

## Baseball Vs Softball: Only the Ball is Smaller

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### INTRODUCTION

The Games of the XXXII Olympiad will be played in Tokyo, Japan from July 23 to August 8, 2021. This is after being postponed in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The host country selected women's softball as a "wild-card" sport to be included in the games after it was dropped in 2012 because Olympic officials deemed the sport not universal enough to attract world-wide attention.

The Japanese are defending Olympic champions in women's softball (from 2008) and will compete with five other teams from around the world for the gold, silver, and bronze medals.

They are passionate enough about the sport to award it the honor of being the first sporting event scheduled in the Olympics (July 21, 2021), a spot normally occupied by football (soccer).

### Compare Games

Most Americans are at least somewhat familiar with baseball (which is following an inclusion path similar to softball into the Tokyo Games) but may not be familiar with the various and sometimes subtle differences between the two games.

Both sports utilize bats, balls, hitting, fielding, pitching/throwing, and catching. After that, the specifics of the games diverge. Everything in softball is smaller except the ball. The fields are smaller, the base paths shorter, the mound/home-plate distance is shorter, and softballs are quite larger than baseballs and yellow in color as opposed to the traditional white baseballs. Women's softball is one of only three sports designated as "women only sports" by the NCAA, governing body of collegiate sports in the U.S.

### Author's Perspective

The author has a unique perspective is analyzing the differences between the two sports. Having played and coached baseball for over 40 years, the transition into coaching girls' softball for

two seasons was interesting and educational. There was much carry-over from baseball, but some areas had to be completely re-learned in order to relate the skills to softball. Probably best to start with the similarities.

### Similarities

As mentioned, the goals of both games are the same. The object is to get on base, move around the bases and score runs by touching home plate. In both sports, base runners come from hits, walks, hit-by-pitch, and defensive errors. Batters are allowed three strikes before they are ruled out and four balls allow you to take first base. Innings are six outs long (three for each team) and softball games normally last for seven innings as opposed to nine innings for baseball. Pitching is the "name-of-the-game" in both sports and can account for as much as 75% to 90% of a team's potential for success depending on the skill of the pitcher. After that, the differences are significant.

### DIFFERENCES

#### Playing Venues and Equipment

Softball fields are much smaller than baseball fields. The bases are 60 feet apart in softball as opposed to 90 feet in baseball. The softball pitcher delivers pitches from 42 feet while a baseball pitcher stands 60.5 feet from home plate.

Baseball pitchers throw from a built-up "mound" while softball pitchers pitch from flat ground. Baseball pitchers deliver their pitches with an overhand delivery while softball pitchers pitch underhand.

Yellow softballs are considerably bigger than baseballs and are designed so as not to travel as far when hit. Softball infields are all dirt surfaces ("skinned") while baseball infields normally have more grass than dirt and seem to get more "true" hops from batted balls.

Softball pitchers and infielders are allowed to wear masks for protection whereas in baseball, only

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the catcher typically dons a mask. Softball bats are generally smaller and lighter than baseball bats (both wood and aluminum).

### Pitching

There is no need for softball pitchers to pitch from the stretch position. Runners are not allowed to take leads off the bases (as in baseball) and softball pitchers deliver all their pitches from the wind-up position.

The pitching “circle” in softball is unique to the sport and involves many subtle rules that limit aggressive offensive base running.

The underhand delivery of softball pitchers is a more economical (than the overhand delivery of baseballs) and provides less wear and tear on pitchers’ shoulders and elbows.

For this reason, softball pitchers are able to pitch with limited rest between outings and can pitch safely and effectively on consecutive days.

Velocity is closely related in the two sports. Top pitching speeds in baseball can exceed 100 mph while very fast softball speeds approach 75 mph.

Given the distances that the pitches travel (42 feet for softball and 60.5 feet for baseball), the hitters’ reaction times are fairly close – somewhere around .3 of a second.

In neither sport do hitters have much of an advantage and .300 hitters are considered accomplished in both sports.

Pitch selection presents some variations in the two games. Baseball pitchers typically feature fastballs, curves, sliders, changeups, and cutters while softball pitchers use the fastball, drop-ball, curve, change-up, and rise ball.

Breaking balls in softball generally do not “break” as much as in baseball due to the difficulty of imparting spin on the larger softball and the shorter distance that the pitches travel.

### Fielding

Softball infielders must be quicker and more accomplished than their baseball counterparts in their “actions” fielding ground balls. Actions are defined as the body movements that take place from the time the infielder first touches a ground ball to the point it is released from their throwing hand. Any “bobble” or slight delay will often result in the batter/runner being safe at first base. This softball requirement makes it very difficult to turn ground ball double-plays in the sport.

### Baserunning

With softball base runners unable to take “leads” from the bases, stealing is more difficult than baseball even though the distance is shorter.

Runners are not allowed to leave a base until the pitch has left the hand of the softball pitcher. Compare this to baseball where runners can take as much lead as they dare without getting “picked off.”

Aside from this rule, most other base running techniques are similar in both sports.

### Hitting

One unusual hitting feat that occurs frequently in softball (but not baseball) is slap-hitting or “slapping.” Some, usually fast left-handed hitters, employ the technique by getting a running start in the batter’s box and try to make ground-ball contact with the pitch and use their speed to beat the infielder’s throw to first base.

The softer the contact the better as a slower hit ground ball is more difficult to field and throw successfully. Hitting is another area that, aside from “slapping”, is very similar to baseball.

### CONCLUSION

The game strategy of both sports is not as different as one might suppose although “small ball” is probably practiced more in softball.

This is the usage of bunts, hit-and-run plays, steals, and squeeze plays to score runs one at a time rather than playing for the big inning.

It often succeeds by forcing the defense to cleanly make all the plays necessary to stop the offense.

It is interesting that players from each sport aspire for different goals in their attempt to attain the highest levels. Baseball players, of course, have as their ultimate goal the opportunity of playing in the big leagues or Major League Baseball.

Not so for softball players since there is only a very limited amount of professional softball and only the elite can qualify for the national team to represent their country in global competition.

College softball is the more likely goal of youthful softball players. As softball continues to grow, look for future Olympic Games to include the sport.

It will also be likely that a new generation of softball players will become fans of Major

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League Baseball and baseball fans will embrace the ladies' game.

The excitement of both sports should give new meaning to the term, "National Pastime."

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