



# Coaching 6u (TBall) & 8u (Machine Pitch) Softball

## Vienna Girls Softball League (VGSL) Vienna, Virginia USA

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## **PREFACE**

The manual is intended to benefit 6u and 8u (MP) Division coaches, players, and parents in the Vienna Girls Softball League. It is intended to help making coaching easier, save coaches time, and provide ideas on how to be a better coach. Suggested practice and game tactics, ideas to get volunteers and handle problems, and sample email notes and forms that coaches can use are provided. Policies and rules are also included.

If you have patience, enjoy teaching young girls, and played any recreational softball or baseball (even as a child yourself), you can be a great 6u or 8u (MP) coach. Yet, having played softball and baseball myself for 20 years and being a parent of 3 daughters, I was surprised to learn how much I did not know about coaching young girls when I started. Now that I have been a coach for several seasons, read a few books on coaching, and shared information with my fellow coaches, I am more informed. I hope by sharing some of my knowledge and experiences with you, that you will find coaching as fun and fulfilling as I have, and also start off with a better knowledge base than I did. This manual reflects not just my insights but those shared with me by contributors and reviewers listed on the cover page, especially Eric Cohen, co-author and VGSL Training Coordinator.

It was my third practice in my first season. A batter noticed a worm in front of home plate. She said “Look coach a worm.” My initial response was a foolish “OK are you ready to hit the ball, now.” Luckily I corrected my mistake. The catcher said “Yes, it is a worm”. The on-deck batter said “Where”. Then I yelled to everyone “Hey girls, there is a worm. Come up here and look at it”. I joined the fun and went with it. Softball is not that important. Fun is. Three minutes later we resumed our practice. At that point I realized I had the right attitude and had arrived in the zone. I had become a 6u coach. OK you get the idea now.

Two years later, I am thrilled to see one of these girls hitting almost every ball thrown to her and another knocking it to the outfield grass every other at bat. A few can play catch from 30 feet apart. Some can tell me which base to throw to and why. It is a big time commitment with no monetary award but many coaches will tell you they get a lot of pleasure out of teaching a fun game and watching these girls develop socially, mentally, and physically. The smiles and excitement they generate make me feel glad that I have invested the time to coach. If you think coaching at this level is for you read on. . . .

## **INTRODUCTION - EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**

You need to be aware that this is about teaching the most basics of the basic. This manual is focused on 6u (was known as 6U) and 8u (was known as Machine or Coach Pitch) softball. If you're teaching 8U or 6U forget about teaching how to back up a throw, or slide, or do the hop-skip to throw from the outfield. If you absolutely want to do that don't coach at this level. You can read many great books on coaching softball (including three that I cite frequently in this manual). Yet very little information in those books will benefit coaches and players at this level; that's why I wrote this manual. Remember what you are doing . . . coaching 5-8 year olds. You are helping to build the character of the women of tomorrow. Recognize how important this is. Enjoy their smiles, silliness and the experience. Encourage them to have fun and you will too.

And many coaches will stick with a team for years and eventually will be teaching many of the same girls how to turn a double-play.

Many of us coaches have played for years, and we will take a lot of things for granted. Yet, it is very likely that most 6u players and some 8U players will know absolutely nothing about softball. So while terms like home plate, the pitcher's mound, and the batter's box are common language to us, these are foreign terms to them. If you tell a player to run home when they are standing on third base already, she may look confused and say it's too far and look towards the parking lot. It's not because the 60 feet from third to home is too far, it's because they are thinking about how to get home and that starts by getting to the car. Remember to choose your words carefully, Home plate sounds like a plate on the table at home. Some players may prefer to call it fourth base. After a few weeks the proper terminology should be taught to the girls and then used regularly.

Just because it's obvious to you that after you hit the ball you should (a) run and (b) run to first base first, this is not obvious to young girls that have not played before. They may not run at all or may choose to run to third base. After all most players bat righty and after swinging they are facing towards and closer to third base, so it would seem logical to run to third base.

**The three most important concepts of 6u and 8u (CP) are:**

- 1. Don't swing a bat when someone is standing next to you.**
- 2. Don't stand next to someone who is swinging a bat.**
- 3. Don't throw the ball if the person you are throwing it to is not looking at you.**

Other concepts you will initially teach are:

1. Take the glove when you go in the field and not your water bottle.
2. Take the bat with you when you go up to bat (and not the glove).
3. When you bat, face the field, not the fence. (Note that by fence, I mean backstop, but don't say backstop to a novice player since they probably will not know what that means.)

The pitcher's rubber is not used for pitching at this level. However, it is still a center of attention. During games, in between batted balls many defensive players will enjoy wiping every particle of dirt off of it until it shines in the sun. Other players situated in a semi-circle around the shining pitcher's rubber will be focused on another field improvement, building dust mounds. This is not what coaches think of when they think of coaching softball. But this is the reality of coaching at this level. Many coaches started at a later age or just don't recall what it was like on the softball field this far back.

There is a good chance many beginning coaches will be coaching many of the same players for several years. Coaches will be amazed and proud of the players' social, mental, and physical progress and will be teaching more intricate parts of the game. But that comes later. For now, coaches should go along with the fun while teaching the most basic of the basics.

## **Chapter 2. Coaches' responsibilities, before the season starts**

### **- Getting Selected**

The 6u and 8u (CP) Division Commissioners, respectively, are responsible for selecting all head

coaching positions for teams. Not everyone who volunteers to be a head coach gets to serve as a Head Coach because it is possible that there may be more adults requesting to be head coaches than teams. The Commissioner selects head coaches positions based on prior softball coaching experience, prior teaching or coaching experience with this age group, playing experience, ability to interact with players, parents, other coaches and the commissioner, and an assessment of the volunteer's ability to conform with VGSL and 8u (CP)policies.

**Organizational Meeting** - Coaches attend an organizational meeting with the Commissioner where they will be given a general overview of the Division policies and rules. This is usually held during the week preceding the first practice date. This meeting is used for program orientation, going over these rules, policies and guidelines, and answering questions to help coaches get started.

### Acquiring and Organizing a Team

Getting a Roster – Coaches' daughters or other designated relations are automatically assigned to the coaches' team. Coaches may also request other particular players on their team. The Commissioner will attempt to meet those requests while also ensuring that the teams are organized, in order of priority by, (1) accommodating player requests to be with a prior team or coach, (2) car pool requests, (3) school, and (4) team parity.

