



# Teaching Softball Skills

Ayr Minor Softball

2015





## Part 1

- Intro to Instruction
- Hitting
  - Swinging
  - Bunting
- Fielding
  - Infield
  - Outfield
- Throwing

## Part 2

- Pitching
- Catching
- Baserunning
- Coaching Tools



## Intro to Instruction

- As a coach we have a responsibility to teach our athletes in a manner that allows them to get the most enjoyment out of the game for a lifetime. Safety is extremely important.
- In general the best approach is to teach the athlete to understand what they are doing and learn to evaluate their own performance
- Whenever possible have the players explain what they are doing and how it felt



## Intro to Instruction

- Be aware that not all players are created equal and many will not respond to your teaching methods. Don't consider this a defeat but a challenge to find another way to get the message across. Usually there is a way.
- It can be very helpful to talk with parents to learn how their child best communicates
- Communication encourages all parties to be engaged in the process which leads to the best results



## Intro to Instruction

- Patience will be your best tool in providing instruction.
- Remember, our goal is to help the players improve and foster their love of the game, not to turn them away from it. You need to recognize when you are at risk of the latter.
- Now it's time to get technical. Let's review the preferred teachings for AMSA...



# Hitting Instruction



Hey Batter Batter!

What 3 factors determine the quality of a hit?

1. Bat barrel speed at contact
2. Bat barrel direction at contact
3. Performance characteristics of the bat

As coaches we can teach a player how to control 1 and

2. We can also make recommendations on 3 but it is the least important of the group



## Hitting Instruction

We should always remember that anything we teach a player about hitting should improve

1. Speed or
2. Direction

If it doesn't help with either of those it is really not necessary.

**Style doesn't improve batting averages!**



## Hitting Instruction

What is our goal when hitting?

- Put the ball in play and hit it HARD!!!

Hard hit balls are the most difficult for the fielders to defend and give the greatest offensive benefit.

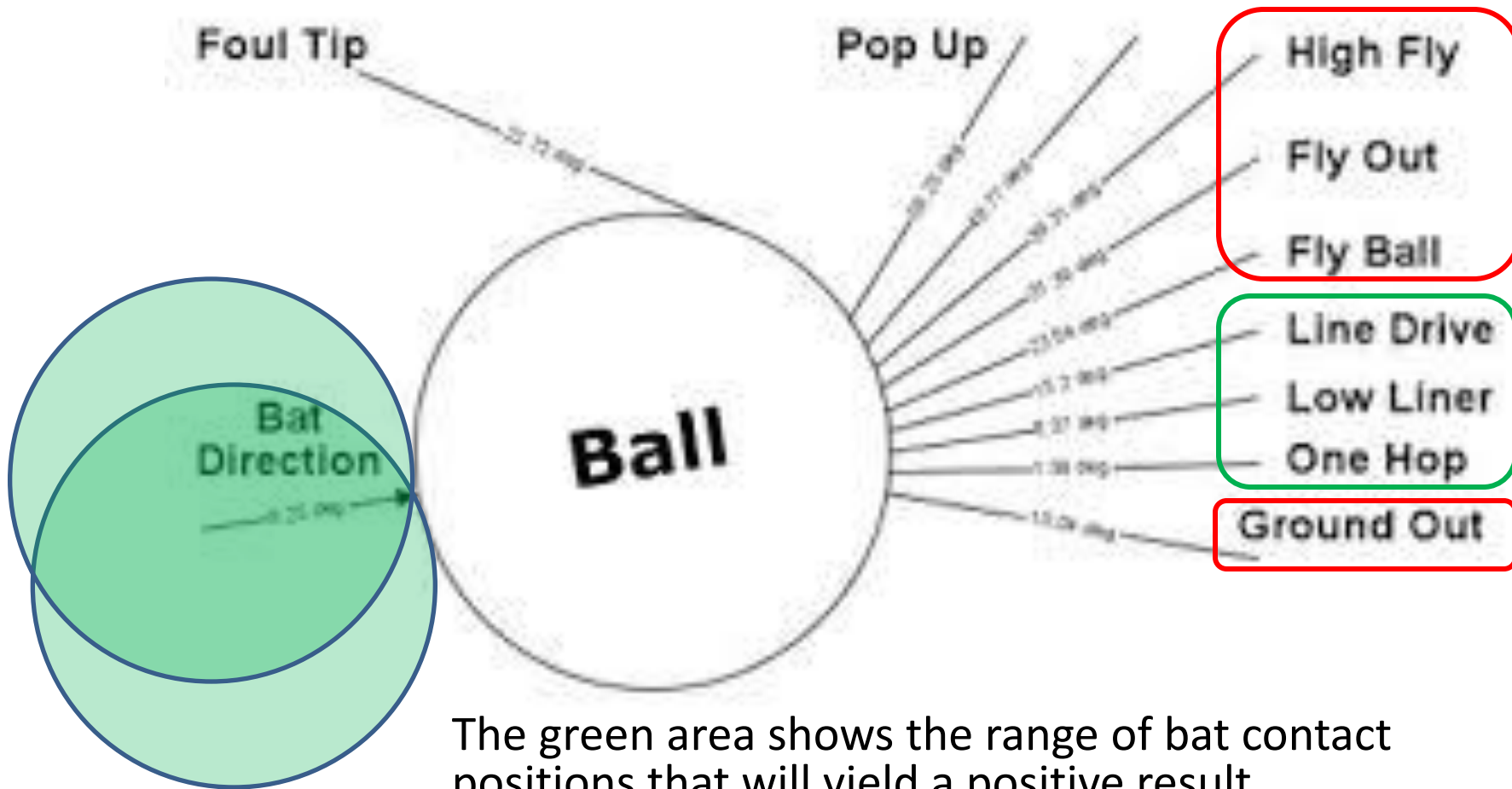
The single greatest contributor to hitting the ball hard is the direction of contact between bat and ball. The more aligned the bat path is to the ball path at contact the more energy will be transferred to the ball.





