

NFCA INSTRUCTIONAL CORNER

Teaching the Slap: A Study of the Progression and Analysis of Slap Hitting

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The following is the first in a two-part series. Please look for the second part in the February edition of Fastpitch Delivery.

Slappers are as rare as dominant pitchers. Teams that have one or the other seem to be successful. Softball is a unique team sport where one position can dictate the success of the team. The best way to counter dominant pitching is to utilize the “short-game” with speed. The philosophy of creating slappers is not as difficult as it appears.

In this study, we identified five phases for teaching the crossover and acknowledged how to utilize it in bunting, punch bunting and slapping. In addition, we analyzed 15 elite slappers from various universities that played in the 2007 NCAA Division I softball tournament. The focal point was to determine what all elite slappers have in common. Once obtaining this information, we compared them to high school slappers from Flower Mound and Trenton High School. Finally, we wanted to answer the question, “Where is the optimal place for slappers to start in the batter’s box?”

Five Characteristics of Slappers

1. Above average speed (3.0 or faster from home to first).
2. Preferably a player that throws right-handed.
3. Player with rhythm and agility.
4. Player that has an aggressive attitude.
5. A player that is a creative thinker.

Five Main Phases in the Crossover

Stance

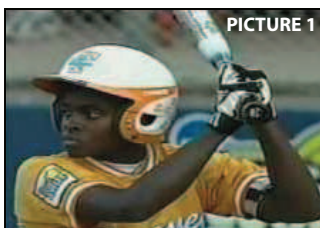
The execution of the crossover step is essential for left-handed batters who are developing their “short-game” skills. In analyzing the elite slappers, they adhered to five main phases. The first phase pertains to balance. Most had a balanced and rhythmic stance. Their hands and hips were moving slightly, preparing the muscles to “fire” prior to an explosive movement.

Their bats were slightly angled with the barrel over their head and hands above or at the top of the strike zone.

All but one positioned themselves somewhere parallel to the plate and close enough so that the crossover foot (left) can reach the front inside corner of the box. Needless to say, it was hard to tell if they were “short-gaming” or “swinging” it. (See pictures 1-3.)

Negative Movement

Right before the slappers made an explosive move, they engaged in negative movement, which is sometimes known as “loading” or a “trigger.” Their upper bodies began to lean forward, quite similar to a pitcher who gets into the attacking position before her delivery. Their hands are close



to their body and both elbows are pointing to the ground. Their right foot initiates the negative movement. The elite slappers either picked their foot up and set it down or moved it slightly back. The most critical event during this phase appears to be when the right foot is placed in a position to create maximum “push off” for the crossover step. (See pictures 4-6.)

Positive Movement

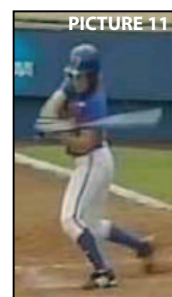
Once slappers place their right foot under their body, they transfer their weight to the right leg and then explosively push off, striding out with their crossover leg. Most elite slappers’ crossover step landed on the front inside corner of the box and in some cases stepped out of the box. This is also known as “attacking the chalk.” During the crossover, the hips open up to the pitcher and the shoulders remained square. This is the most important phase because the longer the slapper remains linear the longer they will stay in the hitting zone, thus, allowing them to hit off-speed pitches. (See pictures 7-9.)

Contact

In phase four, the slappers put the ball in play with an inside-out swing. With their hands close to the body they begin to swing but lag the barrel behind in the zone. Most slappers were able to hit an inside pitch to the left side of the infield. The one exception was Kendra Posey (Picture 10), who pulled pitches on the inside part of the plate. Caitlin Lowe and Kristen Shortridge demonstrated the most efficient inside-out swing of the slappers analyzed. Neither hitter pulled a pitch when they were slapping during the 2007 Women’s College World Series. However, Caitlin did “punch bunt” several inside

pitches just to the left of the pitcher and to the right of the second baseman. In the contact phase, most slappers created early bat lag. This is when the slapper’s bat enters the hitting zone. A final note – they never lost momentum at contact and their right foot moves towards the pitcher on contact. No slapper’s right foot was in an exact place, but it either dragged forward or was in the air. The only foot that is planted on contact is the crossover (left) foot. (See pictures 10-12.)