Practice and Game Times - The Division Commissioner and Schedule Coordinator will be responsible for setting the practice and games times and fields. Coaches will be given an opportunity to request particular times and fields from a set of designated slots made available to the division.

Uniforms - Coaches need to work with the uniform coordinator to get shirts, visors, and socks for players. The issued uniforms should be worn by all players during games but exceptions are granted (e.g., a girl lost or forgot her hat or shirt). However, uniforms cannot be altered e.g., writing all over them, cutting off sleeves, changing color, etc. without the approval of the division commissioner and the uniform coordinator.

Equipment - Coaches will be informed by either the Commissioner or the Equipment Coordinator when and where to pick up equipment. Coaches either need to get the equipment themselves or find a parent or coach to pick up the equipment at the designated place and time.

VGSL supplied equipment:

- Bats
- Batting helmets
- Balls
  - Practice
  - Game – 1 new ball for each home game
  - Whiffle (available, request if desired)
- Catching gear- mask, chest protector, shin guards
- Uniform- shirts, socks, visors
- First aid kit, cold packs
- Batting tee, construction cone (works as a cheap tee)

You may wish to get these on your own

- Towels for wiping wet game balls
- Ball bucket
- Wiffle balls – golf ball and softball sizes
- Hair bands
- Brush for home plate
- Cooler and bags of ice

If you need any additional items, contact the equipment coordinator.

### **General Responsibilities of a Coach**

The vast majority of players will not regularly play softball once they leave VGSL. Yet they will learn valuable lessons in teamwork, sportsmanship, interpersonal, and athletic skills that they will stay with them for many years. It is the coaches' responsibility to teach good sportsmanship, teamwork, provide encouragement, and, most importantly provide a safe environment. Coaching involves more than just bringing equipment to the field and helping girls to play softball. It involves preparing players mentally and physically and providing a positive role model (ASEP 2004). Coaches need to have a genuine concern for their players and a desire to share their own enthusiasm and knowledge about softball (ASEP 2004).

The head coach, operating within the broad guidelines of VGSL policies, runs the team with regard to setting practice times and days, determining offensive and defensive strategies, assigning player positions and establishing playing time. A head coach should be available for games and practices at least two hours per day, two or three times per week for the duration of a season. A head coach must also find time to interact with parents, other coaches and League officials and respond to e-mails on a daily basis.

The head coach should have 2-4 assistant coaches. Assistant coaches are selected by the head coach. Coaches should explain their expectations and philosophy with the assistant coach. A head coach should arrange for an assistant coach to run the team when the head coach needs to miss practices or games or is unavailable to respond to email and phone questions.

VGSL coaches are also required to be good role models for children and exhibit good sportsmanship. Coaches will try to insure that all the kids have fun and avoid negative criticism of children. Coaches will not use profanity, abusive language or threatening behavior towards any player, parent, coach or official. Coaches need to ensure they can commit to these obligations and standards. Coaching privileges can be revoked by the Commissioner.

### **ORGANIZING YOUR TEAM (Before Season Begins)**

Once you have a team it is necessary to contact the players' parents and inform them that you are the coach. Chances are the players and their parents are anxiously awaiting this notification so try to do this as soon as you get your roster. It is advisable to make an introductory phone call to each family and inform parents of the first practice and to ask them to look for a more descriptive email. Ask for confirmation that they received your information. Your email should look something like this.

Welcome to the *name of team* in the 8u (MP) Division of Vienna Girls Softball League (VGSL). The following girls are on our team this season . . . First, I want to thank *name* for volunteering to be assistant coach. This is our third season together. Also, thanks to *name* for also volunteering to help coach. I am looking forward to a fun season with players and parents.

For the first practice be sure your daughter has a glove, size at least 10 1/2 inches, water bottle and rubber cleats. **First practice is at Louise Archer ES, Friday March 10, at 5pm.** Please plan on staying after practice for a parents' meeting so we can all meet each other, discuss the plan for this season, and answer any questions you may have. The Second practice is Monday March 13, at Louise Archer at 5pm.

For those of you that do not know me, I coached the *name of team* in the spring and 8u (CP) in the fall. I am also an assistant coach to the *name of team* in the *name of division* where my oldest daughter plays and helped coach them in 8u (CP) last year. Prior to coaching, I played baseball for # of years in *high school* and before that I played softball for # of years. I take a lot of pride in helping young girls develop their social and athletic skills by participating in team sports.

I look forward to another fun season. Please confirm you received this email and let me know if you have any questions.

*Name*  
*Coach Name of team*  
*Phone number*

Put together a team roster that has addresses and phone numbers (home, work, cell) and distribute this to all parents. Ask them to verify that their information is correct or supply the missing information. Distribute this corrected roster to everyone. **Have a copy of the roster at all team events.**

## **Interacting with Parents**

Team Parent Meeting - Coaches should meet with parents at the beginning of the season to review rules, discuss schedules, answer questions and help the parents get to know one another. A good idea is to hold the first meeting at a playground adjacent to the softball field after the first practice. The players will have something to do, and the meeting can take place with (hopefully) minimal distractions. At this meeting the need for volunteers should be stressed and those who indicated on their registration form that they volunteered for a position should be publicly thanked.

Coaches can also provide parents with a written list of expectations, along with parent roles and responsibilities. Many parents, especially those whom have not recently been involved in sports, may not realize that players need to be at games at least 15 minutes prior to the start of the game to warm up.

## Problems with Parents

Occasionally there may be problems with parents. Typical problems include overbearing parents who "know" their child should play a certain position, verbal abuse (and, rarely, physical abuse), and inappropriate criticism of the coach. Most overbearing or problem parents usually just want to be heard and by giving them the time to listen to their concerns they are usually satisfied (Strahan 2001). Below is a set of guidelines for parents that may help to prevent these problems

from arising. People generally behave better if they know the rules. Distribute these before the parent meeting and discuss them at the meeting. Let them know that these are the guidelines established for the entire division, not just your team. In some cases it may be necessary to remind them of the League guidelines about negative comments and criticism which are also provided below.