# Hitting Instruction

- How important is contact angle?



The green area shows the range of bat contact positions that will yield a positive result... not very big is it?

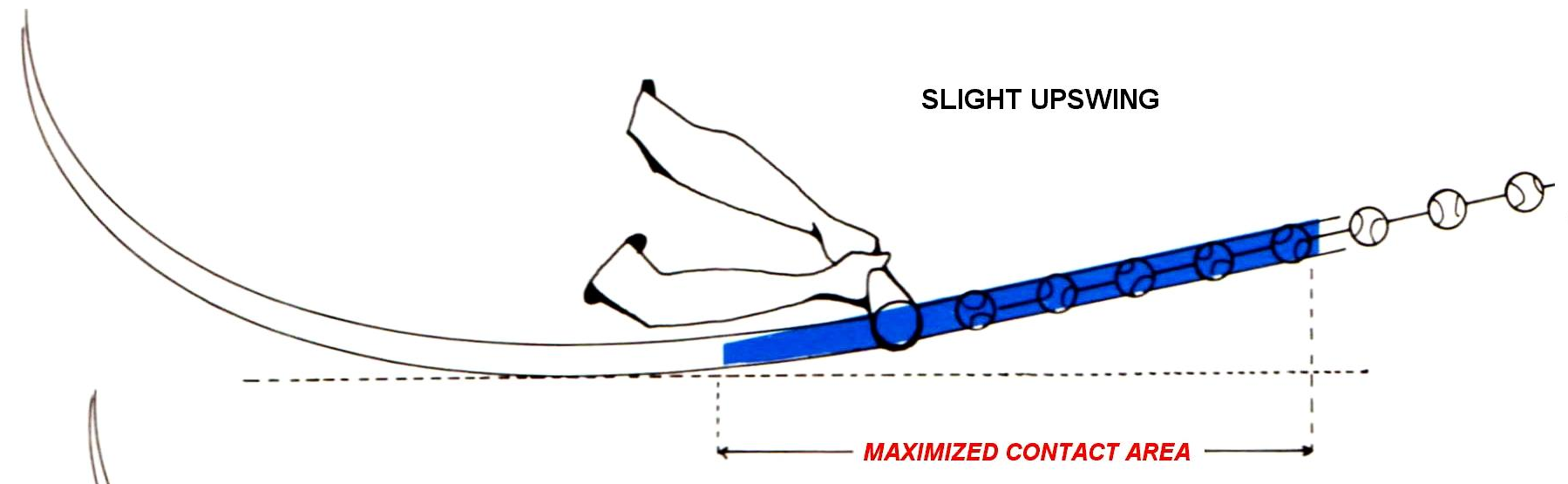


# Hitting Instruction

Since our primary goal is to hit the ball at the correct angle, how do we do that repeatedly?

- We want the bat to match the incoming trajectory of the ball for the longest period of time possible

*Note: recent video analysis proves that in almost all cases the ball is actually moving in a downward trajectory in softball (although less severely than in baseball). Only the very highest levels of adult pitching can produce upward movement in the hitting zone.*





# Hitting Instruction

Let's compare three different bat paths and note the length of the contact zone where the bat can meet the ball.

## Proper Bat Path

Getting the bat on the same plane as the pitch for as long as possible creates the best chance to make contact.



Which one do you want your hitters using?



