

Kids These Days

Cindy Bristow - Softball Excellence

This is Part 4 of my 6 part article series for the National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA)

As the college softball season closes another successful chapter I want to deviate from pitching for an issue and comment on the recent Women's College World Series. While everyone will talk about the Washington Huskies' impressive win and the sudden offensive explosion we all witnessed I want to use the tournament to highlight something I hear more and more from coaches, and that's the phrase, "kids these days". I hear coaches say its hard coaching kids these days because they're so different, or they're so young, or they're so ungrateful. We've all heard these things before and no doubt uttered a few such comments ourselves.

Of course "kids these days" are different because most of us "coaches these days" are getting older – whether we want to realize it or not. The older we get from our players the greater the gap in all kinds of things, and most of those things are easily noticeable. Things like texting, Twittering (really called "Tweets"), having a job, work ethic, even equipment – it's all very different from when most of us were growing up.

But different doesn't have to mean bad. I'd like to use some examples from the recently completed WCWS to show how I think "kids these days" are terrific, and how Coaches These Days are incredible as well. We all might different in the way we communicate, how our parents have raised us and how even the sport of softball is different – but we're the same in much more important ways.

Let's take a look at the recent WCWS and see just how fantastic kids are these days:

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1. Personal Responsibility to their Team & Teammates – every interview was another reminder of how much each player felt personally responsible to their team and their teammates for their play. If they felt they hadn't played well enough they were willing to admit it on national tv and promise to do better by the next game for their team! I never heard any excuses I simply heard young women willing to stand up and in front of everyone take responsibility for their actions!

2. Personal Encouragement and Support – how many times did you see a starter taken out of the game in a crucial situation and that starter be on the fence cheering for her replacement louder than anyone? Nobody went back to the dugout gripping about the coach taking them out, or complaining to another teammate. Whoever was taken out of the game simply supported the coaches decision and immediately started supporting their replacement. We could ALL learn a HUGE lesson from this behavior as it's too easy to make things personal at a moment when they should be about TEAM!

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3. Never Say Die – are you kidding me?! How many times did it seem like a game was over only for the outcome to completely shift in the other direction? Kids these days never once quit during that entire WCWS, even if it meant a 2 out grand slam was needed to stay alive! Kids these days hit 4 total Grand Slams in this year's WCWS and 3 of them either won games or else kept a team in the game.

4. Shake it Off – Kids these days were able to somehow shake off a game-losing walk, or error, or bad at-bat and rebound the next game and not only win but dominate. It was truly amazing to see how focused these young players were and how able they were to give everything they had, have it end poorly for them and then quickly turn their minds around and approach the next game as if the last one never occurred. That type of behavior is difficult for seasoned professionals to do never mind for 18-22 year olds.

5. Give it All You've Got – I think it was obvious for anyone watching this year's WCWS that every single player on every single team gave every single play everything they had! That's what draws us to this event and why 60,512 people paid to get in to witness it in person and why every single game was on ESPN! We all want to believe we have it in us to keep going when the going gets tough, but we're not so sure we do. We all want to believe that we too would keep fighting and battling when our team was down by 3 runs with 2 outs in the bottom of the 7th, but we're pretty sure we wouldn't. We all want to believe we would keep pitching our guts out even if it meant pitching for 4 ½ hours in 95 degree temperatures no matter how poorly we might be doing, but we're not sure we could. And we all want to believe we could come through in the clutch to hit a pinch-hit grand slam, but that little voice we all have says we might not. And yet all of these things – and more – happened this past week in Oklahoma City and it's why I so greatly admire the Kids These Days.

I believe that our sport and our country is in Great shape because of kids these days and the coaches these days. These kids, or players, weren't acting on their own! They were playing out and trusting all the months and years of training they'd had via their coaches. Sure, it took their own individual courage, guts and determination to execute when the pressure was on, but the Coaches These Days were also amazing:

Coaches These Days:

1. Support to the Hilt – this WCWS really showed coaches supporting their athletes no matter what. When players struggled and needed hugs – their coaches were the first ones there to comfort them. When players needed to be supported in the media the coaches were giving supportive comments and backing up their players and when the camera's panned the dugout to find that one coach rolling their eyes – well they're still looking because every single coach was backing up every single player with both their actions and their words. It was a terrific job of really trusting their players to do everything that everyone had trained all year to do!

