

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Fastpitch Softball Players (How to have fun, improve, and win)

Tom Sherry

Dr. Steven R. Covey, in his best selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, (Simon & Schuster, 1989), outlines an approach of looking at challenges and identifying principles that enable individuals to be successful and live an effective, balanced life. Borrowing from those ideas (with full credit to Dr. Covey), I would like to suggest seven habits that fast pitch softball players might consider adopting when looking toward their upcoming season or preparing for the off season routine of conditioning and skills development.

First, let us build a foundation that you can use as a reference when you are developing the habits. We say our goal is to be highly effective. But what is effectiveness? Effectiveness is the ability to get what you want, and get it over and over again. Most anyone can do what it takes to get one thing in particular--once. But, being able to do this on a consistent, long-term basis requires much more character and commitment. It also requires that you invest in yourself and maintain your ability to produce your desired results. Our getting results must be balanced with our ability to keep getting those results. Put all your effort into getting something and none into maintaining your ability to get it and you will run out of gas. Put it all into self-maintenance and none into getting results and you will accomplish nothing. The following habits will help you maintain this balance. They will also enable you to get what you want and keep getting it.

HABIT 1: BE PROACTIVE: I am responsible for my choices.

(I will play my game, not someone else's.)

You are responsible for your level of play. Play your own game. This means compete against yourself, not against the other team or players on your own team. You have no control over how they play and no one has control over how you play. Remember that game when it seemed no one but you were able to catch or throw a ball or the game where everyone else could do no wrong. If you play off them, they may limit your effort if they are not a significant challenge. Or they can shatter your confidence and security if they're too much better than you are. In either situation, you are dependent on others for your performance. If you blame others for your performance, or for putting you in a bad situation, you give them control of you and how you play. This will not only make you inconsistent, (playing tough against the good teams/playing slack against the weak ones) but also you won't get a true measure of your strengths and weaknesses. Your ability is not measured against someone else. While fastpitch softball is a game of both taking initiative and responding to developing situations, your choice to prepare, or not, for each situation determines how you will respond. It is the difference between using your strengths by choice, or reacting through your weaknesses. Anyone can look smooth when things are going well. But, how you handle yourself in the face of adversity is a demonstration of your true character. The bottom line is that you have no control over the situations that are presented to you, but you do have control of how you respond to them.

HABIT 2: BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND: What do I want out of this?

(Why am I spending all this time here?)

This is the habit of mental creation. Sometimes called visualization, it is seeing in our minds the result we are trying to achieve. In the large sense, it is your purpose for being here. Ask yourself, what do I want to accomplish as part of this team. In a smaller sense it gets down to individual goals. What do I want to achieve out of each of these drills/practices, etc. This thought process is necessary both during practice

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and games. The more you've gone through it in your mind, the easier it will be to do with your body. It will help to sharpen the mental edge and make you a more relaxed player. Mentally create the outcome and your performance to achieve it before it comes time to do it. If you don't pick your desired results someone will pick them for you. Not choosing is actually a choice. If they are picked for you and you find that your personal goals aren't along the same lines as your coach or your teams, you may very well find yourself under a lot of stress. You also might want to reconsider the Why am I here? question. For the team to be effective, all the participants need to be on the same page and focused toward a common goal.

HABIT 3: PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST: What must I do to achieve my goals?

(Put my money where my mouth is.)

Now that you have determined the reason your playing on this team, you must decide what are the most important things to you to help you achieve that goal. Wanting it, without backing up the desire with action, is just dreaming. Saying it want to be the best hitter/pitcher/fielder I Can. means absolutely nothing without the will to do what it takes. Otherwise, we would all be the best at everything! You've got to walk your talk. Your commitment and dedication is demonstrated not in words, but in actions. This is the only way to achieve your goals (results). This is where practice and repetition of good skills is effective. You are building both mental memory and muscle memory. The more muscle memory (able to make the play without thinking) the less mental concentration required. This frees up your brain (where most of your ball playing is done) to think about and stay ahead of the game (situational awareness) and the plays ahead. (Remember about responding with strengths, vice reacting with weaknesses?) A good fastpitch player goes where the ball is, but a great fastpitch player goes where the ball is going to be. Putting first things first helps you to stay ahead of the game.

Habits One, Two and Three deal with you and your relationship with yourself. They help you become independent and secure in yourself as an individual player. Once you have accomplished the first three habits, you are ready to effectively interact with others and become a real part of and a contributing member of a team.

HABIT 4: THINK WIN-WIN: What is the best thing to keep everyone coming back and working hard?

(There is plenty out there for everyone.)

