

Game sense

'Developing thinking players'

Whilst it is important for the softball coach to be able to demonstrate and teach junior players the fundamental skills of softball, it is also important to incorporate games and mini strategies through the provision of drills and modified games into the training program.

The Game Sense approach places the game centrally in the coaching session, rather than at the end. Skill development is not forgotten but is incorporated into the game situation. If a player is not experiencing success, the coach can point out other ways the player might try. Traditionally, if a child was seen to be performing a skill incorrectly, the whole group stopped and the player was singled out and used as an example of what not to do. With the Game Sense approach, the player receives individual instruction, which does not single them out as all the other groups continue with the game.

This approach develops skills by capitalising on opportunities which arise in a minor game environment. By doing this, players are not only learning sport skills used in the game but are learning many other important Game Sense concepts such as:

- Decision making – 'Where is the open space?'
- Risk taking – 'Should I throw or hold the ball?'
- Problem solving – 'How can I slide to evade my opponent?'
- Thoughts about time and space properties – 'Can I score now?'
- Perception – 'Where am I in relation to others?'
- Tactics and strategies - 'Will I fake a throw?'

These concepts are central to making sense of games, and developing the relevant skills of where and when to move. These skills are essential when playing any sport but are frequently over-looked in preference to emphasising doing an isolated skill rather than thinking about all skills.

Why the Game Sense approach?

- Coaches tend to teach to the average player, leaving the experienced players unchallenged and bored, and the less skilled players with low self-esteem and little confidence in their own ability.
- People wanted to play the game but they were unable to do this well until they had acquired all the skills of the game. Game Sense uses minor games as a stepping stone in the exploration and development of a strategic approach to the game.
- Everyone can participate and succeed in Game Sense because individual needs are met by modifying games to suit varied skill levels. For example, with a modified softball game, the participants can be offered choices about how to play the game. Groups of more experienced players may choose to use a bat to hit the ball, the average players could elect to use their hand to hit the ball, while the

less skilled may choose to throw the ball. Each player is challenged but at the same time achieves success.

- It is possible to play a 'good game' (in a tactical and strategic sense) with poor technique, so the less skilled are still able to achieve. For example, if a person uses incorrect technique but places the ball in a good position in the field, it is a good tactical decision and should be rewarded.

Boredom and repetition

If a coach emphasises the same skills year after year, players become bored and possibly drop out of the sport. Game Sense is a way of improving technique, introducing strategy and keeping young people interested and involved in the sport.

Lack of knowledge

Many skilful young athletes are not exposed to game strategies. These athletes make poor decisions, have inflexible techniques and know little about the game. The coach makes all the decisions and the athlete performs the skills without having the opportunity to link them to the real game. Game Sense challenges people to become 'thinkers', who make decisions, solve problems and develop sound strategies.

Implications for coaches

In the Game Sense approach, the emphasis is on how people learn rather than on how coaches coach. Coaching should enhance, not inhibit the natural learning process. Coaches need to step back and help athletes think about what they are doing so they can change their own performance.

A coach needs to ask two questions before criticising an athlete's performance:

1. If I intervene, will I make a difference?
2. If I give the person some time and direction, will they find the answers for themselves?

The minor game used in the Game Sense session is selected because the format will provoke players into thinking about their actions and the situations which arise in games. Let people play the game, keeping the rules as simple as possible. More often than not, they will come up with ideas of how to play the game and will make the game work for them. If the coach stands back more, the player may ask for help. If an element of the game is not working, certain key questions can be asked to set the participants thinking about the game, eg 'The opposition is scoring too many runs, what can you do to stop this?' Rather than a verbal answer, have participants demonstrate strategies through the playing of the game.

Participants can make better sense of what they are playing if they can identify similarities in games. The coach should draw on players' previous knowledge of other games to help with playing particular games.

The coach should ask 'How can I help my players know and enjoy the game?' rather than emphasising technique as the only way to 'better' the game.

Softball Batter Up – producing confident players

The SBU program activities have been based on the Game Sense approach. The program and has been developed by Softball Australia in recognition of the need for a nationally branded junior participation program to encourage children to be a part of softball from an early age. SBU has been designed to introduce participants to the fundamental skill of softball through a variety of activities and games designed to develop physical fitness, social skills and an understanding of the game.

The major emphasis of SBU is on the development of players as confident contributors to the 'team'.

SBU is recommended 4-12 year olds to cater for participants of varying ages and abilities. The program has been designed to be flexible in its delivery and to reflect the individual abilities and experience levels of each participant. The Softball Batter Up card set contains 65 different softball activities that have been aligned to National Health and Physical Education curriculum. The card set also contained additional information such as safety, quickly and easily forming groups and how to plan each of your sessions. The SBU website contains a heap of great features for the coach including a session planner and video clips of the activities.

Players advance through SBU as they progressively develop the skills and competencies to enjoy the game. This confidence can be further developed through the encouragement of the coach by ensuring their language and training program promotes the positive development of players who 'try'.

Encouragement should be given to players to always 'hit the ball', 'throw the ball', 'challenge the runner' etc as this will develop 'thinking' players who will be capable of making the right split second decisions when the time comes. Coaches don't field or hit the ball for the players; they can't tell the player how their arm strength will match up with the speed of the baserunner or how their running speed will correspond to the outfielders' throw from centre field. These things can only be learned by the players in 'real time', in 'real situations', so it's the coach's job to allow this learning to take place in training situations and during game-time without interference. Many of the training drills and mini-games will help to foster the decision making process for players, as well as increase the level of enjoyment particularly at practise sessions.

As coaches, our language should reflect the positive, desired outcome that we want our players to achieve. Replace all phrases like 'wait for a strike'; 'don't chase the runner' or 'wait until I tell you to run' with more appropriate phrases like 'if you can reach it, you can hit it'; 'go ahead, throw the ball' or 'you make the decision when you need to run'.

This positive reflection of effort will empower the player to move into a confident mindset that encourages them to try at all times. Sometimes they will succeed, sometimes they will fail, but throughout, they will be learning from doing, as opposed to trying to learn from not attempting. Most people/players operate from a 'fear of failure' platform, which discourages the chance to 'try, assess the outcome and make adjustments'. Fearing failure will always limit learning capacity and produce timid players. On the other hand, a coach encouraging

players to try, assess the outcome and make adjustments, will lead the players through intrinsic learning to become confident and assured team members. This method of instruction will provide your athletes with a sound developmental pathway that will, in turn, ensure a much smarter team of players who will push the envelope and produce a standard of play over and above their age-group.