



## Defensive Myths in Fastpitch

### Defensive Myths:

#### Softball Defense — The Greatest Myth

The biggest myth in Fastpitch Softball has to be "Let's get the lead runner out". When should you attempt this play? ALMOST NEVER, with a few exceptions. The winning strategy on defense is to make high percentage plays, don't give away any runs, and avoid giving up the big inning. In almost all situations, it's better to make the easy out at first base rather than try to get an out at any other base. Trying to get the lead runner out is a perilous situation and can lead to disaster for your team. I know you have serious doubts about this strategy so let me give you a couple of very recent experiences.

#### Softball Defense — Dispelling the Myth #1

We took our team to watch the Baylor Bears play a double-header. This is college Fastpitch Softball, and if you follow Baylor you know it's at a very high level. In two games, 14 innings total, the combined number of times that either team tried to get the lead runner out was two. One play they were successful and the other play lead to an overthrow at second base and the runner scored. As I recall, the scores in these games were 7-6 and 5-3. So there were plenty of runners on base and plenty of opportunities to try and get the lead runner. So why didn't they try? How could college teams only attempt it twice in 14 innings? What have they figured out that you don't know? And do you really think you are a smarter or better coach than two Division 1 NCAA college coaches? Or maybe they have figured out the keys to building a winning fastpitch softball defense.

#### Softball Defense — Dispelling the Myth #2

My next example strikes home much closer. We have had our softball defense practicing getting the lead runner out this year. Not that this is the play we want to make all of the time, but we are trying to educate our girls on when they can make this play, when they can't make it, and what to look for in making their decision. So here was the situation: A preseason game, top of the first inning, no outs, runner at third, and a slow roller hit to the pitcher. The pitcher fields the ball and throws chest high to the catcher which allows the runner to slide underneath the tag and score, and the batter ends up at second base in all of the commotion. The batter ends up scoring later in the inning to give our opponents a 2-0 lead. The final score in the game was 2-1. If we had made the play at first base the game would have been tied 1-1 and we would have gone to extra innings. Since this was a preseason game we are encouraging our players to attempt that play, and from this experience our pitcher learned just how close that play was, and what it will take to make that play later on. She also learned that if it is that close, take the out at first base.

So when do you get the lead runner? Obviously if the winning run is on third, less than two outs, and the last inning or very late in the game, you have to prevent the runner from scoring. However, I would suggest, if you know you are going to get to bat again, I might let her score and go down by one run, but make the out at first and avoid the big inning and avoid going down by two or more runs. It's a lot easier to score one run than it is two score two or three.

The next obvious time to get the lead runner is when the bases are loaded and the ball is hit to the pitcher, catcher, or third base. However, the girls need to know that if they don't field the ball cleanly, or if there is any hesitation or doubt, immediately make the play at first. Depending on the stage of the game and the score, you may well want to move the first baseman closer to home to be able to make the play at home.

Unless it is very late in the game and the score is tied or I am behind, I would NOT have my shortstop or second baseman throw home. The odds are way against making this play and you risk the big inning. Remember, you are building a solid fastpitch softball defense, not a risky defense.

The other lead runner situation is with a runner on second and the ball is hit to pitcher, shortstop or third base. Obviously, if it is a force at third this is a much easier play. If it's not a force, and the ball is hit to third, typically the runner will stay put. However, I'm always surprised at how often the runner will bolt when the ball is hit to shortstop. The third baseman has to make this call because she can see the play. As soon as the ball is hit, the third baseman moves to the base, she now has a perfect view of the runner and the shortstop fielding the ball. It's now her responsibility to make the call to the shortstop to go to third or first. By the way, this was the lead runner play that Baylor made successfully in their game. The shortstop should not have to assess this situation at all. If she does not hear the call from third, then it is an automatic that she goes to first. Great on-the-field communication is essential to building a great fastpitch softball defense.

The hardest lead runner play is getting the force out at second base. There are four times when this MIGHT be attempted. You must remember that the runner on first generally gets a pretty good jump off of first base, so much so that generally the second baseman has a hard time beating her to the bag. So the four times you might attempt this are:

1. The ball is hit up the middle to the shortstop who only has to step on the base,
2. The ball is hit sharply to the pitcher (the shortstop must make the call to the pitcher),
3. The ball is hit sharply to the second baseman (the shortstop must make this call)
4. A line drive hit to center field and the runner has indecision if the ball will be caught.

On any slow ground balls the play should be to first base. Getting the force out at second base is easily the worst executed play in Fastpitch Softball. Be mindful of the consequences of your decision. Which would you rather have? A runner at second base with one out, or runners at first and second and no outs. How much pressure do you want to put on your defensive unit? Continually putting undo pressure on your own softball defense will lead to errors and indecision.

Some of the keys to your rock solid softball defense are:

- Make a very high percentage of easy outs
- Don't take unnecessary risks
- Don't put undo pressure on your defense
- Don't give up the big inning
- Don't make your players indecisive

By dispelling the lead runner myth, your softball defense will have a much easier time on the field and will play the game with greater confidence. You will notice a substantial decrease in errors, unearned runs, runs allowed, and big innings and GAMES WON!

Go through a game in your mind and think about getting the out at first base 95% of the time or trying to get the lead runner and only being successful about 50% of the time (as were the colleges). If you follow the guidelines above, and practice these situations hopefully your team will eliminate attempting the very low percentage plays, and maximize the higher percentage plays. Now you have a solid and smart fastpitch softball defense that will keep you in the games, and more importantly, NOT LOSE GAMES.