

A GUIDE TO SLOWPITCH SOFTBALL

1: The Basic Game

Slowpitch Softball is played by two teams of ten players each. The teams take it in turns to bat and field. The batting team is called the **OFFENSIVE** team and the fielding team is called the **DEFENSIVE** team.

Most Slowpitch Softball is played by mixed teams, where men and women play together, usually in a 5:5 ratio. However, this ratio sometimes varies, and Slowpitch is sometimes played by single-sex teams as well.

The basics of Softball are very simple. A player, known appropriately enough as the **PITCHER**, pitches the ball to a **BATTER** who hits it and runs around as many bases as possible before the ball is retrieved and returned under control by the defensive team. The aim of the game is to score more **RUNS** than the opposition, and a run is scored when a player on the batting team advances around all three bases and back to the home base (called **HOME PLATE**) from whence he/she started.

Unless you hit the ball so far that you can run around all the bases before it's returned (a **HOME RUN**), you'll probably have to stop at one or more bases on your way around and wait for the next batter to hit the ball so you can advance further.

Meanwhile, the defensive team is trying to get batters and base runners **OUT**, either by catching balls hit in the air, as in cricket, or in various other ways we'll get to later. As soon as three players on the offensive team have made outs, the two teams switch: The defensive team comes in to bat and the batting team goes out to the field to defend.

An inning is completed when each team has batted, and a full game consists of seven innings. A game usually takes between 60 and 90 minutes to play. Players bat in a prearranged order (in mixed games with a 5:5 ratio, men and women bat alternately). After the last batter in the order has hit, the first batter comes up again. If the final out in an inning is made by, say, the fourth batter in the order, then the fifth batter will be the

first to hit when the team comes in to bat again. Batters keep their place in the batting order even if they were out last time they batted.

2: The Playing Area

A Softball playing area is contained within a 90-degree angle, and is usually called a **DIAMOND**, because the central part of the playing field - the **INFIELD** - is diamond-shaped. The **OUTFIELD** extends outward from the infield to a boundary, either actual or notional. From above, the playing area looks like the illustration following. Everything inside the thick black lines is known as **FAIR TERRITORY** and is where most of the action takes place. The shaded area outside these lines is called **FOUL TERRITORY**, where some action can take place. Everything beyond this is called **DEAD BALL TERRITORY** because if this ball goes into this area, all action stops. As a basic rule, the batter must hit the ball into fair territory.

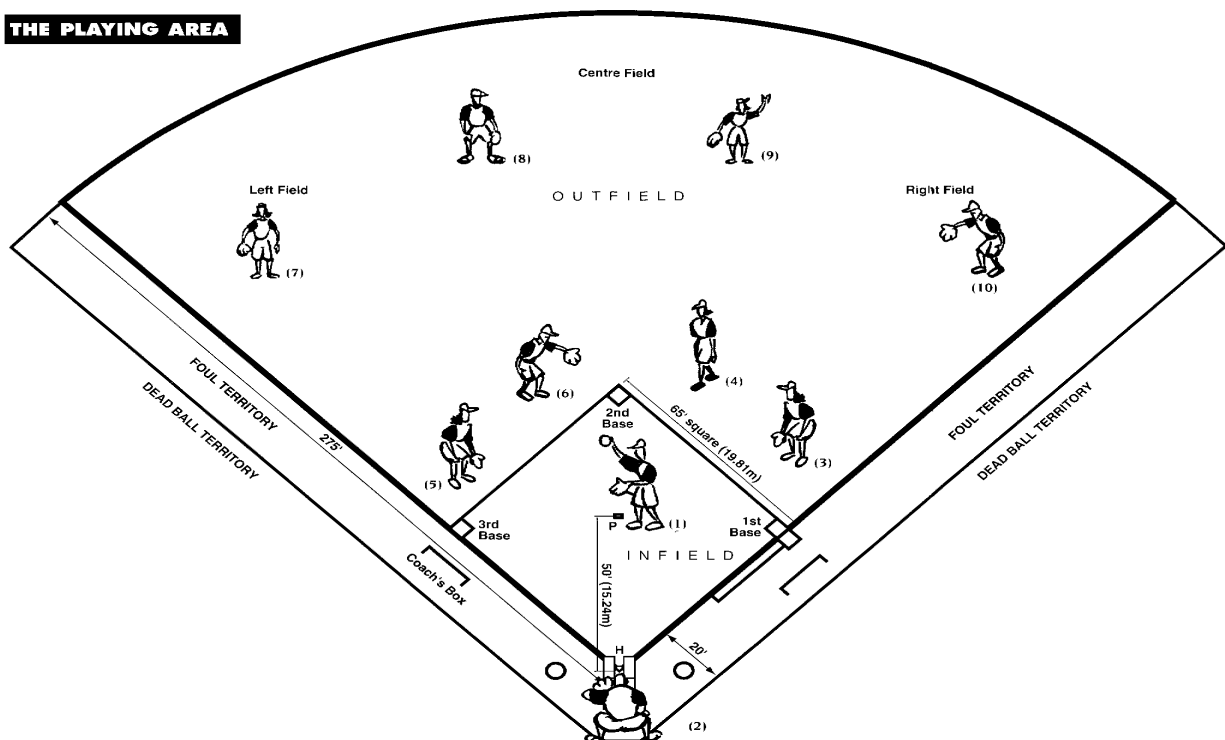
You will often hear people referring to **LEFT FIELD**, **CENTRE FIELD** and **RIGHT FIELD**. These terms mean exactly what they say. Left field is that part of the outfield which is to the left as you look at the field diagram; centre field is the outfield area behind second base; and right field is the outfield area to the right on the diagram.

