

“Middle’s open!” - Norms regarding hitting in adult recreational softball

Gretchen Peterson *

Department of Sociology, California State University, Los Angeles CA, United States

Introduction

The number of adults and children estimated to be playing softball in the United States was more than 42 million in 1991 (Dickson, 1994). In the 20 years since that estimate, it is likely that the number has grown even higher with participation rates high for both men and women. Recent estimates from the Amateur Softball Association (ASA) are that 2.5 million players are involved annually in their adult softball programs (ASA 2010). However, the Amateur Softball Association is just one of many softball organizations that run tournaments and leagues for participants. Leagues and tournaments are available for players at all skill levels ranging from novice to highly competitive. The sport of softball includes both fastpitch and slowpitch versions. The focus of this paper is on slowpitch softball (as was the work of Amenta, 2007) where the pitch is delivered underhand with a specified minimum amount of arc (typically the pitch must at least go over the batter’s head). Thus, unlike fastpitch softball or baseball, a slowpitch softball batter has time to adjust their swing and exert some control over where they hit the ball. Of course, how much control one can exert depends on the skill level of the player, but the slow speed of the pitch makes some bat control possible.

This paper examines one of the interactional aspects of adult softball, the phenomenon of “going middle”. Going middle refers to a batter hitting a softball back up the middle of the field at the pitcher. While the pitcher does have a glove with which to catch the ball, changes in bat and ball technology mean that the pitcher has a fraction of a second to react to a ball hit at them. Thus, these technological changes have led to increased danger for softball pitchers and have contributed to the creation of this phenomenon of “going middle”.

New technology, New danger

In recent years, technological advances in the production of softball bats (particularly the emergence of composite and titanium bats) and balls has led to a greater possibility for severe injury to occur on the softball field. The ASA first adopted bat performance standards in 2000. These performance standards are based on batted ball speeds (the speed at which the ball comes off the bat). In 2000, the batted ball speed limit was set at 85 miles per hour.

*Email: gpeters@exchange.calstatela.edu

In 2004, the standard was raised to 98 miles per hour, but this change resulted in a reduction in batted ball speeds in games, since the testing methodology was improved (ASA, 2007). The change in testing methodology involved testing all bats on their actual "sweet spot" instead of the same location on every bat. The sweet spot is the location on the bat which yields the highest batted ball speed when struck properly. While a number of softball organizations have adopted ASA approval as their standard for determining legal bats, considerable variability still exists. Particularly in co-ed tournaments, many organizations will have different legal bat lists for men and women, such that women can use bats not approved by ASA. The use of different bat lists for men and women is an example of a gendered rule in softball that is based on the perception or assumption that women are less competent players (for a discussion of other gendered rules in softball, see Wachs, 2002). Even with bat standards designed to improve safety, a softball pitcher is still in a very vulnerable and dangerous position. With batted ball speeds that can exceed 100 miles per hour, the pitcher has approximately .33 seconds to react to a ball hit directly at them.

While it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the total numbers of injuries that occur in adult recreational softball leagues and tournaments, there have been several deaths which resulted from being hit by a batted ball. These deaths typically result when pitchers have been hit in the head or chest by a batted ball. One death from being hit by a batted ball in recreational softball occurred in early January 2008, in the Houston area, when an umpire standing behind the pitcher was hit in the head and later died. While such extreme injuries may be rare, 51.2% of respondents to an online survey of softball players who are currently or ever had been pitchers (N=962) indicated they had suffered an injury as a result of being hit by a batted ball. Injuries ranged from minor bruises to significant fractures and many pitchers indicated they had been injured multiple times.

The increased danger that now exists for pitchers has led to a number of different rule changes in many tournaments. Many tournaments in southern California now allow a pitching zone instead of requiring the pitcher to be in contact with the rubber when releasing the pitch. This pitching zone extends behind the rubber several feet and allows the pitcher to be further back when delivering the pitch. This allows the pitcher greater time to react to any balls hit at them. Still other tournaments have rules that line drives hit at the pitcher are ruled automatic outs (at the umpire's discretion). These rules were explicitly created to reduce the likelihood of injuries to pitchers.