A team is a group of people involved in a cooperative effort towards common goals. Our teams goals are: have fun, to develop the skills of each player, and to win. We don't just want to do this once. We want to do this over and over again, as much as we can. Everyone has achieved a certain skill level by now and can make a valuable contribution to the team. You may hear that there is no I in team. That's wrong! The underlying principle of thinking win-win and teamwork is mutual benefit. This means that others win and you (you are the I) win. If this doesn't happen, over the long run, one of you quits, either physically or emotionally. Either way its deadly to a team. Helping others on the team to achieve their goals is a major part of being able to repeat successes. The mentality that there is plenty of opportunity for everyone is key to this process. If you think that when someone else does well that it means that they will take away your spotlight or they will make you will look bad, your not thinking with a team mentality, and maybe you should be playing an individual sport. There is no scarcity of opportunity.

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On the other hand, if you think that if someone else does well, the team will do better, everyone will have more fun, and that will increase the opportunity for you to improve, then you have something that will ensure both individual and team success. The teams with strong loyalty, dedication, and a good number of returning players, are the teams that have a strong sense of teamwork, are thinking win-win, and are focused on common goals.

HABIT 5: SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD: What is your perspective on this?

(Really use your ears before your mouth.)

Always try first to see what your teammates want to get out of the experience. Once you understand (not necessarily agree or disagree with, but really understand) where they're coming from, you will have a much more common starting point for expressing your position and goals, and ultimately where the team should be going. This is really tough. When we think we're right, do we really want someone else's opinion? If you truly listen with a win-win attitude, you will create an environment that will really help build a close, effective team. Understanding their point of view may even influence your view. But so what. The more you know, the more solid your final position will be and the closer you will be to doing the right thing. Once the others feel understood, they will also be much more open to your opinions and position. They may very well see things differently. But, it is just these differences that make the team concept so valuable. The combination of thinking win-win and seeking first to understand is what really gives Habit 6 its power.

HABIT 6: SYNERGIZE: We can go do more together than the total of our individual work.

(United we stand, divided we fall.)

As I said, Habit 6 is the combination of Habits 4 and 5. Thinking win-win and seeking first to understand, you will discover the many differences among your teammates. These come in all forms from attitudes, to skills, to goals, to abilities, and strengths and weaknesses. These all have value. And if you learn how to use them, you can really put them to work for the team. Everyone on the team has fastpitch strengths and weaknesses. If everyone could play every position the same we wouldn't have to worry about a line-up or positions. But we all know this is not so. We have some that can field better than they can hit. We have some that can hit better than they can field. We have some that can play infield and some that can play outfield.

We have some that can pitch and some that can't. Every player is different. Acknowledging these differences provides a common ground of understanding from which team growth can occur. Lets take the nine best pitchers in the area and make them a team. How are they going to do? Probably not that great. Who is going to catch? When they take the field they will all walk to the circle. Who will be the lead off hitter? Who can cover the outfield? These pitchers have developed certain strengths and have other weaknesses. Obviously they will not all be playing with their strengths. The team requires different skills to be well balanced. It is just these differences, which makes the team effective. These are what are used to determine positions, batting orders, pitcher/catcher combinations, pinch runners/hitters, etc. Putting these all together so you magnify the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses is a goal that will lead to real achievement, including fun, improvement and winning.

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HABIT 7: SHARPEN THE SAW: I will maintain my capability.

(Stay in all around shape and stay on top of your game.)

This is possibly the most important habit of all and also the most neglected. This habit magnifies the effectiveness of the other six. We're always so busy going after other things that we don't have time to stop and do maintenance on ourselves. It's like being too busy driving to stop and get gas. Have you ever cut something using a dull blade? It takes a lot more effort and usually force. Try slicing a tomato with a butter knife and look at the results. Abe Lincoln once said, if I had ten hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend eight hours sharpening my ax [saw]. How you sharpen the saw is a very personal choice. It is different for everyone. But it should be done in four areas of your life. One is physical. Stay fit and healthy. This will give you the edge with energy and stamina. You know this and most already work at it. This is why we have off-season conditioning programs. Second is the mental area. You've got to keep your brain in shape with mental exercise. Reading, brainteasers, or any activities that exercise your mind and work for you are good. As I've said, the game of fastpitch softball is mostly mental, as are most things we do. Third, work on your relationships, both with others and the one with yourself. Keep your promises to both. There is probably nothing more distracting than having difficulty with an important relationship. And fourth, do things that you find worthwhile; the things that you see as having lasting meaning and that support your value system. If any of these areas are allowed to get dull, you will find yourself out of balance. If let go far enough, being out of balance will cause something to break. It's the balance of these four areas that keeps us together and enables us to be effective.

After you have done everything you can, and it just isn't working the way you think it should, do not get discouraged and don't quit. Even if trying to practice these habits, you will experience setbacks. There will be games where things just don't go your way, and you'll lose. No one can do it right all the time. But when you lose, don't lose the lesson. Learn from your setbacks and keep moving forward. And remember, the race is long and in the end it's only with yourself. Keep everything in perspective, even though your perspective will change as you grow. As Mike Candrea, Head Coach of the national champions University of Arizona Wildcats softball team puts it-- Always remember, we are preparing these young ladies for a much bigger game than softball.

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