The pitcher stands on a rectangular piece of heavy rubber, the **PITCHER'S PLATE (P)**, and tries to pitch the ball across **HOME PLATE (H)**, a five-sided piece of heavy rubber, guarded by the batter, 50 feet away.

Each **BASE** (First Base, Second Base and Third Base) is marked by plastic bag filled with foam. The distance between each base is 65 feet (quite a long way!).

For safety reasons, **FIRST BASE** often consists of a double base, half white and half orange, with the orange section in foul territory and the white section in fair territory. The batter heads for the orange part, the fielder uses the white part, and collisions are avoided.

THE PLAYING AREA



3: The Defensive Team

The job of the defensive team, known as **FIELDERS**, is to catch or stop any balls hit, with the aim of preventing offensive players from advancing around the bases and scoring runs. Each fielder has specific duties and a specific number, used for score-keeping:

Infielders

PITCHER (1): The pitcher pitches the ball to the batter from the pitcher's plate and then becomes another infielder, ready to catch or stop batted balls and throw to bases as required. The pitcher will often take throws at first base on balls hit to the first base player, or back up other infielders on throws coming in from the outfield.

CATCHER (2): The catcher kneels or squats behind home plate and returns the ball to the pitcher if the batter swings and misses or fails to swing. The catcher also guards home plate against incoming baserunners and tries to tag them out before they can reach the base and score a run.

FIRST BASE (3): This is often a busy position, as many balls will be thrown to first base in an attempt to put batters out who are running from home to first. So this fielder needs "safe hands": i.e., he/she needs to be able to hold on safely to thrown balls. The first base player also guards part of the right side of the infield against batted balls hit on the ground or in the air.

SECOND BASE (4): The second base player will guard much of the right side of the infield and will try to catch balls hit in the air or on the ground. He/she will often catch throws made to second base, though the short stop (see below) can do this as well.

THIRD BASE (5): The third base player guards the area near third base and will usually take throws made to third. This player needs good reflexes (since the ball is often hit hard in his/her direction) and a good throwing arm, since it's a long throw from third to first base.

SHORT STOP (6): The short stop stands between second and third base and tries to stop or catch any ball hit towards left field. The short stop is also in a good position to take throws at second base or, occasionally, at third.

TIP: See how the infielders are positioned on the diagram to cover as much of the infield area as possible. It is a common fault for inexperienced infield players to stand on their base at all times. This isn't necessary and means that they're not covering as much of the field as they could be. It only becomes necessary to touch your base if you are trying to get someone out there.

Outfielders

Outfield positions are not quite so rigidly defined as infield positions. The team captain or possibly the catcher may position the outfielders, sometimes differently for each batter. For example, if a hard-hitting batter is up, the outfielders may all move back, or if a left-handed batter comes up, the outfielders may all swing around towards right field.

In general, however, the **LEFT FIELDER (7)** will play in left field. The **LEFT CENTRE FIELDER (8)** will play to the left of the centre field area. The **RIGHT CENTRE FIELDER (9)** will play to the right of the centre field area. The **RIGHT FIELDER (10)** will play in right field. The outfielder's job is to catch or stop balls hit in their direction and return them quickly and accurately to the infield.