## Hitting Instruction

The most important factor for keeping young hitters engaged in the game is for them to have measureable success...that means **hitting the ball!**

For that reason I promote working from the point of contact backwards. This provides the most “bang for the buck” in the early stages of development and helps build confidence.

*If you have a student and plan to spend 5 years developing him/her into a collegiate player it makes sense to work from the ground up as most instructors do but for our athletes in AMSA this approach is not in their best interest.*



# Hitting Instruction

That said....

Before working on anything a reasonable stance should be achieved by the batter

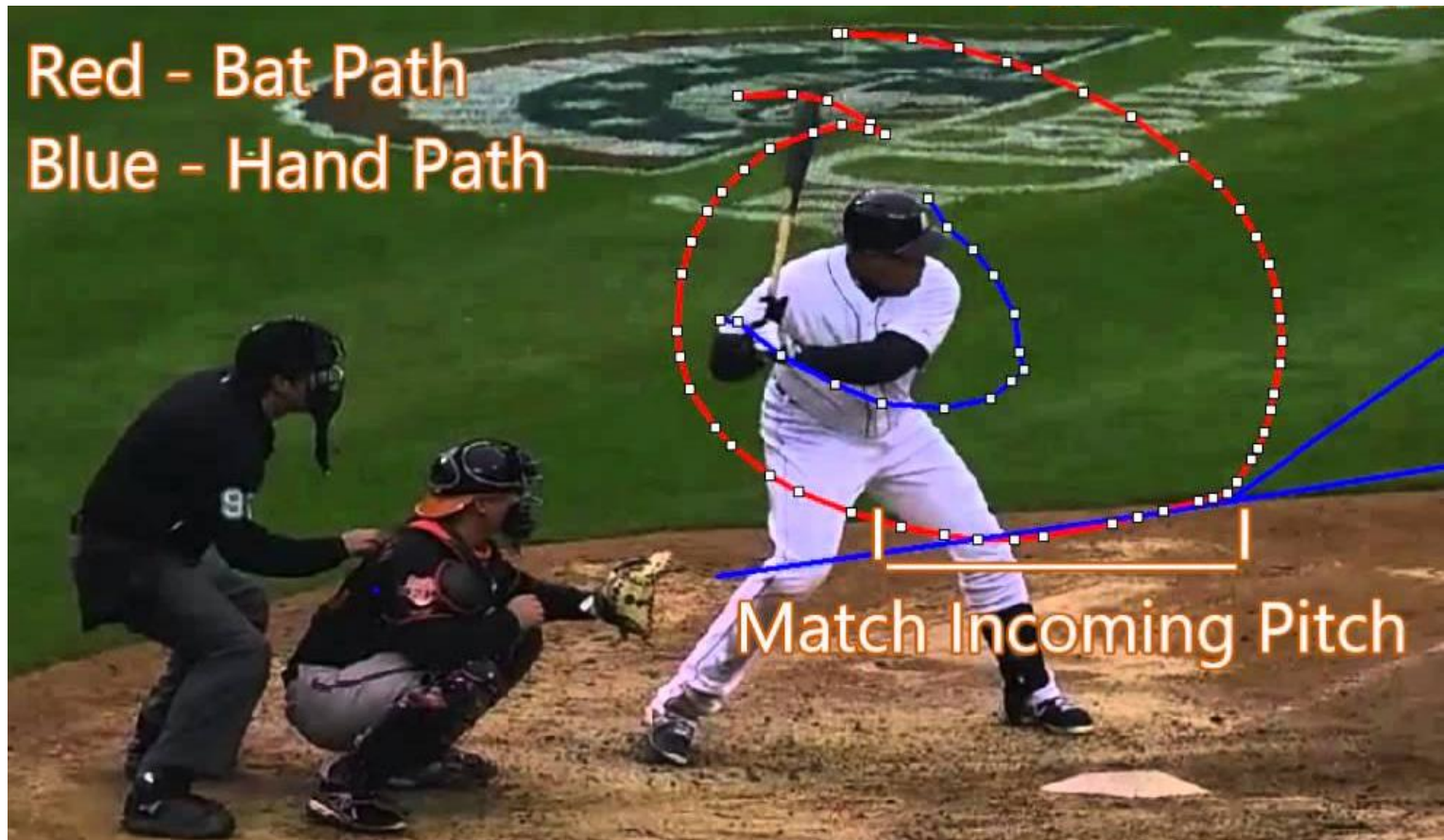
- Feet approximately shoulder width apart
- Slight bend in the knees
- Hitter feeling relaxed, balanced and comfortable
- Bat held in the fingers (not resting in the palm)





# Hitting Instruction

- Overall we want to generate a swoosh pattern for the bat barrel





## Hitting Instruction

Some key points to look for:

- ✓ Hands should remain above the ball throughout the swing.
  - Hands dropping early is a major cause of missed swings for young players. It results in swinging under the ball.
- ✓ Hands should remain close to the body until entering the contact zone
  - exception is for outside pitches
- ✓ The back elbow cannot move ahead of the hands early in the swing.
  - This results in the condition known as “**Bat Drag**” which signifies a major loss of power and repeatability in the swing.



