

HOW TO HANDLE PLAYING TIME PROBLEMS

USING THE WWLS METHOD

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Nobody likes to sit the bench, but let's face it, unless your team only has 9 players somebody's got to sit. It's those "somebody's" that can make or break your team, so discover a positive method to handle a lack of playing time.

This whole issue of playing time has started coming up more and more. I've been getting bombarded lately with questions by parents, players and coaches asking me how to deal with certain issues that usually come down to playing time – or lack of it, or some decision a coach made surrounding playing time.

Players write me wanting to know how to improve their playing time, parents write me complaining about coaches not playing their daughters enough, and coaches write me wanting to know how to help kids that don't play a lot stay involved with the team.

See if you've heard any of these statements around the ballpark when it comes to the issue of playing time:

- It's a conspiracy
- The coach is killing her chances to play college ball
- The coach doesn't like her
- She's playing favorites!

I've been a coach who's had to make some tough playing time decisions, and I've been a player who's sat the bench, so I know both sides. No coach is trying to purposefully stop players from playing in order to be mean; they're simply trying to put the strongest players into their lineup that will give their team the greatest chance of winning. It's a very tough position to be in as today's parent is much more verbal in their disagreement than parents of the past. So coaches are criticized more often, more openly and more harshly than ever.

And yet from the player's point of view, if you don't get to play how are you supposed to get better? I understand that argument and realize it's packed with emotion since the player is far more emotionally attached to her own playing time than the coach is.

So many playing time issues rear their head for the first time either during high school or college softball. Before we look at things we can do to better handle the amount of playing time we're getting, or our daughter is getting, let's first look at 4 reasons why I think so many issues with playing time happen during schoolball (high school or college):

1. **4 Year Age Group** – Since travelball is split up into 2 year age groups players are usually grouped with other players very similar in age, size and skill level. Sure, some players

play up but for the most part players are within a two year age span. While you'll see some differences within a 2 year age group, the talent, size, strength and speed differences aren't nearly what they are when you put kids into 4 year age groups. Now suddenly, that 14 year old high school freshman, if she plays varsity, is competing against an 18 year old senior – and that's a HUGE difference! And in college you'll have an 18 year old freshman competing against a 22 year old senior – of course that freshman won't have the success she had during 18 U Gold Travelball when she was the oldest and probably fastest, strongest and best player on the team. Once the age, speed, size and strength ranges go from 2 years up to 4 years your ability to contribute at the younger age level gets way tougher.

2. **Winning Matters** – In both high school and college, winning matters. There are no more “showcases” where simply showing your talent is the objective and winning is only something you consider on Sunday. Now suddenly winning matters every game, so the coach is now faced with putting the players on the field that give the team the greatest chance of winning that game. This one simple thing impacts who plays and who doesn't more than anything else. It's no longer about making sure everyone gets a chance to play, it's now about making sure the team has the best chance of winning. And, if you think this sounds harsh just think back to the last time your team had a losing record. That's something that nobody wants or likes and you'd do almost anything to change it. Well the coach has the ability to try and change that on the front end by playing the players he or she feels gives them the strongest team.
3. **Old Methods Don't Work** – While in most cases, high school or college isn't the first time a player is faced with unsatisfactory playing time (this also means not playing the position you think you should play), the way that most people in travelball seem to handle this issue is to change teams. In fact it's not uncommon for some players to change teams 2-3 times a season! Don't like the playing time or position you're getting on this team, then simply find another team. And while that might seem like a good solution for travelball, it won't work for high school or college. Sure, you can try and change high schools or even colleges, but it's MUCH harder to do and carries with it much stiffer penalties – players often must sit out an entire season in order to be eligible. So the method you had for handling playing time issues in the past suddenly won't work when you get to high school or college.

This whole issue of playing time is really tricky and it's something I've really debated writing about for some time. I know an article on it will be helpful and yet my purpose isn't to lecture everyone or make people mad. While it might seem like both end up happening please know it's certainly not my intent going in.

