



Introduction to Slowpitch Softball



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Contents

Introduction to Slowpitch Softball	4
Slowpitch Promotional Materials	8
Rule Differences: Slowpitch and Fastpitch	9
Slowpitch Pitching: Rules	15
Slowpitch Pitching: Basic Principles	16
Slowpitch Pitching: Drills	18
An Umpire's Guide to the Slowpitch Strike Zone	20
Why Slowpitch Makes Life Easier for Umpires	22
Slowpitch Promotional DVD	23

Introduction to Slowpitch Softball

Over the past few years, there has been growing interest in **co-ed slowpitch softball** on the continent of Europe.

The **European Co-ed Slowpitch Championship**, held every two years since 1998, is now an established ESF competition, and eight countries entered the tournament in 2010. In addition, an increasing number of countries are entering teams in the annual **European Co-ed Slowpitch Cup**.

More and more countries are starting slowpitch leagues or holding domestic slowpitch tournaments, and a record number of countries requested ESF slowpitch clinics in 2010.



WHY SLOWPITCH?



While co-ed slowpitch softball can be played seriously on a competitive level, it is more often played as a recreational and social sport, and that is one reason for its increasing popularity.

Slowpitch softball is easier to learn and play than fastpitch, and men and women playing together in the same team gives the format an attractive social dimension.

The value of slowpitch to many European Softball Federation countries, especially in the post-Olympic era when public funding for softball is reducing, is that it may be the quickest way to increase the numbers of people playing the sport, and thus increase income for clubs and federations.

Introducing co-ed slowpitch softball to existing softball or baseball/softball clubs is also a way to increase the family orientation of these clubs. A club that can provide slowpitch softball along with fastpitch and baseball for adults and children is able to offer playing opportunities for every member of most families.



IS SLOWPITCH WORTH PLAYING?

In many European countries, slowpitch has been seen as a game that people would only turn to when they became too old to play fastpitch.

It's true that slowpitch pitching – where the ball is lobbed in a slow arc from pitcher to batter – presents no obvious challenges for hitters. That's why the game seems easy to people playing for the first time, even if they have no previous sporting experience. Anyone can hit the ball!

But that doesn't mean that slowpitch requires no real skill or athleticism to play successfully.

Defensive players on a slowpitch team are confronted by many more hard-hit balls than in a fastpitch or baseball game. How well can the defense cope with those hits, and with the larger number of baserunners that a slowpitch game inevitably produces?

Pitching in slowpitch might seem like a waste of time, because everyone is going to hit. But a skilled and accurate pitcher can control how hard pitches are hit and where those hits go. There are subtle skills that make a good slowpitch pitcher extremely valuable to his or her team.

There's no bunting or base-stealing in slowpitch softball, so people ask: "Where's the strategy?" Well, it's true that there is less strategy in slowpitch than in fastpitch, but that doesn't mean there is none. In fastpitch, runs are extremely valuable commodities; in slowpitch, it's outs that are worth their weight in gold, and good teams make sure this is reflected in their approach to game situations.

And one of the most fascinating tactical aspects of co-ed slowpitch is the way in which the strengths and weaknesses of male and female players are used to maximise team performance.

WHY NOT SLOWPITCH?



Co-ed slowpitch softball is a fun team game that anyone can play. You don't have to be a natural athlete or take up a demanding training regime. Men and women of all ages and abilities play together, at the same level. You don't even have to do all that much running – it's a sport that's more about skill than endurance.

So co-ed slowpitch is an ideal sport for company teams, or university teams, or teams made up from groups of friends. And it's the ideal summer social sport, which is why it's easy to get people to try it.

But co-ed slowpitch, like fastpitch, can also be played at a high level, where it becomes an exciting sport with breathtaking skills.

These are just some of the reasons why slowpitch softball is taking off on the continent of Europe – and why the sport as a whole will be better for it.



Slowpitch Promotional Materials

This **Slowpitch Development Pack** contains copies of a single-sided poster, double-sided flyer and double-sided postcard designed to encourage participation in co-ed slowpitch softball in Europe.

These materials have space for national or local contact details to be inserted.

You are welcome to make photocopies of these materials for distribution throughout your country, and a list of prices for printing multiple copies of these materials is available on the ESF website.

If you want to order printed copies of the poster, flyer and postcard, contact ESF Slowpitch Development Commissioner Bob Fromer for more information (development@europeansoftball.org).

It may be possible for the headline elements on these materials to be printed in your country's language for an additional charge. You will need to provide a translation. If you are interested in exploring this option, contact Bob Fromer.



