

Winning 10U Defensive Strategy

If you haven't read the "Defensive Strategy for 8U" let me direct you to that page. You will find many items from that article will still hold true for the Winning 10U softball team. There are a few changes because the skill level has changed. Of course, you may need to modify your strategy somewhat depending on your league rules. There are many variations to 10U League play. Some Leagues are straight girl-pitch, others are modified girl/coach or machine pitch, and some are straight machine pitch. There are also variations on rules for stealing. In this article, I will assume there is some form of girl pitch and that stealing is allowed.

The basis for having a Winning 10U Defensive Strategy is making easy outs. Let's assume that a typical game is 4 innings, which means your defensive team will have to make 12 outs. Most of those outs will come via strike outs or ground balls converted into outs. Yes, there will be the rare pop fly that is caught and even rarer thrown out base stealer. But I sure don't want to count on those two methods for winning softball games.

Pitching: Good Luck with this. You obviously have to put the softball player in this position that can throw the most strikes. Strike outs are a gift to your defense and you need all of them you can get. Pitching is an incredibly difficult skill for 10U girls. I really hope your league uses a modified girl/machine pitch approach. (Check out the Louisville Slugger Pitching Machine that only costs about \$150 which is very affordable for leagues.) But whether it's straight girl pitch or modified, you must put your most accurate pitcher on the mound. If your team can't throw strikes, your 10U defensive strategy won't even come into play. I strongly suggest your pitchers go to a private pitching coach. If they won't go to a pitching coach at least encourage them to purchase a book or video so they can learn to pitch correctly. They need to practice at home a minimum of 4 nights a week throwing a minimum of 100 pitches per night. Suffice it to say, that no other position or skill is as important as pitching. Be proactive and supportive of your pitchers, their development, and their parents.

1st Base: This is now the second most important position on the field behind pitcher. Having your best ball catcher at 1st base is the cornerstone of having a winning 10U defensive strategy. You are still at the age where you must convert the ground balls that are hit to pitcher, 1st base, and 2nd base into outs. These plays should be automatic. It doesn't do any good to have a shortstop with a great glove and rifle arm if the girl on 1st base can't catch.

In determining our winning 10U defensive strategy, let's assume that all 12 outs are going to come by virtue of ground balls. That means there will be 12 plays at 1st base. So who do you want making those catches, the player that catches 12 of 12, 11 of 12, 10 of 12, or 9 of 12? If you are going to play winning softball, you need this number to be as high as possible. To be certain, the more errors your 1st baseman makes, the more games you will lose.

An important element of the 10U defensive strategy is proper positioning of the 1st baseman. She should be about 5 feet in front of the bag towards home and 2 to 3 feet off of the line. There are lots of little pop ups towards 1st and we want her in a position to run up and catch them. Also, it's important to guard the line, as a shot down the line can turn into a triple quickly. As part of your 10U defensive strategy, the 1st baseman has to be a disciplined softball ANIMAL. She needs to go after everything hit on her side of the field with one exception. On grounders hit towards 2nd base, she is only allowed to take about 3 steps to her right. If the ball is further away than 3 steps, she needs to let the 2nd baseman play the ball and she needs to cover the bag. As your 2nd baseman learns to cover 1st base, you can start to modify the 3 step rule.

Catcher: If your league does not allow stealing then disregard this paragraph and put your second worst player here. If your league does allow stealing, the 10U defensive strategy changes so that the catcher position now has a great deal of importance. Not that 10U girls can throw many girls out that are attempting to steal, but with some work this will become achievable, in particular throwing out slow runners trying to steal 3rd base. Even more important is the girl's ability to catch the ball from the pitcher. It has always amazed me how few coaches have their girls steal unless the catcher misses the pitch. So, the more pitches she catches, the fewer free bases your team gives up. It's a lot harder to score from 1st base than it is from 3rd base. Have your catcher work on throw downs to 2nd and 3rd base. You should have a pretty good shot at getting them going to 3rd as the season progresses. The number 1 reason for having a skilled catcher is to prevent runners from stealing home and that's key to a winning 10U defensive strategy.