I think the best way to approach my advice on how to handle playing time issues, and I realize a VERY different approach, is to use the point of view of my Mom – Liz. I'm going to angle in by letting you know **What Would Liz Say**, or **WWLS**. Liz, my Mom, was and still is a fantastic Mom who raised 5 great kids. But, she was also tough as nails. She grew up on a farm in Southern California during the depression, lived through WWII, lost 2 brothers in the Korean War, enlisted in the Air Force, served in North Africa, had 5 kids via natural child birth, and since my Dad was a career Air Force Officer and was stationed all over the world, Mom raised all 5 of us largely by herself.

Anybody who knows my Mom knows she can tell a great story, and while I've heard some amazing tales I have NEVER heard my Mom complain! She wouldn't do it herself and wouldn't let us do it either! She taught us the power of family, as all 5 of us kids still talk to each other almost every week, and yet she had this amazing ability to see life objectively. Of course, as a kid growing up I wanted to slant everything in life my way so the whole "objectivity thing" was a VERY annoying quality for me! But, I've since learned how important Mom's point of view has become for me and how much I rely upon it daily.

So it's Liz's perspective and objectivity that I will use to help deal with the issue of playing time. Growing up, whenever one of us didn't get our way we'd always resort to the "it's not fair" line. I can still hear Liz's response: "*Fair, Smair. Life isn't supposed to be fair Cindy. If you don't like it then you've got to work to change it*" (she loved to rhyme things even when it involved making up words). Of course this wasn't the answer I was looking for – I wanted to find agreement to my particular point of view. – so off I'd go grumbling to myself about how unfair my whole life was. You know the story.

Eventually what I learned was that I wasn't going to find a willing ear in my Mom to all my pathetic "*the world is out to get me*" rants. I'd of course try them on one of my brothers or sisters who had problems of their own so they ignored me. Since complaints really need an audience to survive, and mine could never get any traction I quit complaining. Because of my Mom's consistent responses I was able to guess what Liz's answer was going to be so I eventually bypassed the complaining approach and went straight to the solution. Of course at the time, I was not going to admit that it worked much better to handle things that way, but as an adult, there's NO DOUBT it's helped get me wherever it is I am.

So, let's look at what Liz said to me the one time I came to her complaining that I wasn't getting to play as much as I thought I should, and the lessons she taught all of us on how to handle situations that we didn't like:

1. A Matter of Perspective

Coaches want what's best for the team first and what's best for you as a player second. Mom compared a coach's perspective to their team to that of our family. She said that parents think of the family first and the individual kids second. Sure, she loved and adored every single one of us but her first concern was always the entire family first and each one of us second. From a softball point of view that doesn't mean that coaches don't like and care about each player, they do, it simply means that a coaches priority has to be team first and individual players second.

Conversely, *Players* want what's best for themselves first and what's best for the team second. The issue of playing time to a player is a lot like being one of the kids in a multi-kid family. I was 1 of 5 kids so I always thought my Mom liked one of my brothers or sisters better since from my perspective it was "obvious" she did. Translation – I wasn't getting my way in that particular situation so that skewed my conclusion. As a player, our view of playing time is always skewed since we see the whole situation as it pertains to us first, and as it impacts the team second.

Lesson – A playing time issue always has 2 perspectives; The coach thinks about the team first, players second – while the players think about themselves first and team second.

2. Ownership

This is by far the biggest playing time lesson of all! When I complained to Liz that I wasn't playing enough, Mom's exact words were, "*well Cindy that just means you need to practice more since (coach) obviously doesn't think you're good enough to play right now.*" Of course I shot back with something like, but you're supposed to be on my side, at which point she said, "*Cindy, I'm always on your side, but that doesn't mean the coach is wrong.*" Her ability to make me own the situation by telling me that the problem was me and not the coach was invaluable to me! I didn't want to hear it but I needed to hear it!