Gender and Softball Rules

Several studies have examined issues of gender expectations and doing gender in softball (Wachs 2002, 2005; Malcom, 2003). Wachs (2002) examined the gendered nature of the rules that are used in co-ed softball. Wachs argued that rules such as requiring equal numbers of women and men, alternating batting orders, female rovers, courtesy runners, and the two-base walk for men all serve to reinforce gendered expectations for the competence of players. These rules are often presented as a way of leveling the field for men and women in co-ed and yet they simply serve to perpetuate ideas of male superiority as softball players. For example, the rules surrounding the positioning of a roving player in the outfield are based on the idea that the outfield needs to be set up so that there are open spaces where women can get hits. Rules about rovers typically require three outfielders remain behind a designated line for a female batter until the ball is hit. One outfielder is

allowed to rove in front of that line (in some cases, the rover can only be a female player). This allows teams to strategically position their rover, but still leaves considerable open space between the infielders and the outfielders where women can land a hit. The presumption is that women are not strong enough to earn a hit past the outfielders so that the outfielders must be positioned deep enough to allow women's hits to land. The two-base walk is another example of a gendered rule where a male batter issued a walk goes directly to second base. In some cases, the female batter is also given a walk and proceeds directly to first base, while in other cases she is still expected to hit (although placing the guy on second removes the likelihood of a double play). This rule discourages teams from walking male batters as a means to only let the female batters hit. These are just a couple of examples of the gendered rules, discussed by Wachs (2002), that propose to create a more level playing field for men and women in softball, but that reinforce stereotypes of women as less competent players.

One of the limitations of Wachs' study is that it focused only on league softball and did not examine tournament softball. While tournaments exist for all levels of play, many of the tournaments in southern California are highly competitive. The players in these tournaments often have significant softball or baseball experience in their backgrounds, including former professional and collegiate players among both the males and females. However, even at these highly competitive levels of play, gendered rules such as the two base walk and separate bat lists for men and women reinforce expectations of men as more skilled players.

In tournament softball, the most obvious gendered rule is the use of different sized balls for men and women. In tournaments, men hit the traditional 12 inch diameter softball. Women, on the other hand, hit a smaller, harder 11 inch diameter softball. However, the use of the smaller ball is not just limited to co-ed tournaments since women's tournaments also use the 11 inch ball. This fact distinguishes the ball size rule from other gendered rules since it carries over into single-sex play and is not simply a co-ed rule. Overall, these gendered rules provide a context for understanding how gender impacts perceptions or evaluations of hitting middle.

Current Study

This paper examines the normative and interactional elements that define the act of "going middle" in adult recreational softball. There is very little existing research examining softball, particularly at the adult recreational level. Given the high rates of participation in softball by adults, interactions on the softball field are ripe for sociological analysis. This is also an ideal setting for examining the role of gender in sports interactions because it is one of the few sports where women and men can participate together (Snyder and Ammons, 1993). Several research questions are addressed including: how is "going middle" perceived and what factors affect these perceptions? Also, special consideration is given to the role of gender in the norms surrounding this phenomenon. Given the dearth of research on this topic, this study is primarily descriptive, utilizing a rich dataset derived from observations as well as from an online survey to elucidate the interactions that occur on the softball field.

Data

Observational Data

Data for this paper come from time spent as a complete participant in adult recreational slowpitch softball tournaments in Southern California. Slowpitch softball is characterized by pitches that must meet some minimum arc requirement before hitting or crossing the plate. Minimum arc requirements typically range from 3-6 feet off the ground. The maximum pitching arc allowed varies considerably from 10 feet to unlimited arc. Each softball organization specifies its own rules in regards to pitching arcs.

Among regular players, distinctions are made between leagues and tournaments. Indeed, many tournament players indicate that they use league games "to get their swings in" for tournaments. For many players, tournaments are taken very seriously and the games often have a win-at-all-costs mentality which is not normally attributed to adult recreational softball.

In the greater Los Angeles area, there are at least half a dozen softball organizations running tournaments, so tournaments are played every weekend of the year. I have been a player in both co-ed and women's tournaments and have been an observer at men's tournaments. Collection of observational data began in September 2006 and continued through January 2008.

Survey Data

The survey was administered online using the services of SurveyMonkey.com. The use of an online survey hosting site facilitated data collection and ensured the security of information collected. A total of 31 questions were in the survey incorporating both closed choice and open-ended response questions. The questions on the survey relevant to this study included: initial questions designed to assess players' level and type of experience playing adult recreational softball; a series of questions designed to elicit information about a recent experience with a ball being hit up the middle in a softball game; questions on attitudes towards going middle and rules to protect pitchers; and basic demographic information.

Participants in the online survey were adult recreational softball players, both male and female. The survey was announced through emails sent by the author to softball contacts and through online bulletin board postings. Bulletin board postings were placed on softball websites for areas across the country in order to engage a broad sample of respondents. The postings invited interested participants to complete an online survey about their softball experiences. A total of 1,727 respondents accessed the online survey, although not all participants answered all questions so the number of respondents varied by question.