Follow Through
The last critical phase is the follow through. Basically, the two steps after making contact make up the follow through phase. In the study, all but two slappers’ first step after contact was outside the box. This distance varied from two to five feet on a line to the pitcher. The first step out of the box was with the right foot and their toe was pointing anywhere from second base to first base. The slappers released the bat with ei-



SEE SLAPPING PROGRESSION PAGE 26

DRILLS

DEFENSE

By **MIKE DAVENPORT**
Head Coach, North Georgia

Name of Drill: 5-4-3-2-1 Drill

Purpose: This is a defensive fielding drill that also addresses defensive conditioning. We use this drill most often during the fall season.

Explanation:

- Line up five total infielders/pitchers in four lines facing four fungo hitters. (One player will rotate in at the beginning of line.)
- Players should be at a depth consistent with their position. Corners are approximately 55 feet, middle infielders are approximately 65 feet, and pitchers are approximately 40 feet away (after going through their motion).
- Fungo hitters will proceed hitting each player five "clean" ground balls (no bobbles/no bad transfers/good throws).
- Each player must take five ground balls from each fungo hitter, then move to her left until each fielder has taken five ground balls from each hitter
- Once they have completed the rotation of five, they then repeat the process taking four ground balls, then three ground balls, then two ground balls, then one ground ball.
- Using five players gives them enough opportunity to get from the end of the rotation back to the front of the rotation with possibly a little rest.
- This drill helps to "speed" up the game which encourages our players to learn then to "slow" down the game and focus on each individual play.

WARMUP

By **BILL ROSNER**
Head Coach, Fontbonne University

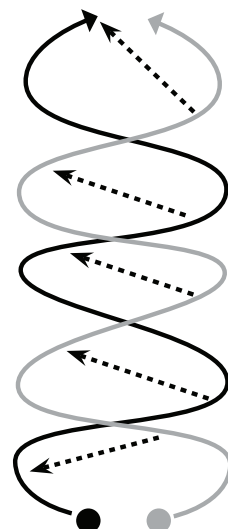
Name of Drill: Softball Weave

Purpose: This works to make softball the focus of our players the moment we start preparing for practice or a game.

Explanation: Just as basketball weaves down the court, our first warmup (versus a jog) is to weave in groups of threes (can have four). The ball starts in the middle line and they toss and catch 60 feet out and back. The ball then starts in the middle again. This time they repeat the process, except the ball starts in the glove and they do a flip back and forth. The next time is barehand, followed by outside of the glove and finishing by rolling grounders out and back.

A great way to start every time and to really get them to focus is to stand in the way of the weave and try to intercept. Sometimes I jump in line, and we make it a lot of fun. The key is that you run behind the person you threw it to.

- **PLAYER 1**
- **PLAYER 2**
- **BALL**



SIGNEES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

Candace James	OF	Prior Lake, MN	Prior Lake HS	Minnesota Blizzard
Samantha Kanak	OF	Sun Prairie, WI	Sun Prairie	
Meghan Lehman	CF	Burnsville, MN	Burnsville HS	Minnesota Blizzard
Kendra Merritt	P	Fort Lupton, CO	Fort Lupton	Next Level

TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL

Sarah Johnson	P	Elgin, TX	Elgin HS
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TUSCULUM

Nicole Ball	UT	Newport, TN	Cocke Co.	Thunder 93
Katie Gross	C/OF	Oakfield, WI	Oakfield	Wisconsin Bandits
Alix Kruel	2B/OF	Horicon, WI	Horicon	Wisconsin Bandits
Katlin Stroinski	P/UT	Howell, MI	Howell	Michigan Outlaws

UC SAN DIEGO

Kayla Hensel	P	Corona, CA	Centennial HS	Mizuno Pride Gold
Monique Portugal	U	San Diego, CA	Westview HS	San Diego Renegades Gold