### **Parent Activities and Responsibilities to help Players enjoy the game more**

- Arrive at the requested time with the proper equipment and water bottle
- Applaud all good efforts and good plays or remain silent.
- Allow the coaches to coach without outside interference or influence.
- See that your children receive ample positive encouragement and hugs regardless of the outcome of their games.
- Ensure that players attend games and practices and, when an absence is required, inform the coach in advance.
- Remain off the field and out of the dugout unless otherwise requested by the Head coach.
- Accept the authority of the coach and acknowledge that it is the coaches' prerogative to choose the type of play, assign who will play what positions, and determine playing time within the Division's minimum and maximum playing requirements.
- Discuss any concerns or thoughts regarding playing or players with the coach privately.

### **Drop-off and Pickup at the field**

A child should not be dropped off at a game, practice, or event without having an adult besides the coach able to assume responsibility for the child. This is especially important if the weather is questionable (cold or wet) since such weather can lead to an abrupt termination of practice.

When parents leave the field they need to ask another adult to watch their child and be sure their child knows who that is. This could be the coach but preferably will be another responsible adult. However, it is the coaches' responsibility to keep track of all the players. They have been entrusted to the coach during practice or game. Nothing will destroy a parent's confidence in the coach quicker than losing their child. Responsibility for the child extends until they have left the field with the person picking her up. After games and practices, coaches can be busy talking to parents and putting away equipment. Do not let that interfere with attention to the players. At this age level, under no circumstance should a practice take place with less than 3 adults present. In the event of a weather emergency or severe injury, an instant departure from the field may be necessary and 3 parents and drivers will be needed to accompany the players to cars. Coaches are expected to make sure all players are picked up before leaving the field. With the ubiquity of cell phones, a parent who is late for pick-up can usually be contacted. (Be sure to get parents' cell phone numbers at the start of the season.) If necessary, coaches should remain at the field or take the player to their home. (Discuss this policy at the team meeting.) With the exception of the coaches' daughter, a player should not be alone in the car with the coach. If a coach has to drive a player home, the coaches' daughter should also be in the car.

### **Getting Volunteers**

Some teams have several parents eager to help the coach run a practice or game. In other instances the head coach may struggle to find assistance to run practices and games, handle equipment, and keep the players happy and in compliance with Division rules. It is very helpful to clarify to parents that the coaches are volunteers and require assistance from several other parents to run the team. After the introductory parent meeting coaches may wish to send an email out confirming volunteer participation. It may look something like this:

Parents of *name of team*,

Thanks for volunteering to help the *Team Name* enjoy playing and learning softball. Based on your registration forms and the team meeting, I went ahead and tentatively put together everyone's volunteer role. Our team parent will help assemble this volunteer list. Please expect to hear from her or contact *Name* if you have any questions or concerns. We still need quite a number of helpers for various activities. Thanks for helping to make it fun for the girls.

- Head Coach - *Name*
- Asst Coach - *Name* (helps with all on the field activity and leads team if head coach is out)
- Third Coach - *Name* (first and third base coach during games helps with practice most of the time)
- Bench Coach - *Name* (helps players follow batting order, put on helmets, occasional practice helper)
- Team Parent - *Name* (information resource, snack and party scheduler)
- Field Prep - *Name* (chalks the lines before the game, inspects the field for glass, holes, etc before the game and rakes the field)
- Equipment & Cleanup- *Name* (puts equipment away after game. Cleans up drinks. Makes sure players leave with glove, hat, water bottle)
- Photographer - *Name* (takes team picture, other pictures if time permits)
- Field day cleanup- Signs in and helps at Saturday *date* field cleanup day, begins at Caffi at 1030.

Head coaches should also inform the team parent to leave them off the snack schedule. Head coaches have plenty to do and enough to bring to the field and should be excluded from this added responsibility.

## Field Locations

Fields that are used by 8U and 6U are listed below. Other field locations are shown on the web site, [vgsl.org](http://vgsl.org). Coaches should have this list with them at practices and games. In the event of an emergency, it may be necessary to provide the street address of the field to the 911 dispatcher.

- **Caffi 1 - 120 Cherry St SE, Vienna-** Located next to the Vienna Community Center on Cherry Street.
- **Caffi 2 – 120 Cherry St SE, Vienna -** Located behind the Vienna Community Center and next to the W&OD bike path. There is a playground to the right of field.
- **Caffi 3-128 Center St S, Vienna-** The field is next to the Vienna Elementary School on Center Street. This field is also known as Vienna 3. There is a playground beyond left field.

- **Cunningham Park – 1001 Park St SE, Vienna** - From Rt. 123, go south on Park Street for approximately 1 mile. Cunningham Park School is on the right. The field is adjacent to the parking lot.
- **Meadow Lane Park – corner of Courthouse and Meadow Lane, Vienna** The park is on Courthouse Rd, between Rt. 123 and Nutley Street, but the field is actually on Meadow Lane. The field is adjacent to the tennis courts which are behind the playground. The playground is not visible from the field. (The facility provides a playground and picnic shelter, but restrooms are often locked.)
- **Louise Archer ES Fields 1 & 2 - 324 Nutley St NW, Vienna** The Louise Archer Fields are located behind Louise Archer ES on Nutley Street. Field 1 is to the left of the parking lot and directly behind the school. Field 2 is also behind the school but is the further away of the two fields. Bring chairs! There is a playground near the parking lot but the playground is not visible from the fields. (The field next to Field 1 beyond the fence is the Madison HS JV field.)

## **CHAPTER 2 - RUNNING YOUR TEAM (While Season is Underway)**

### **SAFETY ISSUES**

While VGSL does not require coaches to take a safety certification course, it is expected that all coaches will consider the safety of their players as their top priority. All injuries must be taken seriously. It may seem that a player is overreacting to what appears to be a minor injury, but coaches should not take any chances. Sometimes, the player is reacting more to the shock of the hurt than the actual pain. Regardless, talking to the player and finding out what hurts is essential. Some pains may hurt intensely for just a short time. Giving the player a little time to rest (and maybe applying some ice to the injury site) may be all that is required to recover. However, if in doubt, do not underestimate the injury. Sometimes parents may try to downplay an injury because they want their player to be “tough.” The coach needs to ignore this behavior and make his own best judgment about the injury.

**Equipment** Apart from sliders, batting helmets and catching gear, there is little other safety equipment regularly used in softball. (Mouthguards are probably not an issue in these age groups.) However, being properly dressed to play is important. Sandals and other open footwear are not appropriate for the softball field at any time. Dresses are not recommended but are permitted for religious or cultural values as long as shorts are worn underneath. Be sure the players and their parents are aware of how to dress.

