

Softball Coaching Essentials

From A to Z

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A is for Attitude

Lou Holtz once said, "Ability is what you're capable of doing. Motivation determines what you do. *Attitude* determines how well you do it."

When I was in high school, I saw the following quote every day before and after practice, before and after games.

"Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right."

At the time, I didn't really believe it. After all, just because you think you can do something doesn't mean you can. And there were times when I thought I couldn't do things, but ended up surprising myself by being able to do them.

But as I got older, I realized how true this quote is. Your mind is a very powerful tool. It can control much of how you perform. So if you go into a situation full of anxiety and worry that will affect how well you do.

However, if you go into a situation knowing that you will accomplish what you want to accomplish, chances are you'll do just that. Why? Because you've just set a goal and often times when you set a goal, you find yourself working toward it, preparing yourself to reach it. If don't have that positive mindset, however, and you never set that goal, do you think you're going work toward it?

Remember what Zig Ziglar said, "You can't hit a target you cannot see, and you cannot see a target you do not have."

Having a positive frame of mind and a good attitude are so, so important. There are a couple of articles that illustrate this point very well:

[The Attitude of Champions](#)
[Attitude is Everything](#)

B is for Believe

Believe in yourself and in your players! On top that, show your players you believe in them through your words and actions. How are your players supposed to believe in their own abilities if they think you don't believe in them? Do your words and actions show them that you think they are capable? Make sure your players know that you believe they can get the job done!

One way to let them know is to tell them. However, be careful that your actions don't contradict your words. If you tell them you believe in them, but constantly remind them of what they are supposed to be doing during game your aren't backing up your words with your actions. If you really did believe in them, would you need to tell them what to do in every situation big or small?

To believe is to have faith, confidence, or trust.

Do you have faith, confidence, and trust in your team? Do you show this in what you say and what you do?

C is for Confidence

By definition, confidence is belief in oneself and one's powers or abilities. Have confidence in yourself. If you're unsure, your players will see it, other coaches will see it, and parents will see it.

How are players supposed to follow a leader that has no confidence in their own knowledge and ability? Why should they listen to you if you are unsure about how or what you are teaching them? Hey, none of us know everything, and none of us *ever* will. So it's okay if you don't have every answer or every solution, it doesn't mean you're an incompetent coach. Walk, talk, and

conduct yourself with confidence in what you do know. If you come up against a situation you don't know how to deal with or don't have the answer to, show confidence in the fact that you *will* find a solution. You *will* learn how to deal with it.

Whether you feel confident or not, project confidence.

Like Muhammad Ali said "To be a great champion you must *believe* you are the best. If you're not, *pretend* you are."

D is for Discovery

Help your players "discover" the game of softball. Get them involved. Ask them questions. Allow your players to learn, see, and explain things themselves.

Instead of just telling them what to do in situations, ask questions. Get them to think the situation through on their own and tell you what they should do and why. The more thoroughly they understand the situation and why they are supposed to do something, the more likely it is that they will remember it.

If you just tell them what to do and all they're doing is trying to memorize what you say without understanding the reasons behind it, the less likely it is that the information will "stick." It may eventually, but it will be a longer process than if you have them think it through and make sense of it for themselves.

Also, instead of having a super long post game talk in which you get on them for all the mistakes they made in a game, try saving your "chalk talk" for the next practice. Come back the next practice and instead of lecturing them on what they could've done, ask them what they think they could have done better. They can probably tell you just about everything you jotted down on your little note pad during the game.

Once they've been able to identify their own problem areas, let them know that you will work on those very areas in practice. Now you've created a situation in which the players know what they need to work on and you are

there to help them by providing the means (in practice) by which to get better. That's more effective than having a bunch of players feeling like, "Well, coach thinks we stink at bunting so now we're going to bunt all practice long." That creates a feeling of punishment rather than an opportunity to grow and get better. See the difference?

E is for Exercise

As a coach you'd like your player to be in shape. It makes training much easier. Show them that exercise is important to you too. It's okay if you can't run for miles on end or if you don't have a body like a professional athlete, but take the initiative to make exercise a part of your life as you expect your players to do.

As an athlete, I've always found it to be a great motivator when my coach could do things along side me. When they could actually do what they were asking me to do. You don't have to be able to make diving stops or hit homeruns over the fence. But when your players do their warm-up lap ~ Do it with them! Even if you can't run a warm-up lap, you can certainly walk one. Who knows? Maybe by the end of the season you will be able to jog a lap. Wouldn't that be great for your player to see? Get into shape so that you can demonstrate a drill every once in a while. Join in on throwing competitions. You get the idea.

