

## **JUNIORS LEAGUE (age 8 and under) TRAINING GUIDE**

**OVERVIEW** – The Juniors League continues to emphasize the fundamental softball skills necessary for successful game play. It is geared toward both experienced and first-time players. Pitching and the pitcher/catcher relationship are introduced for the first time. The coaching emphasis is on basic batting and fielding skills in a competitive environment.

### **FORMAT** –

- Games are played with an 11-inch rubberized ball.
- Defense consists of 10 players, which includes 4 outfielders. However, all players will be in the batting order, even when not playing in the field.
- The pitcher's rubber is set at 30 feet.
- **For the first two weeks of play, games will be coach pitch only. During this time, and before the season starts, you must take time to identify potential pitchers. After the first two weeks, players that have proven they can throw strikes in practice may be allowed to pitch in a game. NOTE: A PLAYER MUST BE ABLE TO THROW STRIKES IN PRACTICE BEFORE PITCHING IN A GAME. The point is to teach the fundamentals of pitching at a younger age, yet not detract from the game. That is why it is VITAL that you do not allow pitchers to pitch if they are not ready (see 'What to Teach' section). Continue to work on pitching in practice, even if you have nobody ready to pitch in a game.**
- When qualified, a player will pitch 3 pitches, followed by 4 more from the coach, if necessary. Batters should be encouraged to swing at good pitches from the player/pitcher.
- Pitches should have minimal arc. This type of pitch is vital for both the batter and pitcher to become successful in fastpitch softball. Windmill or slingshot pitching styles are acceptable.
- **IMPORTANT:** Batters are allowed 3 strikes. There are no walks (exception is a batter hit by a pitch). If a ball is fouled on the 3<sup>rd</sup> strike or 7<sup>th</sup> pitch, the batter is awarded an additional pitch. Otherwise, the batter is out – **NO ADDITIONAL PITCHES! This rule must be enforced to be fair and keep the game moving!**
- Called strikes should be made when a player is pitching. **Please reward the pitcher if she has thrown a strike!** Only swinging strikes are counted when a coach is pitching.
- A team's 'at bat' is over when they acquire 3 outs or have scored 6 runs, whichever comes first.
- Games are one hour and fifteen minutes in length or 5 innings, whichever comes first. The team batting when the time limit expires should complete their 'at-bat'.
- It is important that coaches are prepared with lineups for each inning and teach their players to hustle on and off the field. Game time moves very quickly, so give them as much actual playing time as possible.

- As a coach, you should make every attempt to give all players a chance to play in every defensive position during the year. However, advanced players may be encouraged by playing more time at the positions they seem best suited for (i.e. pitching, shortstop, catching).
- There are no umpires. Base coaches should make the calls. The fielding team must supply a home plate umpire each inning who is willing to call strikes thrown by a player. They also should serve as a ‘backstop’ for the catcher.
- Pitchers circle is 16’ in diameter.
- Only one base is allowed per play on an overthrow.
- Bunting is allowed and encouraged.
- Stealing is not allowed.
- There is no infield fly rule in this league.

## **WHAT TO TEACH –**

Be sure to start your season with a parent/player meeting. This gives the girls a chance to get to know each other, and the opportunity to let the parents know what your expectations are for the season.

### **The Game**

At your first practice, assume your players know nothing about softball. Make sure they understand basics such as: balls and strikes; scoring runs; making outs; etc. Once you have established that everyone has some basic knowledge of how to play, you will be able to move on to fundamentals.

### **Teamwork**

- Emphasize positive interaction between players in practice and games. For example, have girls change partners during practice drills.
- Stress that every defensive position is important.
- Encourage support for each other – celebrate successes together.

### **Good Sportsmanship**

- Congratulate opponents after every game.
- Positive cheering from the team – this is a great way to keep the girls involved and have fun. Be sure that the cheers are encouraging toward your players, not negative toward the opponent.
- No “chatter” from the field (such as ‘Hey, batter!’) Players should be encouraged, however, to congratulate and celebrate when someone makes a good play.
- All players (*and parents*) must show respect at all times for teammates, opponents, coaches, and fans. (See ‘Code of Conduct’ handout)

