

What is Fastpitch Softball?

Fastpitch is very much what its name implies.....fast! Although there are many similarities between fastpitch softball and baseball, there are also as many differences. In fact, although the basic skills of catching, throwing and hitting are in both sports, many of them are done differently to accommodate the different rules. This summary is meant to enlighten and educate you about the game we call Fastpitch.

The Similarities

RULES OF THE GAME Many of the rules governing the game of fast pitch are the same as the game of baseball: General Rules:

TIME IS NEVER OUT... unless specifically called by the umpire either by the request of a team member or when they need to stop play such as to dust off home plate, or fix a loosened base, etc. This why you will see a lot of extra care in backing up throws after a play. Let's say the batter hits a grounder deep in the hole to the short stop, and beats the throw to first base. When the first baseman throws the ball back to the pitcher, you will notice that the better teams have their third baseman back up this throw, because if the pitcher misses the ball and it rolls away, the runner on first may advance immediately. Likewise when there is a runner on third base; on each throw from the catcher back to the pitcher, you will see the better teams have their second baseman back up every throw back to the pitcher for the same reason. If the ball gets away from the pitcher without a backup, the run will score! Outfielders also play a major part in backing up throws when there are runners on base. With a runner on third base, the left fielder must hustle over to the foul line just in case the catcher decides to fire a snap throw to third for an attempted pickoff throw that may get past the third baseman. Runner on first? Then right field has to cover the right field foul line for the same reason. Runner on second? Center field! This also holds true on stolen base situations.

9 PLAYER TEAM Also similar to baseball, 9 players make up the standard fast pitch defense. Recreational and B-level leagues will permit a 10th fielder, but at the upper levels of play there are only three outfielders. This puts a lot of pressure on outfielders because there is a lot more ground to cover. The coach must do a good job of positioning the outfield depending on the skill levels of the pitcher and the batter. This is in addition to the backup coverage that must take place when runners are on base. Often times, the most highly skilled outfielders play Right Field. The reason for this is because most batters are right handed and if the pitcher is strong, batters will be behind putting most of the outfield action to the opposite field. Right field is also a key position because the right fielder has an opportunity to throw the batter out at first on a hard hit grounder to normal or shallow right field. There is the equivalent to the designated hitter in American League in Major League Baseball, but it has a different name. In ASA fast pitch, it is called the DEFO (defensive only) and DP (designated player). The DEFO can play any position on the field and the DP would bat for the DEFO in the batting lineup. This would make a lineup of 10 players. New, in the 2000 season, ASA now allows a courtesy runner for pitchers and catchers. Should they make it to first base, the coach may enter a runner without it counting as a substitution.

HITTING DROPPED THIRD STRIKE The rule actually says that on a dropped third strike, the batter is not out until the defense makes the put out at first base. So, the batter has no choice - she must run! You may notice that on the better teams, the batter will always run to first on any strike three, just in case the ball touched the dirt, she will be safe. Also, this could be a deceptive play used when the offensive team has runners on base. If the catcher can be convinced to throw to first unnecessarily, then other runners might be able to advance on the mental lapse of the catcher.

BUNTING IS ALLOWED - There is a wide variety of bunting, even more than you will find in baseball.

Sneaky bunt - bunting for a base hit. The batter does not "show" too early and waits until the very last moment to surprise the defense.

Sacrifice bunt - moving a runner over to the next base. In this case, the batter "shows bunt" early, to give the batter a better chance of making solid contact. By showing early, the defense usually can get in position early enough to get the batter out at first base. Also, this type of bunt is executed with the bat out in front of the plate.

Slap bunt and Push bunt - are kind of the same thing - if the shortstop is playing deep and the 3rd baseman is playing in, the batter tries to hit it in between the pitcher and third baseman and beat it out before the shortstop can come in and cover it

Drag bunt - is a form of sneaky bunting as the batter is attempting to get a base hit. In this bunt, the bat is not held out in front of home plate it is executed just behind the batter's back foot and is usually done with specific footwork

Fake bunt - then Slap - if the batter squares early and gets the infield to commit, the batter can pull the bat back and try to slap it to an open spot on the field Slappers - speedy players learn the art of the running bunt or slap - these players are known as "slappers". Very difficult, but once mastered, this is a very marketable skill. This is performed as a left handed batter. Where the batter gets a running start, and while still in the batters box either bunts or slaps depending on where the defense is. This can be a deadly weapon.

HIT BY PITCH Hate to say it, but some batters will get hit by the pitch, and like baseball, the batter is awarded first base.

The Differences

RULES DIFFERENCES: This is where the rules of baseball take a different direction than fast pitch.

BASE RUNNING: Due to the differences in pitching motions between baseball and fast pitch, there are differences in some of the rules regarding base running.