Players should wear sliders on both legs. Many players tend to roll them down when they are in the field. This habit should be discouraged as the sliders can soften the force of ground balls hitting a player’s shins. Batters and baserunners must wear helmets with face masks and chin straps. This is a strict VGSL rule, no exceptions. Catchers are required to wear all catchers’ gear, even while just warming up a pitcher.

## Bat and Ball Safety

Only the batter and on-deck hitter should be allowed to hold or swing a bat, with one in the batter's box and the other in the on-deck circle. No other players should be allowed near those areas. Coaches must realize that 6U players and even some 8U players generally do not have the maturity to check around them to be sure the area is clear before they swing a bat. Children at this age may also walk right next to a player swinging a bat. Serious injuries may result from not being proactive.

Most 6U and some 8U players do not understand the line of a throw. During a game or a practice, a player may field a ball and throw to first base (or any base) despite the fact that another player may be in the line of her throw. Players need to be taught 1) to get out of that line by learning where the fielder will throw the ball after she gets it and 2) not to throw the ball at another player directly in the way.

Coaches should always have their VGSL provided first aid kits with them at all practices and games. The first aid kit should be kept with the rest of the equipment. That way the first aid kit will still be available if the Head Coach is not able to be at a practice or game and gives the equipment to an assistant.

## Provide a safe environment.

Coaches should make sure the field is safe for play before practices and games by walking the field and looking for broken glass, large rocks, and holes that might cause an ankle injury (Strahan 2001). Alternatively, this could be a job for a parent volunteer.

## Ice for Injuries

Ice should be available at all practices and games to treat simple but painful injuries. (Girls Softball 2006). It hurts to get hit by a softball. Having ice in a baggy is a useful way to deal with injuries such as this. Not only is the ice soothing, but it helps to keep the swelling down.

## Papers to Keep

Coaches need to have the addresses of fields with them in case of emergency to assist the 911 dispatcher in getting the ambulance to the right place as soon as possible. **Coaches should also have players' contact and medical information with them at all times (on the sign-up sheets) and be aware of the content of that information.** For instance, if a child has an allergy to peanuts, this information needs to be conveyed so that the snacks do not cause a problem. Coaches also need to know if players have allergies to bee stings, or other health problems in the event of an emergency when the parent is not at the field.

## Inclement Weather

Thunder and Lightning- If you hear thunder or see lightning, leave the field immediately. Do not try to get that one last play in. Lightning can strike even when the thunder sounds like it is a great distance away. Teams must then wait 30 minutes after the last occurrence of lightning and thunder to return to the field.

The following is the NCAA statement on lightning safety.

Be aware of how close lightning is occurring. The flash-to-bang method is the easiest and most convenient way to estimate how far away lightning is occurring. Thunder always accompanies lightning, even though its audible range can be diminished due to background noise in the immediate environment, and its distance from the observer. To use the flash-to-bang method, count the seconds from the time the lightning is sighted to when the clap of thunder is heard. Divide this number by five to obtain how far away (in miles) the lightning is occurring. For example, if an individual counts 15 seconds between seeing the flash and hearing the bang, 15 divided by five equals three; therefore, the lightning flash is approximately three miles away.

The following statement on lightning safety is from the American Meteorological Society.

Employ the "30-30 Rule" to know when to seek a safer location. The "30-30 Rule" states that when you see lightning, count the time until you hear thunder. If this time is 30 seconds or less, go immediately to a safer place. If you can't see the lightning, just hearing the thunder means lightning is likely within striking range. After the storm has apparently dissipated or moved on, wait 30 minutes or more after hearing the last thunder before leaving the safer location.

Dugouts with chain link fencing are not safe places to be if lightning is flashing.

### **DO NOT TAKE CHANCES WITH LIGHTNING**

#### **Rain**

After it has rained, fields may be closed by the Town of Vienna, the Fairfax County Public Schools or the Fairfax County Park Authority depending on which group maintains the specific field in question. In that case, teams must stay off of them. VGSL could lose its privilege to use a field if a team uses it when it is closed. If there is any question as to whether a field is open, call the VGSL Inclement Weather line at 703 281 5216, the Vienna Recreation Department Weather line at 703 255 7842, or the Fairfax County Department of Parks at 703 324 5264. The weather announcements on the latter two are generally updated by 3 PM on weekdays.

If the fields are not closed, coaches need to use their judgment as to whether a field is usable. Generally, if footprints can be made but the shoes don't stick when walking on the infield, the field is okay to use. Using a field when it is really unplayable makes it harder to restore that field. Footprints that sink in are hard to rake out when the soil does dry.

#### **General Rules for both 6U and 8U Divisions**

Additional Games - Coaches can set up games in addition to those scheduled by VGSL. The games must be played in place of a regularly scheduled practice time and must be played according to all VGSL rules and policies. However, coaches should realize that learning the skills and fundamentals of the game are more likely to occur in a practice situation than in a game. Players cannot do what they have not been taught. The repetition of a practice does not occur during a game. Do not excessively sacrifice practice time in order to have more games. Coaches should try to create fun, game-like situations during practice to keep the players

interested.

Playing Time for Players - Any child can participate in VGSL programs regardless of athletic ability. In 6u and 8U every player should play in the field and bat every inning, and the batting order and defensive lineup should be rotated in every inning. Coaches cannot reduce playing time or hold players out because of athletic ability. Remember, score is not kept - the game is for the kids to have fun. If a child is part of the team, she has a right to play unless injured, repeatedly fails to attend practice sessions (and this action should only be taken after discussing this problem with the parents), or gets a brief disciplinary time-out.

### Discipline

A coach has the authority to establish reasonable disciplinary guidelines and penalties. This may include disciplinary actions against players who endanger or annoy other players or who willfully disrupt practices, etc. For instance, a player may be given a “time out” and asked to sit on the bench for an inning for swinging a bat close to another player without being careful or for repeatedly continuing to kick dirt after being asked to stop. Such action cannot be initiated for softball skill mishaps and cannot be more severe than one day suspension from team activities.

## **6u Division Rules – Spring 2006**

### **Level of Play:**

Most players are in kindergarten, and there are some first-graders. 6u is intended to get players used to the flow of the game and teach them the most basic skills. If a player can throw and catch, and occasionally make contact with pitched balls, she would be more challenged in the 8u (CP) Division. The majority of players in 6u move up to 8u (CP) after one year. There is one game on Saturday and one game or practice during the week.

