

OHIO HAWKS SOAR

Editorial and photos courtesy of Jamie L. Clark

In comparison to other softball organizations, the Ohio Hawks is still a very new organization. Formed just four years ago, the Hawks debuted with one 12U team. In 2010, the Hawks will field thirteen teams, 10U to 18U. There is no lack of organizations a girl and her family can play ball for in Northwest Ohio, so why are players flocking to the Hawks? Why the meteoric rise? Good questions.

Playing for the Hawks is an experience. Girls just do not come here to play ball. Doug Lenos, the President of the Ohio Hawks and the rest of the Board of Directors want it that way. Lenos thinks it is important to "establish a base of players that understand the game and were trained in fundamentals as 10/12U players." Sounds easy, right? After all, that is what all coaches want. But it is not that easy and most of us know it.

So how does Lenos and the Hawks organization plan on establishing that base? Lenos says that they have identified and are now implementing a uniform method of coaching. They want the players learning the same fundamentals, the same drills, and from coaches with very similar styles. As an organization, they are most proud of their coaching staffs' dedication. Lenos says that at a clinic hosted by another organization, of the 40 coaches in attendance, 23 of them were Hawks staff. That dedication extends to who the Hawks coaches learn from. As an organization, the Hawks have now signed on with some of the best instructors in the country.

At a clinic in November, Clinic Director Derek Jacobs brought in five different instructors. Superstars in their own right, each of them would have drawn an

exceptionally large crowd. What do you get when you bring them all in at the same time? A dynamite cast is what you get. You get priceless information all in one place. Jacobs covered his bases, bringing in a fielding instructor, a coach and physiologist, a catching instructor, a pitching instructor, and a hitting coach.

Howard Kobata, known for being a tough taskmaster and his mountain of knowledge, offered coaches a brief glimpse of a few drills from his repertoire. In a grand ballroom, Howard pulled out his trademark buckets, enlisted two players, and began instructing. Watching him, it is evident that this is what Howard loves

Deb Hartwig



Bill Hillhouse

to do. In moments, he can pinpoint the areas in a player's skill that need work. Once in the indoor facility, coaches lined the sidelines, scribbling notes and scratching their heads. Howard ran through drills with countless girls, explaining, in minute detail, each drill and how to execute it to achieve the desired outcome. If you have never seen Howard in action, it is an experience, one that most players, coaches, and parents do not forget quickly. He rolls balls, two at a time, the girls field them and throw to a target. Each pair gets immediate feedback. "Too slow. Wrong foot." Howard keeps up a steady stream. When players start to field the ball correctly, Howard then pushes on to the next drill. With so much information to teach, Howard is constantly in motion. He says that he always wants more time to instruct and work with coaches so they can in turn use the drills in the most effective way possible.

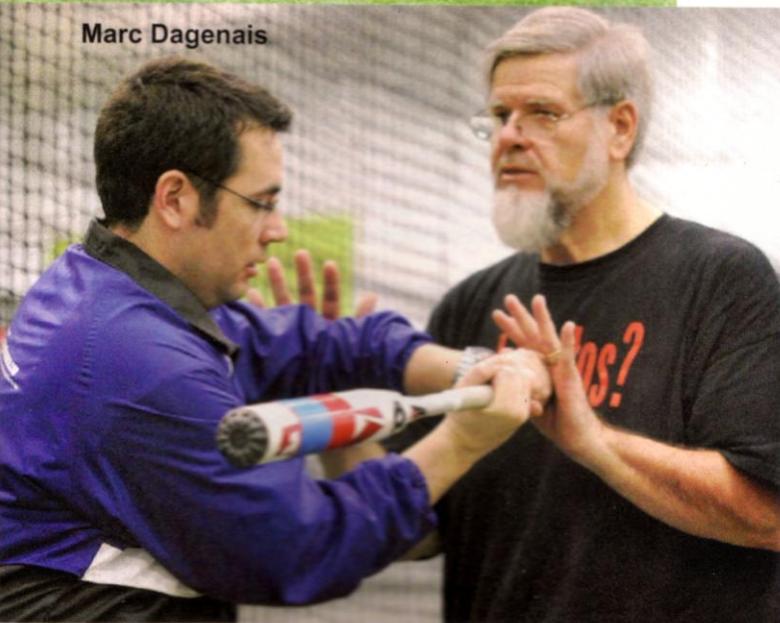
Where does one start when talking about Marc Dagenais? His list of credentials and accomplishments is quite long and a bit intimidating. But as you talk to Marc, his easy going manner puts you at ease and then you realize that you have been standing there talking to him for over an hour and you have covered everything from getting out of the batter's box to the importance of working on core

