



8U Defensive Winning Strategy

The Winning Defensive Strategy for 8U

First, welcome to the wonderful world of coaching youth softball. For the premise of this article, I am going to assume that you are playing some form of machine pitch or modified pitch. As you begin having practices with your little softball players you need to be constantly evaluating which girls are best suited for the different positions. Remember this, Offense wins games, but Defense loses games. **DO NOT** start the season out with coaching blunders that will literally leave your team **DEFENSELESS**. Do **NOT** put your best player at shortstop! You must have a Winning Defensive Strategy. Remember the 8U coaching record of 93-4-2. This information is tried and true, and proven to near perfection.

The key to winning games at this level is having a solid defensive strategy that will ensure the highest percentage of easy outs. Let's divide the field into four zones: right side of the infield, middle of the infield, left side of the infield and the outfield. **My experience has shown that about 70% of the balls get hit to the right and middle infield. That leaves just 30% that go to the left side and outfield.** If the ball is hit to the outfield we might as well concede that as a hit at this age. If the ball is hit to the left side of the infield the odds of making the out are about 1 in 5. Let's face it, the fielder has to field the ball cleanly, make a very good throw to 1st, and 1st has to make a catch. That's asking a lot for a bunch of 7 & 8 year olds. Your team needs to be able to make the easy outs most of the time and the hard outs some of the time.

We need to stack the cards in your favor. So, if a **majority of the hits go to the right or middle of the infield, that's where you need to put your best players.** Think about that for a moment, you wouldn't intentionally put weaker players where you know the most hits go to would you?

In 8 & Under softball, easily the most important position is 1st base. You **MUST** put the girl that catches thrown balls the best at 1st base. At this age it's usually pretty easy to pick out your top prospect for this position. What good does it do to have your fielders throwing to someone that can't catch? What kind of defensive strategy is that? Since this player is your best ball catcher she is probably one of your top fielders as well. That's perfect since about 20% of the balls hit will be going to her. Catch the grounder, step on first base, no danger of a bad throw, and chalk up an easy out. I promise, a stud 1st baseman is going to make coaching youth softball much easier.

After your 1st baseman has been decided, the next most important position is pitcher. (I'm assuming of course that you are playing coach pitch or modified pitch). This should be your most accurate thrower on the team and generally pretty athletic. A good pitcher can cut off many hits that would be headed to shortstop, plus cover slow rollers to second base, and run up to cover the bunt or dinker hits.

Approximately 35% of all hit balls will be hit in the pitchers fielding area. These outs should be almost as automatic as the balls hit to 1st base except for the occasional throwing error. You are starting to look like a genius coaching youth softball. **You have now covered about half of all hit balls with your two best players.** Now that's a winning defensive strategy!

Next is your 2nd basemen. This should be your third best fielder/thrower. This is a relatively short throw and your team must be able to execute this play for an out a very high percentage of time. If you have two players that are very similar in ability but one has a stronger arm, then you might want to put this player at shortstop. Just be sure not to sacrifice very much in making this decision. Outs from 2nd base need to be fairly routine and not an adventure.

Are you getting a clear picture of your defensive strategy? You know where about 70% of the balls will be hit, so as any intelligent coach would do, you have put your three best players in a position to field the majority of the balls. You are going to look like you have been coaching youth softball for a lifetime.

Next, finish filling in shortstop and third base. Remember, even if you put your very best player at either of these positions you are likely to only convert 20% of grounders into outs. And typically, very few balls are hit to these positions in comparison to 1st, 2nd and Pitcher.

The dreaded outfield. **Everyone thinks you are supposed to hide your worst outfielder in Right Field. WRONG!!! This is where you put your BEST outfielder.** You do the hiding in Left Field. **Right Field is really just a deep infield position.** Sharp hit balls to right field can be routinely turned into outs at 1st base. (This defensive strategy is not only for coaching youth softball, but is used all the way through College fastpitch softball.) So put your very best outfielder in right field. I would argue this position is almost as important as third base. The right fielder also has the responsibility of backing up 1st base on all thrown balls. A good right fielder will save more runs and extra bases than you might imagine. Remember, you are coaching youth softball to develop skills, have fun, and WIN.

The most important strategy for Center Field is if there is a runner on 1st and the ball is hit to them, they should catch the ball and run or throw to second base. By this point on your roster, you are probably getting pretty low in the talent pool so running and stepping on 2nd base may be the best defensive strategy. Of course, throughout the season, you will want to be teaching her how to throw and also teaching your infielders to cover the bases, but early in the season this may be almost an impossible request of your team.

Finally, Left Field. God bless her, this is probably your least athletic and has the second most room to develop their fielding and throwing over the course of a season. Next, position her a little deeper in the outfield so when the ball rolls past her she doesn't have as far to run to get it. All of her throws coming back to the infield should be towards 3rd base. As the season progresses you can explain to her when to throw towards 2nd base and when to throw towards 3rd, but just starting out, have her throw everything to 3rd and try to hold those runners to doubles. The logic is, if it has been hit to left field it's probably a double anyway. If she makes a wild throw to 2nd then that double just turned into a triple or homerun. Make the throw to third.

The catcher position is very similar to left field in regard to the talent level of the player. The difference might be that you put the faster runner of the two in left field so she can chase down balls quicker. Most leagues don't allow stealing in this age group, and honestly, even if they do allow stealing, the chances of throwing a runner out are virtually nil. Put your player that has the most room for development in this position. Let's face it this may be the first time this player picked up a ball. She probably has the most room to develop in making a basic catch or throw and it's almost dangerous to have her in the field where a ball might hit her. She needs lots of practice catching and throwing and quite frankly you can't spend all of your practice time just working with her. So, put her at catcher and let her have 60 balls thrown at her every game. She also gets to throw the ball back to the pitcher 60 times per game. **You will be surprised at how quickly she improves.** Suit her up with all that catcher's gear, teach her to squat so the shin guards offer maximum protection, keep her throwing hand behind her so it doesn't get injured, and let her know how important this position is to the team. To be successful coaching youth softball, it is important to make all the girls feel good about their abilities.

If you follow this defensive strategy, the other teams will be amazed at how solid your team is on defense. Of course, that's because they have their tallest girl on 1st base even though she couldn't catch a beach ball, and they have their best fielders at shortstop & 3rd base where very few balls get hit. These are 8 year old girls. You must shape your defensive strategy to their limited abilities to achieve maximum success. After all, that's why you are coaching youth softball...so your daughter's team can develop and achieve maximum success.

If you are still hesitant about this strategy, go ahead and do it your way the first half of the season. BUT, the

closer you get to 4 losses the quicker you might want to think about changing to the defensive strategy that led to 93-4-2. This really is the best defensive strategy for making coaching youth softball look easy.