WAYNE STATE (NE)

Kelcie Bormann	P	Preston, IA	Preston HS	Quad City Firebirds
Megan Hagemann	C	Elkhorn, NE	Elkhorn HS	Sizzle Blue
Tiffani Housh	UT	MO Valley, IA	Missouri Valley HS	Nebraska Shockers
Jordan King	SS	Omaha, NE	Millard South	Omaha Quakes Silver
Ashley Prettyman	UT	Des Moines, IA	Des Moines East	
Sara Scheffert	P	Lincoln, NE	Lincoln Southeast	Nebraska Swingers
Alex Schmidt	UT	Lincoln, NE	Lincoln Southwest	Nebraska Blue Diamonds
Kaitlin Williams	1B/3B	Papillion, NE	Papillion - LaVista South	Sizzle Blue

WESTERN NEW MEXICO

Stephanie Higgins	UT	Escondida, CA	Mission Hills High	San Diego Renegades
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NEWS & NOTES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

Ranieri, Assistant, 98 AZ Cats (AZ); **Vincent Rock**, Head, Crown Point Bulldogs (IN); **Dean Ross**, Head, Lake Hill Bull Dogs; **Chrissy Schoonmaker**, Volunteer Assistant, University of South Carolina; **Lisa Schreihart**, Umpire, (IA); **Andrew Sisneroz**, Assistant, Foothill Gold ASA (CA); **Jason Sparks**, Head, Oklahoma Force Softball (OK); **Robert Staggs**, Head/Athletic Director, Pikeville College; **Allison Steinke**, Head, Parkview HS (WI); **Anthony Stone**, Head, Montana State University Billings; **Tracy Strain**, Mountain Home HS/Arkansas Thunder 97 (AR); **Ashley Sullivan**, Assistant, Eastern Connecticut State University; **Greg Tekulve** (OH); **David Trolan**, Assistant, Mt. San Antonio College; **Rebecca Uresti**, Head, Texas Force (TX); **Jim Valdivia**, Head, Crean Lutheran HS (CA); **John Vanek**, Assistant, Long Island Anthem (NY); **Robyn Ventura**, Assistant, D'Youville College; **Ashley White**, Assistant, Emory and Henry College; **Denise White**, President, Nova Screaming Eagles (VA); **Nichole Willis**, Assistant, University of California, San Diego; **Char Wilson**, Head, Santa Monica College; **Matt Windle**, Head, Baker University; **Merritt Yackey**, Head, Lees-McRae College; **Marissa Young**, Head, Concordia University.

SLAPPING PROGRESSION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

ther hand. The second step out of the box (left foot) was aligned with first base. (See pictures 13-14.)

Progression One: Bunting

Many coaches struggle with the notion of where to start when teaching slap hitting. Before a player

can slap hit, they first must learn how to bunt properly. This will set the foundation. When teaching players to bunt, the pivotal stance is the most effective. Bunting has two main phases, the stance and contact position. In the pivotal stance, the player's stance varies. After analyzing several slappers, it is noted that certain characteristics such as bat angle, hand placement and rhythm, can vary but still have a similar outcome.

The second phase is the contact phase. The batter rotates at the waist and pivots on the balls of both feet, turning the belly button towards the pitcher (Garman, 2001). Both the shoulders and the hips open up. In addition, when the player rotates at the waist, the bat is brought over the top near the left shoulder and is angled slightly with the left hand at the top of the strike zone and the right hand below it. This technique is preferred because it allows for natural bat angle. If a player sweeps in a motion like they are hitting, the slapper will lose the bat angle and increase the chances of popping up the ball. It is important to note, the left hand is in a V-shape and a hand-shaking position with the bat. Furthermore, the left hand should slide to the end of the grip on the handle during trunk rotation. It is recommended that the hands separate for better bat control. The positioning of the left hand is very critical in bunting the ball.