# Hitting Instruction

## Bat Drag



**Bad Drag** should not be confused with **Bat Lag** which is a very good thing for a hitter.

This photo is a good example of Bat Lag where the bat “lags” behind the batter until being forcefully released at the last moment into the hitting zone





## Hitting Instruction

- One area that many players lose power and get out of sequence is in the slotting of the rear elbow. This is the movement from a raised elbow to being close to the back hip during the swing
- Bringing this elbow down is a very important part of the timing and power generation in a high level swing and for that reason I like to introduce it from the beginning

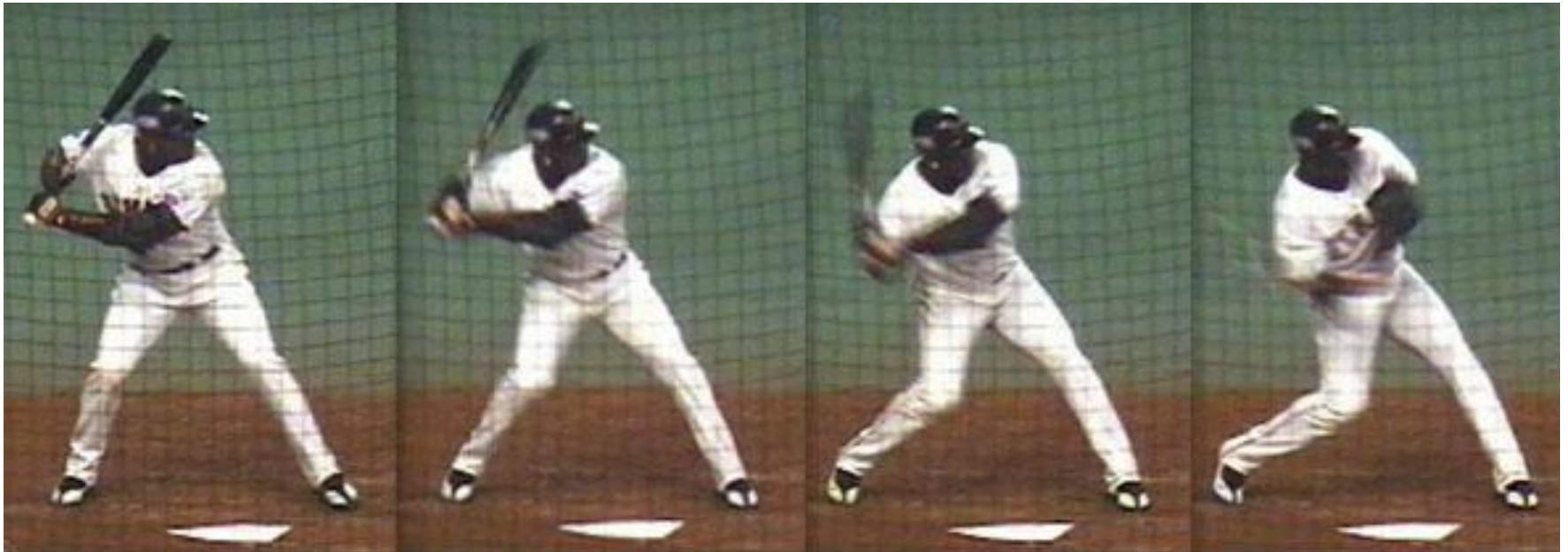


*Many players who start from a low position and don't bring it back up will suffer from **Bat Drag!***



## Hitting Instruction

- Nearly all elite hitters have their back elbow elevated near shoulder height as they “launch” the swing. *Not all start there but they go through there.*





## Hitting Instruction

- Since many young hitters do not understand how to go from a low position to high then back low **I like to start them from the high position.**
- I always try to explain that they need to pass through this position in the swing so if they want to start somewhere else they can but...**if I don't see them pass through this position I want them to start there to feel it and remember it.**



## Hitting Instruction

Those are the primary points to look for in beginner hitters. As players become more advanced we want to dig a little deeper...

- Balance and Weight Transfer
- Extension
- Rotational Separation of Hips/Shoulders

These areas will all help us develop goal #2 – Bat Speed!