VGSL follows the rules of the T.Ball USA Association (2006)

- The ball is not pitched. It is hit off a batting tee.
- Every player bats and plays in the field.
- The ball must be hit 10 feet or is considered a foul ball.
- When the ball is hit, the bat should not be thrown.
- Runners must stay on base until the ball is hit. There is no stealing.
- The inning is over when all players have batted once.
- Safety helmets must be worn when at bat or on base.

### **In addition 6U has several additional Guidelines**

1. The primary purpose of this division is teaching the players basic softball skills, stressing teamwork and fun.

2. Score is not kept in 6u games. Coaches are urged not to talk about winning or losing the game. There is no tournament for the 6u division.
3. Each player will get a participation trophy at the end of the spring season from the league. In addition, coaches and teams may choose to give out trophies in the fall and additional small awards. When giving out trophies coaches should say something positive about each player. If a coach does give out awards, there should be an award for some type of accomplishment for each player on the team, e.g., best batter, best base runner, etc. Look beyond the field, too (best cheerer, best helper, etc).
4. Unless the batter hits the ball to the outfield, there will be a limit of taking one base per play. Otherwise there will undoubtedly be overthrow after overthrow, with no outs ever being made!!
5. Stealing bases is not allowed in 6u .
6. Games consist of 3 innings, or one hour, whichever comes first. An inning consists of each team going through the batting order one time.
7. At the coach's discretion, towards the end of the season, some coach pitching may occur if the players are ready. This is a good way to prepare players for future seasons. Both coaches must agree to and feel comfortable with playing at that level.
8. For the first 3 or 4 games, discretion should be used in calling players out, allowing even semi-close plays to go to the runner. While we do want to encourage the players in the field to try to make the out, the positive value of hitting the ball should be rewarded. We don't want to discourage the batters when they are starting out. Praise the defense for making a great play.
9. Coaches are responsible for ensuring games start and end on time. Parents from both teams will be responsible for raking the infield after each game and before the first game of the day.
10. Coaches or designated parents serve as umpires.

## **8u (CP) Division Rules – Fall 2006**



8u (CP) is intended to get girls used to the flow of the game, to learn basic skills and teamwork, and above all to have fun.

Players range from a few very skilled kindergarten girls to a few novice third graders, with most girls in first or second grade. At the start of the season players should be able to play catch from a distance of 6 feet and occasionally make contact with pitched balls. The majority of players spend 2 seasons in 8u (CP) before moving up to 10U. A nine year old girl should play 10U. For younger players, placement on 10U is the sole decision of the 10U Commissioner and 10U coach. This decision is based on observation and review of the player's ability and maturity level.

There is one game on Saturday and one practice during the week.

### **Guidelines:**

- No "standings" or scores are kept and there is no tournament.
- Games have a 3 inning or 90 minute limit, whichever comes first.
- An inning consists of each team going through the batting order one time. Coaches are responsible for ensuring games start and end on time. The home team is responsible for field preparation before the first game. Parents from both teams will be responsible for raking the infield after each game, to get it ready for the next teams playing on it.
- If both coaches agree and time permits, a fourth inning can be played with players wishing to stay one extra inning.
- All players bat and play the field every inning.
- Coaches or designated parents serve as umpires.

## **Offense**

- The offensive team should have a coach as a pitcher, another coach at home plate to assist the batter, and coaches at first and third base.
- The batter gets 10 pitches to hit the ball. If no fair ball is hit in these 10 pitches, the batter uses the tee.
- If a player takes several pitches to hit a ball and then hits into foul territory but very near to the foul line and ran when she hit it, this hit shall be considered a "fair, enough" ball.
- The last batter of an inning runs around all the bases.
- There will be a limit of taking one base per play, except on hits reaching the outfield grass - then a second base may be taken. Triples and homers are permitted for the occasional batted ball that travels well beyond (100 feet) the infield.
- Sliding is permitted, but not encouraged and there is no stealing of bases.

## **Defense**

- The defensive team is allowed to have up to 3 coaches on the field, with only 2 permitted in the infield. The third coach must be behind second base. Coaches need to help the players learn what base to throw to when they field the ball. Frequent reminders and questions such as "Now that there is a girl on first base, where do you throw the ball if it's hit to you" are encouraged.
- The defense should try to get batters and runners out. An out is an out. While crying is permitted in 8u (CP) softball a batter or runner who is out needs to leave the base. Coach and parental escorts are permitted on the field to escort the objecting base runner off the field if necessary.

## **Miscellaneous**

At end of the game players and coaches should line up and congratulate the opposing team.

Many teams provide snacks for their teams after the game - please dispose of all trash after the game. Bottles and cans should be recycled, not just thrown in the trash.

Sometime after the middle of the season 8u (CP) coaches may wish to send to parents of players a fun homework assignment. This can reinforce the skills that are being taught in the field, and also help the players do some reading. For instance, you can email your players the following:

#### Care Bears - Softball Fun Homework

1. Pretend your team is in the field and you are playing first base. When another Care Bear player throws the ball to you and you step on first base, do you step on the white base or the orange base?
2. After you hit the ball, when you run to first base, do you run to the white base or the orange base?
3. When you go to play in the field and the other team bats, what should you take with you? A bat, a water bottle, a snack, or your glove?
4. When you run the bases which bases do you have to stop at?
5. Which base should you run to as fast you can and only slow down after your foot touches the base?
6. What are the 3 most important things to do when you come to the softball field?
7. Should you stop on home plate, or should you run as fast as you can to home plate and then slow down after your foot touches the base?
8. What is the best part of softball? (batting, fielding, running, or snack)?
9. Name 5 other girls on your team and spell their names.
10. Name 3 other teams we played
11. At what bases do you need to stop and not run past the base?
12. Which foot do you pick up to start your swing? The left or the right? The front or the back?
13. Pretend you are in the field and the other team does not have a player on base. A player hits the ball to you, who do you throw it to? the coach, your mom, the player playing first base, or the player playing second base?
14. Pretend you are in the field and the other team now has a girl on first base. You are standing near third base. If a girl hits the ball to you, who do you throw it to? the coach, the player playing first base, the girl playing second base, to the girl playing third base
15. What was the most fun thing you did in softball this season?

OK that's enough for now. Harder questions next season. Hope many of you play again in the fall or the spring.

