

ENHANCE YOUR SOFTBALL EXPERIENCE WITH A HITTING CLUB

On several occasions when traveling to a SSUSA tournament site, some players volunteer to me that they had not picked up a bat since the last tournament, WOW! So I'm thinking to myself, these guys are not ready for tournament play. In many cases these players don't get going until the last day of the bracket games and by then it may be too late for them to help the team.

Back a few softball years (circa 2009) I visited the Woodlawn hitting club in Florida with my hitting partner Brett "Kreugs" Kreuger; we both reside in the greater Seattle area. Brett and I were on our way to take part in the Jacksonville early season spring classic put on by Curt Hollis. We planned to first stop in Woodlawn to meet up with the Woodlawn coordinator Dave "Pops" North (a great guy) and take part in the bp sessions for two days.

Dave and his associates had developed an early morning hitting activity that was organized and fun. Having a regularly scheduled time and place to practice your game adds to your physical skills as well as socially. Post practice most of us headed over to the local breakfast restaurant where some interesting softball stories were exchanged over sausage, bacon, eggs, hash browns and French toast.

In my estimation there are innumerable benefits in belonging to a hitting club and a salient one is in keeping your game tuned and ready for play. If you have a club in your local area then try and join or start your own. You can pass the word at your leagues or use softball internet message boards to get out the word about starting or joining an existing hitting club.

In 2013 I had the opportunity to start a hitting club at a local facility in the city of Seatac which is nearby. This facility had fields that were turfed for soccer and softball but were not regulation size; so a perfect site for bp and they were available in the mornings. Our former venue for hitting was under water nearly all winter months so this turfed facility afforded us to play year-round in the Pacific Northwest.

We ask for a \$10/month donation from players (cost is about .50/session) and we have about 25 full time members that participate but not every day. Players show up when they want to at their convenience and no one is taking attendance.

It's a good idea for the hitting club coordinator to make every session, especially if bringing the equipment, or delegate to a lieutenant. We like to keep the participation age at 50+ but understand that a weekday morning bp club is more suited for the retired senior player than for those still gainfully employed.

It's extremely important to maintain and take good care of the purchased equipment so they last a very long life. We do change out the balls (3) times a year to maintain good balls to hit. Keeping tattered and torn balls to hit can ruin the experience and players will lose interest. Try and order only 44COR/375 compression balls and not the really high performance ones so the player gets a feel for what they can do in league and tournaments. We order the ISA ROCKS that are used in the LVSSA/SSUSA Worlds in Las Vegas.

A typical day starts with players meeting in the parking lot @ 9:45am every week day morning except Wednesdays which is our league day. We unload the equipment (normally hauled around by the coordinator) on to the transport cart and head to our field. All of our purchased equipment can be Googled online. We hit in groups of three each batter taking three rounds of (10) pitches that are put into play. Having pitchers that can throw batting practice strikes is essential for keeping things moving.

I use my bullhorn to make the announcement for the next group of three to hit. I know everyone's name and skill level as I try to match up ability; I also hit the lefties in their own group and those right-handed batters that always hit the other way. When it's time to replenish the pitchers ball-caddies I'll sound two blasts of the air-horn built in siren and the truck cart will then be rolled to the pitchers area.

Benefits:

- Meeting and getting to know more senior players socially,
- Provides a setting for finding a team that fits your skills and time constraints,
- Prepares player for league and tournament play,
- On-site hitting instruction,
- A sense of belonging and having some where to go in the mornings,
- Swinging and testing the latest bat marketing sensations,
- Determination of bat speed and ball exit speed,
- Provides for fielding and pitching practice.

Equipment:

1. Pitcher protection screen (I.Screen),
2. Ball Collection area safety screen (7 foot wide),
3. Ball collection buckets,
4. Standup ball-caddies for pitcher's comfort,
5. Ball bucket flat truck cart for transporting,
6. Bullhorn (field communications),
7. Bat Compression kit (determines if bat is game ready or toast),
8. First Aid kit,
9. Mounted radar gun on tripod,
10. Large wireless bat speed monitor device.

You're certainly not expected to fortify your startup hitting club with many of the extras that I've outlined above; it's a matter of how much money the club desires to invest. Just make sure you decide on the core essentials that will prepare players for league play and tournaments and for the building of social connections which are critical for enhancing the total softball experience.

Happing hitting,

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