Of the 1,727 respondents to answer the survey, 1,494 answered background demographic questions. The resulting sample of respondents was 90.6% male (1,357 men, 141 women). This distribution is not surprising given the large number of males who frequent online softball message boards. In terms of age, the majority (45.8%) of respondents were in the 25-34 range, followed by 30.1% in the 35-44 age range. An additional 9.8% of the respondents were 45-54 and 7.4% of respondents were in each of the other two age

categories: 18-24 or 55 and over. In terms of racial/ethnic background, the large majority of respondents self-identified as White, non-Hispanic (83.8%). An additional 8.8% of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latino and the percentage of respondents in the remaining categories ranged from 1.7-2.1% (other categories included Black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Biracial or Multiracial, and Other). Respondents came from across the country, as all states except Wyoming had at least one respondent. The majority of respondents were from California (20.1%), followed by Kentucky (11.5%), Florida (5.9%) and Indiana (5.0%).

Demographic data was collected largely to better understand the background of respondents completing the online survey. As is evident from the demographics, the largest group of respondents to the online survey was White, non-Hispanic males. There was some variation in the ages of the respondents, but not much variation in terms of the gender and racial background of respondents to the survey. Given this lack of variation, the survey data is used to supplement the observational data rather than to separately test conclusions. This strategy allows for meaningful analysis of the interactions that occur on the softball field and gives validity to the conclusions drawn from the observational data.

Findings

"Going Middle"

A new terminology has arisen as the dangers which exist for pitchers have become more salient to all softball players. In particular, balls hit back at the pitcher (or up the middle of the field) are referred to as "going middle". Players make the distinction between hitting a ball up the middle versus hitting at the pitcher. Only those hits that are considered to be at the pitcher are considered to be "going middle". A ball hit over the pitcher's head or to either side of the pitcher would not be included as "going middle" even though it may pass close by the pitcher. Results from the online survey found that 59.5% of respondents indicated that they had hit the ball up the middle at the pitcher in a game and another 11.5% indicated that while they had not done so yet, they would consider doing so in the future (N=1515).

Sometimes the distinction between hitting up the middle versus at the pitcher is confounded, by the skill of the pitcher as a fielder or the skill of the batter. For example, "going middle" at a pitcher who would not be seen as capable of protecting themselves (someone who is older or who has obvious physical limitations such as knee braces) is seen as worse than "going middle" against a pitcher who is more skilled as a fielder. Thus, the competence of the pitcher as a fielder impacts perceptions of "going middle".

Perceptions of "going middle" are also impacted by the perceived skill of the batter since assumptions are made about the intentionality of the hit. Attributions of intentionality are important to whether a hit up the middle results in retaliation. As one player described, "middle wars start with a batter with known bat control attempting to hit at a pitcher". Another player described an incident where "a guy purposely hit at our pitcher because he was upset that we tried to back door a girl at third base". Another factor which contributes to perceptions of intentionality is whether the hitter apologizes. The norm exists that if one hits the middle accidentally, one should apologize for doing so. Results from the online

survey showed that the batter apologized after hitting middle in 58% of the recalled incidents (N=1534). If there is an apology (which is believed by the other team to be sincere), then the incident is considered over.

Whether the player runs out the hit can impact the view of an apology as sincere. As one player described, "at a tournament, a player on my team hit the pitcher on the thigh accidentally. My teammate didn't run to first and allowed the pitcher to make the out because he felt bad for hitting him". Another player described how, after he hit the pitcher, "I apologized to the pitcher and walked back to the dugout, allowing centerfield to throw to first to get me out". However, situations occur where players do not apologize and intentionality is evaluated in other ways.

When a player from one team "goes middle", members of the other team often respond by saying "middle's open". This means that now players on that team will feel free to hit towards the pitcher. Results from the online survey indicated that in 27% of the "going middle" incidents described, someone declared "middle's open" after the initial hit up the middle (N=1534). While players say they try to avoid hitting the pitcher normally, they express no qualms about hitting at a pitcher once "middle's open" has been declared. It is also assumed that once middle is opened, the number of hits at the pitcher will escalate as each team tries to protect their own pitcher by hitting at the other team's pitcher as shown in the following examples.

As one male player was walking by a game on his way to lunch, he saw one of his friends hit middle. When he returned from lunch, he asked another guy if everyone had been going middle. The guy responded that it wasn't happening. In this example, the man assumed that since one person had gone middle, it would continue. In this case it did not, although that is not true in all cases.

Another example of this expectation of retaliation occurred in a co-ed tournament. As the pitcher from one team came up to bat, players in the stands watching the game commented how the opposing pitcher had better be ready, since his team had just hit a line drive at the pitcher's head (that had been caught) in the previous half inning. In this case, the batter did not retaliate by going middle, although the comments from observers of the game indicate that retaliation was expected.

