

A Can of Corn:

A Study of the Language of

Western Oregon University Softball

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Introduction

Many people view team sports as a form of entertainment in which good athletes come together and compete with one another. Yes, it is important to have talented athletes on a team if they want to win games, but the components that build a team and bring it to success are much deeper than the surface level of pure talent that people see from the outside. The sport of softball, like other team sports, is all about communication. Without clear and direct communication between coaches and players, “such miscues can cost a team a game” (Dickson *Hidden Baseball Language* 10). If coaches do not verbally communicate with their athletes often, much confusion will occur on the field as the game is constantly changing depending on the situation, opponent, or environment (Buning and Thompson 359).

A huge aspect of the language of softball is hand signs and signals. They are the “central nervous system that allows a ball club to function as a team” and exist in many genres, with hand signs being the most prevalent (Dickson *Hidden Baseball Language* 1).

Signs can come from the third base coach to tell the batter what to do or from a catcher to a pitcher to signal what type of pitch they should throw—fastball, curveball, changeup, drop ball, or rise ball—by holding up a different number of fingers for each pitch (2, 6). A trick that many coaches do to increase their success is trying to “steal” signs from the other team by watching their signals and trying to figure out what each one means. To prevent this happening to them and throw another team off from stealing their own signs, coaches give lots of decoy, or “deke,” signs with real signs thrown in (Dickson *Hidden Baseball Language* 12). These are all key determining factors of how well a team can hit the ball and score runs and how they can prevent the other team from scoring and winning.

There are many names for actions in every aspect of softball, and they usually originate from bright metaphors and hyperboles, reflecting the nature of our American language (Segrave 211). For example, with a fly ball, one hit very high up in the air is a *skyscraper*, one right over the head of the infielders is called a *blooper* or *dunker*, and one that is very easy for the fielders to catch is a *can of corn* (Huddle 104). The terms help players describe what happened and easily understand it without having to go into great detail.

Across all sports, the way coaches interact with their athletes can have a huge effect on their grit and motivation for winning. Studies done with Division 1 softball players have shown that coaches who use language filled with praise and encouragement are more successful in building motivation and confidence in their athletes than coaches who use critical and disciplinary feedback too often (Buning and

Thompson 354). Another way for coaches to strengthen motivation and performance is to communicate their expectations and goals for their players very clearly and straight to the point (Dickson *Hidden Baseball Language* 2). Dancing around with long, confusing descriptions or ignoring athletes and giving no feedback at all can cause poor performance (Buning and Thompson 359).

While there has been a decent amount of research done on the use of verbal communication in sports in general and baseball specifically, there has been less on softball, and none about the specific community of WOU softball players. Another problem with this research is that the articles available were pretty vague on how exactly coaches sign to and communicate with their team; they just explained why they need to be clear and to the point when communicating. The sources that did go into more detail about how coaches use hand and verbal signs were about baseball and written decades ago. Softball is a similar sport, but not the same.

In this paper, I will argue that the Western Oregon University softball team uses its own lexis and language to reach success by setting goals, having coaches clearly and directly communicate with players, and encouraging players to communicate constantly on the field and in the dugout. I will also show how these linguistic characteristics of the WOU softball team connect with Swales' criteria for a discourse community, especially in goal setting and methods of communication used for feedback. The following findings from primary research fill the gap in my secondary research, which is the fact that no research has been published on the WOU softball team, or even the sport of softball in

general, as a discourse community. I will address this by referencing surveys and extensive observations done on the team in game and practice settings.

Methodology

I chose the discourse community of Western Oregon University softball because I am a newer member of the community since this is my first year in college. I thought it would be interesting to learn more about the communication styles in the program from people who have been in it for longer than I have. In order to gather this information, I used two different research methods because I wanted to get a more diverse array of information than what would've been presented with just one method.

First, I sent out a survey to my teammates in our group chat, asking them to complete a Google Form I created. Because of my wording, they viewed completion of the survey as optional (it was) and only 13 out of the 27 players completed it, but this was still substantial enough for my research purposes. It consisted of 17 questions about verbal/physical communication, softball lexis, coaching style, and goal setting (shown in the appendix); 13 of these questions were multiple choice, while I left 4 as open-ended so I could get more detailed explanations on players' thoughts. I asked each respondent if I had permission to use their name in my WR122 paper, and they all answered "yes."

The second method of research I used was observation of softball games that the Western Oregon University softball team played in. The specific games I observed were played in a preseason tournament in Tucson, Arizona, from February 17 to February 19,

2023. My team played 5 games that were each 7 innings long against teams from New Hampshire, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. While participating in these games, I paid close attention to the cheers and language the players in the dugout used, the signs the coaches gave us, and how the athletes and coaches talked to each other in post-game team huddles. In total, this all amounted to about 15 hours of observation. I will also use some observations from team meetings such as “Talking Tuesdays,” weekly team gatherings where we discuss current happenings in our lives to get a better sense of each other as people.