Coach *fill in name*

## **TEAM EVENTS**

Team events apart from the field are a great way to bring a team together. Almost all teams have end of the season parties, but having events in the beginning of the season and during the season are great ways to build team unity. They do not have to be big well-planned parties. In fact, the simpler and less-expensive they are, the better they will be received.

Here are some ideas:

- Pizza after practice – Have some pizzas delivered to the field after practice so the players can hang around and talk.
- Picnic after a game – Have the players bring a picnic lunch to eat after the game.
- Attend a 10U game – This will enable the players to see what it is like at the next level. Informing the 10U coaches ahead of time that they have a special audience at that game may be inspiring to both groups of girls.
- Play a game in a sport other than softball – play soccer or basketball or volleyball. A player who doesn't excel at softball may shine in another sport.
- Watch a movie together – Go to a theatre or to a player's house, if someone volunteers
- Go to a softball game – Watch a local high school game. This can be both very instructive and inspiring to the players.
- Ice cream social – Get together for ice cream after a game.

## **Chapter 3 - Teaching Guidance**

### Practice and Game Tips

There are a few general principles to keep in mind (Strahan 2001). First, girls value sport primarily for social reasons, such as making new friends and being with others. It is not about winning or losing but rather about developing athletic and social skills along with learning the basics of the game. Younger players should focus on the basics such as throwing, catching, tee hitting, running to first base, and throwing to first base for an out as opposed to winning and losing. Also, players (young ones especially) should not be made to wait in long lines or sit around listening and doing nothing. This will encourage them to build dirt mounds in the infield and eventually to participate in another activity besides softball.

Coaches are often seen hitting ground balls one at a time to several players either in the field or in a line. This is a huge waste of time (Smith 2004). Players should be involved in the play every third hit ball. Two or more lines should be set up. Another big waste of time is having several players wait for one player to chase down a ball she missed (Smith 2004). Thus, it is also important to use multiple balls. If a player misses a ball, let it go and hit another one. Use your time and imagination to make practice fun and new such as by using wiffle balls or even an imaginary ball.

You may wish to start or end practices with something fun like a relay race, where players take turns running the bases. However, never force a player to run if she says she feels ill, is very hot, etc. One team can start at second and another at home plate. Players enjoy racing, and running is an essential part of the game. In this one activity the players have fun, learn an essential softball skill, and develop some stamina.

Near the start of each practice session have the players form a circle and initially say their name and team and after a few practices progress to have them name the other players on the team. Tell them the most important things the first time and ask them to tell the other players. The most important thing in softball is to watch out for the bat and don't hit anyone with it. The next most important thing is to have fun. Third is learning softball. Let them modify this in their own words or add new ideas as long as they keep with the same principles. For instance, if they want to say having snack at the end of practice or game make that fourth. The idea is to be safe, have fun, develop friendships, learn a fun physical and mental game, and develop teamwork, interpersonal, and athletic skills. These are helpful life skills that the player learns and takes with them.

Introduce a new drill or skill at each practice: for instance, how to run to first, field a grounder, or swing the bat. At the end of each practice session have them sit with you and ask a few questions about what you covered that day in practice. For instance, how do you run to first base (when you run to first go full speed to the orange base, then slow down after you touch the base). You can ask them to name other players or what each player liked best or what was the most fun part of practice. When teaching skills keep in mind the value of introducing the skill, demonstrating the skill, explaining the skill, and attending to players practicing the skill (ASEP 2001).

When coaching girls it is important to provide encouragement and inspire them to persist (Strahan 2001). It is better to emphasize the positive first and then where others can not overhear make suggestions to the player on how the performance could be even better. Four steps should be used to correct errors (ASEP 2001).

- Praise effort and correct performance
- Give simple and precise feedback to correct errors
- Make sure the player understands your feedback
- Provide an environment that motivates the player to improve

However, skill learning is not the main focus but rather learning how to play skillfully (ASEP 2004). ASEP suggests a games approach to learning rather than "skill-drill-kill the enthusiasm". This is more fun, understandable, and motivating. The idea is to play a modified softball game that is developmentally appropriate after warm-up activities and a brief explanation of what you are doing. For instance, have 3 or 4 players act as baserunners and the others as fielders. Rather than having a batter, the coach throws the ball and a runner goes to first base while the fielder tries to make an out. Make the grounders to the players easy so there is a better chance of getting

an out. (The positive reinforcement of successfully making the simple play gives the player the incentive and courage to try and make the more difficult play. However, do not push the young players beyond their capabilities. It is easy to destroy their confidence. Stretch them, but don't break them.) Teach the players to try to get outs at the closest base. After the base runners go around the bases a couple times switch them with the fielders. Periodically, freeze the action and step in to hold a brief teaching session. The idea is to help the players discover what they need to do to play the game successfully. Then teach those skills and keep advancing the level of skills in future modified games.

After the game hold a team circle. The postgame team circle is not the time to go over tactical problems and adjustments. Instead, focus on your players' attitudes and mental well-being (ASEP 2001). Keep this discussion brief and provide praise and briefly discuss individual and team accomplishments. Remember, once the game is over, their minds are probably on snacks. This discussion can be done while the players are having their snacks.

### Batting

Swinging the bat properly and hitting a ball are difficult tasks. Overcomplicating the teaching process can be totally discouraging for a young player. Keep your instructions simple and teach the swing as a series of steps that are put together. It is not uncommon for beginning players to have learned (at home) a swing that has terrible mechanics but has enabled them to get the bat on the ball. When teaching the player a better technique the old habits can be difficult to overcome. It is likely that introducing them to a new method of gripping the bat or swinging it is going to have somewhat less positive reinforcement (contact with the ball) at first. One technique that is effective is to have the players practice swinging at a tee without a ball. This method allows the player to focus on the process (the swing) and not the end result (the hit). Once the player can more or less consistently swing the bat as instructed, put the ball on the tee and tell her to swing the bat just as she has been doing.