We can cover these topics in an Advanced Hitting session



## Hitting Instruction - Bunting

- Bunting is an extremely important skill in the game of softball, especially for fast players
- Every player on your team should be competent at bunting

Practice it whenever you can and encourage players to practice themselves by playing pepper





## Hitting Instruction - Bunting

- Simply from a safety perspective the 'pivot' approach to bunting is preferred to the full 'square' style. Either one is acceptable
- Encourage players to start the bat at the top of the strike zone
- Use the knees to drop lower
- Use the bat to 'catch' the ball instead of hitting it
- Focus on getting the ball down



## Hitting Instruction - Bunting

- Slap hitting/bunting is a big part of elite competitive softball but it is a skill that requires significant time to master. Due to the general skill level of our program we do not actively teach it however if players want to learn we can provide instruction





# Fielding Instruction

## Fielding

- Ready Stance
- Grounders – infield and outfield
- Fly balls – infield and outfield
- Anticipation and reading plays
- Tagging
- Pivots







## Fielding Instruction

- Fielding Stance
- It is very important that players learn and use a “ready” stance as the ball is about to be pitched at all times.
- Player should have
  - feet about shoulder width apart
  - knees bent
  - hands in front of body
  - head up with eyes looking forward

**Coaches should INSIST on a proper ready stance. Don't make it optional. This is a player safety issue!**



# Fielding Instruction

## Ready Stance

### Infield or outfield

Ready to move quickly in any direction



### Third Base

Lower with glove touching ground

Low position protects from being beaten  
by low grounder



## Fielding Instruction

- Grounders – Infield
- At U10 players should attempt to get in front of grounders, shuffling to side if necessary
- At U12 players should be taught how to field balls on the run. This means being taught how to reach for the ball
- At U14 players should be encouraged to step into the ball to initiate the throwing motion



# Fielding Instruction

## Grounders to the Side

- Always try to field ball in front of the glove side foot
- This allows the player to take one step to plant for a throw.





# Fielding Instruction

## Grounders – Outfield

Teach players two methods

### 1. Block position

- Purpose is to prevent the ball from getting past
- Player should get square in front of ball dropping a knee if the ball stays low





# Fielding Instruction

## Grounders – Outfield

Teach players two methods

### 1. Charging position

- Purpose is to field the ball and continue immediately into a throw
- This is used when the primary objective is to prevent a runner from advancing
- Player should get approach the ball in the direction of the intended throw and field the ball just to either side of the glove side foot



Aspen Photo / Shutterstock.com



# Fielding Instruction

## Fly Balls – Infield

- Players should learn fly ball priority
  - CF, RF/LF, SS, 2B, 3B/1B, C, P
- Call for the fly to alert other fielders
- Players should get under the ball as quickly as possible and be in position when it comes down
- Players also need to be aware of obstacles (bases, pitching player, bat, catchers equipment, etc.)





# Fielding Instruction

## Fly Balls – Outfield

- Players should learn fly ball priority
  - CF, RF/LF, SS, 2B, 3B/1B, C, P
- Call for the fly to alert other fielders
- Players should be taught to step into the fly ball leading to a throw







## Fielding Instruction

### Anticipation and Reading Plays

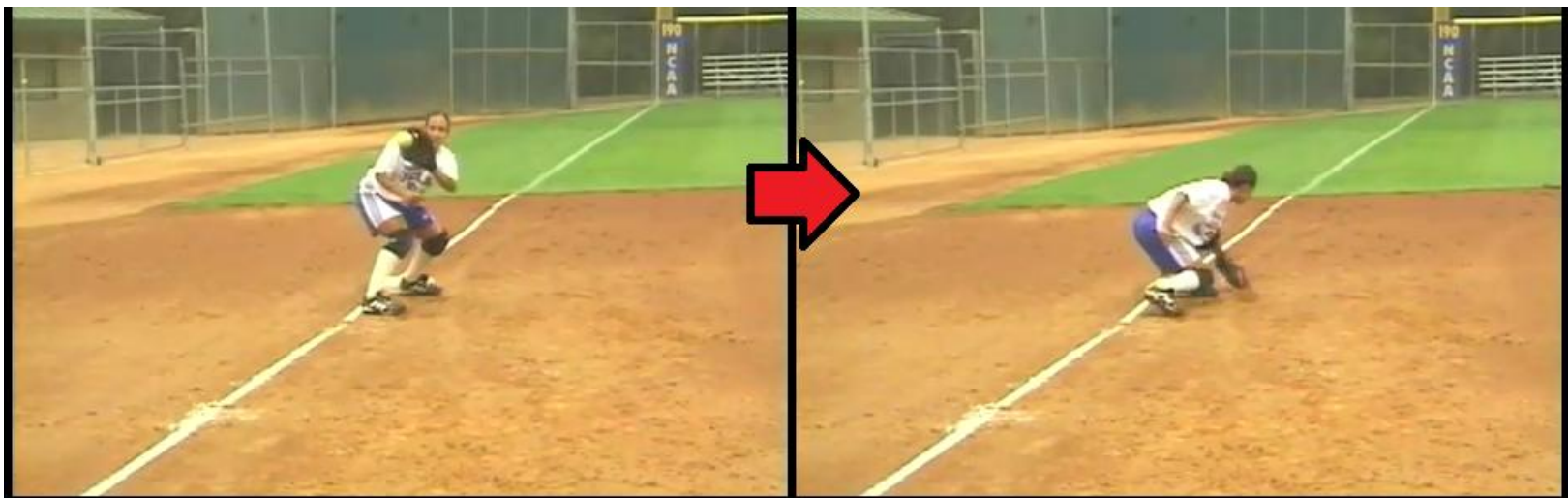
- Teach players to think about upcoming plays before the pitch
- Players should be taught to recognize hitting and pitching patterns to position themselves for the best chance to field a ball