Gloves

Each defensive player, including the pitcher, wears a fielder's glove to stop and catch balls. These gloves may seem

cumbersome at first and even a bit cissy but gloves are essential because:

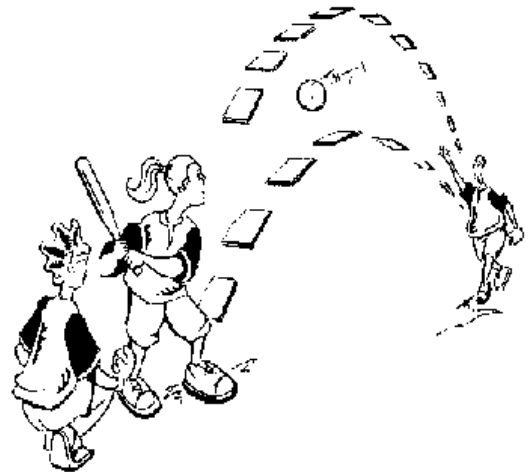
- the size and weight of a softball makes it painful and dangerous to catch without a glove (it's not soft!)
- a glove will allow you to make catches you could never make barehanded (your hand is smaller!)
- a glove will allow you to control the ball quickly in order to throw it, which is an essential part of the game.

Practice using the glove, catching the ball in the webbing rather than the palm and remembering not to rely on the glove to do everything. Close your fingers on the ball once it goes into the glove and cover the gloved hand with your bare hand to stop the ball popping out.

Another reason to practice with the glove is that it's worn on your weaker hand (i.e., if you're right-handed you'll wear a glove on your left hand), and you're probably not used to catching with this hand. The reason for this arrangement is so that your stronger hand is free for throwing.

Part 4: Pitching

In Slowpitch Softball, the pitcher must start with one or both feet in contact with the pitching plate. He may take one step in any direction, but one foot must remain in contact with the pitching plate until the ball is released. The ball is lobbed underarm and must have an arc which reaches at least six feet and no more than twelve feet from the ground. Anything else will be called an illegal pitch by the umpire and will count as a ball unless the batter swings at the pitch.



The pitcher in Slowpitch may seem on a hiding to nothing, since everyone is going to hit the ball. But the trick is to use different kinds of spin, a high arc and variations in the speed or angle of delivery to make things as awkward as possible for the batters.

As shown in the diagram, the batter will be standing next to home plate, ready to hit. Here comes the pitch! For a moment, let's ignore the main object of the game, which is for the batter to hit the ball. Suppose he/she doesn't? What happens then?

Strikes and Balls

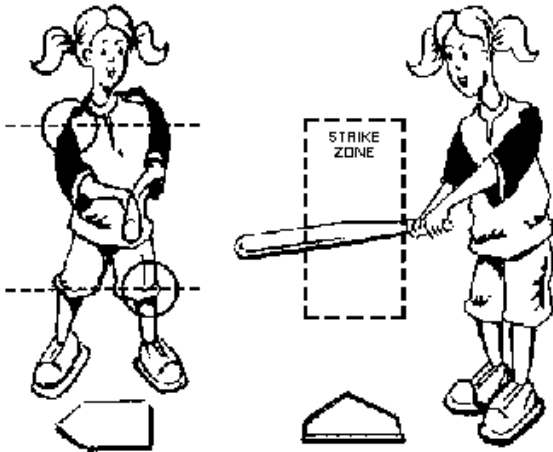
A pitched ball will be described (by the umpire) as either a **STRIKE** or a **BALL**. Basically, a strike is a good pitch and a ball is a bad one.

A GOOD PITCH

- Must be pitched from the pitching plate.
- Must have an arc of between 6 and 12 feet from the ground.
- Must not, in the opinion of the umpire, be too fast.
- Must pass between the height of the batter's knees and back shoulder as he / she stands at home plate in a normal batting stance (you can't make it harder by crouching down!).
- Must pass across some part of the Strike Zone.

Some definitions:

- **THE STRIKE ZONE** is an imaginary three-dimensional column of space with depth, width and corners corresponding to the shape of home plate. A ball needs to pass through ANY part of this zone to be called a strike.
- A **STRIKE** is a pitched ball which fulfils all of the above conditions. In all other cases, the pitch is a **BALL**, unless the batter swings at it.
- A **STRIKE OUT** occurs if three strikes are called against the batter and the batter hasn't managed to hit the ball into Fair Territory.