While the above examples did not involve retaliation, players recounted numerous other instances where retaliation did occur. As one player described, "no one declared middle open out loud but when we came up to hit, it was said then to each other. Our first batter bounced one off of their pitchers shin. He apologized right away but it was only to keep the other team from getting too angry". In another instance, a player explained "my buddy had a ball hit at him as retaliation for someone on our team hitting the ball at their pitcher". Another player describes, "the other team kept hitting at my pitcher so I put a ball off their pitcher's foot my next at bat". Results from the online survey showed that 22.2% of incidents of going middle described by respondents resulted in retaliation by the other team (N=1534).

Factors Affecting Perceptions of Going Middle

The Importance of Networks

Another factor which plays a role in the reciprocation of hits up the middle are the network connections which exist between players. Having played with members of an opposing team is presumed to protect a pitcher from being subjected to hits up the middle.

In an example, a pitcher for one team regularly played with the male members of the opposing team. After the opposing team had hit up the middle a number of times during their game, he expressed disbelief in a discussion with me after the game over the fact that they had done that. He was completely taken aback by it and quite angry that they had done so.

In another example, a pitcher commented to me that he wouldn't mind playing a certain other team because he knew they would not hit middle at him. He felt that because he knew the players on that team and had played with them before, they would avoid hitting middle at him. Because of the amount of softball played by many participants, it is not uncommon for players to be teammates in one tournament and then on opposing teams in another. This is particularly true when players are involved in both single-sex and co-ed tournaments. In the online survey, 69.4% of respondents said they would be less likely to hit up the middle if the pitcher on the opposing team is a friend and 59.6% indicated they would be less likely to hit up the middle if the opposing pitcher was an acquaintance (N=1504).

Role of Gender in Coed Softball – the Pitcher

In competitive tournaments, a female pitcher is frowned upon by the other team. The men often feel they must change their swing so as to avoid any chance of hitting the female pitcher. Even if the team with the female pitcher hits middle, the men on the other team often have a hard time reciprocating because of the gender of the pitcher.

In one instance, a team with a female pitcher had developed, over the course of the day, a reputation for hitting middle at the opposing pitchers. In one game, the team was already leading by close to 20 runs when a player hit a line drive at the opposing pitcher's head which resulted in the pitcher getting a black eye as the ball tipped off his glove. The players on that team did not get the chance to retaliate as the game ended soon after the incident. However, the members of that team relayed the incident to the players of another team in an effort to get that team to retaliate. However, even on this new team, the male players said that they felt they could not hit the ball hard at the pitcher because it was a woman on the mound. The players felt badly that they were not able to reciprocate (both for the player injured on the other team as well as for their own pitcher). The only player to hit the ball hard at the female pitcher in that game was one of the female players, whose line drive was caught by the pitcher.

In another tournament, one of the teams had a woman pitching in the tournament and some of the guys sitting in the bleachers watching the game commented on how they would go middle, no matter what. In a separate conversation, however, one guy said how he would never hit middle on a woman. The conversation then evolved into a discussion of how using

a woman pitcher is believed to be a strategic move by a team to throw off the guys' swings, since the men will try to not hit at her.

Both of these examples illustrate how female pitchers are frowned upon in co-ed softball since it is presumed that they would not be able to adequately defend themselves if a man hit the ball at them. Results from the online survey showed that 81.7% of respondents would be less likely to hit middle if a woman is pitching (N=1504). This reflects or reinforces gender stereotypes of women as less capable softball players than men. The presumption exists that a female pitcher would not adequately be able to defend herself against a ball hit by a male batter. This underscores the stereotype of women as less competent players since men express unwillingness to hit at a female pitcher out of a fear that she might get hurt. She is seen as less capable of fielding her position (or of defending herself against a hard hit up the middle) than a male pitcher.

Role of Gender in Co-ed Softball – the Batter

Since female pitchers are rare in co-ed softball, gendered expectations come into play far more often regarding the batter.

During the playoff game, some of the girls on one team had been yelling "By You!" on various hits going up the middle. The pitcher then made a double play on a ball hit up the middle by a woman and said how that hit wasn't getting by. Then, a guy from the hitting team started walking out on the field yelling at the pitcher about how it was a girl who had hit the ball. Even though a number of players came out of the dugout, the fight never escalated beyond yelling.