When I first looked at the possible methods of primary research, I originally wanted to use interviews and collect genres, but I realized there were problems with these two methods and a survey and observation would be much more useful in answering my research question. Our players and coaches are very busy right now because softball season is ramping up, so it would be hard to find time for interviews. Even if I did find a little bit of time, I would only be able to interview 1 coach and 1-2 players. I think that interviews could have been a really good source of information if I had time to conduct more because I would want to get responses from at least the head coach, one assistant coach, and one teammate from each class to see many different points of view within the community. Instead of interviews, I decided to create the survey because it would give me many more responses so I could have a greater diversity of participants to gather data from. I got responses from 2 freshmen, 3 sophomores, 8 juniors, and 1 senior.

I also veered away from the collection of genres because of time constraints. One of the main genres used for communication in softball is play cards, but if I asked for one of

those it would've given away all of the calls; asking for a brand new fake play card would've taken the coaches too much time to create that they just don't have. So, I chose observation for my second method of research, and this ended up being the one that gave me the most information. There are little things that I noticed when more closely watching the game that I normally don't pay any attention to and wouldn't have even thought to ask questions about.

Discussion

When observing and surveying the Western Oregon University softball players and coaches, the use of language was divided into two overarching groups: player-to-player communication and coach-to-player communication. Within coach-to-player communication, I observed prioritizing goal setting, blunt and to-the-point language, and an intense but respectful coaching style as the most important factors to being a successful coaching staff. Within player-to-player communication, I saw that the most crucial communication comes from the dugout throughout the game and from the players on the field before each pitch.

Goal Setting

Through the information I gathered from my survey, I learned that having clear team goals is essential to players on the WOU softball team. Twelve out of 14 of the people surveyed said that on a scale of 1-5 for importance (5 being most important), they would rate coaches communicating team goals clearly at a 5 (Fig. 1). This aspect aligns with

Swales' requirements for a discourse community because the members of the softball DC here at Western Oregon share a broadly agreed upon set of common public goals (Swales 8). In order to determine these goals, we had smaller group meetings where we all brainstormed goals and then met as a whole team to narrow down and combine them into the main goals we wanted to focus on this upcoming season. These goals include “have 100 stolen base attempts” and “at least split every weekend,” which means to win at least 2 out of the 4 games we play every weekend. Making goals helps promote a sense of connectivity within the team because we are coming together to work for a common purpose to become great.

Figure 1: Responses About Goals From Players



On March 7, we had our weekly “Talking Tuesday” session, in which the team and coaches converse about important topics not specifically about softball, such as mental health. In this meeting, we reflected on our goals for the season and did a progress check to see if we had been performing well enough in our games so far in order to

reach our goals. A big factor of this was not even skill related, but rather connected to vulnerability and trust. A huge thing the WOU softball program focuses on instead of outward skills is internal characteristics that create a good teammate. The coaches asked us to write down our own personal definitions of vulnerability and trust, and then we discussed how these two factors connect together and help us succeed on the field by having each other's backs and having confidence in one another. We rated our current levels of trust and vulnerability on and off the field (averaged around a 6) and decided that we needed to improve these levels by having faith in one another's abilities if we wanted to accomplish our season goals, especially making it to the postseason Great Northwest Athletic Conference (GNAC) Championships. This session reflected the importance of verbal communication within the team because all of the players and coaches could equally share their points of view about the team's progress so we could get feedback and make adjustments to reach more success.

Coaching Style and Language

The preferred coaching style for the WOU softball staff was very clearly articulated by the players in the survey; 93% stated that they prefer a 50/50 mix of a positive/relaxed/fun and critiquing/intense/serious environment created by their coaches. This preference makes sense because after our games, the coaches always let us talk about our performance as a team and then give their thoughts on how we played that weekend. Just as Swales states in his criteria, a discourse community is a group that uses specific methods of communication such as meetings or team gatherings to provide information and feedback (Swales 8). In Arizona, when we didn't play anywhere near our

best, the coaches sternly told us that we needed to get it together, but still used a respectful tone and didn't yell at us. And even in situations like those, they always made sure to bring up something that a few people or the team as a whole did well that game. For example, after our 0-6 loss against Mercyhurst University on February 18, our coaches critiqued us on our hitting and pitch selection because we only had 4 hits the entire game, but praised those players who did collect hits. This is very important to promote trust and close relationships between the coaches and their athletes because when they talk to us in a respectful way, we will reciprocate that respect and listen to their feedback.