F is for Fun

Fun, fun, fun. You'll hear me say this over and over and over again: Softball is a *game*, it's supposed to be fun. Never, ever forget that. Players will not play this game for years and years and years if it's no fun. I truly believe that the only way you ever reach over and above what anyone ever expected is when you are doing something you really enjoy. Only then will you be willing to go that extra mile or practice on your own time. Only then will you be willing to put in the extra effort and that separates the average from the great. If softball is no fun, players will do what is required and go no further. If you want your team, your players to reach above and beyond, make it enjoyable!

G is for Goals

Goals are not only important for players but for coaches too. You can set goals for your team's progress (i.e. cover the pickle by the 2nd game of the season, practice 1st and 3rd situation at least once a week, cover pick-offs before the first game of the season, work on bunting every day, etc).

Then you could also set some goals for yourself as a coach. For example: attend at least one coaches clinic this year, find an assistant that is excellent in teaching the slap, set a date for parent meeting, work on improving non-verbal communication skills, etc).

We always talk about goals for the players and for the team, but goals for you as a coach can be very beneficial as well. We talked about this a little under A is for Attitude. Give yourself a clear plan of action for improving as a coach, improving as a staff, improving the processes used by your team, and more.

If you don't know where you're going, it's going to be tough to get there. Set some goals and give yourself a clear direction and picture of where you want to go.

H is for Honest

Be honest and up front with your players. Don't promise playing time you won't give. Stick to your word. It's very annoying for players to hear their coach say one thing one week and something else the next. Say what you mean and mean what you say. It's tough to motivate players if they don't believe you and it's almost impossible for players to believe you if you shoot your own credibility in the foot from day to day, week to week, or even month to month. If you say you're going to do something follow through. Never make promises you can't keep. Players can respect a coach that keeps his/her word. You're only as good as your word, so think before you speak.

I is for Individual

Yes, you want to promote team building and playing together. But as a coach, you have to realize and understand that each player is an individual. Each player learns differently, has a different outlook, is playing for different reasons, and reacts to situations differently.

It is your job, as the coach, to get each player to reach their full potential and bring out the best in every single one of them. What works for one player doesn't work for all. The hitting drills and pre-game warm-up you used last season for last year's players may not work as well for this year's players. Some players respond when you push them others shut down. Some players need a lot of encouragement and positive reinforcement, others worry when you don't push them enough.

A great coach know each player and will learn what best motivates them. A great coach will know what they need to do to get each player achieving above and beyond what anyone ever expected. Something Cindy Bristow said in a clinic stays with me to this day:

If you want to make things easy on *yourself*, use a cookie cutter practice.

It's easier to just run a practice and treat everyone exactly the same and if a player doesn't do well in that environment, too bad for them. It's their fault that they just can't keep up. Maybe they're just not cut out for softball or for your level of play.

That line of thought gives you an easy out as a coach.

But doing things the hard way is what's best for your players. Take it upon yourself to find a way to get every player to progress. Don't let players fall by the wayside just because they learn a little differently, don't quite have the same physical talent as the others, or don't respond as well to the same cues that the rest of the players do. If coaching was simply about running drills and teaching "how to" throw, field, hit, and catch, anyone could do it.

Get to know each player. Reach all of them, not just the ones that respond most to your "style." It's a tough job, but as the coach, it is also your *responsibility*.

J is for Journey

Success is a journey, not a destination.

Your season is like a journey too. Therefore it's extremely helpful to know where you are going on this journey before you start. What do you want to accomplish? Where is this team going? What do you want this team to achieve? Do you have a clear path and a clear direction? If not, it's time to get one.

Once you've found your direction and chosen your path. Don't forget to smell the flowers along the way. It's okay to celebrate when you reach a milestone! This can provide the renewed energy your team needs to continue along your journey.

If you were going on a "real" journey, wouldn't you have a map, or at least a plan? Your season should be no different. Set goals, make a plan, and work the plan!

K is for Knowledge

There is always something more to know. Continue to learn and develop your coaching skills. Increase your knowledge of new drills, offensive strategy, defensive strategy, rules of the game, organizing a practice, communicating effectively, and more.