This example illustrates how hits up the middle are viewed differently when they are done by women or men. A hard hit up the middle by a man is presumed to be intentional whereas a hard hit up the middle by a woman is presumed to be accidental. Even when a highly skilled female player goes middle, male players generally ignore the possibility that it was intentional. Indeed, if the female batter apologizes, a male pitcher may ignore it or explain that the apology is unnecessary. On the other hand, male batters get criticized if they do not provide a sincere apology for going middle.

It is also considered inappropriate for a guy to make a play that shows up a woman (such as snapping a catch or talking as this pitcher did). This expectation that women are not as competent and should not be shown up by a man still held in the above example, even though the women on the hitting team had been verbally taunting the pitcher and indicating that their behavior was intentional. Certainly, these gender stereotypes are tied in with notions of masculinity. A male player may be loathe to admit any fear from a ball hit by a (presumably weaker) woman, thus they are expected to brush off any balls hit middle at them by women.

The idea that women are not skilled enough to go middle intentionally was expressed by a male pitcher at another tournament.

After a woman hit a hard line drive at the pitcher (which was caught), a woman on the other team yelled "why are you hitting at my pitcher?" and another woman yelled "we can hit

middle too!". In the next half inning, the first batter tried to hit middle but it was a weak hit and he was thrown out. After returning to the dugout, the pitcher said he wondered why the other team was crying about the girl going middle, since it is not like women have bat control.

This example shows how the expectation of male players is that women do not have the bat control (or in some cases the strength) to worry about when they hit middle. Results from the online survey indicated that 94% of respondents said they would be not at all likely to retaliate a hit up the middle if the batter was a woman but only 36.4% would be not at all likely to reciprocate a hit up the middle by a man (N=1514). Another pitcher echoed this sentiment when he said that he didn't mind when women hit middle, just when men do it. These differential expectations for competence support previous research that has found that even when men and women are subjectively evaluated as similarly athletic, males are expected to be better hitters than females (Biernat and Vescio, 2002).

The above examples also illustrate a gender difference in expectations of competence for female players. In both instances, female players were making statements about women's hits that indicate their belief that going middle was intentional. However, both the reactions of the men and their statements indicate that men do not share this belief that women can hit middle intentionally or that it is not problematic when they do so. Wachs (2005) found that superlative performances by female softball players were interpreted in ways that undermined their competence. Outstanding plays were attributed to luck or contextualized as being "good for a girl". As Wachs (2005) demonstrates, differential competence is attributed to men and women in terms of their softball skills. Because of general expectations that men are better athletes than women, it is assumed that men have greater bat control when hitting the ball. Thus, men who go middle are presumed to have done so on purpose. Most women who hit middle are assumed to have done so accidentally.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that the phenomenon of "going middle" in adult recreational softball is defined by certain normative expectations. These norms reflect beliefs that a player should not hit middle at a pitcher they know (importance of networks) and should not hit at a woman pitcher (role of gender – the pitcher). Also, hits by women are not to be treated as "going middle" in the same way that hits by men are (role of gender – the batter). In particular, female batters are presumed to hit middle accidentally rather than purposefully, but this belief appears to be held only by male players, not female players.

Adult recreational softball is one of the few sporting arenas where men and women participate together (Snyder and Ammons, 1993). As such, it provides an ideal setting for examining gendered norms and stereotypes in sports. For the sport of softball and for softball players, this research demonstrates that certain factors affect whether an initial ball being hit up the middle could escalate into a confrontation or even a larger conflict between the teams. Softball organizations need to consider what rules to put in place to insure the safety of players in a time when technology has increased the danger of playing the sport for participants. Instituting rules such as closing the pitcher's box to line drives (this rule states that a line drive hit through the box where the pitcher stands to deliver the pitch is an

automatic out) can reduce the frequency of players “going middle” and the likelihood of retaliation.

References

- Amateur Softball Association (2010). <http://www.softball.org/adult/index.asp>
- Amenta, E. (2007). *Professor baseball: Searching for redemption and the perfect lineup on the softball diamonds of Central Park*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Biernat, M. & Vescio, T.K. (2002). She swings, she's great, she's benched: Implications of gender-based shifting standards for judgment and behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(1): 66-77
- Dickson, P. (1994). *The Worth book of softball*. New York: Facts on File Inc
- Malcom, N. (2003). Constructing female athleticism: A study of girls' recreational softball. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(10):1387-1404
- Snyder, E. E. and Ammons, R. (1993). “Adult Participation in Coed Softball: Relations in a Gender Integrated Sport.” *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 16(1):3-15
- Wachs, F. L. (2005). The boundaries of difference: negotiating gender in recreational sport. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75(4):527-547
- Wachs, F. L. (2002). Leveling the playing field: negotiating gendered rules in coed softball. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26(3):300-316