Lesson – Take ownership of your playing time issue & consider that the issue might be you instead of always thinking the coach is wrong.

3. Work to Change What you Don't Like –

Liz taught all of us that we could be a power for change, that If we didn't like something then we should work to change it. Instead of complaining about it, we should work to change it. This approach helped me pick my battles since some things aren't really worth the effort to change them. Just because I didn't like something didn't mean I didn't like it enough to put the work in to change it, so I learned that these were the situations where I'd just shut my mouth. Complaining about a situation was NOT the same as working to change it, and complaining about anything was NEVER an option with Liz (still isn't!). Complaining is like a poison – it can make you and everyone around you sick. As a player, don't do it and as an adult, don't let your players or daughter do it.

Lesson – If you don't like the amount of playing time you have then work to change it – with your actions not your mouth.

4. It Must Be You!

This message is basically the essence of #3 – the problem with playing time isn't a coaching problem, it's a You problem. Liz taught all of us that we weren't going to fix the coach so that meant we had to improve ourselves. It wasn't even an option that the problem might be the coach. The message was always that it must be me, which by the way was very empowering since I have power over me, and I don't have power over the coach. Occasionally the problem is the other person as if you're looking through a window, but most of the time the problem is YOU, as if you're looking at a mirror. When it comes to playing time, always assume it's a mirror you're looking at.

Lesson – When it comes to playing time accept that there are parts of your game that you can improve and you're on your way to increasing your playing time.

5. What Are You Going to Do About It?

Liz's fallback response to anything we were complaining or griping about was, "So Cindy, what are you going to do about it?" It's along the same lines as #4 above and implies that you're going to take some action. You're going to have to take your issue past the point of frustration and get a plan of action. Chart a course to start to correct whatever the problem is – in this case playing time – and get after it. When Liz asked me what I was going to do about not playing as much as I wanted to it really made me think about why I wasn't playing and helped me realize it was because I wasn't strong enough or good enough. So, every morning for the next year I got up at 5:30am and ran 3 miles, then pitched for 30 minutes to my brother before going to school. When I went back to play on my team that summer, it was a whole different story because I was a whole different player. I'd actually done something about it and felt the increase in confidence, pride and ability that comes with personal accomplishment and sacrifice. Liz didn't make me get up and do all that, it was my idea and my passion. She simply helped me think about what I was going to do to change the situation.

Lesson – Take action to change the situation that you're not happy with. If you want to play more then be specific about how you're going to change your current skills in order to change your playing time.

6. Make Yourself Useful

This is something Mom (Liz) would say to any of the 5 of us whenever she'd see us standing around while everyone else was working. She'd say, "Cindy, make yourself useful as well as ornamental". Of course as kids, we had no idea what she was talking about, but now when I think of that I crack up! Basically she was telling us that by simply standing there our only role was that of an ornament, and who needs a life-sized ornament. In a household, as with a team, there are far too many things to do for people to be standing around watching others working.

I'm not suggesting that players with limited playing time got there by standing around at practice, not at all. But, I do strongly believe that Liz was spot on when she said to "Make Yourself Useful!" That's tremendous advice for players, because the more useful you can be the more likely you are not only to make the team, but to play. There are a LOT of different ways that players can make themselves useful to a coach and a team. They can play different positions; have multiple factors within different skills and bring lots of intangibles to the team.

I think we'd all agree that having strong and versatile players is important to a team, and within that team we need players who can pitch, hit, throw, catch, field and run. But where this gets difficult is that judging how well players do these important skills is

“subjective”. That means it’s up to personal opinion, and that person is the coach. Unlike track, we can’t line everyone up at the starting line and simply pick the first 9 players that cross the finish line. That would make it easy, not only to select the team, but to limit criticism and disagreement.

