

Michele Smith — Oly

This summer's Olympics are putting the spotlight on the world's best athletes in Athens. But these top-flight athletes all know that performance is determined by preparation before ever stepping on the field.



Michele Smith, two-time Gold Medal winner with the USA Softball team, follows some of the best training regimens and shares that knowledge.

“It is just as important to take care of your body off the field as on it,” Michele said. “If you’re in good condition, you have better reactions to hit the ball faster and farther.”

Being in shape is just good sense for playing your best. But did you know recent studies also show that athletes that are in good physical condition experience fewer injuries than those who aren’t?

Keys to conditioning:

- Fitness conditioning
- Weight conditioning
- Pliometrics
- Agilities drills
- Core strength training

But Michele notes you should not get too serious too early with conditioning for the younger players. Most kids 5-8 years old are getting all the exercise they need to build their muscles to play by playing, and don’t need conditioning workouts.

Graduate the amount and intensity of workouts for the age of the participants.

Again, just developing good, moderate training habits with the players will help them as they grow.

Fitness conditioning

For fitness training, Michele stresses fundamental exercises that everyone can do like jogging, biking, aerobics and anything that gets the cardio-vascular system pumping blood. Sustaining elevated heart and lung functions helps the body prepare for hard

exercise, like games, and increases the body’s ability to function at this increased activity level for longer periods. Fitness training also is beneficial for weight management, for more sedentary players.

Weight conditioning

Weight training should be undertaken only for those 12 years of age or older, as younger bodies are still growing and developing. Placing too much stress on growth plates and other fragile areas through weight training can cause developmental injuries.

For the older athlete, weight training offers increased lean body mass for higher metabolism and healthier, stronger muscles. All major muscle groups should be worked: chest, arms, shoulders, back and legs.

Examples:

- Chest — bench press, flies
- Arms — biceps curls, triceps extensions
- Shoulders — military press, dips, shrugs
- Back — rows, pull-downs
- Legs — squats, leg curls, leg extensions

Pliometrics

This is explosive training to increase the player’s bounding abilities, and overall speed and energy. While many weight programs train the muscles for slow, strong movement, pliometrics trains the muscles to have faster, explosive force, especially important in the pitching motion.

Examples:

- Single leg bounds — hopping up and down on one leg
- Standing broad jumps — jump forward
- Lateral jumps — jump to the sides
- Vertical jumps — jump straight up
- Jump-tucks — jump up and pull knees to chest

Agilities training

These are important to strengthening connective muscles, those around ankles and knees especially. Agility drills help develop “fast twitch” muscles, which allow changes in direction, quick hands, and also “builds body awareness in spatial

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relationship,” Michele explained, meaning the player understands better where they are on the field and where to move to reach the ball or tag a base.

Examples are foot drills like running a dual line of tires, doing the karaoke step (cross-over step running sideways), as well as hand drills for catching and tossing the ball quickly.

Core strength training

“The core (abdominals and back) is important for body strength in playing ball since players push off the ground in throwing, fielding, running and especially hitting and pitching,” said Michele. “The player is transferring their strength and movement from the upper body to the lower body and vice versa in all these movements.”

Good basic exercises for the core are: sit-ups, crunches and leg elevations, and “super-mans” or hyper-extensions for the back (reverse sit-ups).

“If you’re in good condition, you’re going to be better able to play late in the game,” Michele stressed. “Or when you hit that deep triple, you won’t gas going around second and get thrown out.”

The seasons of conditioning:

- Off-season: Have them hit the training and/or weight room 3 days a week, combined with cardio-vascular workouts more extensively to build strength and endurance. Do the core training workout every day, and combine the plyometrics workout with weight training for older athletes.
- Pre-season: Getting ready — workout off field two times a week. Michele points out that if you are practicing with your team three days a week, you will want to have the players do some aerobic activity two additional days, to build endurance.
- In season: The team is playing more, so you want them to stay consistent and maintain their fitness level, so exercising one to two times a week is sufficient.

“It is just as important to take care of your body off the field as on it,” – Michele Smith.

Remember, proper workouts include warm-ups and cool down periods. Don’t rush your players into exercise without getting their blood pumping and core body temperature elevated, Michele stressed. And when they are done, make sure they stretch out and cool down so they don’t have muscle problems after the workout.

For more information on warm-ups and cool downs, check out the last issue of the ASAP News for Michele’s article on these topics.

Finally, Michele notes you need to help your players make good decisions on proper nutrition, since their bodies need good sources of meats, grains, fruits and vegetables to be strong and sustain their activity level.

Michele Smith

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