There are a few things batters frequently need to be reminded of:

- how to hold a bat
- use the proper bat size and weight
- where to stand in relation to the tee or plate
- knees should be bent
- hands should be together on the bat
- keep bat back
- pick up front foot and put it down before you start swing
- turn back foot with body as you swing, don't pick it up
- front foot should be just behind or at tee at point of contact
- start your swing sooner (Coach pitch)
- **DO NOT THROW THE BAT AFTER HITTING THE BALL**

It is important for players to be able to swing the bat easily and use the correct bat size. Strahan (2001) provides suggestions for determining the proper bat weight and length. The best way to test a bat for proper weight is to have the player grip the bat with one hand, stand with feet together, and hold the bat straight out to the side with one arm. If the bat is too heavy she will struggle to keep it on a vertical plane. She should be able to keep it steady. To test for bat length have the batter stand with the feet together and stand the bat by her side (knob end up) Have the player place the palm of the hand on that side of the body directly on the knob. If the arm is slightly bent at the elbow, the bat is the proper length. However, while these guidelines are generally helpful, an individual player's size and strength will affect these rules. It is important that the player feels comfortable swinging her bat. Lighter and shorter is better than heavier and longer. Bat speed is more important than bat weight in generating power. A bat that is too long can upset a player's balance when she swings it.

When teaching hitting off a tee, many coaches position the player too far forward (in relation to the plate) and thus the player makes contact with the ball too early in the swing. The contact should happen at the point the wrists snap and with the ball even with or slightly ahead of the front foot. Many coaches initially align the batter's front foot at the tee at this point of contact. This may be fine if the player does not take a step. However, coaches need to be aware as to whether each batter steps forward with the front foot. Coaches frequently neglect to make this adjustment, and, as a result, players that step with the front foot pass the plane of the tee and make contact too early. Also, the tee should be situated such that the stem is at the front of the permanent plate so players learn to make contact with a pitched ball in the same place. (That is, don't put the tee's plate exactly on top of the in-ground plate.)

Batters should bend their knees because that aids in creating torque and also helps in adjusting to the thrown ball (Girls softball 2006). During the swing, as the hands come forward, 10% of the weight on the back foot should be shifted to the front foot. The object is to shift that weight right at the moment of impact. In a swing with good mechanics, this shift will occur naturally. When teaching a player to hit off the tee, it can be useful for the coach to hold the bat with them and help them swing level. Coaches may need to demonstrate multiple times to pick the front foot up just a few inches (as opposed to a high step) and put it down. Finally, while a few girls learn to pivot on the back foot during the swing just from a demonstration, many of them learn it better the coach actually bends down and gently turns it for them.

One of the ways to teach players to turn their hips when swinging is to have them stand at the tee and put a long wiffle ball bat behind their back, holding it parallel to the ground with both arms. The player stands as if batting and then the player turns her body and tries to knock the ball off the tee (as the bat comes around from behind her). This helps players learn to pivot the body when they hit.

Some young players have not learned how to be careful with the bat and may put others in danger in their excitement to swing it. Some players need to be reminded not to swing the bat when the catcher or coach is nearby. When teaching batting or putting the ball on the tee, the coach should gently hold onto the top of the bat when near the batter so as not to get hit. Some young players will swing the bat as soon as the ball is on the tee, regardless of the danger to the coach. It can be helpful to make it a rule that the player doesn't swing the bat until the coach says something like "Go ahead". Also, some players need to be taught not to throw the bat after hitting the ball.

## Running

Beginning players in 6u and 8U need to be taught how to run the bases. There is nothing natural about running to first base, as opposed to third base, after a hit. Even the necessity of touching the base instead of just running past it has to be taught. It is also important to teach when to touch the orange base or white base at first.

Players frequently run to the (inner) white base instead of the (outer) orange first base when trying to beat out an infield grounder. To prevent collisions with the first baseman and to learn the basics of running to first, they need to be taught to go full speed to the orange base and then slow down after they touch it. Having them slap hands with a coach who is positioned a few feet beyond the base may help because it teaches them to continue to run after touching the base. Players need to be taught to treat second and third differently since they have to be able to stop at those bases. Home, of course, is treated like first. It sounds simple to those who have done this or watched it for years but it's not innate.

A few players hit the ball and run to third base instead of first. From their perspective this makes good sense since it's closer and after most batters (righties) swing they are pointed in that direction. This may take a couple practices to sink in to a few players. Have players do this swing and run one at a time starting with a more advance player demonstrating how to do it correctly. When teaching how to run to first, have the players begin by first swinging an imaginary bat at the plate and then running.

After teaching the players how to run to first, they need to learn how to be prepared to run to the next base. They should be taught to use the base as a starting block by having them put the ball of their left foot on the edge of the base and the right foot on the ground next to the base and about halfway to the back edge of the base. The right foot should be pointed forward towards the next base. The knees should be bent and the body leaning forward in a ready to run position. 6u players may not leave the base until the ball is hit. 8u (CP) players can start learning to take a couple steps and turn and face the batter as soon as the coach releases the ball. When the batter needs several pitches to hit a fair ball, this movement will help keep the base runner's attention attuned to every pitch.

For some players, good running form comes naturally. Many need to be reminded frequently to pump their arms in a front-to-back motion (as opposed to side-to-side) and to run quickly. Others need help running on the balls of their feet. Good running form also includes a forward lean of the body. One drill that helps to teach this is to have the players stand with their feet together and then lean forward until they lose balance and use that momentum to start running with a forward lean.

With the more developed players you can start working on how to circle the bases when running more than one base at a time. You definitely want to do this with players who can hit the ball to the outfield grass and can run out doubles. When players who frequently can hit a double (a ball to the outfield grass) come to bat, base coaches should remind the runners at first and second that they should advance two bases if the ball makes it out of the infield dirt.

## Game Strategy

Typical softball fielding positions do not apply in 6U or 8U because the players cannot hit the ball that far and there is no pitcher. One strategy for 6U is to place all the players about 35 feet from the batter in a semi-circle around the pitcher's mound. There is no one at second base and on every play the throw is to first. The player on the right field line plays a little deeper and closer to first base and gets all the throws.

A preferred strategy is to get players learning to cover bases and have the semi-circle less crowded so they are less likely to fight for a ball. Basically there is an "inner infield" and something resembling a regular infield and no outfield. Depending on the number of players at the game, there can be two to four "inner infielders" in the aforementioned semi-circle. Then the other players play a shallow infield (similar to an infield in position to throw out the runner at third going home) except there should be 5 players in the shallow infield positions. One at each base, another between first and second, and the fifth shallow infielder situated between third and home.