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2. You Can Do It – what better way to say “I believe in you” than to call timeout and put you into the game. Not just a game, but the biggest game of your year at the biggest point in the game. And how many times did we see coaches have the faith in their team – not just their starters but their entire team – by putting in a non-starter who usually came through with flying colors.

3. Proof is in the Pudding – It’s obvious from all the great offense, tough pitching, clutch defense and overall fantastic play that the job these 8 coaching staffs did with their teams was tremendous! You never know how a young athlete will play when she’s on that big of a stage, all you know is how well you can prepare her. And every single player was expertly prepared. Great job coaches!

10 Things that Matter Most to Being a Champion -

Now let’s shift gears for a minute and talk about 10 Things that Matter Most to Being a Champion. With the Women’s College World Series just wrapping up it’s a great time to talk about what it takes to be a champion. It’s easy to know that championship teams need good pitching, a solid defense and timely hitting – but do you know the 10 things that matter most to being a champion?

It’s great that there’s more college softball on tv now and that all the games of the Women’s College World Series are televised but playing softball is about more than getting on tv, or even getting a college scholarship. Softball is a tough sport to play because it’s so challenging, and champions rise to challenges.

I’m concerned and confused when I see parents carrying equipment bags for their kid, when pitchers tell me “that’s hard”, or when hitters tell me they haven’t practiced since their last lesson because they didn’t have time. I’m concerned because I know these are behaviors that don’t help players, and confused because these same players tell me they want to play college softball.

While college softball might look exciting and glamorous on tv what you don’t see is all the months of preparation, all the miles of sprints and all the tons of weights lifted in an effort to be ready to make that one pitch, or hit that one line drive, or throw that one runner out at the plate. College teams all know it’s those long hours of preparation, hard work and sweat they put in during the fall that pays off during the spring.

Playing softball in college is not a right, it’s a privilege and privileges are earned. If your daughter or your players want to play softball in college they need to work now to start earning that right. Remember, those college coaches can go anywhere in the United States (and even the world) to find their 18 players so **why** would they want your daughter or your player? That’s the most important question you could ever ask yourself.

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Why you? Is it because of your terrific attitude, or your desire, or your work ethic or your hustle? Or is it because you think you're talented? Remember that there are thousands of talented players all over the country so what else makes you different? Here's a list of 10 things that I feel are important to not only playing softball in college but to ultimately being a champion. I think you'll be amazed at how simple this list is, how none of them deal specifically with talent, and yet each of them impacts the talent you might have.

I've got to warn you – this list is my honest opinion and might be viewed by some people as harsh. I am not aiming this list at any one person but am simply saying some things I believe will truly help a player achieve her goals of being a Champion! I hope you read these 10 items in the spirit they were meant and put them into action.

10 Things That Matter Most to Being a Champion:

1. Carry Your Own Stuff – while this might seem like a crazy thing to put in a list of 10 Things that Matter to Being a Champion I think it's VERY important as a step to personal responsibility. I see too many parents carrying their daughter's (and son's) equipment to and from the ballpark, and while these parents are probably trying to help their kids, they're really doing them a disservice. It's my stuff so I need to take care of it. I need to clean it if it's dirty, dry it if it's wet, know where it is when I need it and carry it when I'm going to and from practice and games. Softball players are not golfers so we don't have caddies that carry our equipment around for us. If any of you were fortunate enough to watch the 2008 Olympic Softball Team play on its exhibition tour then you no doubt saw the Olympic players all carry in their own equipment. From Cat Osterman to Stacey Nuveman to Jenny Finch – they all carried their own equipment plus all the nets and balls and team equipment (as picture 1 shows). If **you** need it then **you** should carry it!

