Softball remains one of America’s top recreational activity choices. In 1999, one large Ohio city recorded 13,000 games played by 35,000 participants (Siedentop, 2001). When the National Standards for physical education (NASPE, 1995) are applied to softball, it is clear that by the end of second grade, a child should be able to strike a ball with a bat using the correct grip and side orientation, catch a gently thrown ball using properly positioned hands, and throw a ball hard while demonstrating proper overhand technique and opposition. By the end of fourth grade, there are expectations for fielding with a glove and exhibiting a mature form while batting and throwing. Although modifications (i.e., T-ball and throw-ball) create more game-like play for younger participants, it is still a challenge for elementary physical educators and youth sport coaches to provide adequate hitting and fielding trials within an activity to ensure that children improve fundamental skills and meet expectations for learning.

Over-the-Line is a striking/fielding game designed from the perspective of the Games for Understanding (GFU) tactical model (Werner, Thorpe, & Bunker, 1996) to serve as an alternative to traditional kickball, softball, and baseball. Over-the-Line can be modified for developmental appropriateness and tasks can increase in complexity as tactical awareness is attained. This article shares the game (along with its modifications), outlines a sample lesson, and identifies game situations, tactical decisions, and elements of skill execution that comprise the game. This should enable readers to create lessons appropriate for their students.

**The Game**

Over-the-Line was originally played on the beach. The defensive fielding team arranges itself behind a line (that extends from first base, through the pitcher’s mound, to third base) and attempts to catch balls hit in the air. The offensive (batting) team is allowed three outs to advance imaginary runners around the bases. So, while “runners” (see explanation below) advance on hits, the batters never run. A hit is any ball that passes the line in the air and lands on the ground without being fielded. A grounder or dribbler landing in front of the line is an out. Any ball hit in foul territory, to the left of the third base line or to the right of the first base line, is also an out (see Figure 1).

The ball is put into play with a soft-toss from a teammate. The ball is tossed underhand into the strike zone of the batter from a low posture, on one knee or squat, and from the side (e.g., right side of a right-handed batter). The batter exhibits a side orientation to the playing field while waiting and watching for the toss. The tosser needs to kneel or squat at
a safe distance from, and in full view of, the batter to avoid being struck by a swinging bat.

The skills of soft-tossing and/or hitting a soft-tossed ball can be taught at the third or fourth grade level. The teacher should assume the role of tosser when the skill is first introduced to younger ages. The game can also be modified to bat a thrown ball, kick a stationary ball, or bat off a tee.

Game situations and tactical decisions are simplified in Over-the-Line by always “making a play” on the batter. Imaginary runners advance only one base on any hit unless the ball is hit over the head of a fielder (a “home run” that clears the bases and scores a run for each “runner”) or out of bounds (foul = out, see Figure 1). For example, let’s say the first batter hits successfully between two fielders, so the hit places a runner on first base; the second batter flies out (the ball is caught before it lands on the ground) for one out, leaving the runner at first base; the third batter hits over the fielders, which clears the bases and scores two runs (one for the batter and one for the “runner”); the fourth batter hits a short grounder in front of the line, resulting in a second out; the fifth batter hits a line drive over the line that is fielded on the first hop, resulting in a runner on first base; with two outs and two runs scored, etc. This example shows how important verbal communication is during game play. Students can keep track of hits, outs, runners, and runs scored. They can strategize about the situation and take part in decision making. Next, the technical demands of the game skills must be developmentally appropriate for all students, requiring modifications to the game that progress from simple to complex over a series of lessons.

Modifications for Over-the-Line

A primary part of the Games for Understanding tactical game model (GFU) is the use of conditioned (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2003), or modified, games. Conditioned games emphasize a particular core tactical situation found in official game play. Using situations to design conditioned games redefines the nature of game play, allowing the teacher to more often answer “yes” to the ubiquitous, “Are we going to play a game today?” As core situations or conditions occur during game play, the need for practice blends nicely with students’ desire to perform the skills needed to execute a tactical decision. For example, in a situation where the bases are loaded and there is one out, the tactical decision of place hitting (hitting the ball to an open space) can be introduced.

The tactical model allows the whole class to work on a particular situation and explore different situations or options. Questioning students about the batter’s options in a particular situation is likely to result in solutions that drive subsequent practice tasks. In the current example, students would practice different tosses and stances for place hitting.

Lessons designed with developmental appropriateness in mind results in equipment changes. In the early stages of growth, kicking is an easier striking skill for children, especially when using a large ball. Children also are more successful initially kicking a stationary ball, then progressing to a rolling or dropped ball. Batting tees serve a similar purpose as a fundamental place to begin learning to swing a bat and, therefore, keep early games going quickly. Considerations of bat length and weight allow for quicker and shorter swings. The selection of ball size, weight, and composition also influence success. Then, what about gloves? For example, the use of a soft sixteen-inch rag ball encourages two-handed catches if gloves are not used. These are each important equipment considerations for the teacher to make when planning to include Over-the-Line in a striking/fielding games unit.

