

## NFCA INSTRUCTIONAL CORNER

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

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The following is the second in a two-part series. Please look for the first part in the January 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.

In the first part of the article, we discussed the five main phases in the crossover and progressions one and two, which are bunting and drag bunting.

### *Progression Three: Slap Hitting*

Slappers should not move on to slap hitting until they are skilled bunters. In addition, the players should develop an explosive crossover before advancing to the final phase. The stance, footwork and placement of the crossover step are the same in drag bunting and slap hitting. Matter of fact, slap hitting is basically an extension of drag bunting. When teaching players to slap, it is very important to teach an inside-out swing with their hands starting at the top of the strike zone. In other words, the hands are tight to the body and the barrel lags behind as the slapper swings. The player begins their swing when the crossover step is firmly planted and the right foot is moving towards the pitcher. This has always been a point of debate, but after analyzing the elite and high school slappers, this appears to be the correct sequence of events.



In addition, a critical event that takes place during the slap is the slappers hips need to be open to the pitcher. This is important because it releases the hips from being loaded and allows the them to swing only with the upper body creating less “pop” on the ball when contact is made. Finally, it is vital that the slapper's shoulders stay closed until the swing takes place. Plate coverage will suffer and they will pull the ball to the right side if they allow their shoulders to pull off as their hips open up to the pitcher.



### *Analysis of Attacking the Chalk*

Attacking the front chalk with the crossover step has much more merit than originally considered. We wanted to determine which philosophy of crossover was more productive: being in the middle of the batter's box attacking the front chalk, or starting in the back of the box taking the first step after contact towards first base and up the foul line. Geometry and math experts – Dee Haffner (Trenton Middle School math teacher), Zachary Zastoupil (math teacher at Trenton High School and former head softball coach) and Joleen Yeager (Trenton High School geometry teacher) – were able to expound some of the reasons for attacking the front line. The location of the batter in the box prior to the pitch turned out to be a key factor in the effectiveness of the crossover. After measuring and calculating the dimension, it is clear that when a slapper starts in the middle of the box it will be an advantage.

As mentioned earlier, starting in the box parallel to the back tip of the plate allows the batter to attack the chalk line with the crossover foot, which is the shortest distance to first base. We found that attacking the front chalk line on the inside corner of the box with the crossover step allowed full plate coverage and allowed the batter to step directly towards the pitcher. Once a batter's crossover step is more than three inches from the inside line of the batter's box, the player loses any plate coverage along the outside line of home plate. A pitch over the outside corner cannot be hit with consistent success due to the bat length and the batter's inside-out swing.

We noted the elite slappers attacked the front chalk line with their crossover foot, then planted their lead foot anywhere from three to four feet in front of the chalk. At times, their lead foot was even inside the batters box inside line, almost in front of home plate.

We initially found that attacking the front chalk line on the inside corner of the box with the crossover step allowed full plate coverage and allowed the batter to step directly toward the pitcher. The step with the lead foot after contact then planted almost 10 inches from the inside line of the batters box and 3-foot-4 in front of the front chalk line. The distance to first base from the spot of the lead foot contact was 53-foot-4 inches, making the distance longer than that of a player starting at the back of the box.

Conversely, the player that can attack the front chalk line with the crossover step then step toward the pitcher in a straight line with the inside line of the batter's box, shortens the distance to first base drastically. A player attacking the front chalk line on the inside corner of the box can step as far out as four feet with the lead foot after contact and shorten the distance to first base by as much as one foot, four inches.

Cutting the distance by less than 1.5 feet does not seem like much of a distance, but take all of these factors into place: momentum needed to get that far out of the box, the actual distance of travel, as well as the angle of travel to the base. All of these, when put together, allow the batter a more efficient and quicker approach to first base.

The distance starts to increase again as the batter's lead foot gets closer to the foul line, especially after a player's crossover step lands more than three inches inside the batter's box from the inside line. The distance to first base from three inches inside the batter's box and four feet in front of the front chalk line, decreases to just 51-foot-7 to first base. As mentioned earlier, once a batter's crossover step is more than three inches from the inside line of the batter's box, the player loses any plate coverage along the outside line of home plate. A pitch over the outside corner cannot be hit

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## SLAPPING PROGRESSION

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with consistent success due to the bat length and the batter's bat extension deep in the strike zone, while making a positive movement toward the pitcher.

The information gained from Mrs. Haffner, Coach Zastoupil and Mrs. Yeager allowed us to make the following mathematical conclusions:

The center of the softball diamond meets at an intersecting line from the rear tip of home plate to the rear tip of second base, intersecting a line that reaches from the corners of first and third base down the lines farthest from home plate. The center of the intersecting line from home to second base will be 42-foot-2. The center of the pitching rubber in the collegiate game will then be 45-foot-7 to first base and the batter's box outside front corner is 52-foot-5 to first base. The closer the batter gets to the pitching rubber, the shorter the distance to first base, as long as the batter is taking a direct path towards the power line of the pitching rubber. Once the batter's approach veers towards the foul line, the angle towards first base becomes more narrow (acute) and the distance to first base increases. The distance to first base from the center of the pitching rubber changes in the high school game because the pitching rubber is three inches closer to home plate, as opposed to the collegiate distance of 43 feet. This distance (45-foot-3) is pointed out only to acknowledge the differences in this constant, but has no bearing on the batter's positive movement toward the pitching rubber.

