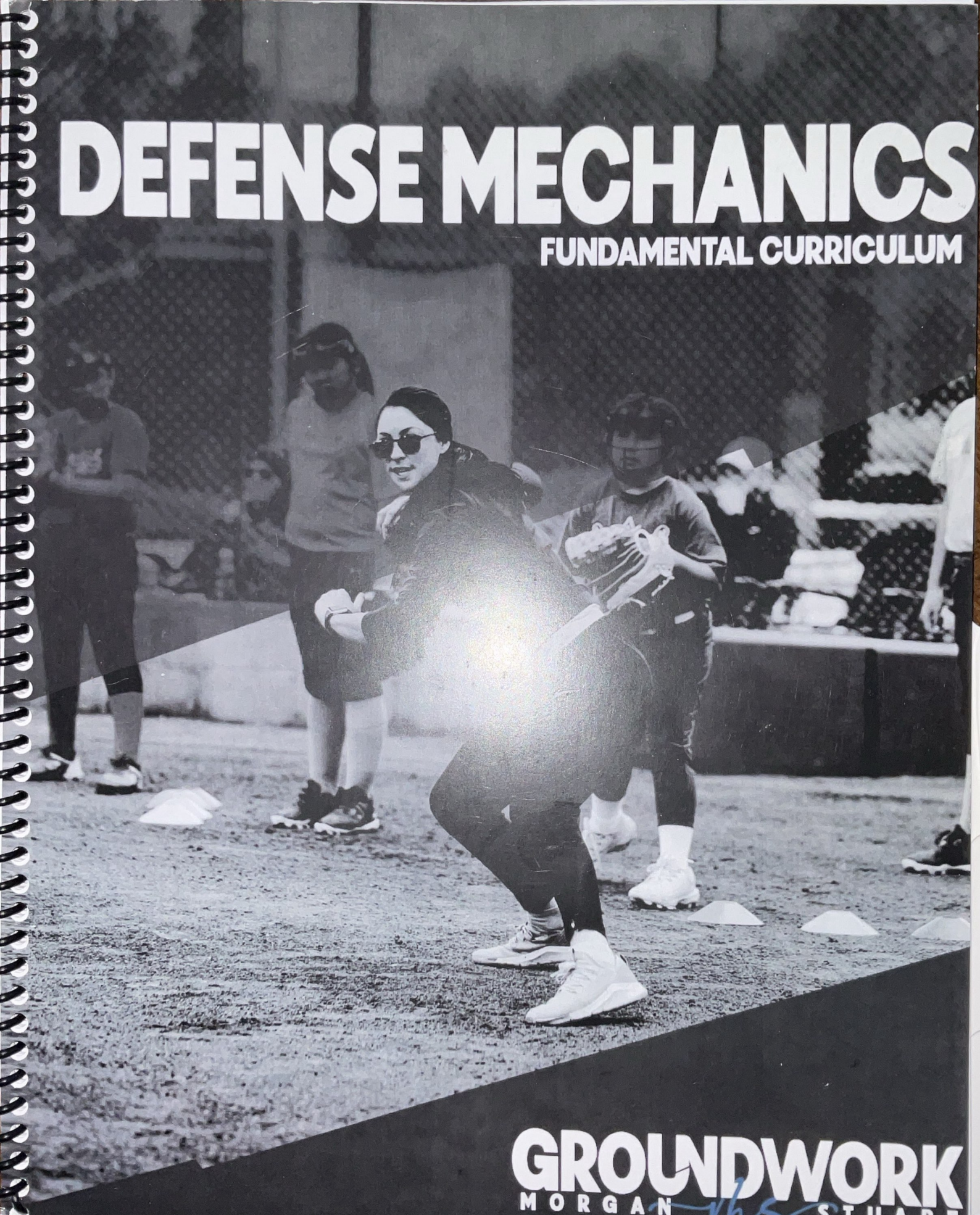


DEFENSE MECHANICS

FUNDAMENTAL CURRICULUM



GROUNDWORK
MORGAN *Stu* STUARD

WHAT'S IN THIS MANUAL

HOW IT WORKS

This manual is divided into two sides for quick access for exactly what you need.

This side is devoted to my defense mechanics broken down by concept. On the flip side of the manual, you will find age group-specific concepts and coaching tactics I use every day with my players.

DEFENSE FUNDAMENTALS

My curriculum for the mechanics I put into every lesson, practice, and clinic.