Players also said they prefer "when coaches' explanations of drills/movements/situations are quick and straight to the point" (93%), with only one player in the survey preferring explanations that are "long and in detail." Bluntness is central in the language of softball because the game moves so fast. If coaches want to yell out something to their players in the middle of the game, they have to do so quickly or else they will run out of time before the next pitch happens. However, when receiving direct feedback on their mistakes from their coaches, some of my teammates still prefer this straightforward language and don't care about their feelings getting hurt, but others like it when their coaches approach them with respect and are careful not to put them down. When asked in the survey how players prefer coaches to approach them in a situation of failure, Sophie, a junior outfielder, said, "I want them to tell me what I did wrong and what I can do better. No need to bullshit me." In contrast, Sydney, a freshman infielder, explained, "I want my coaches to critique me and make me better, but I also

want them to respect that I am human and not perfect. Constructive criticism but in a positive way, not just putting me down.”

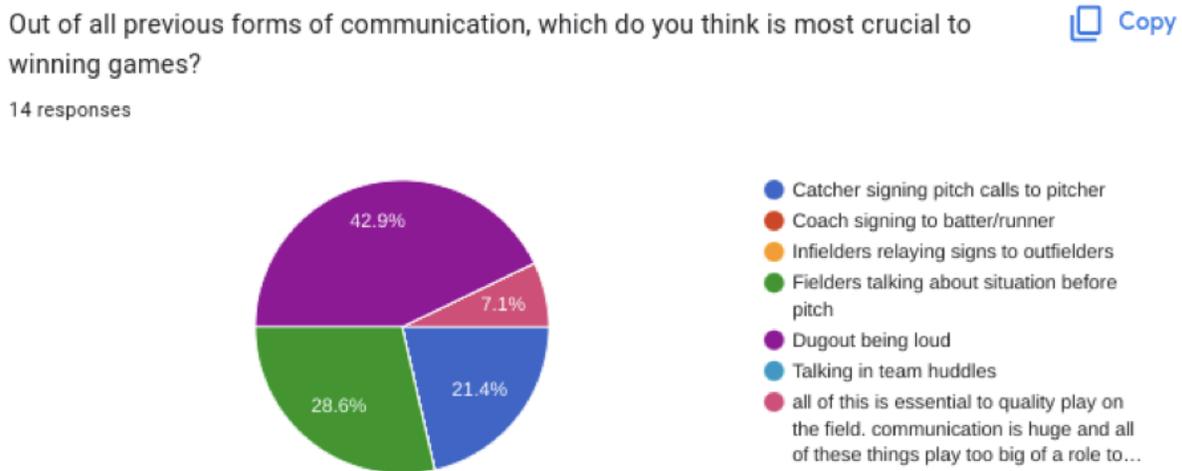
Interestingly, I noticed that all except one of the players who preferred a straight up response were upperclassmen. This leads me to infer that the nature of the WOU coaches is very direct because the student athletes with more experience in the program are more used to that coaching style. Freshmen and some sophomores may still be thinking of more sugar-coated feedback they have experienced in the past and are not quite used to the more serious, adult environment of college sports. This also connects to Swales’ 6th guideline, in which there are different levels of expertise among members of the community (Swales 8). In the WOU softball program specifically, the coaches and seniors would be considered “experts” whereas freshmen would be more like “novices” since they are new to the team and are still getting used to the structure and language it uses for communication.

Communication From the Dugout

Figure 2, shown below, displays just how valuable communication from the dugout is during games. The fact that 43% of the players surveyed believe the “dugout being loud” is “most crucial to winning games” underlines that player-to-player communication is even more important than coach-to-player communication in competitive settings. The coaches hold this belief as well and remind us of its importance often; both of the games we lost in Tucson were largely blamed on lack of energy and talk coming from the dugout. Communication from the dugout is so crucial to success in games because it

keeps everyone engaged in the game, encourages players on the field with good energy, and creates chaos and intimidation for the opponents. Emma, a freshman catcher, believes that “having an encouraging dugout affects everything else. If the dugout is loud, then the field will be loud, and if the field is loud the pitchers are more encouraged to throw the pitches they need to throw because they know the team has their back.” This also connects to a later theme of players talking on the field before every single pitch — when they’re constantly communicating, the pitcher has trust in them to make plays when the ball is hit to them.

Figure 2: Responses About In-Game Communication From Players



Intensity in the dugout is a great way to get into the other teams’ heads and cause them to make mistakes. These errors are caused in part by cheering from the dugout, which is a form of language unique to the sport of softball. Cheers in softball consist of players yelling repetitive phrases, usually aimed towards the other team about things they may be doing wrong such as making an error, not pitching enough strikes, swinging

and missing at a pitch, or striking out. For example, when the other team's pitcher keeps pitching balls and walking people on our team, we cheer "eenie meenie minie moe, how many balls is the pitcher gonna throw? I know you see it, I know you see it" and repeat this twice. We do this to fluster the other team's pitcher so that she continues to throw balls and walk our players onto the bases so we have more chances to score runs. If our cheers are loud enough, it may also be hard for the other team to focus which could cause them to make errors instead of making outs. Softball is a huge mind game, and being as loud as possible is an effective tactic in winning the mind game, which makes the physical game easy. Once the opponent is defeated mentally, it's hard to lose.