## **Fundamentals**

- Throwing the ball – Teaching should be done step-by-step. Start with proper grip of the ball, and then follow with wrist snap. Use bow-and-arrow drill to teach proper arm movement, body position, stride, and follow through.
- Catching the ball– Explain the importance of giving a target and using two hands.
- Fielding – At this level, it is important for the players to feel comfortable with the ball. It may be helpful to use tennis balls or Whiffle balls in some drills. Players should learn proper positioning (ready position) as well as how to catch ground balls and fly balls. It is also very important to teach young players when and where to throw the ball after it has been fielded.
- Batting – What players learn about batting at this age will become their foundation for batting as they grow older. It is important that they learn all of the steps necessary to make contact with the ball: Proper grip and stance; where to stand; ‘squashing the bug’; eye on the ball; follow-through; and release of the bat after the swing.
- Bunting – A player that can bunt well may be the most crucial offensive weapon a team has in competitive softball. It is important that players learn proper form and gain confidence at an early age. Also, it is just as important for players to learn how to defend a bunt.
- Pitching – As a coach, it is important to learn the basics of pitching to be able to teach your players properly. Become familiar with the grip, stance, wrist flip, 9 o’clock position, 12 o’clock position, ‘opening the door’, ‘closing the door’, and follow through. Use drills and handouts to teach the progression of pitching. Make sure parents and players know that pitching takes many hours of practice before they will be able to throw with speed and accuracy, and that not every player will get the chance to pitch in a game. **\*\* PLEASE BE SURE THAT YOU HAVE A COACH OR PARENT THAT IS WILLING TO WORK ON HIS OR HER PITCHING SO THAT BATTERS RECEIVE GOOD PITCHES IN GAMES AND PRACTICES. \*\***
- Positions – Begin teaching the skills needed at each position as well as responsibilities and coverage.
- Base Running – Players should learn the basics of base running: Run through first base; making a turn; watching the coaches; and leading off. Players at this age should be able to grasp the concept of tagging up if a fly ball is caught. Stealing is not taught at this level. Sliding should not be a focus at this point, although this is left to the discretion of each coach.

**\*\* A note on aggressive base running: At this level, it is important for players to learn to take extra bases when they can, but it is not the intent in this league to exploit poor defensive skills. Be judicious as to when to take another base. Ask yourself: “If this team could play solid defense, would I send my player?”**

## **WHEN TO TEACH –**

Practices are scheduled prior to the season, and a weekly practice is **strongly** recommended throughout the season. Using a practice plan, begin with the basics of the game. Add new drills and skills at each practice, but be sure to review what has already been taught. Repetition is the best way to learn a skill. The focus should remain on fundamentals throughout the season, although new skills and concepts may be introduced as the season progresses.

## **HOW TO TEACH –**

It is extremely important to make practices and games fun for the players. Be creative when planning your practice. For instance, kids love to have contests during practice. Give them an opportunity to compete, especially in a team format (a throwing relay, for example) that reinforces the team concept. A favorite: Scrimmage against parents and siblings.

- Keep practices and games positive.
- Be Committed; Be Consistent; Be Honest – Give your players a reason to want you as their coach again next year.
- Use drills that work best for your team – generally drills that keep everyone active or have very little down/waiting time. Attention span is short with a 7 year old.
- Have handouts available for parents if they wish to work with their daughters at home.
- Emphasize to parents that practice at home is far more valuable than team practice. Ask your players at the beginning of each practice who has been practicing at home. Make it a source of pride.
- Communication:

At practice or a game:

1. Get their attention.
2. Keep their backs to the sun and to any distracting activity so they can see and focus on you.
3. Kneel or sit to be at eye level with your team.
4. Ask questions to keep players involved and ensure their understanding.
5. Stay enthusiastic.
6. HAVE FUN!

With Commissioners:

1. Call or email commissioners with any questions you have about the league, players, drills, expectations, etc. We welcome any feedback in the hopes of improving the OYAA softball experience.
2. Keep the commissioners informed on equipment issues and diamond conditions.

Be sure to attend clinics offered by OYAA and make use of available drills and handouts. If you are looking to work on a particular skill and would like additional drills, let us know and we will send you information on where to find what you need.

Thank you for volunteering to coach in the OYAA fastpitch softball program. It is your dedication and commitment that makes our program one of the fastest growing in the area. The girls who play for you today represent the future of Olentangy Softball... and the future of our community.

## **We couldn't do it without you!**

### **CONTACTS:**

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OYAA Web Site: Click on the softball pages at **[www.oyaa.org](http://www.oyaa.org)**

### **DRILLS AND INFORMATIONAL WEB SITES:**

**[www.y-coach.com](http://www.y-coach.com)** – A youth coaching web site. Instruction, philosophies and drills.

**[www.eteamz.com](http://www.eteamz.com)** – Lots of drills.

**[www.syasoftball.com/coachescorner.html](http://www.syasoftball.com/coachescorner.html)** - This is a great site. It has detailed instruction on fundamentals as well as drills and practice suggestions.

**[www.ehow.com/list\\_1077.htm](http://www.ehow.com/list_1077.htm)** - Practice suggestions; info on defensive positions.

**[www.decatursports.com/softball\\_drills.htm](http://www.decatursports.com/softball_drills.htm)** - Excellent site for drills.

**[www.hueytownfastpitch.com/coaches](http://www.hueytownfastpitch.com/coaches)** - Go to tips and drills link. Also, use main link to find a link for softball cheers.

**[www.positivecoach.org](http://www.positivecoach.org)** – Great overall site for coaches and parents.