2nd & 3rd Basemen: You will need to evaluate your talent pool for these key positions. Keep in mind that you must convert the easy outs and lots of balls get hit to 2nd base. But you might be able to put a little weaker player here who is very good with ground balls and can make the throw to 1st without sacrificing much. If so, you can put a little stronger player at 3rd base. This year 3rd base will be responsible for covering bunts, and taking throws from the catcher to get base runners attempting to

steal. If you can put a fairly athletic girl here you will really shore up the left side of your infield. Be sure to have her work on cutting off ground balls that are hit towards the hole at shortstop. As part of your 10U defensive strategy, you want to have a very aggressive 3rd baseman. If the ball is on the ground anywhere on the left side of the infield, she needs to be going after it full blast. I want to turn this girl into a softball ANIMAL.

Also of note, typically you will want to position your 3rd baseman about 10 feet towards home and about 3 feet off of the foul line. However, the weaker your shortstop is, the further off the foul line you want 3rd base to play to help cover more of the hole. Playing up towards home will allow her to cover bunts and will make the throw to 1st a little shorter and easier.

Shortstop: The least important infield position at this age is shortstop. I know you think you need a stud softball player at shortstop, but remember, one of the keys to this 10U defensive strategy is to have the ANIMAL at 3rd cover some of the shortcomings at shortstop. If you are lucky enough to have enough talent that you have filled all of the other infield positions, and still have a good player to field this position, then you are well on your way to having a championship season. The shortstop's responsibilities are fielding her position and taking throw downs from the catcher. You will probably find it very discouraging at how terrible your shortstop is at catching throw downs from the catcher. Don't worry, this is a common problem. Besides, even if you had a great player at shortstop, how often could your catcher really throw out a runner stealing 2nd base? Not very often.

Right Field: Still the most important outfield position and a key softball player in our winning 10U defensive strategy. Backing up throws to 1st base, grounders to the right side of the field, and of course balls hit to Right Field. Just as in 8U and all the way through High School, this is a deep infield position. 70% of balls hit to right field are an opportunity for an out at first base. Further, there are more balls thrown to 1st base than any other base resulting in more overthrows that have to be chased down. A heads-up softball player in right field will be the difference in winning and losing in several games. She can make your 10U defensive strategy look like pure genius. When evaluating who should play right field, you are looking for a softball player that will stay focused on her responsibilities and will hustle on every play. She can't be late backing up the throws to 1st base...she has to be there!

Left Field: This is now more important than Center Field. Your catcher is going to be making lots of throws to 3rd base and you need someone that is alert to back up that play and throw the ball back in quickly. Also, if you have a good Right and Left Fielder, they can each help out the Center Fielder.

Center Field: This is where your Three-Toed Sloth goes. She doesn't have to run anywhere to back up throw downs to 2nd. Anything hit to her she can throw back to 2nd base and have a relatively short throw. Let her know how important the position is, and that you are counting on her to help out the other two outfielders, and pray nothing gets hit to her. And if she is really, really bad, be sure to remind her when soccer registration is next Spring. J

As part of our 10U defensive strategy, positioning of the left fielder and center fielder should be a little deeper than that of the right fielder. The right fielder has the opportunity to make some great plays at 1st base so you will want to cheat her up a few steps to possibly make the out at 1st. It's a risk/reward situation. Don't bring her in so close that the risk outweighs the reward. On the other hand, left and center do not have that same opportunity to make outs at 1st. So play them deeper so that nothing gets passed them. A ball that gets buy either of these positions is a home run. It's far better to keep the ball in front of them. Giving up home runs is not a very successful 10U defensive strategy.

The final key to having a successful 10U defensive strategy, is to be sure and focus practice sessions on the responsibilities you have set for the different positions. Such as...

Right Field — Come up fast and make a hard throw to 1st

3rd Base — Any ball hit on this side of the field is yours. Be an ANIMAL!

Center Field — Come up fast and throw hard to 2nd base

1st Base — Be an animal, but don't break the 3 step rule.

I can hear you now grumbling, "What does this guy know?" So here is the answer. As a 10U coach, over 200 games coached in 10U alone, numerous trophies from tournament play including 3rd place in the State Tournament, 6th place in overall state ranking, and 1st place in our league's 13U division. A huge reason for our success was having a winning 10U defensive strategy.

If you follow this 10U defensive strategy, you will give your softball players the best chance at developing into a winning team. Sure, you might have to make some modifications depending on the abilities of your softball players, but try to stick to the principles of this 10U defensive strategy.