FAILURE RECOVERY

The athlete that recovers quickest will most likely win. I believe this is the biggest skill and coach can teach their player and the most important lesson sports can teach us about life.

INTRODUCING MENTALITY (FLIP SIDE)

Understand what motivates and drives your players. Set expectations & goals with your team and get started the right way.

- FIRST STEPS FOR A NEW COACH | Culture, Philosophy, Mentality
- COACHING GIRLS V BOYS | A Lot of coaches in softball are coming from baseball. Here are the similarities & differences...

COACHING MECHANICS FOR EACH AGE GROUP (FLIP SIDE)

Concrete tactics for proven transformation in players broken down by age group. I teach the same mechanics for all ages, but how we progress and what we focus on differs. Defense and hitting will be touched on.

PRACTICE PLANNING (FLIP SIDE)

How to write a solid practice plan and my template for constructing efficient workouts.. You'll get an idea of how I put practices together, plays your girls should know, etc.



DEFENSE MECHANICS

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BASIC SETUP

Getting Ready vs The Starting Position

Players must put themselves in a good athletic position as they begin to get ready. Chest forward, slight bend at the knees, balanced, feet about shoulder width apart.

Their mental focus should be funneled back in before each pitch. In other words: being "ready" isn't just about having your body in the right position, it's about having your mind right, too. Between pitches, defenders can watch around, communicate with coaches and teammates and take care of the area around them.

When the pitcher gets the ball back, fielders will move back to their spots, but you won't see their true *starting* position until the pitch is on the way. As the pitcher starts her motion, you'll see fielders step (right foot, then left foot- for right-handed throwers) or hop into their real "ready" which we call the Starting Position.

When the ball enters the hitting zone (total area where ball is able to be hit), infielders should have JUST arrived at their Starting Position: weight on toes, hands out in front, and ready to move in any direction.

Typically, the closer your position is to the hitter, the closer your glove is to the ground.



Fielders' eyes are on the hitting zone and they can anticipate where the ball will be hit based on how the hitter makes contact with the ball as they read the bat angle.

Fielder is bent at the knees & at the waist- this ensures that the butt is BACK and hands are able to be in front of the body. Very similar cues as our "fielding position" as you'll see in APPROACHING THE BALL.

Set Up Checklist

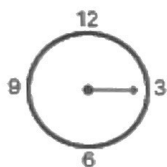
- Chest forward
- Bend C knees
- Glove out in front of eyes
- Feet set when ball in hitting zone
- Weight centered/ slightly forward
- Mental affirmations

FIRST STEPS | ANGLES

As you move up in the levels of softball, your first step to the ball gets more and more important. Since one of the only things that changes as we get older is the SPEED OF THE GAME, your first step can be the difference between safe or out.

Your first steps are based on the SPEED AND DIRECTION OF THE BALL.

Regular Speed Ground Ball



On a ball hit to you, get your eyes to the side so you can read the hop. Some fielders will take a step to their right in order to get their eyes to the side and approach the ball. If you think of the angle of your first step like hands on a clock (the hitter is twelve o'clock)- that first step would be to three o'clock. This is a set-up step to move through the ball and set up your throw.

Hard Hit v. Softly Hit Ground Balls

On hard-hit ground balls, the feet move soft. On softly-hit ground balls, the feet explode forward. Every approach to a ball is different based on the speed and direction of the ball. We work a lot on the hard-hit first step angles in lessons because it's a great way to understand how our feet can get us in a better position to SEE the ball. If we can see the ball, we can catch the ball.

Hard hit (ball hit to forehand side)



Soft hit (ball hit to forehand side)



EXAGGERATING EXPLOSIVE FOOTWORK

A big part of drills is exaggerating feelings and movements in order to make small adjustments.

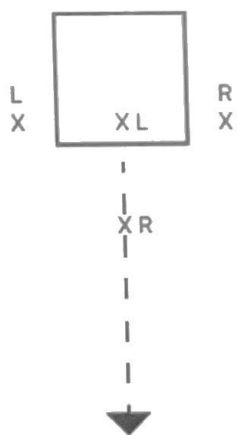
Terms you will hear in drills for drop steps, hard-hit ball footwork, and any drills that are designed to get us to the ball faster:

"Punch step": *Instead of pivoting the foot, we like to replant in some cases to turn toes in the direction of the ball quicker*

"Get toes and hips turned in the direction of the ball": *To prevent backpedaling*

"Outside foot"

Dropstep Drill Set Up + Path



Hard Hit Ball Set Up + Path



APPROACHING THE BALL | FIELDING POSITIONS

BUTT BACK, CHEST DOWN, HANDS OUT, ALWAYS ON THE BALLS OF THE FEET.