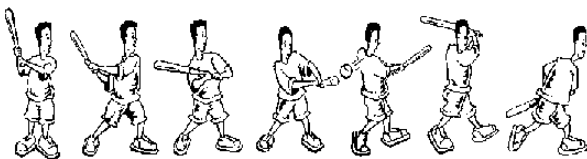
A **STRIKE** is called if:

- a pitch is good and the batter fails to swing, or swings and misses, or swings and hits the ball into Foul Territory (without it being caught) or into Dead Ball Territory
- a pitch is bad (would be deemed a **BALL**) but the batter swings and misses it

A **BATTER ON BASE** or a **WALK** occurs if:

- A pitcher pitches four **BALLS** - bad pitches which the batter makes no attempt to hit. In this case the batter will walk to first base.

Putting batters on base is dangerous since it 'loads the bases' with runners who can score if a big hitter gets a ball into Fair Territory. The basic job of a Slowpitch pitcher is to throw strikes!



5: Batting

A right-handed batter will stand to the right side of home plate (from the pitcher's point of view) and a left-handed batter to the left of home plate. Once a batter hits the ball into fair territory, he/she advances counter-clockwise around the bases.

Basic batting techniques:

- Start with your weight mostly on the back foot and the bat drawn back.
- Watch the ball all the way to the point of contact with the bat.
- Begin the swing by stepping towards the pitcher with the front foot.
- Twist the body to open the hips, then the shoulders, which pulls the bat through to meet the ball.
- It's important to have a full follow-through on the swing

If and when you hit the ball into Fair Territory, you **must** run. You have no choice. You must drop (never throw!) the bat down into Foul Territory and run as fast as possible to first base (and on to further bases if you think you can make them safely - i.e.,

before the fielders can get the ball to a player on that base). Remember that you must touch every base with your foot as you run past it, and when you decide to stop at a base (apart from first base and home plate), you must stop on it, not run past it. If you run past, you're liable to be tagged out.

FAIR AND FOUL BALLS

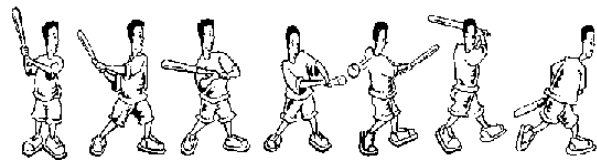
A ball is considered to be **FAIR** if:

- it lands in the outfield (i.e. in Fair Territory), and then rolls foul
- it is hit into Foul Territory, but then rolls into Fair Territory before it passes first or third base.
- it hits either first or third base, no matter where it goes afterwards!

A ball is considered to be **FOUL** if:

- it is hit into the infield (i.e. in Fair Territory) but then rolls foul before it passes first or third base
- it is hit into Foul Territory outside the outfield and then rolls into Fair Territory

NOTE: A ball touched by a fielder standing in fair territory is **FAIR**, a ball touched by a fielder in foul territory is **FOUL**.



6: Running the Bases

So you've hit the ball, it's not been caught in the air by a fielder, it lands fair and you're forced to run. You have now become a **BATTER-RUNNER** until you reach first base, and a **BASE RUNNER** thereafter.

You are not considered safe - i.e. you can't become a base runner - until you reach first base without being put out. If any defensive player is holding the ball and touches first base with any part of her body, or the ball itself, before you get there, you are **OUT**.

A typical example would be this:

You hit the ball along the ground (called a **GROUND BALL**) to the short stop. You set off for first base. The short stop picks it up and throws to the first base player, who catches the ball in his glove while his foot is in contact with the base. The ball gets to her before you can reach the base. You're out! You can be put out in the same way at all bases to which you are **FORCED** to run (we'll explain when you're forced to run and when you're not in a moment).

As a base runner you are never safe until you are touching a base. If at any point you are touched with the ball (whether in or out of the glove) by a fielder and you are not safely in contact with a base, you are out. This is called a **TAG**.

There are two exceptions to the **TAG** rule:

Over-running first base. As a batter-runner, you don't have to stop dead on first base. You are allowed to make contact with the base and then run on beyond it in a straight line (so you don't lose speed and momentum) after which you can safely walk back to first without the danger of being tagged out. However, if you pass first base and turn into the field of play with the intent to run on towards second, you can be tagged out. When running to second or third base, however, you must stay in contact with the base once you reach it. Incidentally: you can also over-run home plate when scoring a run.

A dead ball situation. An example of a dead ball situation is when the batter swings and hits the ball into Foul Territory. The ball is now considered dead and no play can take place, so if you had left your base on the swing, you are allowed to walk back to it in safety prior to the next pitch. Another common example of a dead ball situation is an **OVERTHROW**. This is where a ball thrown inaccurately or missed by one of the fielders ends up in Dead Ball Territory. At this point, the umpire will call the play dead. Any base-runners are then allowed to walk safely to the base they were attempting to reach at the point when the throw was made, plus one more. Even if a base runner was standing on a base, he will be awarded the next base he might have advanced to. Inexperienced players often dispute the award of bases in this situation, but that's the rule!