Great coaches know that they don't know everything and they probably never will, but they still continually strive to learn and grow. A coach's desire to learn is crucial to coaching success. Along with the desire to learn, you must also have the desire to *apply* what you learn which means you may have to make changes, you may have to adjust. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to, not only learn, but to implement the new knowledge you obtain? Change can be scary, but sometimes necessary. Be willing to make adjustments as you learn.

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How can you increase your knowledge? There are many different ways to do this. Here are just a few examples:

Read books

Attend clinics

Observe the best in the game and learn from them

Talk to other coaches

Suggested books:

[Coaching Softball Successfully](#)

[Softball Skills and Drills](#)

[101 Offensive Drills](#)

[The Baffled Parent's Guide to Coaching Youth Softball](#) (excellent for newer coaches)

[Coaching the Mental Game](#)

[Heads Up Baseball](#)

L is for Leadership

Coaches *are* leaders! What kind of leader are you? Are you an effective one? Do you have the leadership skills you need?

Good leaders:

Establish Trust

Make Tough Decisions

Empower

Inspire

Know their team

Grow their team

Take charge

Communicate Effectively

Listen

Make others feel important

Accept honest criticism

Are Innovative

Exude positive energy

Celebrate

Have a human touch

Are accessible

Give their team a shared vision that they not only see, but live.

M is for Motivation

Don't assume that your players are going to motivate themselves. Even the best athletes in the world need motivation from their coach at times.

Four concepts for motivating players include:

- Inform them of how well they are currently performing
- Let them know how you want them to perform in the future
- Assist in Building their Character
- Build a good Coach-Athlete Relationship

Players that are motivated will always play better than those who aren't. But the whole "rah, rah" pep talk before a game isn't the best way to motivate your players. Being able to motivate your team is an every day thing. It starts in practice. Be a motivator every day, not just game day.

N is for Natural

In this case, I'm talking about natural consequences. It can get very frustrating to get players to listen or change simply by telling them to do it better. Why not incorporate Natural Consequences into your practice. That way you don't have to yell your head off, but the players still get the point.

For example, I think it's a great idea to have players go get the ball if they make an overthrow. Plus this gives them accountability during practice that we want them to have in the game. In the game if they make a bad throw there is a consequence, but often times, that's not so in practice. In practice there's no real reason to HAVE to make your throws good. Plus, as a coach, I can't stand when we have to take a 5 minute break just to go shag all the balls that were overthrown. Having a player shag their own ball once their turn in a defensive rotation is over will eliminate the need to have everyone shag after the drill is done. It will also keep you from running out of balls during a drill due to bad throws.

Natural consequences are often more effective and less stressful than constantly getting on your players or raising your voice at them.

O is for Organization

It's very important to be organized as a coach. Come to practice with a plan. Knowing what you are going to do in practice before you get there allows you to get more done in a shorter period of time. Plus you don't want to be on the field during a water break trying to figure out what you're going to do next. It doesn't look good to the players or the parents watching. They will notice.

Also, being organized is important for getting players and parents vital information in a timely matter. I've been a parent on teams where the communication between the coaches and parents was terrible mostly because the coach wasn't organized. The coach seemed to always be flying by the seat of her pants and it's tough to run a team like that. That also makes it tougher to earn the respect of the players and the parents. Again, they can tell when a coach is well organized and when they are putting things together at the last minute without much thought. Being unorganized does not reflect well upon you as a coach.

P is for Patient

Not all players learn at the same pace, and as we said before, not all players learn the same way. Be patient when you teach.

I asked an high school player, "If you could tell your coach to do one thing, what would it be." Do you know what she said?

"I wish my coach would take more time with me because I'm a slow learner."

Now I had just met this player and had no clue that she may be a slow learner. Everything that I'd see of her on the field indicated that she was a better than average player. Yet she obviously had run into situations where she felt coaches were rushing her or were being impatient with her. In fact, it was enough so that if she could tell coaches any one thing, it would be that – be

more patient with me. I'm going to get it, just not necessarily as fast as you'd like me too.

Sometimes being patient involves thinking of another way to get your point across. If you've been trying and trying to teach something and the team or a player isn't getting it. It may be time to try a new approach. Peter Sprenkle, developer of *A Softball Coach's Toolkit*, introduced me to the Rule of 3. If you've tried 3 times to explain something and you're still not getting the point across, try something different. Take a step back and figure out what you need to do to get the players to "get it." Trying the same approach time and time again and expecting a different result doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

A patient coach will take the time to think about what he or she can do to help the player learn the concept. An impatient one will assume there's something wrong with the player. Be a patient coach. Remember you are there to teach. You are there to get the players to learn. Not just some players, all of them.