Many players struggle to maintain an athletic posture due to lack of strength.

Daily, girls should be practicing their defensive positions correctly to strengthen the muscles that will improve their game. CATCHERS (that also play another position) are prime candidates to place their weight in the middle of their feet OR on their heels.

By moving their chests forward, and butts BACK, these girls will create a better position to move side-to-side or otherwise to the ball.

Make sure that your weight is on the balls of your feet and that you HINGE at your waist before bending your knees so you can get your hands closer to the ground and move to the ball before squatting and getting out of an athletic position.

1. Vision: Eyes behind the glove.

2. Balance & Footwork: Feet lead the body. Right, left, field (for right-handed fielders). Beat the ball by getting the feet set.

3. Glove positioning: Fingers down.

With the exception of advanced infielders, it is best to always start with the fingers of the glove facing the ground so that the thumb-side can open up to field the ball instead of the fingers opening/ flipping "up" to "down."



Many have an issue with being LATE with their gloves due to a poor starting position. Fielder must have enough time to get BEHIND AND BELOW the ball in order to field the ball and not just meet it.

PRACTICING POSTURE

What happens with bad posture?

If fielders are not able to keep backs flat and field the ball with chest over the ground, it will be hard to field the ball out in front of their eyes.

After fielding, if their back isn't flat, players will be slower to transition into their throw.

How to practice on your own?

Use a mirror to watch yourself get into a balanced fielding position. When looking up at the mirror, your chest should be even or lower than your butt.

When looking at the side (mirror is to your left or right), your back should make a straight line.

Isolate your practice by starting drills from your knees and working up to your feet so you can feel "flat back" and "chest down, over the ball."

Examples Of Posture:

Bad Posture:



Good Posture:



DEFLECT & TRANSFER

The ball never stops, it only changes direction.

A transfer can be called "the break" or "deflection." When we transfer the ball, we are getting the ball from the glove to the throwing hand. We want to do this as quickly as possible to be able to make plays on time.

I like to think about the transfer as "breaking from the middle." When we field, the glove's job is to get the ball back to the middle (center of chest or in front of belly button) and the throwing hand moves to the glove to get the ball.

Many young fielders will try to bring glove to the ear and this is too slow.

Timing of Feet and Hands

Timing the upper and lower body is very important for a quick release- if the hands are separated, but the feet are not balanced and ready to throw, the throw will be delayed OR it won't be accurate or powerful.

After fielding, work to get the back foot (right foot for right-handed throwers) under your head as quickly as possible so you're ready to throw.

The shallowest part of the glove is the middle of the glove where you probably have a bruise from catching the ball the wrong way (The POCKET, not the WEB). Have a goal to DEFLECT ground balls off of the same part of the glove every time to practice good habits and to decrease errors of balls "tipping off the end of your glove."

Practice FOCUSED work by expecting to deflect the ball off that specific part of the glove. Aiming for a smaller target (even when catching the ball) is a more advanced way to train.

GLOVE PATTERNS

Forehands: Make sure eyes stay behind the glove to see the ball all the way in. Fingers of the glove get around the ball to start to bring the ball back to center.

Backhands: Get underneath and behind the ball & try to “beat the ball” to the spot when you can. When fielding from the ground up, the elbow will end UP so the fielder does not stab down to get to the ball — when stabbing happens, the glove is LATE. *Think:* “Little forward, big up with the elbow”

GLOVE IN FRONT OF EYES

What's the goal?

- See the ball into your glove
- Feet stay behind glove to have momentum through the ball
- Pick your hop instead of let the ball play you

What happens with gloves behind your eyes?

- Slower transfer
- Can't see the ball to catch the ball

How to practice on your own?

- Every single rep, focus on watching the ball from bat (or roll) to the glove (or bare hand).

Drills to help glove position?

- RDL Drill, Fielding Position Through the Ladder
- Barehand knee picks

ELBOWS UP | FEET SET BEFORE THROW

What Is "Elbows Up?"

This is a coaching cue I use to get the girls to separate the ball from their glove so that the ball is facing down instead of up to start their throw.

Any time there is a drill that does not require a throw, I will have the girls move their feet and get to "elbows up" to reinforce the athletic move towards their target even if they are not completing the play.