LEADOFFS The runner may leave the base at the moment the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. Many of the better base runners use what is called the "rocker step" where they start the running motion on the down stroke of the pitcher. The runner's back foot will start behind the base and will be the lead foot. This way the body has motion while technically still in contact with the base. Getting the timing correct is the key to not leaving too early or too late. **STEALING** The runner may continue after the lead off depending on how lucky or fast they think they are. Certainly if the catcher drops the ball, even momentarily, is a sure sign for the runner to take off.

THE LOOK BACK RULE This is a very major difference between the rules of baseball and fast pitch. The reason being that the pitcher pitching underhanded cannot pitch from a stretch position, nor pick off a runner that would have a lead. This is why the runner may only leave the base after the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. However, you will notice a pitcher's circle. If the pitcher has control of the ball in the circle and is not in the act of making a play on a runner, any runners that are off a base at that instant must IMMEDIATELY go ahead or back to the base. Any failure, delay or hesitation will cause the runner to be called OUT by the umpire.

12 INCH BALL In fast pitch, the 12 inch ball is used. This may not seem like much, but there is an adjustment period especially in the 12-U and 14-U age groups where girls hand size could make it more difficult to get a good grip on the ball. Also, the 12 inch ball doesn't travel as far, so there are differences in the way certain offensive and defensive situations may be played. In younger age categories a transitional 11 inch ball is used to accommodate smaller hands for pitchers and throwers as well as make it a bit lighter of a ball to hit.

STRATEGIES AND MECHANICS Although many of the rules are similar, there are major differences in strategy and mechanics. This is primarily due to the differences in field dimensions, especially the distances between bases and the pitching distances.

Base Path Distances		Baseball vs. Fast pitch	
Age Group	Baseball	Fast pitch	
14-U to Pro	90 feet	60 feet	
10-U to 12-U	60 feet	60 feet	

What this means to the game: Advantage: Offense - Strategy: Short Game Softball is a three-second game. It takes the softball player three seconds to go from base to base. Baseball is a four-second game. With only 60 feet to travel, this one-second advantage goes to the offense in three distinct situations: bunting, slapping and stealing. Baseball is the opposite; because of the extra distance to travel the advantage goes to the defense. Fast pitch defensive strategies must take this difficulty into account. Many male coaches who have baseball backgrounds often have to learn "the hard way" that fast pitch is a different and unique game. The three main components that are described below are known as the "short game". The short game is exploited by the better teams as their primary means of producing runs.

Bunting - In fast pitch, you will see 1B and 3B playing perilously close in, an average of 30 feet, or less, from the batter. Sometimes it will seem like they are right in the batter's box with the batter. If the corners stay back any farther, they will have no chance at getting the batter-runner on a good bunt. This is not only due to the shorter base path, but also because the bigger 12" ball slows down a lot quicker. In baseball, the corners can play back farther and still successfully defend the bunt, because the thrown ball can catch up with, and overtake the runner in the additional 30 feet that the baseball runner must run. Some fast pitch teams will in fact have an outfielder jog towards 2nd or 3rd to cover the base in certain situations, something that you NEVER see in baseball.

Slapping - If the defense plays in close to prevent a bunt, the proficient slapper can hit the ball just hard enough to get past the tight defense. If they slack back, then it is bunt. If the corners are in and the middle infield is back, then it is a "push bunt". It is like a chess game, because theoretically, there is always an open spot in the infield where the better batters can place the ball for a base hit. Fast pitch slappers are taught to "read the defense" and respond with the appropriate batting action. This is why slapping is such a powerful offensive weapon. It gives new meaning to that old standard softball cheer: "I see a hole out there...."

Stealing - Likewise with stealing. Pitchers and catchers must really work together in steal situations. With running times for the top players in the game of fast pitch from 1st to 2nd being in the 2.9-second range, that means if the runner is stealing, the catcher must be able to get the ball to 2B in about 2 seconds. Any bobbled ball by the catcher will likely result in the runners advancing to the next base. Runners on third are always on the lookout for that wild pitch or passed ball that will give them the opportunity to steal home. The defense must be extremely quick and well-practiced to recover from the wild pitch or passed ball and still get the runner out on the attempt to steal home.

Signs and Signals - Fast pitch hitters and base runners must always check with their base coaches for signs and signals on every pitch. As each different pitch count and defensive alignment could change the offensive team's strategy from one pitch to the next.