Q is for Quality

You've heard that saying "Quality not Quantity." Quality practice is better than plain old "quantity" practice. Two hours of solid, well planned practice is better than three hours of fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants practice.

Remember what we talked about back at letter "O"? Organization can help you have better quality practice and get more done within a shorter period of time.

You've probably also heard "practice makes perfect" and then heard people clarify that with "Perfect Practice makes Perfect." Warming-up (throwing) without proper fundamentals really doesn't do much good for throwing performance. Be sure that your players are making quality throws in practice (even in warm-up!). If you only stress throwing mechanics during "throwing drills" and disregard it the rest of the practice, you may end up with players who make 40 quality throws during the "throwing drills" and 100 non-quality throws the rest of the practice. How do you think their body will perform a throw during a game when it's time to just react? The way they threw the ball 40 times or the way they threw the ball 100 times? Stress quality!

R is for Respect

A coach who gives respect is more likely to get it in return. Respect over the long term is not gained by simply being in a position of authority. If you don't respect your players, chances are they won't respect you. Without respect, motivation is just about impossible. If your players don't respect you, they won't believe you, they won't give their absolute best for you. Having the respect of your players is obviously a big part of being effective as a coach. But you won't get it without giving it.

S is Simple

When I interviewed Nancy Ellis, National High School Athletic Coaches Association's Coach of the Year in 2002, one of the things she referred to was KISS – “Keep It Simple Stupid.”

Simplicity works. Why? Because simple tasks and skills are easier to master than complicated ones. Don't you want your players to master the skills you teach? Perfecting basic plays and being able to do them well over and over and over again is much, much more effective than teaching complicated plays and techniques that players can only do “okay.”

The book [*Coaching the Mental Game*](#) (Dorfman, 2003) has two pages dedicated to “Simplicity.” My favorite part goes like this:

“Simplicity is an indication of trust in what a coach believes. No garnishes, no garbage. The desire to be clever sometimes overwhelms the understanding of how to be effective.” (pg. 199)

What? Another reference to that book? Hey, what can I say, it's a great book. I like it.

Simplicity is especially important during competition. We don't need the players to be thinking about swing mechanics in the box or the different steps they need to go through to make a good throw as they field the ball on defense. A couple simple cues I often use are “Ball first, make a good throw.” I tell players that when a ball is hit to them, the only thing I want them thinking about is stopping that ball. Without the ball they can't make a

play. So Ball First. Then after you get the ball, make a good throw. Period. Stop the ball, make a good throw. That's what I want to see. Very simple.

On offense I like to tell players, "Hit the strike." I want them to know that as long as they choose swing at a strike ball, they'll do just fine. Why? Because that's what we train to do in practice. We train to be able to hit any strike, outside or inside, high or low. I reinforce the idea with them that they can hit any strike. So now when they go in the box they don't have to be thinking of swing mechanics. I don't have to be giving them cues on their stride, their hands, their hips, etc. Just see the strike, hit the strike. That's it. If they choose strikes good things will happen. Don't give complicated hitting instructions to your batter between pitches. The simpler you keep things during the game the better. Your player's minds needs to be clear to "do" not "think."

T is for Teach

Remember that you are there to teach. Being a coach on a team is very similar to being a teacher in the classroom. The only difference is that you are teaching sports rather than academics. Many teachers go through years of schooling and training to learn their craft. How many coaches do the same? Most teachers are required to attend seminars and continued learning events each year. Do you do this as a coach?

When you coach you are, in essence, a teacher. Recently the head coach I work with loaned me his copy of [*Coaching the Mental Game*](#) by H.A. Dorfman (2003). In this book Dorfman shares thoughts from John Wooden, legendary UCLA Basketball coach. Here's an excerpt from the book:

He offered one of his many strong views about coaching, particularly referring to what he believes to be a coach's major responsibility: "He should remember he's there to teach," Wooden said.

"He should remember he's there to get a player to learn. ...If he's recruiting just to have great players, he shouldn't be there. He should be a teacher."

U is for Understanding

Understand your “audience” – your team! Talk to your players and coach them in a manner that is fitting of their age. For example, the way you explain something to high school aged players would probably be different from the way you explain it to a 10U team. Also remember that much of what may be second nature to you may not be second nature to them. Never assume your players know something just because you think they *should*.