Why Should The Ball Face Down?

Depending on what position you're playing (or working on), the throwing circle can be bigger or smaller- but the first move from the glove should always have the ball facing gate ground to start that circle.

With the ball facing up, athletes will be prone to "pushing" the ball in their throw.

Elbows Lead "The Break"

Directly following the transfer is The Break. This is an athletic stopping point to check fielders in. It occurs right after they transfer the ball to their throwing hand.

The inside part of their throwing-hand foot should be facing their target to get their body turned to throw.

Remember, feet get set too...

Knees and elbows are bent as the fielder gets inside part of the back foot turned to the target. Ball and pocket of the glove are facing down as the fielder is starting the arm path to begin their throw (Ball first rotates down towards the ground, then away, before facing the target).

Something to look out for: Make sure this separation position doesn't look ROBOTIC. The elbows should not be even with the head when separating. The cue is meant to trigger the first movement of getting the ball out of the glove.

PARTS OF THE THROW

1. Work from the ground up

The throw starts from the lower body. In order to throw harder, farther, and with more accuracy; starting rotation with back foot and hips to start your throw will give you better results than using your upper body first (specifically your front shoulder). By only using the shoulders, players are not able to get full power & risk injury.

We use the concept of SEPARATION. Throwing is like hitting. Hips rotate first, then the shoulders and arm follow. In our "1, 2, 3 Throwing" Drill:

1. STEP
2. HIPS
3. REACH, TURN GLOVE, THROW

2. Stay in line with your target

Inside part of your back foot (for righties, this is your right foot) turns towards your target. This turns your knees, hips, and shoulders in the direction you're trying to throw. Your feet set your "line" to your throw.

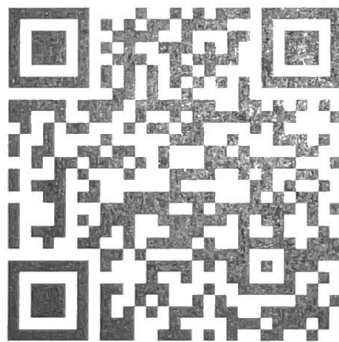
3. Pull glove to be even with your chest.

Keep your front shoulder in line with your target for as long as you can. Once the ball is being released, your glove should stay in line with your target. Sometimes I tell my girls to "puke" in their gloves- this tells them to rotate the glove to face the chest and keep the glove in front of the chest after their throw.

Glove stays on glove side & in front of the body or tucked to throwing shoulder depending on preference.

Further note: PINCH. REACH. THROW: Pinch muscles in the back to activate big muscles. When we pinch to bring scraps closer together in our backs, this gets the glove “out of our way” so the throwing arm has a clear path to throw.

*****PLEASE NOTE:** Throwing has LOTS of complicated routes it can take if you are feeling pain or if you need to correct mechanics you have had for a long time! I have listed the very basics of what I go through with each of my lessons, but for a more in-depth view at throwing, scan the below QR code for more resources.



Click Or Scan QR Code!

Ensure you are logged in beforehand.

Keep Your Feet Moving...

In a lot of our rolling drills, you'll notice a cone for the girls to run around after the play. This is to make sure they follow their throw instead of leaning back against their front foot to keep their weight back. If they do not move feet after their throw, they are not transferring weight/power into the ball.

COMMUNICATION

Why Practice Communication?

The game REQUIRES us to talk to our teammates:

- Calling the ball loudly
- Pre-pitch calling out the play
- In-play talking directing cut-offs or base to throw to

This is a HUGE concept for girls growing up in softball- we are embarrassed to say the wrong thing, to sound silly, or to just talk at all. This can be some of the most uncomfortable things to work on, but if you don't practice them in practice, how will you know how to do them in a game?

One of the hardest things for girls to start to do on the field (especially if being loud does not come naturally) is talk to each other on the field. This can even be a safety issue. Girls NEED to know that this isn't an "ask" from coaches. Talking is a requirement of the game.

Pre-pitch talk

- How many outs, where are the runners, where is the play?
- During play
- Call for the ball, call the play.

Be a good teammate

A lot of the "pulling teeth" feeling of getting your girls to talk can be helped by focusing on them being good teammates to each other.

I tell my girls: Make sure to be aware of your teammates on and off the field, show respect by listening & giving thoughtful feedback. Part of this is your presence and communication.

