

***The Psychology of Role Players:
Keeping Non-Starters on a Positive Path***

Previously Published in
Fast Pitch Delivery

Dan Leidl & Joe Frontiera

Athletes who devote countless hours to batting and fielding, sacrifice their spring for the softball diamond, and spend additional free time at team events and meetings expect to contribute to the team's efforts on game day. Unfortunately, most athletes equate game day contributions with playing on the field, and it can be difficult for coaches to address this perception. Most coaches can recall those nightmare incidents when a couple of non-starters became team "cancers": Playing time rumors started circulating, "Unfair" and "She doesn't deserve it" echoed from the back of the bus and locker room, and small groups of friends that seemed quaint and harmless became rivaling cliques. But, how does a coach avoid the frustration and retaliation of a player who gives of herself but still isn't given any playing time?

Coaches avoid playing time discussions for a variety of reasons. Some believe that the success of the season hinges on the quality of practice and preparation the team puts in, so they avoid talking about playing time to avoid overemphasizing its importance. Similarly, some coaches steer clear of potentially lengthy playing time discussions that detract time and energy from the team's larger goals. Additionally, some coaches avoid addressing the depth chart all together so as to create an uneasy climate in which everyone's "On the Bubble". In this instance coaches believe that uncertainty motivates players to stay sharp and competitive, which may work up to the third or fourth week of game play, when the player's know the roster's likely to be set. While all of these techniques can be rationalized, they are generally less of a solution than a cause for a problem.

Players participate in sports with hopes and expectations of playing. They consider game play as a means of contributing to the team, having fun, and defining themselves as a meaningful part of the larger group. Players generally place a tremendous importance on game time, often associating their entire athletic experience with their game day memories. With players placing such an emphasis on playing time, coaches would be remiss to ignore or demean the issue. By not talking about it openly, coaches may unwittingly send the message that players who don't play aren't that important. In an effort to avoid the anger and frustration that often develop in non-starters, coaches can address playing time in a number of ways that will not only defuse players' anxiety, but will also establish an appreciated precedent regarding honest and forth right communication.

1. *Schedule individual meetings for the beginning of the season:* Scheduled individual meetings at the beginning of the season are wonderful ways of checking in with players regarding goals, dedication, personal life, and focus.

These meetings are appropriate venues for discussing playing time plans, and also show players that you value time spent talking with them. It is imperative that you are honest and up-front with players during these discussions about roles, what they bring to the team, and areas of improvement. During these meetings, you can ask players how they think they can best contribute, what being a starter means, and what being a non-starter means. If the player is a non-starter, impress upon her that she will be asked to push the starters to improve, must be prepared to perform in specific game situations, may be a key contributor in the future, will be called on to enhance the camaraderie of the team, and will play a vital role in the organization's success throughout her career. Talk with the player about what she brings to the team: Maybe the player is a scholar who can help other girls on and off the field with tactical nuances and difficult subjects; or, maybe she has a knack for cheering other players up with a smile. After you've realistically discussed the player's role for the team, ask her to think about whether she's comfortable with that role or not. When players know what they're getting into up front, they have the choice to either stick with it or move on. If they choose to stick with it, you'll have the leverage to pull aside a frustrated player who is starting to cause problems and remind her of her initial choice to contribute. When you begin the season honestly and openly with players, your expectations for them to speak with you honestly throughout the season are weightier.

2. *Maintain an open door policy:* Players who feel that they can pop in to speak with you about frustrations and problems often feel less tense and trapped regarding their concerns. We all need to let off steam from time to time, and coaches who invite players to speak with the staff about worries or aggravations are likely to keep their team free of extraneous distractions and festering problems.
3. *Articulate clear team policies to the group:* Finally, establishing team policies about discussions regarding playing time are helpful for when the topic comes up. Mandating that playing time issues are not to be discussed in the locker room or on the field, and that all issues are to be discussed directly with the staff can be helpful in avoiding damaging chatter. One of the more creative and seemingly effective team policies related to playing time that we've heard is out of the remarkably successful collegiate lacrosse program at Princeton. The staff encourages playing time discussion, but stipulates that individuals who request more playing time identify who they should be playing over. After meeting with the staff, dissatisfied players are expected to address the entire team the following day in practice, state who they think they should be playing over, and compete with the player they've identified for time in the up-coming game. As you can imagine, the staff receives few playing time complaints. Clearly this policy demands an uncomfortable level of openness, but it also encourages players to think diligently about their frustrations. This type of forced reflection may impress upon a player that coaches often have tough jobs in picking out a game day roster. When encouraged to think about their complaint at such a deep level, players may quickly recognize that they're simply lacking the experience or skill

needed to fill a starting role, and may develop a new respect for the coach's decision.

While these strategies are best employed at the beginning of the season, how can coaches deal with playing time frustrations throughout the highs and lows of a competitive schedule? To follow are a number of tactical strategies that a staff can employ to avoid conflict, promote team unity, and enhance the good feelings of players who may not see much game time.

1. *Spend equal time with role players:* Spend as much time speaking with and addressing non-starters as you do with starters. Remind the team of the value of the role players by congratulating them on strong efforts in practice, optimistic cheering in the dug out, or perceptive tactical observations shared with the staff. Utilize your staff and encourage them to work and develop relationships with players who may not see the field that often. Have the staff mentor specific players who are on the bubble and eager to get to the next level. Additionally, take time to encourage and speak with non-starters as individuals, checking in with them about grades, their personal life, and their team contributions.
2. *Help role players experience competition:* One of the most significant things that non-starters often miss is the simple thrill of competition. Practicing softball skills can seem repetitious, but they don't have to be. Develop competitions for practice, reserve time for scrimmaging, or designate certain days throughout the season as "Fun Days". Not only will competitive drills seem more fun for the players, but they will also add a spark to the practice schedule while further developing team camaraderie through fun and healthy competition. Track batting and error percentages during certain drills, add best out of 5 or 10 competitions, or make a routine drill a single elimination contest. These types of contests not only provide bench players with competition, but they also take the tedium out of daily practice. Adding these types of drills and "Fun Days" to the season can also prove an exciting challenge for the coaching staff by encouraging creative and unique drill development.
3. *Do your best to play as many as you can:* It is important for coaches to sincerely work to get players in when the opportunities arise. Some coaches are driven by fear, leaving the lineup card alone even when the team's up by 9 in the bottom of the sixth. Realistically, a comeback's out of reach, but even if the opposition makes a run, showing confidence in your non-starters can pay big dividends. Using these games as opportunities to get the supporting players playing time not only keeps them happy, but it also breeds confidence in the team. Putting non-starters in positions to succeed or struggle with game time adversity helps young players prepare for the future, while developing strength beyond the starting lineup. Additionally, selectively inserting non-starters into starting positions can significantly improve bench players' attitudes. Giving the starters a needed rest, and giving someone else a chance may improve team strength and chemistry.

You might be surprised with the enthusiasm the starters show in supporting their hardworking teammates.

There certainly isn't a cure-all answer to the many issues that may come up regarding playing time, but we imagine that some of these ideas may help in preventing and dealing with playing time concerns. Should you have a specific issue that you would like to discuss, feel free to contact either Joe or Dan at one of the e-mail addresses included below. Good luck, and enjoy the season.