Advantage: Pitcher - Strategy: Short compact swing In the table below, are national averages for girls fast pitch pitchers in the various age groups. While 44-47 miles per hour may not seem like a lot, realize that the 12-Under pitcher throws from 35 feet. What that means is at 44 miles per hour, traveling a distance of 35 feet, it takes the ball only .548 seconds to reach home plate. At 53 mph, from 35 feet, it takes the ball only .450 seconds to arrive. What we are talking about here is that our

11 and 12 year old hitters need the same reaction time that a professional baseball player needs who is facing a 91 mph baseball from 60 feet. Can you say Tom Glavine?

Fastpitch pitching speeds and Baseball equivalents					
Age Group	Distance	Typical Speed (MPH)	Top Pitchers (MPH)	Reaction Time (seconds)	Baseball Equivalent (MPH)
10-Under	35 feet	37-41	43-46	.645 ~ .519	63-79
12-Under	35 feet	44-47	50-53	.542 ~ .450	75-91
14-Under	40 feet	46-49	52-55	.593 ~ .496	72-82
16-Under	40 feet	50-53	54-57	.545 ~ .478	75-86
18-Under	40 feet	53-56	58-61	.515 ~ .447	79-92
College/Pro	43 feet	59-64	65-72	.497 ~ .407	89-101

On average, the batter has a little less than one-half second to get the bat on the ball. That means the batter has about .2 to .25 seconds to analyze the pitch, decide whether or not to swing, and if the decision is to swing, there is another two tenths of a second to decide where to put the bat and to physically get the bat on the ball. This is why many people who are knowledgeable in the game of fast pitch agree that hitting a fast pitch softball is one of the most difficult challenges in all of sports. The challenges for our pre-teens are the same as men who get paid millions of dollars to do the same thing.

Strategy: The Compact Fast pitch Swing In fast pitch, batters must take every advantage they possibly can in order to get the bat on the ball. So, how does the fast pitch hitter overcome the advantage that the pitcher has? Simply put: eliminate any wasted time, energy or motion in swinging the bat. The ultimate fast pitch swing is "short, quick and compact". It is also necessary to consider the benefits of the "rotational method" over the "weight-transfer method" (there are proponents of both in fast pitch). There are several aspects of the fast pitch softball swing that can be applied to baseball, but there are many flaws in the old-style baseball swing such as Ken Griffey's long-looping, round-house, weight-transfer swing. In addition to reaction time, there is also a significant difference in upper-body strength between the 25-year-old male and the 10-18 year old female. That method of swinging takes way too much time for girls playing fast pitch. The top hitting instructors in fast pitch today are teaching the short, quick, compact, rotational method.

Short means keeping the hands close to the body, with the wrists remaining cocked until the point of contact, usually out in front of the batters front foot

Quick - means using explosive wrist snap at the point of contact. Hitters must learn not to "cast" or "bar out" by snapping their wrists too early in the swing. Many coaches refer to this mechanical flaw as a "sweeping swing". If wrist snap is too early bat speed at point of contact will be reduced. It is also advantageous to keep the swing plane level, to slightly downward, to drive into the ball.

Compact means the combination of Short and Quick, but with the additional features of minimal stride, (usually the no more than the width of the hitters shoe), and a very slight pre-launch trigger, usually just a slight movement of the hands to make a "small reverse C" or "letter J".

Rotational Method means that the player generates power with the lower body, by driving the back hip through the ball just after point of contact. Hitters are instructed to envision themselves as a pony on a merry-go-round, where they have a pole that goes from the top of their head, down through their body and into the ground in the middle of their stance (it is not as grotesque as it might sound), and that all they are allowed to do is rotate on the axis. This helps correct the flaw known as "lunging" which is heavily associated with the weight-transfer method of hitting.

Weight-transfer Method - proponents suggest that this method is designed to achieve more consistent contact, and that the rotational method can cause the front shoulder to fly open causing loss of power and contact. The debate continues in the world of fast pitch. The ideal fast pitch swing starts from the ground and works its way up. Starting with the back foot, up the back leg, into the back hip, initiating the pre-launch trigger, into the short, quick, compact and rotational aspects concluding with pronounced follow through that is slightly up. If successful, the fast pitch hitter has reduced the obstacles to putting bat on ball.

BALL TRAJECTORY With a combination of the fast pitch pitcher's release point (slightly below the hip), and the absence of a raised pitcher's mound, the ball starts on its way to the fast pitch batter at least 6 feet lower than in baseball. The trajectory of the ball is usually somewhat upward, although every fast pitch pitcher learns to throw a good Drop Ball. But probably the biggest single difference between hitting in baseball and hitting in fast pitch softball is hitting a good RISE BALL. Even All Star Major League Baseball players have been stymied when they have attempted to hit against some of the best fast pitch pitchers in the game. Eddie Feigner, (the King and his Court), once struck out - in order - Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, Brooks Robinson, Maury Wills, Harmon Killebrew and Roberto Clemente.