One drill that may aid in the early stages of bunting would be to have the players pair up about 10 feet in front of each other. Using a softball, have them toss the ball to each other and the players use the pivot stance and catch the tossed ball with their left hand. A key point in this drill is to have the players catch the top of the ball with their left hand in a hand shake position, but never catch a ball with their palm pointing toward the sky. In addition, the slappers should bend their knees on low pitches, trying to keep somewhat of an upright body posture. Body posture is very important. The players should refrain from leaning too far forward and avoid jabbing to catch the ball, but instead give with the ball to simulate catching an egg. This will help the slapper begin to learn how to "deaden" a bunt.

A second drill is to have the slappers use the same mechanics, but put a bat in their left hand and remove their right hand from the bat. Once again the focus is on top of the ball with motion of catching the tossed ball instead of jabbing at it. This bunting progression is vital for slappers, and coaches should not advance to drag bunting until they have become proficient bunters.

Progression Two: Drag Bunting

The next progression for slap hitters is drag bunting. The slappers must insert the crossover, which takes place between the stance and contact. Once again, it's very important that the slappers are able bunters. The stance is the same but as the pitcher gets to circle peak or top of the circle, the slapper positions her right foot under her



PICTURE 13



PICTURE 14



PICTURE 15



PICTURE 16

body. There is no secret formula on where a slapper should place her right foot to initiate movement. Each slapper will develop some type of rhythm and explosiveness based on her physical capabilities. What is important in regards to the "footwork" is that the right foot position itself under the body to create an explosive push off, thus creating momentum towards the pitcher.

The next critical movement is the crossover step, which begins as the pitcher is releasing the ball. As the slapper's left foot crosses over, the bat is brought to the contact position mentioned earlier. The left foot plants on the front inside corner of the batter's box and the right foot is now heading towards the pitcher when contact is made. In the video analysis, when elite slappers planted their left foot on the crossover, their body resembled a "C." In addition, elite slappers' left foot pointed anywhere from the shortstop to pitcher, which has significant implications on the slap hit and will be discussed in further detail in the slap hitting section. The ball should be bunted with the left foot firmly planted and the right foot is moving towards the pitcher. (See pictures 17-18.)

One drill to help slappers create explosive movement out of the box is as follows: have the slapper get in the box, while the coach stands about 10 feet away and throws front toss. The slapper will bunt with only the left hand (one-handed bunt), while timing themselves with the coach who is front tossing. The key point is when the ball is released, an explosive crossover step begins with the hips already open. In addition, it is important to note that the crossover step takes place at the same time that the bat is brought to a bunt position.

After the players get proficient with this drill, make a 20-foot mark on the first base foul line and time the players to that point. The first 20 feet are critical and slappers must learn to reach top speeds by this point. Have other slappers waiting in line check to make sure they are attacking the front chalk and that their crossover step is explosive.

Mark Larriba and D. Allen Hilsdon are both students in the Texas Woman's University master's program in conjunction with the National Fastpitch Coaches College.



PICTURE 17



PICTURE 18

2010-II NFCC SCHEDULE

DATE	COURSE	LOCATION
Nov. 5-7	407: Winning Strategies for Game-Day Coaching INSTRUCTORS: Dever-Boaz, Miller, Tschida	Rosemount, MN
Nov. 12-14	401: The Art of Championship Coaching INSTRUCTORS: Craig, Blevins, Revelle	Columbus, OH
Dec. 5-7	403: Position Play & Individual Defensive Skills INSTRUCTORS: Edwards, Nuvevan, Wright	San Diego, CA
Dec. 5-7	404: Solid Team Defense & Strategy INSTRUCTORS: Tarr, Blevins, Lenti	San Diego, CA
Dec. 11-13	405: Explosive Team Offensive & Strategy INSTRUCTORS: Drysdale, Candrea, Walton	San Diego, CA
Dec. 11-13	406: Coaching Dynamic Team Practices INSTRUCTORS: Bruggeman, Pallozzi, Hutchins	San Diego, CA
June 2-4	408: World Series Coaching & Game Observation INSTRUCTORS: Tschida, D'Arcy, Baker	Oklahoma City, OK
June 5-7	405: Explosive Team Offense & Strategy INSTRUCTORS: Drysdale, Edwards, McSpadden	Oklahoma City, OK