Rule Differences: Slowpitch and Fastpitch

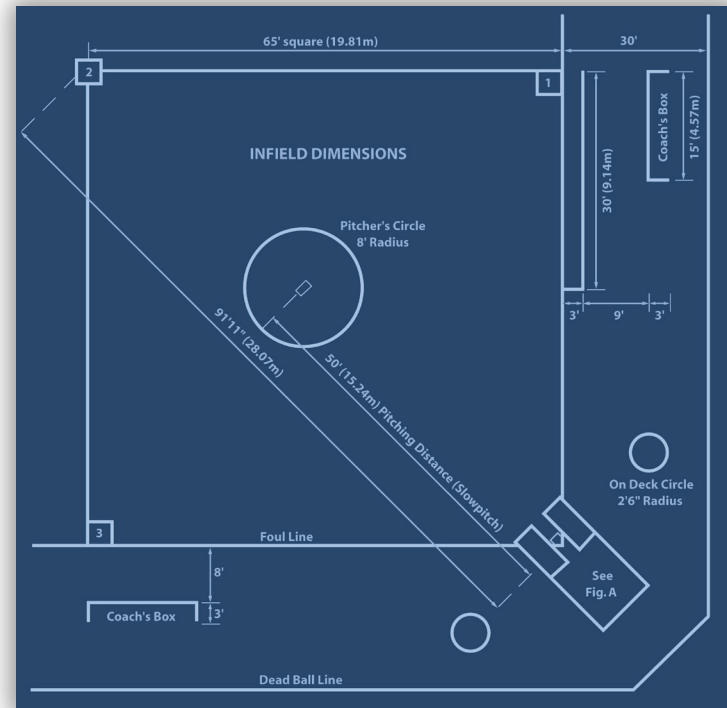


Many people in Europe are still confused about slowpitch rules and how they differ from fastpitch. So here is a summary of the most important rules that are unique to slowpitch and that determine how the game is played.

FIELD DIMENSIONS

In adult slowpitch softball, the field dimensions are:

- Distance between bases: 65 feet (19.81 metres).
- Pitching distance: 50 feet (15.24 metres).
- Minimum outfield distance: 275 feet (83.82 metres).



FORMATS AND PLAYERS

Slowpitch can be played either as a **co-ed** game or as a **single-sex** game by men or women.

Whichever is played, a slowpitch team has **10 players** on the field, with four outfielders instead of three. All other positions are the same. There are no fixed rules about where those four outfielders are positioned.

When played as a co-ed game, the standard ISF and ESF rule is that there must be **five men and five women** on the field: two men and two women in the outfield and two men and two women in the infield at whatever positions the team decides. The pitcher and catcher must be one of each.

However, it is possible to play co-ed slowpitch with a different ratio of men to women (6:4 or 7:3), in which case there must be at least one woman in the outfield and in the infield and a woman must be either the pitcher or the catcher.

BATTING ORDER

Where a co-ed game is played with the standard five men and five women on the field, the batting order must be constructed so that a woman is followed by a man and vice-versa. You can never have two men or two women bat consecutively.

Where the ratio of men to women is different (6:4 or 7:3), there are special rules about how this kind of batting order must be constructed, ensuring that no more than two men bat consecutively.

PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Slowpitch softball is often played without the use of batting helmets or protective equipment for catchers, and the rules do not require them. **However, a catcher's mask is highly recommended**, and there is just as much reason to wear a batting helmet as a batter-runner or baserunner in slowpitch as in fastpitch.



PITCHING

In slowpitch, the ball is delivered underhand with one foot remaining in contact with the pitching plate until the ball is released. A legal pitch has to describe an arc reaching a **minimum of six feet (1.82 metres)** and a **maximum of 12 feet (3.65 metres)**. This arc ensures that the pitched ball will travel slowly. The judgment about whether a pitch conforms to these parameters is made by the home plate umpire.

As in any other form of softball or baseball, the rulebook strike zone applies: in this case the ball must cross some part of the plate between the batter's front shoulder and back knee. But since the ball is coming downwards through the strike zone in slowpitch, it takes a while to learn how to judge balls and strikes.

BALLS AND STRIKES

In slowpitch, any pitch that hits any portion of the plate as it descends to the ground is a ball, even if it passes through the strike zone. A foul ball hit when a batter already has two strikes is a third strike and the batter is out.



BUNTING AND STEALING



Bunting is not allowed, nor is base stealing. A baserunner must remain in contact with the base until the pitched ball is hit or crosses home plate.

Accordingly, there can be no such thing as a wild pitch or a passed ball on which runners can advance. A pitched ball is, in effect, a dead ball until it is hit.

WALKS

A walk to a woman batter in co-ed slowpitch means the woman takes first base, as normal. But when a male batter is walked, he gets **two bases** and goes to second base (via first base).

With less than two outs, if a man is walked, the following female batter simply takes her turn at bat as normal. But if a man is walked with two outs, **the following female batter can choose either to bat or to take a walk**. These rules are designed to prevent teams deliberately walking men to get to female hitters they think might be weaker.