# Fielding Instruction

## Tagging

- Safety is the first concern for tagging technique. Please do not teach players to block a base.
- Players must be taught to set up to the infield corner of the base to tag a runner
- Tag should be made approximately 10" before the base at ground level
- Up to U14 the sweep tag technique should be taught





# Fielding Instruction

## Pivots

- At U14 players in the middle infield should be taught to make the double play pivot at second base
- Footwork should focus on avoiding the sliding runner
- Fielders can be taught both the step behind and step through techniques from both 2B and SS sides





# Throwing Instruction

## Throwing Instruction

### Key Points

- Recognizing patterns
- Teaching proper throwing pattern



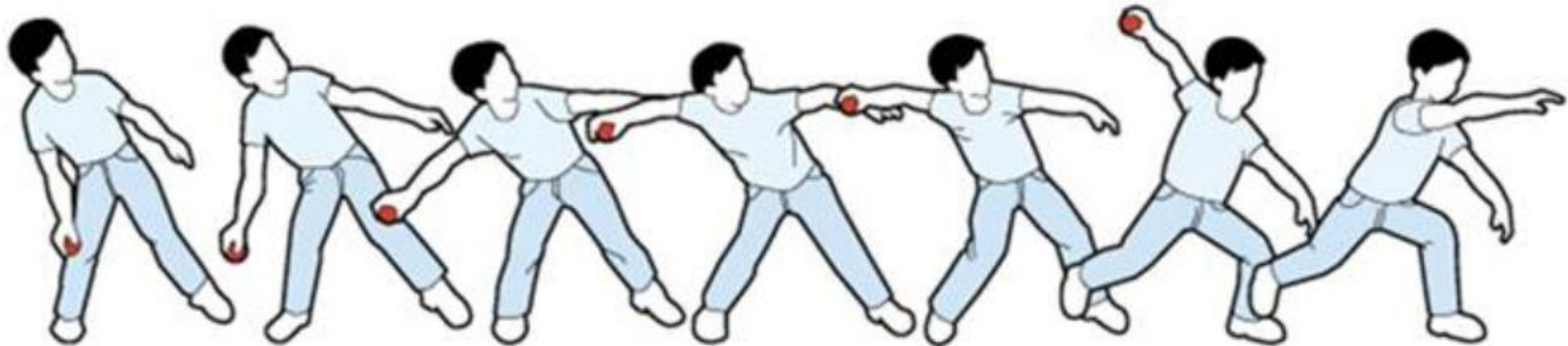
# Throwing Instruction

With young, untrained players you will typically see a couple different throwing patterns. Often the patterns are distinctive between boys and girls.

## BOY

A right-handed boy steps first with his left foot. Hips rotate first, then shoulders. He involves most of his body.