strength. He is a veritable mountain of information. Coaching since his early teens, Marc was the youngest coach to earn full level III coaching certification at the age of 19. He has studied sports psychology and physiology. He is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist and has worked with both the women's and the men's Canadian National teams and a number of other elite athletes. Marc brings so much to the table yet during a break, you could find him in the hitting cage with another instructor, discussing the mechanics of hitting. Of the clinic, Marc says that it was great to "meet so many great softball minds in one spot." That is precisely what the Hawks were aiming for.

Howard Kobata



Marc Dagenais



Deb Hartwig can captivate an audience. Her passion for her topic is evident and as her talk progresses her energy infects the crowd. Coaches begin to ask questions and Deb's carefully planned talk takes on a life of its own. She comes back to her main point, that as coaches and teachers, we are often ineffective with our delivery. Hartwig stresses that many times, players do not understand what coaches say and the best way to teach them is to show them. At the facility, Deb sets up her equipment and has a catcher get in the cage. They run through the drill and then the player, Mom and Dad, and a group of coaches, watch as Deb works through the player's motion frame by frame with the Right View Pro software on her laptop. Deb compares this young lady's motion to one she has stored, one of another young player who uses the correct mechanics, moving the footage forward by milliseconds. The split screen view of our catcher and the other catcher help our young lady, and the growing group of coaches, compare every aspect of her mechanics. Deb follows her own advice, showing this young lady the same exact things she would have told her on the field during practice.

Bill Hillhouse and Deb Hartwig are similar in that they both believe that the proof is in the demonstration. Bill's talk seemed to cause confusion with coaches as a good many of his points are contrary to what they have been taught and in turn teach their pitchers. At the facility, Hillhouse demonstrates and then instructs players in the mechanics he himself uses. Hillhouse himself will say that a lot of what he teaches flies in the face of what many coaches teach. He demonstrates countless times and as the pitchers adjust their mechanics and their pitches start to hit the glove with more frequency, the confusion starts to fade. Parents and coaches are loyal to their pitching instructor, more so than with any other type of instructor and Hillhouse understands this. He presents his view, demonstrates how he pitches, and explains why he does what he does. The explanations make sense and it is hard to argue with the logic of what Bill teaches.

Everyone in the softball world knows who Crystl Bustos is, but how many of us know her hitting coach Howard Carrier? An unassuming man, Howard says that he did not teach Crystl how to hit, he taught her how to hit the ball farther. Drawing on his own life experiences, Howard knows firsthand about balance and weight transfer. He also knows that these are two of the biggest keys to hitting and that most female players are not taught to hit, or throw for that matter, using their lower bodies as efficiently as males are. Before Howard starts working with a player on hitting, he watches her throw. In doing this, he sees time and again that most females do not use their legs to generate more power in their throw. Carrier says that this carries over into hitting and that getting a player to use her legs and core more effectively and efficiently is a large key to hitting with more power. Carrier has teamed up with Crystl Bustos in the northwest Ohio area and provides hitting instruction to a good number of players, many of them Hawks.

From the time a girl begins to play for the Hawks, she will be learning the game in a well thought out and focused manner. From year to year, the girls are going to be taught by coaches who coach and teach in a similar method. Hawks coaches are required to attend clinics in the off season, weekly meetings during the season, and work together to develop a solid instruction and practice plan that is similar across all the teams. Players have use of an indoor facility in the off season and access to return visits from a few of the instructors from the clinic. Lenos and Jacobs hope to be able to bring these instructors back for return visits to continue with what has been started.

In a short period of time, the Hawks organization has proved that they mean business. In 2009, the 10u team that is the beginning of that skill base the Hawks are trying to develop, went 52-16, won 8 tournaments, including the Midwest World Series. This success is getting attention and in turn is drawing players from further and further away. If you think they have accomplished a lot in four short years, keep watching, the Hawks are just getting started.

For more information: Ohio Hawks - www.ohiohawks.com; Howard Kobata - www.softballskills.com; Marc Dagenais - www.softballperformance.com; Deb Hartwig - www.justsoftball.com.

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