Being in the dugout also gives players a unique point of view where they can clearly see the entire field. Those in their positions on the field may not be able to see certain things going on because it's happening behind their back or out of their peripheral vision. Maddie, a senior pitcher, explained that "the dugout has the best view of the field, which gives them the ability to relay information to fielders/runners/hitters about situations and different things going on." Because of where the dugout is positioned in relation to the field, players not actively playing can see everything and communicate to their teammates about what the opponent's runners and batters are doing and what kind of pitches the other team's pitchers are throwing. This allows the team to have a better chance of winning because they can get outs quicker when they know more information about where the ball may be hit, and they can get more hits and more runs when they can predict better where the pitcher will throw the ball.

Players Talk Before Every Pitch

Figure 2 shows that the second most important aspect of communication to help the WOU softball team win games is fielders talking about the situation before each pitch. This usually entails calling out the number of outs and what base the infielders and outfielders should throw to based on where the ball is hit. Players will also give encouraging remarks to the pitcher such as “you got this,” “atta babe,” and “keep working.” Just as in the cheers we use, talking before every single pitch follows a pattern of repetition in which the situation is repeated by each person on the field before each pitch, even if the situation has not changed. Repetition just ensures that every possible situation is ingrained in players’ minds and they are ready for anything to happen. Sophie stated, “the form of verbal communication before a play is vital to execution because it prepares you and your teammates for every possible scenario.” No matter where the ball is hit, because of pre-pitch communication, each player should know exactly where they will throw the ball if it is hit to them. “It can also lead to the best outcome, getting an out or keeping the runner from scoring,” she said. Being able to talk about something before it actually happens builds anticipation which allows players to make a play a lot faster than if they had to take the time to think about where they have to throw the ball in the moment.

Conclusion

My study on the WOU softball team has shown that effective communication is one of the most important aspects of the game. Whether it be from coaches or just between players, using clear and positive language is the missing piece that brings all of the skills and preparation together in games to lead a team to success. There has not been much

research done on this before with softball teams and general, and no published studies exist about the WOU softball team at all. I think this new study was extremely valuable because it displays that softball is so much more than just a sport; it's an experience that teaches players effective communication skills they can use to create meaningful relationships and help them find success in future settings such as the workplace. Through being a part of this discourse community, we learn how to teach others in a way that is tailored to their individual needs, converse respectfully, and work as a team to think through solutions to all the possible scenarios that can occur.

I think that the team could be even more successful in upcoming seasons if the findings from the survey were to be studied by the coaches because each player explains the coaching style they prefer. After looking at the responses, the coaches would know how to approach each player in times of failure so that they can actually improve; for example, if a player preferred a positive response and the coaches utilized blunt language, the player would probably dwell too much on their mistake and not have their head in the game. If players hear feedback the way they prefer, they will be more inclined to make improvements, flush their mistakes, and stay loud and communicate with their teammates on the field so everyone can stay up and in the game.

Speaking of coaches, I believe the additional research that is needed for all of this information to connect and come full circle is getting more input from the coaches. I surveyed the players and got multi-word responses, but never directly asked the coaches any questions about communication of coaching styles, only observed how they exerted these components during games. They have a much different outlook on the

game and how it should be approached because rather than actually playing, they have to plan everything out and guide us towards success but can't actually physically control how we play. I think that to fully understand a discourse community, one needs to hear points of view from all of the different members—novices and experts (coaches). Along with this, I think it would be important to also interview a couple players from each class—freshman, sophomore, junior, senior—to get thorough responses, rather than just the short answers I obtained from the survey, from players who have been with the program for different amounts of time and have had different experiences.

I would recommend future research to be done by someone who is a part of the Western Oregon softball community because they would already have an idea of the culture and how practices, games, and other team events flow and could connect their research findings to their previous knowledge for more in-depth analysis of the program. Finally, it would be interesting not only to gain more information about the Western Oregon softball program, but also to study other Division II softball teams with similar techniques by looking at the communication styles they use and how it compares to their record, and to compare this to WOU. If other teams use different coach and player communication styles than Western Oregon and have more success than our program, we could study their use of lexis and language and try to implement their techniques more into the way we communicate to see if it helps us win more games. It would be a great way to see even more points of view and reflect on the ways we currently communicate.

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Author Bio

Carly Turpen is a freshman from Boise, Idaho. She came to WOU to play on the softball team and because of the tight-knit community. As a major in exercise science, Carly hopes to teach PE/coach or be an athletic trainer at the high school level one day. In her free time, Carly enjoys hanging out with friends and family, working out, adventuring outdoors, and playing guitar.