Other modifications to consider include the number of participants and use of space. Over-the-Line can be played with as few as 2 vs. 2 and as many as 6 vs. 6. Off-sided games, with more or fewer fielders against one batter, can be created when the teacher wants to focus on offense or defense. For example, if hitting is the focus of a conditioned game, it makes sense to have fewer fielders. The length of the baselines can also be shortened or lengthened, influencing the distance to out of bounds and home runs. The “line” is usually set at the imaginary pitcher’s distance, but can be adjusted in or out to give the batter an advantage or create a disadvantage. When students use a tee to bat, the line might be moved closer to the batter to decrease the likelihood of grounders, resulting in more hits instead of outs. Finally, the angle of the baselines can be increased or decreased, giving the batter more or less space for fair hits (see Figures 2 and 3). These are particularly important considerations when teaching the game to second and third graders.

Once conditions and equipment have been determined, the rules should be reviewed for potential modifications to keep play moving. New rules may needed to speed up play. For example, allowing each batter to have only three tosses speeds up the offense. Overall, the rules should be limited to only what is necessary to play a particular conditioned or modified game. Additional rules or modifications can be added as situations arise that require them (Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin, 1997). For example, the tactical decision to hit to open space in right field with one runner on base is the focus of an off-sided conditioned game. After a question/answer period, students practice place hitting to right field. When the game resumes, a rule is implemented to reward such hits with an automatic run.

The goal of implementing the GFU approach at the elementary level, with games like Over-the-Line, is to familiarize students with the type of games and sports encountered in a secondary school Sport Education model (Smith, 1991). Practice activities, tasks, and drills should resemble core tactical situations presented in conditioned games. It is, therefore, important to identify the game.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Situation</th>
<th>Tactical Decision</th>
<th>Elements of Skill Execution</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soft Toss Pitch</td>
<td>How high to toss the ball; What distance should the ball be tossed in front of the batter? What type of toss is best for each batter? What kind of toss is best for placement of a hit down each line?</td>
<td>One knee open stance; Toss to insure a shoulder-to-shoulder swing of the batter; Hand position under the ball to reduce spin; Communicate with batter on timing of release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batting</td>
<td>Where to hit the ball on the bat; Point of contact (power zone) What toss to select to hit to different fields (open space) - How high a toss? - How wide a toss?</td>
<td>Develop profile on fielders' success thus far. Grip is loose with hand relaxed; pivot on back toe and rotate hips into swing; front side arm extension; contact ball out front of stance; squeeze bat on impact; snap wrist and roll; hips snap through and long follow through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batting</td>
<td>What kind of hit is wanted?</td>
<td>Fly ball: 2 out of 10 will fall in; ground ball is automatic out; line drive: 8 out of 10 will fall in; soft, well-placed blooper is effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensive Team</td>
<td>Where are the runners? How many outs are there? How many runs have scored?</td>
<td>Verbal talk aloud among teammates is critical to the game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to anticipate path of ball</td>
<td>Concentrate on ball as it comes off bat; look for cues to get direction and speed of ball: sound as it hits bat, angle of bat, angle and speed of ball as it leaves bat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>What is best ready position?</td>
<td>Body erect; arms loose in front of body; glove knee level and hands not on knees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to best move to the ball</td>
<td>As soon as ball leaves bat, run with arms pumping; eyes remain focused on the ball; run on toes minimizing up/down body movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How and when to call a ball</td>
<td>Call for ball as soon as possible; must not stop after calling; others move into back up position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to handle a pop up</td>
<td>Ball is caught above eye level on throwing side with both hands. With the catch, arms give as elbows flex to absorb force of the ball; squeeze ball with both hands as bring ball into body; allow “give” to move across ear on same side as throwing arm to reach cocked arm throwing position and enhance release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to field a fast-dropping, short, fly ball</td>
<td>Approach body low and glove extended toward ball; keep head down and chin tucked; back of glove faces ground; fingers point away from body and pocket faces and is open to ball; eyes on ball until it enters glove. As catch is made, wrist and arm “give” and ball hand closes over glove; ball is brought to chest as body straighteners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to field a long, fly ball hit over right shoulder</td>
<td>Do not back pedal. Pivot and jab step to the right rear and turn toward where ball will come down; feet point in direction of run; eyes look back over left shoulder and remain in contact with ball; try to get behind ball and wait in throwing position. If fielded on the run, extend glove arm across body and use back hand catch. Extension occurs in last 4 steps, not early and not at the last minute; give with catch and pull ball into body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to field a long fly ball hit over the left shoulder</td>
<td>Pivot and jab step to left rear and run to where ball will come down; feet point in direction of run; eyes look back over right shoulder. If time to get behind ball, stop, turn back to right and assume catch/throw position; if not time, extend glove arm to make catch on the run during the last 4 steps. To get into throwing position, player first allows momentum to continue in direction of run; at earliest opportunity, checks momentum by bracing right leg; body completes rotation to right and throws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fielding</td>
<td>How to field balls hit directly overhead</td>
<td>Direction of turn depends on how far ball is hit. If shallow enough to get behind it, pivot to right and place body in correct throwing position with minimal turning of head and trunk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensive Team</td>
<td>How to call for the ball How to call teammate on to the ball How to back up teammates Where are the runners? How many outs are there? How many runs have scored?</td>
<td>Verbal talk aloud among teammates is critical to the game.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
situations, tactical decisions, and elements of skill execution created by each modification of Over-the-Line.