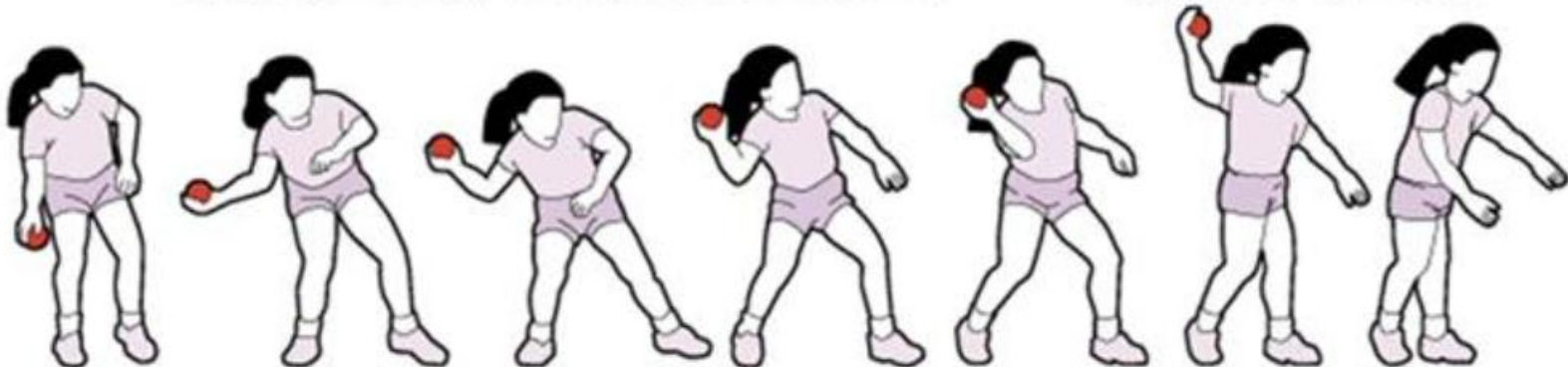
His arm and hand whip around as he releases the ball.



## GIRL

A right-handed girl steps much later in the sequence, often with her right foot. The motion is limited mainly to her forearm.

Her shoulders and hips rotate at the same time, if at all.





# Throwing Instruction

- We have started to introduce high level throwing instruction to all groups U10 and above
- This program is based on the High Level Throwing Patterns program by Austin Wasserman of AB Athletics in Nashua NH
- This is a comprehensive throwing development program by a knowledgeable athletic therapist/pro baseball player. It is being used by players across the world including Major League Baseball
- It is very important that all coaches stress the importance of players doing the drills at home and using the proper movement patterns in practice and games
- AMSA has a throwing development plan posted on the Player Development page of the association website



## Throwing Instruction

- Improper technique can lead to erratic throws but also to injuries both short term and chronic
- If a player under the age of 16 complains about pain from throwing **there is something wrong!** It is likely that the player either has poor technique or an injury.

*Note that general soreness for the first couple practice sessions is a normal body reaction to muscle fatigue*

Watch the player for technique and if necessary ask AMSA Player Development for help





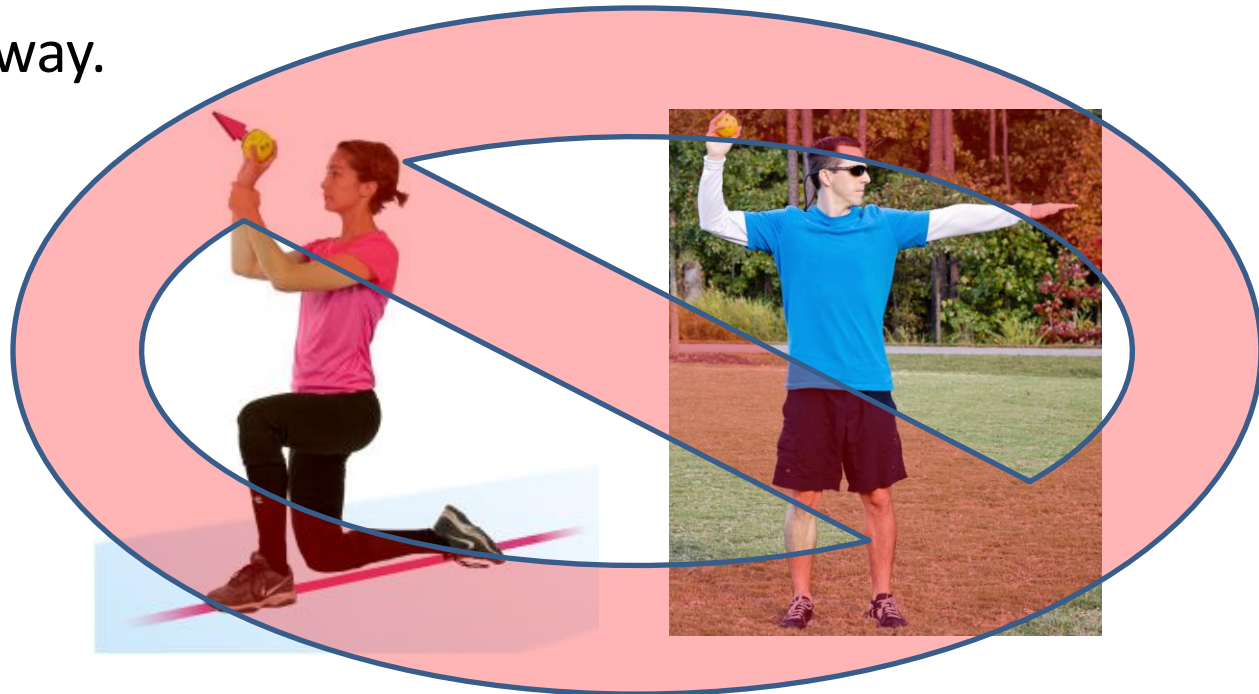
# Throwing Instruction

In order to promote proper throwing patterns we need to abandon a couple long-standing teaching cues