This is explained by the theories of geometry, when the angles of a triangle decrease the sides must increase in order for the constant side of the triangle to remain the same and the two sides to meet at the angle opposite the base (first base). With this in mind, the constant is the distance from home plate to first base along the foul line. As the angle increases when the batter steps toward the pitcher then proceeds to first base, the sides of the triangle decrease – specifically the side from the plant foot after contact to first base. *The calculations and the findings were confirmed once constant distances were put into a scaled model using SmartDraw 2007.*

The distance from the pitching rubber to first base only shows that the farther up the power line from home plate the shorter the distance to first base. The concept to remember is the attack of the front chalk line; it is impossible and impractical to think a batter's lead foot could get to the pitcher's rubber. The idea is to attack the front chalk with the crossover step and continue toward the pitcher with the lead foot, starting toward first as far in front of the box as possible after contact.

In conclusion, the batter should start near the middle of the box with home plate between the feet of the batter and the batter about midway up the box from away from home plate. The distance from home plate and the pitcher should be relative to the batter's crossover step, attacking the front chalk line along the inside corner of the box to no more than three inches inside the box. The batter's crossover step should be as far forward toward the pitcher as legally possible, attacking the far side of the two-inch line of the batter's box. The batter should then push off with the crossover foot and stride as far toward the pitcher as possible in order to shorten the distance to first base.

### Comparing High School and College Slappers

Many players are starting to play competitive softball at such an early age. Because of this, high schools are getting more softball savvy players. We were astounded that the high school players we analyzed had excellent slapping skills and are very comparable to the elite players.

We are not professing that the high school slappers are on the same level as the elite players, but what we are saying is that they have excellent fundamentals in slapping. To do a more in-depth study, we must analyze a greater portion of high school



slappers.

In the analysis, we discovered the major difference in executing the crossover between the high school and college slappers was that high school players lacked explosiveness and did not attack the chalk. Of the 10 high school slappers, only three attacked the chalk. In order to get to this attack mode, the players must possess explosive movements. Both of these critical elements of the slapping must be practiced. In the fall, video analysis will become a top priority with our slappers. We will film our drills periodically to check that the slappers are being explosive. Video analysis will help the players monitor their development. Also, still photos are just as valuable.

Finally, in the fall, players must know how to evaluate their own progress. They will do this by using the self-check style of learning. After the softball season, our coaching staff will create a rubric so the players will be able to self-assess their phases of the crossover. In addition, as we do our "short-game" drills, the slappers will have to evaluate each other using the reciprocal style. It is essential that they become aware of their slapping skills.

*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. Photos Courtesy of ESPN, Flower Mound High School and Trenton High School. References: Garman, Judi. Bunting and Slap Hitting. Softball Skills and Drills. (2001). 179-191.*



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## DRILLS

## DEFENSE

By CHRIS SOUTHARD  
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**Name of Drill:** Outfield Fungo to Infield

**Purpose:** To get as many game like ground balls as you can in a short amount of time.

**Explanation:** *Materials:* Bats, Buckets of Balls, Empty Buckets, Throw down plates, hitting mats. *Set-up and execution of drill:* All infielders are at their positions with an empty bucket behind them. We put down two hitting mats on either side of home plate. On the mats, we put down a throw down home plate. The outfielders will then soft toss balls to a partner, who will hit ground balls to the infielders. The outfielders on the 3rd base side hit to the 1st and 2nd baseman, and the group on the 1st base side hit to the SS and 3rd baseman. I have the hitters alternate each swing who they hit to. The first round, there are no throws; the players just toss the ball to the empty bucket behind them. As we continue we will add throws. For example, we will have the fungo on the 1st base side hit only to the 3rd baseman, while the right side of the infield takes balls and throws them to the SS covering 2nd base. Then we flip it to the other side. Also, we will add pressure situations. I will set a number of balls that must be fielded in a row without an error. The number can be whatever your skill level is: 20, 50, etc. If we commit an error, then we start over from 1 and add a consequence.

This is a fast paced drill that allows you to get a ton of ground ball work in a short time and in game-like situations. We will usually switch hitters every two minutes.