OUTFIELD LINE

All of the above is in the ISF Rulebook. One rule that isn't, but is sometimes used in co-ed play, is that a line is marked across the outfield in an arc 150 feet (45.72 metres) from home plate. All outfielders have to stand behind this line until the ball is hit.

Again, this is designed to make sure that outfielders don't play too close when women bat, because when they do, women have almost no space between the infielders and outfielders in which to get base hits.

USE OF 11" AND 12" SOFTBALLS

In ESF co-ed slowpitch play, two different balls are used: an 11" ball when a woman is batting and a standard 12" ball when a man is batting. This is easy to manage within a game (the umpire hands the appropriate ball to the catcher for each at-bat) and it overcomes the disadvantage for women of having outfielders play too close, because the 11" ball travels further.

The use of two different-sized balls does not seem to present problems for pitchers or fielders.

TIME OUT

In slowpitch, there is no equivalent of returning the ball to the pitcher in the circle to stop play, as happens in fastpitch. Instead, the home plate umpire will call "Time" after every play when he or she is satisfied that the ball is under control by a member of the defensive team in the infield and that baserunners are not showing any intention to advance. This is a judgment call on the part of the home plate umpire.

After "Time" is called, all runners resume contact with their base, the ball is returned to the pitcher (if he or she doesn't already have it) and the next pitch is delivered when pitcher and batter are ready.

Slowpitch Pitching: Rules



The pitcher's pivot foot MUST be in contact with the pitcher's plate throughout the delivery.

The pitcher must come to a complete stop with the ball in front of the body and the front of the body facing the batter.

This position should be maintained for at least one second before delivery,

The catcher must be in position to receive the pitch.

A pitcher shall not wear a batting glove on the pitching hand.



Slowpitch Pitching: Basic Principles

Many people without much experience of slowpitch softball think that the only responsibility of pitchers is to throw strikes and then hope that his or her fielders can catch some of the balls that will be hit.

It's certainly true that almost all batters in slowpitch will hit the ball and many of them will hit it hard. Strikeouts are a rare occurrence, and almost always happen when a ball is hit foul with two strikes rather than on a called or swinging strikeout.

Despite all that, a good pitcher is still able to have an influence in limiting the offense of the other team, by making batters swing at pitches they don't necessarily want to hit and by getting batters to hit ground balls or fly balls rather than line drives.

The key to being able to do this is **accuracy** (the ability to throw pitches consistently to exact locations) and **variety** (using different spins and movement and changes of pace).

Clearly, batters in slowpitch have a lot more time to make adjustments to different pitches. But through accuracy and variety, a pitcher can still keep hitters off balance, ensuring that balls are not hit as hard or as far as batters intend.

Here are some basic principles for slowpitch pitchers:

- Practice and experiment until you can throw a variety of pitches, with different rotations, at different heights and at different speeds – and throw all these pitches for strikes.
- Use your body and especially your legs when delivering the pitch – not just your hand and arm. Stride forward into the pitch and follow through – but when the ball has left your hand, drop back and assume a fielding position. A pitcher who is a good infielder will save his or her team many runs.



- Work ahead in the count – then make the batter hit your pitch.
- If the umpire will let you pitch with an arc higher than 12 feet (3.66 metres), this will give you an additional advantage. Try throwing pitches slightly above this height until the umpire starts calling them illegal.
- How do you want the batter to hit the ball? If you want a ground ball, use top spin. Use backspin to induce a fly ball.
- Read the hitter. How is he or she set up in the batter's box? What pitches (in terms of location, height etc) might the batter find difficult to hit well?
- Read the approach of the opposing team. Do they tend to swing at first pitches? Do they take strikes? Plan your pitch sequences accordingly.
- Vary your pitches as much as possible to keep hitters off balance and to disturb their timing. In addition to changing location and spin, work on throwing pitches at different speeds. Though the differences will be small, this can still disturb hitters' timing, resulting in fly balls rather than line drives.
- In general, the high inside pitch is the hardest pitch to hit well.
- In the end, good hitters will hit all pitches hard. Try to get good hitters to hit to your strongest defensive players or to areas of the field where they don't normally hit.
- Walks will kill you! All walks are bad. Walks to female batters are worse!
- If the opposing team is hitting consistently no matter what the pitcher throws, change pitchers.
- **Practice** is the key to achieving **accuracy** and **variety**. Do not waste practice opportunities. If you are pitching batting practice to your own team, use the opportunity to work on your pitches. Practice on your own or with a friend. Pitchers in fastpitch or baseball have margins for error but a slowpitch pitcher needs to be almost perfect to be effective.

