

Use of a Defender's Mask in Youth Softball

As a coach, a mom of a softball player, and the director of our softball program, I am often asked about the use of defender's masks in our program.

While I cannot make the purchase of or the use of a mask a mandatory requirement of our leagues, I can offer you information and my personal opinion on their use and allow you to make your own informed decision for your player.

What is a defender's mask?

A defender's mask is a piece of safety equipment made of metal or plastic that is typically worn by infielders, and most prominently pitchers. They are rarely, if ever, worn by outfielders. The point of the mask is to prevent facial injuries from hard hit softballs off the bat, balls that bounce off the ground, and/or misjudged or misplayed balls in the air. The use of masks has been increasing in the past few years after stories of terrible facial injuries. Add to that, the construction of composite bats that are made to give hitters great exit velocity, and you have opportunity for injury on the field.



These masks are widely available in youth and adult sizes at a variety of price points at stores like Dick's, Modell's, Amazon, etc.

You might say to yourself, "Well I played high school softball in the 80s, 90s, etc. and I didn't need a mask." I can say the same thing for myself, but a lot of things about safety in many sports have changed throughout the years. For instance, football helmets that can now measure the blow of impact to determine if a player may have had a concussion.

Why should a player wear a defender's mask?

For our younger players, starting at about the third or fourth grade level, I would recommend their use for several reasons:

1. Accidents happen. They are learning the game, they are not perfect, they will drop balls, misplay balls, etc. I wouldn't want a preventable accident to ruin the game of softball for a player.
2. Little girls don't always pay attention. I have been there with teams and seen it in action, little girls are easily distracted, and it only takes that one time to have a ball come off the bat right at the one player that is not paying attention and there is no time to warn her.
3. Sense of confidence – typically when you feel protected you play with more confidence. So if that ball jumps off the ground and hits her in the chin when she is wearing a mask, it just becomes an "oops" moment and she is back in the game. I wouldn't want to see it turned into a game-stopping moment when we need first aid and we have a player in tears.

For the older players in middle school and approaching high school, I have found that we have a wide range of abilities on the field. With some players, softballs can travel at speeds well over 50 mph when hit by a batter, pitchers and fielders at first and third base have less than a half second to react when a ball is coming right at them.

Our coaches in Fair Lawn are very good about assessing the abilities of the players on their teams and playing them in positions appropriately to avoid situations in which girls who may not be able to react quickly are not in the wrong place at the wrong time. We want all players to have FUN, learn the amazing game of softball, and be safe. But, accidents happen.

That being said, my daughter uses a facemask in softball. Here she is at third base for our Fair Lawn Varsity team (make sure you come see their games this year!). Not once has she said that the mask hinders her performance. But more than once, she has said, "I am glad I had my mask on for that one." She will be playing softball in college next year...she was recruited wearing a mask and she will still be wearing a mask next year.



Here are pictures of college players ...Duke, Florida, Oregon.....



Here is another opinion on facemasks from a professional player:

<https://coleymarieries.com/2017/12/13/wearing-a-face-mask-doesnt-make-me-any-less-of-a-professional/>

Now don't go thinking softball is too dangerous a sport for girls, it is not. IT'S A GREAT GAME!!! Softball is my favorite sport: softball allows players of all abilities to have success; when played at the highest level it is so fast and exciting to watch; softball is a game that makes you think; softball is a game that builds camaraderie and friends are made on the bench.

Feel free to research the subject on your own and come to your own conclusion. If you have any questions about softball equipment, please feel free to contact me:

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