



Changeup

By Jamie Goldberg
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Striding onto the freshly mowed field at Wig Beach, I began my Sagehen softball senior day with a smile on my face, caught up in the festive mood. Streamers, balloons and banners celebrating the soon-to-be graduates on the team sparkled in the sunlight of a Saturday afternoon. But as I stood, a few hours later, about to step in to face Cal Lutheran's top pitcher, tears filled my eyes. I wiped my face with the V-neck of my once-crisp, now grass-stained uniform and took a deep breath.

It wasn't just my final at-bat for the Pomona-Pitzer Sagehens or my final at-bat after four years and 300 at-bats as a collegiate softball player. It was my final at-bat ever in the somewhat obscure world that is fastpitch softball, a realm I had been competing in since the third grade.

Fastpitch softball doesn't have the name recognition of baseball, basketball or soccer. Yet, 2.4 million people in the U.S. above the age of six, mostly females, play fastpitch, according to a 2012 report from the Sports and Fitness Industry Association. At the college level, that number dwindles to 29,670 women. A select few women's college fastpitch players go on to play for the U.S. National Team. Others will join the handful of adult fastpitch leagues. But for the vast majority of us, college marks both the pinnacle and the abrupt end of our fastpitch careers. After that, players must learn to accept a recreational form of the sport. As my former teammate Kindra Wilson '08 puts it: "When you graduate it's a forced retirement. The only option is slowpitch softball."

With more than three times as many participants, the slowpitch version of softball far exceeds fastpitch in both numbers and name recognition. It is an all-inclusive game that draws skilled former fastpitch softball and baseball players, recreational players and novices looking for a social activity. Young and old play it at picnics and parks across the country. For former fastpitch athletes, it's the only way to stay connected to the game, but it's not *our game*.

I started playing fastpitch when I was 8. Within four years, I was competing year-round on select teams, traveling around California from my home in Marin County to play four to seven games each weekend. We would play in the early mornings or late at night, in fierce wind or light rain, in 110-degree July heat in Modesto and 40-degree chill at Lake Tahoe. I would return home with bumps and bruises and a coat of dirt covering my face.

On weekdays, I attended practices or met with a private hitting coach who taught me to shorten my swing to get around on a fastball—at the college level, pitchers throw upwards of 65 m.p.h. from only 43 feet away forcing the batter to react more quickly than a Major League Baseball player connecting with a 90 m.p.h. fastball.

For many of us skilled enough to play in college, fastpitch became our identity. We sacrificed parties, hanging out with friends or even taking coveted classes, to be at the field daily until the sun set. We attended 8 a.m. weight training and shared meals and weekends together. We were a family, united by the same goals: to play to our potential and to win and lose as a team. We all loved the rush of competing on the field for each other and our schools. We celebrated our wins, and lingered over losses. Another former teammate of mine, Ali Corley '11, who still holds the Sagehen career homerun record, sums it up best: “It was such a huge part of my life. It’s hard being very good at something that doesn’t matter when you graduate.”

Back to my own final at bat as a Sagehen, I vividly recall standing in the batter’s box as Cal Lutheran’s pitcher sent the ball rising toward the plate. I swung and heard the loud ping of rubber meeting metal. The yellow ball soared nearly 200 feet toward the left field fence. The outfielder sprinted back, looked up, and, in one fluid motion, extended her glove toward the ball.

Out! Nothing came easy in fastpitch. Only a few months after I graduated from Pomona, I stood on a makeshift softball field in tennis shoes with a group of colleagues at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. As the captain, I brought extra gloves for my new team and assigned positions at request. We talked about where we would grab drinks afterwards and I suppressed my urge to give my new teammates pointers on their swings. I secretly wanted to stack my team with the best players.

I’m not the only former Sagehen player who has had to adjust. Shortly after Wilson graduated, she too joined a company slowpitch team. That lasted a season—it was too hard to get 10 players to commit to weekly games. But she found another team and kept playing. At first, Corley wanted nothing to do with slowpitch. As a point of pride, she doesn’t even compare it to fastpitch. But after a few months of inactivity, she joined a team to throw and swing again, even though, “it’s not the same level of intensity as fastpitch.”

And that intensity is what we former fastpitchers miss. When I first started playing slowpitch, it was difficult to watch teammates let lazy fly balls drop in the outfield or forget to tag up. And I didn't have the same pride hitting a slowly pitched ball grooved down the center of the plate. In the box, it took me a few tries to sufficiently slow down the compact swing I had been polishing for years, so as to squarely hit the high arc lob pitch characteristic of slowpitch.

I found my mood fluctuating with the score of the game, my competitive nature sometimes making my teammates anxious. But with time the fastpitch world has felt farther away. Over the last two seasons, playing in games filled with forgotten errors, I have become far less concerned with softball pedigree. Some of my teammates are skilled athletes in their prime, who are as immersed in following Major League Baseball as I am, and channel their energies and competitive juices into slowpitch. Others are less experienced, but still relish the camaraderie that comes with playing for a team of like-minded colleagues. When my team spiraled through a losing streak this season, I found it didn't detract from light hearted bantering with my newfound friends. We tossed the ball around on the sidelines, chewed over projects we were working on and leisurely took photos of our teammates up to bat. No statistics and no pressure.

For the first time in my recent memory, I could simply play softball for the pleasure of the game and the people around me. Best of all, as I began to adjust to this style of play, some of the old adrenaline came back. I was competing. This season, as I stood in left field, body hunched over, anticipating the ball, it didn't matter that half of my team were novices, or that they would never understand what it felt like to play fastpitch. This had to become my new experience of "softball," too—the game I can play throughout the decades of my life until my legs or arms won't hold up anymore. And so I'm learning to let fastpitch go.

Slowly.