Rather than go for the lead runner players should be encouraged to throw to the nearest base to increase the likelihood of getting the rare out. There should be one coach on each side of the infield. Coaches need to be in the field and remind players to which base she should throw. By late season, 6U and 8U girls should be asked where to throw and supply the answer and the reason until they understand the concept. Coaches can make the distinction between force plays and tagging the runner after these basics are understood. A third coach can be outside the infield and work with the second baseman on how to cover the base and what to do if the ball gets hit to her. This coach can then move to help the catcher before the last batter (who gets to run all the bases).

The catcher returns the ball to the pitcher in 8U or stands around in 6U. However, for the last batter the catcher gets the throw and needs to be taught to tag everyone out, without blocking the base path. Since the ball is relatively big compared to their glove and hand they need to be taught to make the tag with the ball in the glove, covering the ball with the throwing hand. This is worth going over a few minutes in a few practices and worthy of reminders to the catcher each inning. The third defensive coach can remind and help the catcher when the last batter of the opposing team comes to bat.

In 6U and 8U players should be rotated around the field every inning and every game. Rather than try to remember who goes where it is easiest to develop a 3 game line-up that rotates them around. The one exception is first base where for safety reasons it is best to have someone that can catch the ball playing that position. If this is the case first base can be rotated around the players (at least 3) that can make the out if the throw is close. See the sample line-up card below.

A similar inning and three games rotation should occur for the batting order. This helps to equitably distribute the thrill of being the last batter who gets to run around all the bases. The players also desire to be the first batter, and it is also useful to share this opportunity. Occasionally a player does not want to bat last and run the bases. Coaches should encourage them to try it but if they still resist then give the extra opportunities to those more motivated to run.

The below batting order shows positions and for a team of 9 players with four innings.

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Alyssa	P	C	1	CF
Emily	C	P	CF	2
Emma	1	2	C	1
Alison	CF	1	3	C
Holly	3	CF	P	P
Lexi	SS	LF	LF	SS
Sami	RF	3	RF	3
Becky	LF	SS	2	LF
Kelley	2	RF	SS	RF

### Fielding (though it's mostly really catching and throwing)

Be aware that in these age groups activities designed for both throwing and catching frequently result in throwing and chasing. It may be more effective to have a player throw to a coach or a target instead of another player when teaching throwing and to have the coach rather than a player make the throws when teaching catching.

To practice fielding, simply bounce or roll the ball to each player playing in the proper position and have her throw to another player at a base. It is not necessary to actually hit the ball with a bat. Use assistant coaches and split the players up into groups of three. Have a player cover a base and throw grounders to the other two players and have them throw to the base person. Don't waste time having players positioned all over the field and hitting them grounders in turn about only once every 3 minutes. This is good for encouraging building dirt mounds, chasing butterflies, or counting planes or birds, but little else.

Alternatively, coaches can also split players into two or three groups with assistant coaches doing different activities on different areas of the field. One group, perhaps the less skilled players, could work on catching or throwing along a fence. It is useful to have a fence or a coach behind the players to minimize the time spent chasing the ball. Start out with easy, close throws. Then have the players take one step back each time they catch a ball. If they drop a ball, they have to start real close again. Making this into a game makes this fun. A second group of players could field grounders as discussed above and a third group could work on batting in the outfield. It is best just to have two players fielding the balls – fewer players result in more opportunities for each one to field the hits.

Beginning players usually need to be taught how to throw properly, especially with respect to using the body while throwing and throwing off the correct foot. Two good drills to help remedy this are one-knee throwing and no-stride throws. In the former, players kneel on the throwing knee with the glove leg out front. Players throw to each other for a desired period and then move a little further apart. Emphasize proper shoulder turn, hip turn, and follow through. For no-stride throws players stand with the glove foot forward and the body turned at a 90° angle to the target (fence or player) about 5 yards away. Players throw using only shoulder and hip turn -- no stride. This set stance should help the players to get the feeling for the proper way to step.

A frequent mistake in catching is to catch balls above the waist as if they are below the waist, that is, with the hand turned so that the fingers are pointed down. This can be gone over in a group without the ball, in a group with the ball, and individual reminders on the field are necessary. Some players take a long time to learn how to properly catch a ball thrown above the waist. It helps to explain to them that fingers should be up above when the glove is above the waist and fingers should be down below the waist (simply - ball's up, fingers up; ball's down, fingers down). Frequently, players have been taught to catch by having an easy throw lofted to them, so it is natural for them to catch the ball with the fingers down. Catching the ball with the fingers up is unnatural and perhaps a little frightening. One way to help the players overcome this fear while teaching to catch with the fingers up is to use a foam rubber ball that will not hurt them. Once they realize they won't get hurt if the ball does hit them, they are more likely to try to catch the ball with the less familiar fingers up position.

## **Chapter 4 - At the end of the season**

**Critique/Evaluation** - Following the last games of the season coaches are encouraged to submit comments and recommendations to the Commissioner.

### End of Season Party

Coaches could provide a certificate or at a minimum say a few words about each player's accomplishments when handing out trophies. Each player gets a participation trophy at the end of the spring season, but not the fall season. Coaches should plan ahead and say something good about every player even if it is as basic as "occasionally makes contact with a pitched ball" or "now has a great stance at the plate".

### **Information for Parents**

Coaches should send a letter to parents at the end of the season congratulating the players for their progress and accomplishments. To help the parents of returning players sign up for the right division for the next season, coaches can send some guidance advising them which division will be best for them. Some general guidance concerning this should come from the commissioner. For instance:

Girls born in 1997 should move up to the 10U division when they sign up to play in fall 2006 and spring 2007. Most girls born in 1998 should play 10U in fall 2006 and spring 2007. (*note*

*the dates need to be adjusted*) Beginners, less mature players, and those players still struggling with throwing, hitting and catching should still play 8u (CP)(8U). The decision to move up can be based partly on social reasons or carpool requests. But parents need to be aware that in 10U, a harder ball is used, and most teams play games or practice 3-4 times a week. In the spring season, teams are formed by a draft.

Almost every girl born in 1999 should play 8u (CP) in fall 2006 and spring 2007. Only a mature player and star player can play 10U.

Coaches should also ask parents for an evaluation and suggestions. It is also nice for the coach to let the players know what his/her plans are for the next season.

Coaches need to be sure to return equipment. However, returning coaches may obtain permission to hold onto equipment for the following season. The equipment coordinator needs to take inventory and place orders well in advance of the next season. Thus, this final step after the season ends is important.

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