## NEWS &amp; NOTES

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**Ali Ritter**, Head, East Stroudsburg University; **Michelle Rodoni**, Assistant, California Grapettes 18U (CA); **Dean Ross**, Head, Lake Hill Bull Dogs (AK); **Jonathan Russell**, Head, Northern Vance High School (NC); **Cory Rywalt**, Head, Dutchess Debs (NY); **Ralph Sakauye**, Head, Kahana-Nui (HI); **Kristin Schalk**, Assistant, Ottawa University; **Phil Shepler**, Executive Director, Marion Diamonds Fastpitch (OH); **Andrew Sisneroz**, Assistant, Foothill Gold ASA (CA); **Jason Sparks**, Head, Oklahoma Force Softball (OK); **Robert Staggs**, Head/Athletic Director, Pikeville College; **Michael Stipa**, Head, Delco Diamonds Gold (PA); **Michael Stoffey**, Head, AZ Jaguars (AZ); **Anthony Stone**, Head, Montana State University Billings; **Tracy Strain**, Mountain Home High School/Arkansas Thunder 97 (AR); **Amy Suiter**, Head, Western Washington University; **Dean Taylor**, Head, Eastern High School (KY); **David Taylor**, Head, Wildfire 16U (FL); **Joe Thomas**, Head, Long Island Mustangs (NY); **Kim Tillett-Poole**, Head, Texas Glory (TX); **Mary Tobin**, Head, Stafford High School (VA); **Jim Tomey**, Head, Francis Parker High School (CA); **Rebecca Uresti**, Head, Texas Force (TX); **Andrea Vangoss**, Assistant, Concordia University; **David Wells**, Assistant, Snake River Hysteria Softball (ID); **Ashley White**, Assistant, Emory & Henry College; **Denise White**, President, Nova Screaming Eagles (VA); **Jarrett White**, Corona Angels (CA); **Russell Wilhoit**, Assistant, Greensburg High School (IN); **Jennifer Williams**, Head, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; **Randi Wilson**, Assistant, Murray State University.

## SOUTHARD

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than Frisco. Once the home of one small Class 2A school, Frisco is now the home of six different Class 4A high schools. Ironically, one of those rivals – Frisco Midway – ended Wakeland's run in last year's regional final on the way to its own state championship.

"That is part of the challenge," Southard said. "This area has really taken off. They all take great pride in their athletics. You have to work hard every day to stay competitive. You really can't take anything for granted."

The Wolverines have been working hard from day one, even despite an 8-20 mark in that inaugural campaign. Southard said the disappointment was short-lived because the newness of the program created so many day-to-day challenges that he, his staff and his players found rewarding.

"I really never realized how many things I took for granted at my other two schools," Southard said. "Tradition is such a big thing at schools. Sometimes, teams win games simply because of their names on the uniform. All of a sudden I am at Wakeland and there is no school. There is no tradition. You are now trying to establish a tradition."

Instead of finding this as an adversity, Southard and his staff decided to make it a challenge.

"What is your pregame chant?" Southard said. "How do you throw the ball around the infield? These are the small things that I took for granted. All of a sudden this was a chance to start new. Everything we were going to do, we were going to do a first time."

"It was a unique opportunity for the players to really build something that was going to last a lifetime."

The first set of Wolverines went about trying to write their own version of the history books.

"We actually did not have a junior or senior class when the school started," Southard said, "So we had young players playing varsity softball from day one. The first year was difficult. We were taking a group of girls and asking them to play varsity competition. We knew we were going to take some lumps."

"Honestly, we went into each game trying to not get run-ruled. Alexis had pitched nothing but tournament ball. So

now she is pitching without time limits. It was a matter of getting 21 outs in every game. We actually finished 7-7 in district play and won six of our last seven games.

"It was a night and day difference between how we started the season and how we ended it. You could see the maturity. Honestly, that first year may have been the most rewarding one I have ever had as a coach."

Despite a lack of victories, the seeds of a successful program were sewn by that first team.

"In 2008, we added a few more kids who had played before," Southard said. "Alexis was a year older. Our goal was to make the playoffs. We were able to do that. We tied for the district championship and had a good run in the playoffs. In the third year, we moved from 3A to 4A. Again some newcomers made us as talented as anybody in the area."

"It was just a matter of gelling together as a team. The success from the year before made the team determined from the very beginning. We made it back to the regional semifinal and had a good year."

Then in 2010, the Wolverines actually posted an undefeated regular season. Wakeland crashed the *USA Today*/NFCA High School Top 25's Top 10, ranking as high as third.

"The goal never was to go undefeated," said Southard, who is assisted by Josh Tabor, Eric Littleton and Brooklyn Spring. "But you had Alexis in her fourth year in the circle. The junior class was the deepest class that we have had. The girls took a lot of pride in playing with the bullseye on their back. We really got on a great run against great competition. This really solidified that we had built a tradition."

Kelci Garza is the other signee from the 2010 senior class. She is presently playing softball at Butler Community College in Kansas. Another key senior was Kelsey Hawter, who is now attending the University of North Texas but not playing softball. The 2011 class includes Brook Cline, who is going to Delta State University and Jaime Ohm, who is going to Western Texas Junior College.

The junior class features four commitments – Newcombe (West Texas A&M), Brittany Gehle (West Texas A&M), Tess Soefje (University of Houston) and Darian Dunn (Angelo State University).

With the tradition now established, the Wolverines still in uniform hope that the best is yet to come.