

# The Washington Post

THURSDAY, MAY 27, 2010

## Ex-college athletes teach girls the ropes

By Kathy Orton  
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Thursday, May 27, 2010

A softball can be intimidating to an 8-year-old. That's why Jessica McNurlen tosses soft, pillowy marshmallows to the girls she's teaching to hit.

"It works on their hand-eye coordination," she said. "If they can hit a marshmallow, they can hit a softball."

Having played softball since she was 7, competitively until she was 22, McNurlen not only has the knowledge to teach the sport's fundamentals but also understands the trepidation girls might have.

"I'm able to answer questions they might have that they might be afraid to ask because I know what the question is," said McNurlen, 24. "I try to bring up their fears before they do: 'I'm afraid to catch the ball.' It's okay to be afraid to catch the ball, but this is how we're going to learn how to do it."

McNurlen, a former first-team, all-region player at Mercyhurst College, is one of a handful of former college players who coach for Koa Sports, a Montgomery County-based company that offers athletic programs for girls and boys. Koa, a Hawaiian word for strength, is unlike most open-registration, recreation-level sports programs in that it uses former college and professional athletes to teach fundamentals. Such elite coaching at a young age, although common for boys, is almost unheard of for girls.

Wayne Cohen, 43, a lawyer and entrepreneur from Potomac, and Tony Korson, 27, a former All-Met baseball player at Walt Whitman High School, founded the company last August. They initially focused on boys' sports but quickly recognized a need for girls' programs after a survey of their clients generated an



Koa Coach Jessica McNurlen whispers softball suggestions.

overwhelming response.

"A lot of girls don't play field hockey or lacrosse until ninth grade," Korson said. "We kind of want to change that."

To provide girls with role models in their sports, Cohen and Korson hire women to coach in their girls' programs.

"One central thing is really to have female coaches coaching girls," Cohen said. "It's not to suggest that they wouldn't necessarily relate to a man, but it's 100 percent our model because they will relate differently to a woman. They see the way she throws the ball, see the way she catches the ball, see how she bats the ball."

David Fink, a Potomac resident whose daughter Mira, 8, and son Alec, 14, participate in Koa programs, said he is especially pleased that a woman is mentoring his daughter.

"It's really having the chance [for her] to work with

other young women instead of having Mom or Dad coach,” Fink said. “We’ve talked about it where she sees young women who have worked hard and played, and then they’re teaching her how to play.”

Cohen and Korson said they don’t expect girls in the softball program to be thinking about college scholarships but rather to be learning fundamentals and having fun. But given their success on the boys’ side -- an elite baseball program Korson started several years ago has helped place about a dozen players on college teams -- they hope some girls will continue playing at higher levels.

“Will some of them go on to play college ball out of here? Possible,” Cohen said. “Is that the goal right now? No.”

Michaela Davis, 8, of Bethesda started playing softball early last month after a friend told her about Koa. She has learned how to field a grounder and catch a pop fly, and she excels at her favorite activity, batting.

“I got a hit on the first try,” she said.

For information on Koa Sports, visit <http://www.koasports.org> or call 301-229-7529.