ALL-AGE DEFENSE FUNDAMENTALS TO KEEP IN MIND FOR ALL PRACTICES



1. The ball never stops. It only changes direction. Practice “deflecting” the ball into the throwing hand to improve transfer time and to keep the play moving.
2. Field from the ground up. Fielders who do not appear “smooth” often are late to have their gloves open or low enough. To be more on time, keep fingers facing the ground in approach and out in front of eyes. Make sure she understands the proper approach (more like an airplane landing and not a helicopter).
3. The key to developing good habits and mechanics is posture. Back flat. Waist hinged. Knees are bent and weight is on the balls of the feet.

4. Speed and direction of the ball dictate your first step to the ball. Hard hit balls mean you step soft (sometimes back to make sure you allow yourself enough time to see and react to the ball). Soft hit balls mean you step hard- charge.
5. No reaching. Move your feet first. The feet get the rest of your body in position to get to the ball and then transition to get rid of the ball efficiently.
6. The direction of the inside part of your back foot dictates the direction of your body and the ball being thrown.
7. Good rule of thumb on drop steps is to get toes facing the direction you want to go as quickly as you can. Toes turn hips, hips turn shoulders.
8. Great infielders have a confident presence. Move, speak, and act with confidence.
9. Keep your eyes behind the ball and your eyes behind your glove. Seeing the ball is the first step to catching the ball.
10. Elbows Up: The position a fielder gets into after the ball breaks from the glove; elbows always stay bent, ball facing ground, arms are equal and opposite. Another word for this term is "transfer." This starts the arm circle before the throw. Try to break in the middle of your body (in front of the chest or belly button). Don't let your glove move all the way back to your ear before you get the ball out.

FAILURE RECOVERY

Different types of players have different reactions to failure. The most common type of players I see & then different ways we can practice failure recovery for those types to try are listed below:

Common Reactions to Failure v ASAP Training

- Crying, tantrums, “out of it” mentality, lets mistakes bleed into other parts of the game, breaks player down long-term
- Acknowledge failure
- Spot your personality: rage machine, escape artist, yes girl
- Activate a way to combat falling into a common reaction and train an ELITE reaction (one that will help us learn, get back to neutral, aid in recovery)
- Practice daily

1) Train Fast: “Escape Artist” (They don’t want to be in that moment naturally, but this exposes that impulse and forces them to stay present.)

- Don’t give player time to overthink their mechanics after they learn them
- After a mistake: they have to be in it or they will continue to fail
- Drills, pace of ball, situations

2) “Release” Routine: “Rage Machine”

- Time constraint to “get back to the fence”
- Taking gloves off means taking the at-bat off their mind, wiping dirt means wiping play away
- Back to a focal point: foul pole

3) Set Expectation To Finish The Play: “Yes Girl”

- Can’t just go through the motions of listening to a coach. They have to refocus and perform.
- If they don’t finish the play, there’s a consequence.
- Create mechanics around finishing the play: barehand pickup, set feet, eyes to target first

ASAP DAILY JOURNAL

We all want to recover from failure and disappointment quickly, but we could only do that if we've trained as hard mentally as we have physically. The purpose of ASAP is to build mental memory in the same way we build muscle memory.

ACKNOWLEDGE FAILURE

Failure happens to everyone, every day. It's often minor and completely overlooked. Small failures, however, can teach us a lot about the strength of our mental fortitude and resilience. The first step is learning to acknowledge disappointment in the moment, not shrugging it off as unimportant.

What's one thing you failed at today? This could be a specific event, drill, or even an emotion you had to deal with during the day.

SPOT YOUR DEFENSIVE PERSONALITY

Once we recognize disappointment, we get the chance to analyze our reaction. Everybody has an arsenal of responses to disappointment - anger, humor, sadness, shutting down, lashing out. Knowing how you react and learning new ways to respond are the keys to managing your mental game.

What was your reaction? What made you feel like that way OR what did that failure make you act like?

ACTIVATE YOUR DEFENSE

Everyone has natural reactions to situations, but that doesn't mean those responses can't be changed. When we start to focus on desired outcomes after we encounter disappointment, we can begin to change over time, transforming our "natural" destructive inclinations into constructive solutions.

What will you do to get out of this mindset?

PRACTICE

In order to develop mental resilience to failure, we must take every opportunity to practice these skills.

What's a routine you can implement to build your mental armor for this in the future?

WAYS YOU PRACTICE MENTALITY WITH YOUR TEAM