From a list of possible game situations, the teacher creates (a) a conditioned game employing a tactical game situation that stimulates student thought, (b) questions that help students probe and identify the skills needed to handle the tactical situation, and (c) practice tasks for improving movement and skills prior to returning to game play.

**Sample Lesson**

The following is a sample lesson in which students identify a plan to defend space. The psychomotor objective is for students to successfully field a variety of speeds and types of hits in the air and accumulate six outs. The cognitive objective is for students to make good decisions related to either fielding the ball or backing up an adjacent fielder (by calling the ball or preparing for off-ball movement and support of the other fielder). The affective goal is for students to cooperate and communicate with each other to make the best catch possible together.

To speed up play, balls are to be fielded and placed in a bucket, exchanging buckets when the tosser’s is empty and the fielder’s is full.

The conditioned game is Call for and Catch Six. The game is played with 3 teams of 2, with 2 fielders at a time playing defense against 4 batters (2 teams of 2). Defensive side-by-side positions are played to facilitate communication and movement for short and long hits. A narrow field is set up, giving the fielders an advantage. An out is recorded only if the ball is called audibly before the catch. Teams keep track of their total runs scored on offense (during two rotations of hitting). A batting team rotates to the field after the fielding team has accumulated six outs. After 18 outs, all three teams will have batted twice and played defense for six outs. After the initial conditioned game (18 or 36 outs), the students will meet with the teacher for questions. Tactical questions from the teacher include the following:

Q: What was the goal of the conditioned game?
A: To successfully field against batters and get six outs quickly; to call the ball and make a good catch for the out; to communicate with a partner so, together, we make the best catch; to back up the partner who called the ball first.

Q: What about your goal when you are on offense batting?
A: To score runs and win.

Q: When on defense, how were you able to field fast, dropping balls?
A: Call the ball. Move feet quickly to the ball. Extend glove with the thumb down.

Q: Why is it important to call the ball and communicate with a teammate?
A: So we can make the safest and best catch as a team.

Q: What should the fielder who didn’t call the ball do, and why?
A: Back up your partner. Call him/her onto the ball as it is approaching.

Q: As a batter, with one or two runners on base, what are your choices?
A: Hit over the fielders. Hit the ball to the weaker fielder (side). Hit to open space.

Answers to the tactical questions will be used to modify practice tasks such as the following:

Two defensive players versus a tosser. Tosser throws balls or makes fungo hits, depending on the developmental level, to the fielders. The fielders field ten balls, with an emphasis on correct footwork and communication. The teacher may specify a type of catch or modify the task for height and/or distance of the toss/hit. For example, Table 1 (under “fielding”) describes a tactical decision for fielding a fast-dropping, short, fly ball. A drill can be set up to enable students to work specifically on that game situation.

During game play, the teacher should engage in skill cues and self-talk reminders (“body low,” “glove extended”), peer coaching (“That’s the way to keep your body low, Kathy”), refinements from the teacher to improve the skill quality (Rink, 2002; “Let’s take another look at a correct catch-and-cover when fielding the ball”), and immediate congruent and specific verbal feedback (“That’s the way to call the ball, Dan” or “Super effort at getting your feet to the ball, Diana”). An assessment rubric might include cues such as “call all balls,” “feet to the ball,” “watch it in,” “catch and cover,” “recover and throw,” “get the angle,” and “back up like they aren’t even there.” These are accurate cues that assist the learner and help determine whether or not skills are executed correctly.

After the practice task(s), play Call for and Catch Six again. Having practiced execution of the tactical decision, involving movement and communication with a partner, should improve the quality of game play.

**Conclusion**

Teachers who have experienced the GFU model, and those who are willing to try something new, will likely acknowledge this model provides a rich vehicle for reaching benchmarks within the National Standards for skills such as throwing, catching, and striking. It also creates thoughtful and meaningful dialogue and activity in the gymnasium and on the fields.

Challenges for the teacher include increased pedagogical skill, planning, and practice. Rewards include an environment of student discovery and the freedom to make decisions about their own learning (Smith, 1991). Students who are successful game players will likely turn to game involvement as a lifetime event. Let us move on toward teaching and playing games like Over-the-Line for sport, fun, and understanding.

**References**


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