So let’s look at some of the different things that coaches look for when selecting players and determining their lineups. Of course these things depend greatly on the age group being coaching, but I do hope this list serves as a guide to all the ways that players can be useful to a team, as well as all the things that coaches can take into account when determining who makes their team, and who plays:

Throwing Skills

Quickness of Release	Touch
Accuracy	Long Throws
Arm Strength	Tosses
Throws Under Pressure	Throws on the Run

Fielding Skills

Hands – quickness, softness, touch	Fielding on the Run
Range – side to side as well as forward and back	Situational Awareness
Quickness	Balance
Footwork	Position Versatility

Hitting

Power	Hitting with Runners in Scoring Position
Bat Control	Short Game Skills
Pitch Selection	Hitting Under Pressure
Plate Discipline	

Pitching

Control	Attitude
Movement	Work Ethic
Speeds (Fast and Slow)	Mound Presence
Pitches	Fielding Skills
Pitching Under Pressure	

Catching

Glove Work	Quickness & Agility
Release Time	Leadership Skills
Accuracy	Attitude
Arm Strength	Working with Pitchers
Balance	Blocking/Footwork

Additional Attributes

Speed	Ability to Make Others Around You Better
Attitude	Judgment
Competitiveness	Baserunning Skills
Versatility	Strength
Desire to Improve	Fitness Level (ability to stay good through long game & season)
Cooperation with Teammates/Staff	Coachability
Maturity	Situational Awareness

As you can see by these lists there are a lot of factors that go into determining not only who makes a team, but who plays. Selecting the best players for a team is usually easy; it's the last 2-4 decisions that get extremely tough. Any additional factor that you can have as a player helps make it easier to distinguish yourself from others. And trust me, when it comes down to selecting the final player for a team from 3-4 possible candidates, every little advantage helps. An example of this is any of the 4 Olympic Softball Teams the United States has had. In Softball, the Olympics only allowed a roster of 15 players and anyone in high level softball knows that's a pretty short squad. As a result, there were some players selected for those teams that may not have been the absolute best-in-the-world at one position, but were outstanding at 2-3 different positions. What that meant was that by selecting these versatile players, the coach was able to have a roster of 15 players with the versatility of a roster of 17-18. Sure, there were some very disappointed players that didn't make those Olympic teams that may have been able to say, "hey, I'm better than so-and-so at x position", and they were probably right. But, again, the coach's job is to look out for the entire team and the "team" was stronger by having some utility players on the roster instead of 15 players that could only play 1 position.

Lesson – Ornaments are for trees. By making yourself useful, you stand a far greater chance of making your team, cracking your lineup, and making it in life!

7. Fair-Schmair

One of Liz's favorite words, other than schmant (which rhymes with can't), is schmair – as in fair-schmair. I have no clue how you spell it but I do know that Liz has always said that life's not fair, that nobody said it would be fair. You simply want to give life your

very best shot and know you've done your best. If you sit around waiting for things to be fair you're going to be disappointed. Do your very best, hope your opponent does their best as well, and then move on. I know this sounds like Liz is harsh, but if you're raised knowing that things aren't always fair, then you don't go into every single event in life expecting it. Some things are fair and some things aren't, and that's life. What you want to do is give everything your very best. Focus on giving your best instead of using some of that energy to worry about whether or not things are fair.

Lesson – Give your best to everything you're doing instead of spending time & energy worrying about whether things are fair.

8. Show Some Respect

"Cindy Marie, show some respect!" Needless to say growing up in a military family respect was big! Not only did I learn to *"show some respect"* but I knew specifically who it was I was supposed to respect. Respect your elders, respect the rank, and respect their experience. My Dad taught us that you don't have to like the person, but you must respect their rank. Liz would always say there were people in this world that have earned our respect by virtue of their life, or age, or status and we need to acknowledge and show them respect. I always liked that and to this day it's hard for me to call my elders by their first name. Not a bad habit if you ask me!

Lesson – Whether or not you agree with the coach you must show them respect.

