along every year. Pitchers that are also valuable fielders would be my next choice, and then pitchers that have overwhelming power, or great control, but not both at the same time.

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PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS CONT.

Attitude/Coachability

This is one area that we would place a great deal of importance on. While you can have a player with average skill and a great attitude – and they can improve their skills with practice, the player with good skill and a bad attitude is hard to change.

That's why we might lean towards players with good attitudes. A good attitude sets an example for the rest of the players on the team. The best players usually have the best attitudes. It is that simple.

Since softball is a team sport, everyone needs to be working together when they are on the diamond. If you have a few players who think they are above the team, or they don't need to put out the same effort as other players on the team, they can affect an entire lineup.

You can select players who have a questionable attitude in the hopes that they will be swayed by the others with a good attitude. You can also keep a close eye on these players so that they don't become a distraction to the other players. A big attitude problem isn't something we would take on my team. The players with good attitudes are great motivators for the players that do have the better skills and they can be valuable in pushing those players to greater heights.

When we are putting together our roster and we have the final positions to fill, we fill it based on attitude over skill every time.

General Athleticism and Potential

This can be hard for some coaches to gauge, but we think it is important. All you have to do is think of that player that can throw the ball 100 miles an hour, but can't hit the broad side of a barn. Or the big swinger that can hit it over the fence, but misses more than he or she makes contact.

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PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS CONT.

Athleticism is an important tool in determining the quality of a player. Some players have skill, but very little overall athleticism. You are going to have to do a balancing act – in our experience, there is more potential in players with excellent athleticism and lower skills than with skill and little athleticism.

Potential is a funny thing. But, identifying it can be a gold mine for a coach. Uncovered talent is all over the place, but some players need a little more coaching than others. Every coach wants to find that diamond in the rough – so-to-speak. Especially if it is your job to find the next big star for the high school senior team. So, put some stock in potential and see if you can cultivate a new player or two every year.

Announcing Your Cuts

The most difficult and stressful part of tryouts is announcing your cuts. This is something that must be handled tactfully and delicately. Most of us can remember being cut from a team as a kid, and it is not a pleasant experience.

The key thing to remember with making cuts is feedback. The Comments section in your Team Selection Matrix should be filled with specific suggestions on how each player should improve his game. I would encourage you to meet privately with each cut player to discuss his strengths and weaknesses. This can be done in person at the gym or field, or over the phone. Explain clearly why he was not selected, and what he needs to work on to have a better opportunity of making the team next year. This will also provide the Documentation that some schools require for all competitive team cuts.

Some coaches will prefer to simply post the team list in a public area, and have the hopefuls come by to see if they made the team. If you choose this option, ensure that you encourage the cut players to approach you privately to discuss their specific development areas.

On the next page is a sample team matrix, with values assigned to certain traits. You may choose to assign different values for your matrix.

SAMPLE TEAM SELECTION MATRIX

Player	Sugg Position	Positional skill set		Attitude & Coachability		Athleticism & Potential		Total Wtd Score	Decision	Comments
		Score	Wtd Score	Score	Wtd Score	Score	Wtd Score			
		(1-10)	(x60%)	(1-10)	(x30%)	(1-10)	(x10%)			
Maggie Brown	SS	8	4.8	9	2.7	8	0.8	8.3	Keep	
Shelley Benitez	Pitcher	3	1.8	10	3	6	0.6	5.4	Keep	Needs to improve game awareness, but great attitude. Will be a good player down the road
Liz O'Conner	Catcher	8	4.8	2	0.6	6	0.6	6.0	Cut	Very talented, but very poor attitude
Betsy Jones	3B	5	3	9	2.7	10	1	6.7	Keep	With right coaching, will be a very good varsity player.
Darma Hubert	LF	1	0.6	5	1.5	6	0.6	2.7	Cut	Very physically strong, but needs to improve eye-hand coordination and footspeed.
Inga Kendall	2B, SS	9	5.4	6	1.8	7	0.7	7.9	Keep	
Jo Hammond	P	8	4.8	7	2.1	6	0.6	7.5	Keep	
Erica Molina	CF	8	4.8	7	2.1	7	0.7	7.6	Keep	
Tami Dubrow	1B	7	4.2	7	2.1	8	0.8	7.1	Keep	
Tamara Forde	RF	2	1.2	8	2.4	5	0.5	4.1	Cut	
Claudia Williams	P	3	1.8	3	0.9	7	0.7	3.4	Cut	Needs to improve consistency
Raelle Penfield	C	8	4.8	4	1.2	7	0.7	6.7	Keep	Will need coaching to improve attitude
Kim McGill	OF	7	4.2	6	1.8	9	0.9	6.9	Keep	Very athletic. Skills need work, but huge potential.
Catie Concordia	Mgr	5	3	3	0.9	6	0.6	4.5	Cut	Perhaps not ready for the team, but perhaps manager
Beth Matthews	1B	6	3.6	5	1.5	5	0.5	5.6	Cut	
Lauren Tobia	3B	8	4.8	9	2.7	7	0.7	8.2	Keep	
Becca Drummond	SS	9	5.4	8	2.4	7	0.7	8.5	Keep	
Mel Sherbrooke	P	5	3	7	2.1	5	0.5	5.6	Cut	Good attitude, but weakest of the pitchers
Jess Johnston	RF	3	1.8	6	1.8	6	0.6	4.2	Cut	poor attitude
Marie Stanley	CF	8	4.8	7	2.1	7	0.7	7.6	Keep	
Haley Fullerton	LF	5	3	4	1.2	4	0.4	4.6	Cut	Need to improve coordination

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