It’s difficult to understand your players and how they process the information you give them unless you get to know them. Getting to know your team is a crucial element to being a successful leader for your team. If you need some tips on what your players are thinking, don’t forget to check out **What Softball Players Really Think About Coaches**. It also includes a survey you can give to your players to get feedback directly from them. Get it at AllAboutFastpitch.com/players.html

V is for Vision

All great coaches have a vision. They have a clear picture of where they want their team or their program to go. They give this vision and this direction to their team. They know what their team stands for what it believes in. But if you are to develop this, you must first know what *you* stand for and what *you* believe in. Without a vision, there is no direction. Without a direction, there is less chance for great achievement or great success. We talked about goals and how important they are. But often times, goals are based on vision. In order to set effective, worthwhile goals, you must first have a vision of where and what you want to be. Clearly define your vision and it will be much easier to make a plan to achieve that vision.

W is for Writing

Writing can be a powerful tool. Jot down ideas.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I get ideas for practice or thoughts on what to say to the team during the strangest times of the day. So having a

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notepad or notebook close by all is a great idea. That way, when a good softball idea pops into your head in the middle of the day, you can jot it down. You won't forget it, but it also won't interrupt what you are doing at the time. Especially if it happens when you are at work or somewhere else when you really need to be concentrating on something else. Write down your thoughts so that you can come back to them later. It will clear your head so that you can concentrate on what you are supposed to be doing, but you can also make sure that this awesome idea won't get lost somewhere in your brain. You have it on paper!

Other things you can write out are: goals, practice plans, outlines for meetings, and what you expect parent conduct to be during the season.

That last one is one you should write out and go over during your parent meeting. There are definite benefits to this which are covered in the Special Coaching Report you can get for free at www.AllAboutFastpitch.com/SpecialReport.html

One more thing about writing or jotting, I've read that sometimes just jotting down ideas in a sort of brainstorming session often times spurs on new ideas and new thoughts. So it can be a great way to come up with fresh approaches to practice or to problems you may be facing.

X is for X-ample

Be a great example for your players in the things you say and do. Attitude is key. If you're attitude stinks, don't expect anything more of your players. If you want your players to be positive be positive yourself. If you want your players to be prompt, make sure you are always on time. If you want your players to be excited about what they are doing show that you are excited about what you are doing out there together on the field. You know what you need to do. Be a good example because if your actions often contradict your words, you'll lose credibility. Be the type of person, have the type of attitude you want you players to be and to have. "Do as I say, not as I do" isn't going to fly very far if you want the respect of your team and if you want players to actually do what you ask.

Y is for You

How can *you* improve? Continue to look for ways to improve *your* performance as a coach. There is always something new to learn always a way to get better, not only for your players, but for yourself. Great coaches will get feedback from others on their skills. Find out what associates and peers think you are doing well and what you could do better.

Also take some time yourself to evaluate your own skills and knowledge. Think about what your own strengths and weaknesses are. Think about how you can maximize your strengths and how you can improve in weaker areas. Only you can change yourself, but first you have to know what needs to be changed.

Z if for Zeal

Be enthusiastic! Zeal is defined as fervor for a person, cause, or object; eager desire or endeavor; enthusiastic diligence; ardor. Have fervor for your players, for your team, for what you are trying to accomplish this season (you do know what that is right?) Enthusiastic diligence – not just determination. Be diligent about improving your players and your team and do it with excitement and enthusiasm!

Remember what Winston Churchill once said,
"Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."

Love what you do, enjoy it, throw in some zeal and you *will* become the best you can be. If you can do that, you'll be on the path to success as a coach.

Here's to a great season! Don't forget your ABC's,



Stacie Mahoe

Owner - www.AllAboutFastpitch.com

Host – www.FastpitchTalkRadio.com

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Don't forget to check out these other resources for coaches:

What Softball Players *Really* Think About Coaches

Real thoughts from real players. Get your wheels spinning and think about what you can do differently as a coach to be more effective.

Get it at AllAboutFastpitch.com/players.html

Keeping Softball Fun e-book

Tips, ideas, drills, and competition to keep practice fun and interesting. Great for newer coaches! Plus, when you purchase Keeping Softball Fun, you'll also get our 20 page report on Motivation and Mental Toughness.

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