2. The Harder It Is To Do, The Better You Are When You Do It - Hard work matters because it is "hard" and that means not everyone can do it! It means if you work hard enough and are then able to do something that's considered "hard" then you're special. Work harder to do things that are hard instead of saying "that's hard" and then quitting. The easiest path won't get you anywhere - it's not about getting the best bat or the most expensive glove or the coolest shoes if your swing stinks, you can't catch anything and you're out of shape and slow. Too many players want the easiest way to get something and if anything involves hard work then there's an excuse why it can't happen. The harder something is to do the better you are when you do it. Playing college softball is hard and coaches are looking for players that thrive when things get hard, they aren't looking for players that say "that's too hard" and quit.

3. Make Plays Not Excuses - What's so puzzling to me is that the excuses usually come first from the parent and then from the player. The parent is quick to point out why the kid couldn't practice this whole week, and why she wasn't able to pitch good in her last game and why she isn't getting good grades...meanwhile carrying all the players equipment to and from the parking lot before scurrying off to the snack bar to buy the player a drink. Helping your child is

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one thing, but making excuses for them only teaches them to make excuses for themselves. Sports aren't about excuses, they're about results. So practice making results instead of excuses.

4. Stop Talking and Start Playing – I don't want to hear why you couldn't practice; I want to see that you did practice. I don't want to hear why you couldn't throw strikes because the umpire wasn't calling anything outside, I want to see that you were able to recognize the strike zone and immediately shift your pitch just enough to get the strike called. And if I don't want to hear it then you know the college coach who is probably paying part of your tuition to be there doesn't want to hear it either. Talk less and play more!

5. Take Responsibility – own your actions no matter what the outcome. If you made the pitch whether it's good or bad, own it. Work harder to own your actions and skills and quite putting your efforts into excuses about why you couldn't or didn't succeed. Everyone knows you weren't out there trying to blow it. If you struck out with the bases loaded everyone knows you weren't trying to do that, so quit making excuses about why you did. Instead, work harder to figure out what you learned from the situation and how you'll use that knowledge to succeed the next chance you get – because you **will** get another chance! Remember that if you own it when things go good you've got to own it when things don't go so well!

6. Say Please and Thank You - to your parents, to your coaches and to your teammates. Many colleges believe this matters so much that they require their players to say "Thank You" every day at the end of practice to their teammates and their coaching staff – because being nice to each other matters!

7. Remember That The Game Doesn't Know – The game doesn't know which team is favored, it doesn't know which team is the underdog, which team won yesterday, which team has never won, which team plays in warm weather and which team never gets outside until mid-April. The game only knows what you're doing right now so you must play as hard and as smart as possible right now because the game doesn't know your team is favored to win, it only knows that the other team worked harder and won! So play "in the moment softball" because the game doesn't know.

8. Be Ready – be ready when your name is called, when the ball is hit to you, when you're called on to get the bunt down, when your team needs you strike out this hitter, when your team needs your leadership...whatever it is, be ready! Instead of sitting on the bench complaining that you don't get to play as much as you think you should, or as much as your parents think you should, be ready when you do get to play. Put your practice in, pay attention during games and Be Ready so when you do get to go in you'll be so good that they'll never take you out! Be ready instead of being negative!

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9. Pay Attention – look at things that matter. Look to see if their infield is playing back, if their pitcher is always throwing the first pitch for a strike, if the runner before you got on and you'll probably need to bunt. Pay attention to anything that might matter and help you play better and help your team win! Cheering is ok, but don't miss seeing the important stuff because you were doing a cheer. You don't get extra runs for cheering better than the other teams so watch while you cheer.

10. Remember That You're A Teammate and Not The Team! – no matter what position you play, who you play for and how good other people think you either are or will be, it doesn't matter! Because you're still just a teammate, you're never the whole team! That's why stats don't matter. The only stat that matters is Runs so do everything in your power to help your team get more runs than the other team. It takes a TEAM to win so be a great teammate!

If you're looking for exercises or methods to help improve any aspect of your team including competitiveness, toughness, and teamwork then check out our book, [A Coach's Guide to Creating Team Chemistry: Tips on Coaching Female Athletes](#)