9. Quit Complaining

By now you've guessed that complaining wasn't big on Liz's list. Complaining doesn't help anything, so why do it? If you have something that you feel so strongly about that you must tell someone, then actually talk to the person you're complaining about since they're the only one who can give you answers or make any kind of change. Liz was big on saying *"if you can't say anything nice then don't say anything at all!"* Not only did that rule apply to all 5 of us kids, but to my Mom and Dad as well. I don't remember my Mom complaining about people to us, or about things for that matter. My Dad tried complaining about the officials but that didn't last long. Mom's point was that all the complaining in the world wasn't going to change what we were complaining about, so why do it?!

Lesson – Complaining to anyone but the person you are complaining about is not an option. Unless you can say something nice, don't say anything at all.

10. You Signed Up For It

I was raised at a time when quitting was not an option. Once we signed up for a team we were on it for the whole season. Liz told us that we knew the rules when we signed up for the team – nobody guaranteed we'd start or get any playing time. I can still hear Mom's response to my one-time pathetic complaints about my lack of playing time, *"remember*

Cindy, you signed up for it!" Liz said that playing on a team was like being a part of a family – everyone has their chores to do and their roles to play and the better everyone is at doing their part the better we'll all get along. You can't quit a family and you shouldn't quit a team. Sometimes quitting is the easy way out when you find yourself in a tough situation, but ***instead of quitting, try to get tougher than the situation.*** That doesn't mean it's going to be easy, that doesn't mean the coach is right in his or her decisions. It just means that you made a commitment to be a part of that team and even though you're not getting the playing time you may think you should get, you're still a part of that team. Liz always told us that we couldn't quit every time something didn't go our way, and she wasn't going to let us quit now. I can hear her words as loud as ever, "*Cindy, the season only lasts for a couple months, and you can do ANYTHING for a couple months!*"

Lesson – *You signed up for the team so stick it out. Quitting is an easy way out, try sticking it out instead.*

These 10 messages from Liz summarize the essence of the Playing Time issue. Coaches want the best players playing that give their team the greatest chance for success. If that's you then great, but if it's not, then instead of complaining about not playing or trying to find fault, try instead to come up with a plan to help increase your playing time chances. Being a player in the middle of the pack puts you in a position to have a coach's opinion of you impact your playing time. Being at the top of the pack, talent-wise doesn't allow for those kinds of decisions to hurt you.

The last two pieces of advice I'd leave you with are this; don't concern yourself with Fault, and don't be afraid to talk to your coach. Fault doesn't really play a role when it comes to the issue of playing time. It's very popular now for both kids and adults to say, "It's not my fault", but I want to offer a totally different perspective. Accept the fault, take ownership, and then move on. Not accepting it means that if things go well it's all you but if things blow up, well, it's not your fault. Teams need players who will be there through thick and thin so fault doesn't really matter. Do your best and take ownership for your efforts and actions. It's a behavior that will definitely help the coach notice you from all the others.

If you want to find out why you're not playing more then there's only one person you should ask, and that's the coach. If you're going to talk to your coach about playing time then here are a few suggestions:

- The player needs to be the one talking to the coach and not her parents.
- Politely, and so that all your teammates don't hear you, ask your coach if there's a good time to talk to her/him away from the team.
- Start by saying that everything you're about to say is NOT meant to challenge the coach's decision, not at all. Say that you're not questioning the coach's judgment and that you know everyone can't start – you simply want to know what specific things you can spend more time practicing in order to get better. Take a little notepad with you and write down what the coach says so you can make sure you're spending your time practicing the right things.
- Then, whatever your coach says say "*Thanks for your time coach. I appreciate your honesty and I'll really work hard on these things*" – and mean it! Show up early to

practice and stay late so you can spend extra time on these things. Not only will this help improve your playing time chances but it will help make you a stronger player and teammate in the process.

Keep in mind that at every level of softball the skills are the same. Players Pitch and Hit and Throw and Field and Run. The difference is in the ability to do those skills at that level, at that speed and under that pressure.