Slowpitch Pitching: Drills

FOR BEGINNERS

Use 3 players – 1 pitching, 1 catching and one in the middle holding his/her glove above their head.

Get the pitcher and catcher to start out about 20 feet (6 metres) apart. The pitcher must pitch the ball over the outstretched glove of the middle player and get it accurately to the catcher's glove. Once accurate at 20 feet, get the pitcher and catcher to gradually increase the distance up to the regulation 50 feet (15.24 metres). Assuming all three players taking part are learning to pitch, the pitcher and catcher can pitch back and forth to each other and after 10 pitches each, one will swap with the player in the middle. Once players can do this drill accurately, have the player in the middle jump up and try to catch the pitched ball, forcing the pitchers to throw a higher arc.

FOR ALL LEVELS

Get the pitcher to pitch to a catcher. The coach will have another ball in his/her hand and be standing just to one side of the plate but out of the way of the catcher. As the pitched ball crosses the plate, the coach throws a ground ball at the pitcher who must field it. This teaches getting into correct fielding position after releasing the pitch.

FOR INTERMEDIATE OR ADVANCED LEVELS

Get pitchers to practise specific pitches (high inside, low outside, flat but high in the strike zone, high arc but landing just behind the plate), plus different spins and speeds.

Once a pitcher is able to throw 6 out of 10 pitches as instructed, then pitch a “sequence”. The pitcher must get ahead of the hitter and then hit corners. Any pitch pitched over the middle of the plate is counted as a hit, but a completed sequence is counted as an out. The target is to pitch more outs than hits.

PITCHING AID



A good pitching aid is to use a target made from a sheet of plywood or chipboard that is the width of home plate and 3ft high. This can be hung from a fence so that the top of the target is shoulder high. The pitcher can then see exactly where his/her pitches are in the strike zone and whether they are strikes or balls (when the ball hits the target it will make quite a loud bang, which gives very good feedback).



An Umpire's Guide to the Slowpitch Strike Zone

BASIC FEATURES TO LOOK FOR

Pitcher's foot in contact with the pitcher's plate.

The stop:

- Ball in front of body for ... 1 second.
- Release time ... no more than 10 seconds.
- Wind-up and start of pitch:
 - No stop or reversal.
 - No quick pitch.
- Arc:
 - 6 to 12 feet (1.8 to 3.6 metres) from the ground.



ILLEGAL PITCHES



A pitch is illegal if it is:

- Too high.
- Too low.
- Too fast.

Call the pitch “illegal” as soon as you can, before it reaches home plate. Signal a delayed dead ball and call a ball against the pitcher. Warn the pitcher if the pitch is too fast.

However, if the batter swings at an illegal pitch and puts the ball in play, the delayed dead ball is overridden, the ball is “live” and the results of the hit will stand.

THE STRIKE ZONE

A strike is a pitch that crosses over any part of home plate between the batter’s back shoulder and front knee when the player is assuming a normal batting stance and irrespective of where the batter is standing.

However, a pitched ball that passes through the strike zone, but is not swung at and hits home plate is always called a ball.

Why Slowpitch Makes Life Easier for Umpires

In many ways, slowpitch is a simpler game than fastpitch, because elements such as bunting and basestealing and the actions and strategies associated with them don't exist.

And slowpitch softball is also easier for umpires, because there are far fewer situations in which the ball is live.

In slowpitch, **the ball is dead if:**

- A runner fails to keep contact with the base he or she is entitled to until a legally pitched ball reaches home plate. If this happens, the runner is out. There is no leading off base, no pickoffs and no base stealing in slowpitch.
- A pitched ball hits the ground before reaching home plate.
- A batter bunts or chops at the ball. If this happens, the batter is out.
- A strike or a ball is called.
- A ball passes the plate, whether or not controlled by the catcher. There are no passed balls or wild pitches in slowpitch and no "dropped third strike" opportunity for the batter to reach first base,
- A foul tip has been legally caught or the batter hits a foul ball on the third strike. In both cases, the batter is out.

In slowpitch, the umpire calls the ball dead at the end of each play when the ball is in the possession of a fielder in the infield and there is no immediate prospect of a play.

There is no 8-foot circle rule and no look-back rule.

In fact, the only time the ball is **live** is when it has been hit into fair territory, or when a batted ball is caught in foul territory, since runners can advance after the catch.

Slowpitch Promotional DVD



This **Slowpitch Development Pack** contains a short DVD narrated in English.

The programme is just under three minutes in length and is designed to promote the co-ed slowpitch format to European players and federations.

You are welcome to make additional copies of these DVDs, or upload and distribute them by email or through the Internet. Or, you can order more copies from the ESF at cost price.

The programme is also available with narration in French. If you would like a French version of the programme, contact Bob Fromer (development@europeansoftball.org).





For more information about slowpitch softball in Europe, contact:

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