

Helping Students Reach Their Goal: Some Highlights of Coaching Softball By

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Before softball season started, several students sought me out to tell me how excited they were to have me as coach, and that now they would be able to beat their rival, Shashe River School, which had humiliated them in past seasons. Botswana's secondary education program has two levels: a three-year junior secondary school (Forms 1-3), and two-year senior secondary school (Forms 4-5). Mater Spei College (MSC) in Francistown was one of about 16 secondary schools in the country with both levels. The boys meeting with me were Form 5 students and insisted upon raising funds for proper uniforms, organizing regular practices, and working hard in preparation for competitions. They urged me to work with the school managers to obtain equipment such as aluminum bats, gloves, and official softballs. The girl leaders were Form 3 students, but were just as passionate and committed to the goals the boys advocated. Later, over 50 students participated in our first official team meeting, with the girls outnumbering the boys and almost exclusively Form 1-3 students, compared to their mostly Form 4-5 counterparts. The first regular practice meetings for the boys and girls squads were held after classes in the afternoon about twice weekly each.

The teams had scarce equipment, and it had to be shared among both teams. Our only bag of gear stayed at my house, near the field. With few girls and boys dropping out of softball during the first term, this made it a challenge to keep practices engaging. Still, everyone had a great deal of fun. Although many of the students had played softball the previous year, few were disciplined in their approach. This year, they learned to hustle after ground balls and not to throw the bat after hitting the ball and going to first base. Also, they improved immensely on both the offensive and the defensive side of the ball. If errors were made or if students did not go all-out, one of the things I introduced was the loud order of "Run to the tree!" Down the right field line about 250 feet from home plate was a large tree. During our exercises it had become a marker for distance running and training, and now it served as a place to run as fast as possible to instill discipline and the motivation to learn from one's mistakes. In time, all the team would shout, "Run to the tree!" if poor play, lack of effort, or an error seemed sufficient cause...and an offender dogging it on the initial run often brought demand for several trips to the tree!

The annual school celebration of St. Patrick's Day brought with it a treat for everyone at the school. The girl's team played a few innings against the school staff, and it was the first look the school community had at the progress the girls had made. They impressed everyone with their competitive spunk and grit. The staff, including Principal Rasebotsa, had little success in hitting their pitches, and the girls were thrilled to strike out the faculty. Although the staff squeaked out a 2-1 victory in four innings, the girls all had fun and were proud to give them a run for their money. The boys played a very competitive intra-squad game showing off big hitting, stellar defensive plays, and improved pitching.

Local volunteers from several countries created a softball team to play the local secondary and teacher training schools, which was integral in the continuous improvement of both teams during my two years as coach. Scandinavians, Canadians, Australians, and Americans teamed to provide MSC a chance to hone its softball skills in a competitive environment. The volunteers were older and more experienced than their secondary school counterparts and they helped teach hitting, pitching, and fielding skills before and after games. Perhaps even more importantly, they helped to model the psychological and attitudinal dimensions of competitive sport to the youngsters. Each time the volunteers played MSC, they saw improvement in the overall play of our teams.

In May, the boys and girls uniforms were purchased with monies collected from team members and donations from staff and friends of team members. Ten softball gloves arrived from South Africa prior to term 2 and the start of the competitive season. We had five games to play against the North Zone rivals (Shashe River, Tutume, Maun, Setlalekgosi, and Francistown Teacher Training College), and the students were thrilled in anticipation. In my first season as coach I learned the excitement of traveling on some the roughest roads of Africa by crowded bus or in the backs of lorries. The road to Maun was long and dusty, but when we arrived the boys won in a big way, the girls losing a heartbreaker by a couple of runs. I marveled as the students prepared large meals and shared their blankets and clothing in the cold desert evenings. The students were very appreciative of such trips and in many cases were able to visit relatives living far from Francistown.

To insure fairness of softball rules and game play, coaches from both sides umpired and refereed the games. It was a difficult task to stay focused as coach while remaining an impartial umpire or referee, especially during the toughest games against Shashe. The Shashe girls were an older, more experienced, and confident club. Our girls played very well despite the daunting challenge, and it was only in the later innings that Shashe pulled away to close victory. The MSC girls held their heads high knowing that in former years the games had not been so close, and that, as a young team, they would have more opportunities for success. On the other hand, our boys were mostly in their last school year, and they stood equal in size and power, and in their own minds had the abilities to overcome previous seasons' outcomes. Again the game was close into the later innings, and this time some controversial close calls made the game even more heated than any I had participated in as either player or coach. Shashe rallied late with several runs and pitched out a 17-9 victory in Francistown. There would be no rematches, and although MSC won out its 4 other games easily, once again the Shashe River School was king of the North Zone. The Shashe girls were undefeated for my first year too, our MSC girls going 3-2 and tying Maun for second place.

During the third term in October and November, 1976, returning ball players for both teams were able to practice and play practice games against FTTC and the volunteers. After the disappointing losses to Shashe, both teams seemed ready to improve their overall game and take on Shashe during the 1977 softball season. As a coach I felt more ready and experienced to meet the challenges ahead of me. I didn't feel that I could be surprised by the abilities of the opposing teams nor did I think of motivating and

getting the team to play to its highest potential as obstacles. The girl's team was more experienced and capable of swinging the bats with more power and consistency. In three of the games this resulted in lopsided victories, but in close games with Shashe and Tutume, the girls were not able to get the timely hits or the big defensive stop. They finished with a 3-2 record again, but with much-improved run production.

The early season brought heartache, as a strong boy's Shashe team beat MSC in another close battle, with each team scoring many runs. By winning out the remainder of their games, however, and with an upset Shashe loss, MSC tied Shashe with a 4-1 record. Everyone associated with the softball teams saw this as a chance to beat Shashe this next time! I remembered the previous season, and how in my first meetings with the team leaders their focus was to beat their archrivals. The toss of the coin was in our favor and the one-game playoff would be in Francistown. It was always easier to get ready for home games, and the home field crowd would help the team. It was evident from the very first pitch that the MSC boys had the confidence it would take to beat Shashe. Our boys were still holding their heads up high in the sixth inning, while Shashe's seemed drained of the confidence always present in our losses to this powerhouse. As the last out was made and MSC won 17-8, the girl's team members surrounded the boys and they all danced together with tremendous pride and happiness, as at last their driving goal had been achieved by the boys but for everyone. I watched grinning from ear to ear, knowing that while this was my last year as coach I had helped our students achieve an important accomplishment in their young lives while learning about a healthy, competitive and fun sport!