- Wrist snaps
- L-Position

Both of these positions promote inefficient and unnatural movement patterns which can lead to injury.

There is a better way.







## Throwing Instruction

We want to think of the throw as a dynamic movement, not a series of still images.

Several body parts are involved in each stage of the throw and it is beneficial to train them together in most cases.

The AMSA training plan sets out a sequence to be followed for development

An important point to remember...

**“In order to create velocity you must create resistance in the throw.”**



## Throwing Instruction

The best way to create resistance in the throw is to have rotational separation between the hips and shoulders (i.e. twist)

Baseball pitchers provide an exaggerated look as you can see his hips turned half way open but the shoulder are still pointed to the plate



Not using this power source forces a player to use the arms to generate force

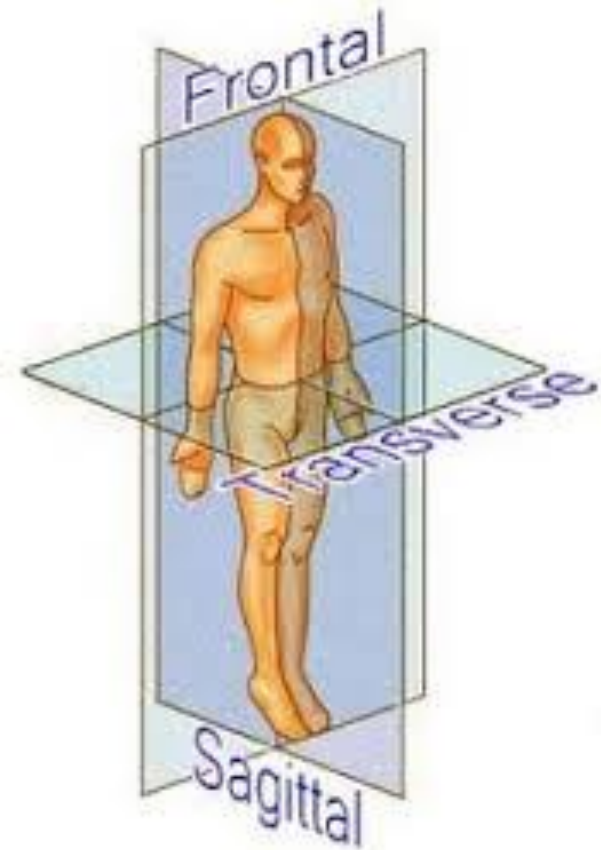


## Throwing Instruction

The most natural way for our elbow to extend is in the Frontal plane as used in Jumping Jacks

Many players extend in the Sagittal plane which has less cushioning effect in the elbow joint. Over time this can lead to tissue damage and pain.

We want to develop a throwing pattern to take advantage of the most natural way for the arm to extend.





# Throwing Instruction

By combining a trunk/shoulder twist with frontal extension of the elbow we can deliver the ball on the correct trajectory.

There are a couple key movements and sequences that need to be achieved to make it work.

The first one we develop is the wrist tip behind the head.

Many coaches instruct that the ball should not come behind the head but this is simply not the case for a high level pattern. In fact, this small movement relaxes the shoulder muscle complex which allows it to do what it wants to naturally.

This movement is trained using the **Water Bottle Drill**.

**\* This might be the most important drill a player will ever use**



## Throwing Instruction

After demonstrating competency with the Water Bottle Drill they can move to further drills including

- Bat Lag Drill
- Seated, Arm Behind Drill
- Standing, Arm Behind Drill

These will help to ingrain the movement patterns on the way to developing a high level throw

Review the AMSA Throwing Instruction Plan for more details





# Pitching

## Key Points

- Setup
- Arm circle mechanics
- Drive mechanics
- Fielding
- Pitching objectives



## Catching

- Stance
- Receiving
- Blocking
- Retrieving
- Throwing
- Leading





## Baserunning

- Running technique
- Anticipation
- Lead offs
- Sliding/Diving
- Rounding
- Obstruction/Interference