Now we'll look more closely at when base runners are forced to run and when they're not, and what fielders have to do in these situations to put runners out:

Force Outs

Let's suppose that you have made it to first base safely and now the next batter comes up to bat. Remember that you can only advance to second base or beyond if the next batter hits the ball or receives a walk.

However, if the next batter hits the ball into Fair Territory without it being caught in the air, you are forced to run towards second base because the batter-runner is coming to occupy first base and no more than one runner per base is allowed. In any situation where you as a base runner are forced to advance, the defensive team can put you out simply by throwing the ball to a player standing on the base to which you're advancing. This is called a **FORCE OUT** (or Force Play). No tag is necessary, although the fielder can choose to tag you while you're between bases if he wishes.

Let's suppose that you're a base runner on first and the next batter hits a ground ball to the short stop. You are forced to run to second, the batter-runner is forced to run to first, and the defensive team has a choice of two possible **FORCE OUTS**: you or the batter-runner. If they're feeling ambitious and there are less than two outs, they can go for both of you. If they're successful, this is called a **DOUBLE PLAY**. Typically, the short stop would throw the ball to the second base-player standing on second (that puts you out) and the second base-player would throw immediately on to first base. If the throw reaches the first base-player before the batter-runner reaches the base, they too would be out!

Force plays can apply at any base. For example, if there are base runners on all three base's (this is called **BASES LOADED**), then all the runners are forced to run on the next hit that isn't caught in the air, and the fielders could get a **FORCE OUT** at any base - including home plate.

Tag Outs

You have probably already grasped the point that fielders must **TAG OUT** runners who are not forced to run; simply standing on the base with the ball won't do.

Say you are the first batter in the inning and you hit a **DOUBLE** (a hit that allows you get to second base). When the next batter hits the ball and runs toward first, you don't have to advance if you don't want to, because no one is coming to occupy your base. If you do choose to head for third, you are **UNFORCED** and to put you out, a fielder must tag you with the ball in hand or glove before you reach your target base. In fact, you can turn around and run back to the base you came from if that seems a wiser choice; no one is coming to occupy that base and it's still yours!

There is a great deal of skill and judgement involved in base running and a good runner can often gain an advantage by forcing the defensive team to panic and make mistakes. So pay attention

at all times, run hard and look for chances to take extra bases when the defenders make bad throws or simply aren't paying attention. Never give up on the possibilities until the umpire has called "Time!" and the play is over.

Catch Outs (ball is caught in the air)

Suppose you're on first base with less than two out and the next batter hits the ball in the air towards an outfielder (this is called a **FLY BALL**, or, if it's hit on a low, hard trajectory, a **LINE DRIVE**). Well, as soon as the outfielder catches the ball before it hits the ground (and the laws of physics tell you this will happen within seconds), then the batter is out - at which point you're no longer forced to run to second, since there's no batter-runner coming to occupy first. The force is off.

Instead, you can choose whether to advance to second or not and so the defensive team can't get you out with a Force Play. They can only get you out by tagging you with the ball: a **TAG OUT** or Tag Play. That's why, if the ball is hit in the air towards a fielder when you're a forced runner, you shouldn't automatically take off for the next base, because the catch might be made and the force removed.

AND HERE'S THE KEY POINT: you cannot advance to the next base on a caught fly ball unless your foot is in contact with the base you're already occupying when the catch is made, or afterwards. This is called **TAGGING UP**. You must tag up before you can advance after a caught fly ball. Why? it's a rule!

Sliding

Remember that we said you can overrun first base (or home), but not second and third, where you can be tagged out if you're not in contact with the base. But running hard and then stopping dead on a small base isn't easy!

One way to do this is to slide the last few feet into the base along the ground, so that you come to rest on or in contact with the base with minimal loss of momentum. Another reason to slide is that you will present a smaller and more difficult target for the defensive player who might be waiting to tag you.

TIPS FOR SLIDING

Start your slide about 10 feet from the base. Tuck one leg under the other, lean back into a reclining position, but keep your fists clenched and your arms up off the ground (to avoid injuries). Sliding is most fun and least painful on wet grass; it can be a killer on Astroturf or gravel infields!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This guide is entirely based on the BSFs IDIOTS GUIDE TO SOFTBALL produced some years ago.

