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NFCA Question of the Month

Key for Transitioning to Metal Spikes? Just Like Anything, Practice

In regards to metal spikes, how do college coaches help their freshmen transition? Are there new techniques taught, from diving/sliding to baserunning, etc.?

Incoming freshmen who play the infield positions have to understand better how to set up for tag plays when covering the bases. The biggest mistake young freshmen make is in their positioning around the base due to the fact that they have never dealt with being spiked or cleated by metal.

Heather Tarr
University of Washington

I believe the biggest issue is off the diamond when walking across concrete areas around the park. I did have one injury suffered by a player who was wearing metal cleats for the first time, but it occurred on a damp, rainy day when she slipped on the concrete floor when going to the restroom between games.

I do encourage players using them for the first time to execute sprints, drop steps, pivots, crossovers and hitting the bases on the inside corner while rounding. Most players who have good fundamentals to begin with have exhibited few or no problems in the transition.

Henry Christowski
Simpson College

We order a fall set for freshman or players that have never worn metal. We keep everything in practice game-related so that they get used to them while in situations that they will be facing. A few of them trip at the beginning, but besides that, through trial and error, just practicing helps the athletes adjust and get used to them.

Jackie Boxley
Citrus College

There are tremendous adjustments that need to be recognized and dealt with (by the coaching staff) early on when asking our freshmen to make an adjustment from wearing molded cleats in high school to metal spikes in college. It is my belief that wearing metal spikes changes all facets of the game from a more solid landing off the rubber for a pitcher to being able to get out of the batter's box quicker for a slapper. Our coaching staff works a lot with our freshmen on baserunning and sliding, mostly for injury purposes, but also for adjustment reasons.

Heather Bruder
Bluffton University

Athletes can adjust to wearing metal spikes by wearing them to practice, which hopefully includes, jogging, stretching, cutting, and sprinting. I have only had one athlete really dislike metal cleats over the

years, and her reason was quite childish. The majority of the athletes really like how much better they can cut and run in various conditions in which we practice and compete, and metal cleats are truly a superior cleat.

Besides coaches getting the cleats to their athletes so they can practice and condition in them, the only other thing a coach can really do to help his/her athlete transition is to be sure that the first few weeks the dirt/infield is groomed and as soft as possible. This way, the cleat itself has good traction and helps the athlete not feel as if she is wearing "ice skates." The spikes actually pierce the ground versus gliding over it, and ankle rolls are less likely.

Kama Tucker

Greensboro College

From a strictly performance perspective, most of the athletes that try playing in spikes are impressed with the improved traction over molded cleats and there is not much complaint. The real concern is safety. We had an athlete break her leg sliding feet first with spikes on, so it is an issue about which I am hyper-aware.

We place more emphasis on sliding headfirst than I ever did with my high school teams, and this is part of the reason – though not the only reason. Still, I do work on feet-first slides. We practice sliding in the outfield grass in sock-feet. Emphasis is on sliding on the hip as opposed to the bottom half of the leg. I point out to players where the pads are on their sliding shorts and how this high side placement demonstrates where their weight ought to go. Above all, we want our spike-wearing players to get their weight off their feet and get those spikes away from the ground. Many players, mindful of their spikes, slide exclusively headfirst.

One other important safety issue: sometimes walking on cement with spikes can be like walking on ice. Absolutely no running on pavement in spikes.

Marty Kreman

Santa Monica College

We talk with our players about picking up their feet and running on the balls of their feet more. We also make sure we teach and practice sliding prior to handing out the metal spikes, so that problem is eliminated.

Jay Miller

Mississippi State

In all honesty, I don't believe there are any secret drills out there to teach your athletes to transition to metal cleats. The best approach you can take is to get the cleats ordered early. That way, they have the advantage of practicing in metal throughout the entire offseason.

This will give them enough time to make any adjustments necessary and feel comfortable in what they are wearing. It is inevitable that one or two freshmen will get their cleats caught and fall when initially practicing in metal. Better to have this happen early in the offseason rather than later during the actual season.

Lisa Field

Santiago Canyon College

I make it very simple with my student-athletes. I give them the option of plastic or metal, and most of my players choose the metal spikes. I truly do not have a special technique – I give the metal spikes to them and we go to work. It usually takes the players a few days to get used to them, and then they love metal spikes. They say it is easier to run the bases with metal spikes and easier to go after balls in the field.

Players say they get a better first step with metal spikes. A lot of my frosh say they feel so much safer in metal spikes because their feet are securely on the ground.

I really want our players to be comfortable. I have only seen one player have an injury due to wearing metal spikes. She was making a diving catch and her legs got tangled, and it cut her leg. I have never seen any injuries sliding into the bases. You may get the occasional step on the first baseman's foot on the bag, but other than that metal spikes seem pretty safe.

Jeff Franquet

Georgian Court University

We assume the incoming freshmen do not have the proper technique for sliding wearing metal. We do not let them attempt a slide in practice without first demonstrating to us she has at least the basic technique of the simple bent leg and headfirst slides. We do this by either starting every practice or ending it with just the freshman on a sliding mat in socks only. Then we graduate to turf shoes, and then finally metal in the dirt. This setup is for freshmen only, and they must do this every day until they convince me they can do it in dirt and not get hurt. This usually provides enough incentive to have them focus and want to master it quickly.

Jacque Joseph

Michigan State University

From the perspective of a travel ball coach that has a freshman daughter playing in college now, here are some things we went over when the new shoes came in. Players have to be reminded that the slide should begin far enough out in front of the base or blocking catcher's gear so that the feet are not the only extremity responsible for slowing the player's momentum. A late decision to slide creates panic, and the temptation is too high to just jam a foot in the base on a close play, thus taking all the momentum of the slide on the lower leg and ankle.

As a base coach at third, I make sure that my players see me signaling for a slide in plenty of time for them to adjust their approach. Headfirst slides only serve to make a smaller target for the defender to tag, but this leaves the player a bit more vulnerable to injury.

I have my teams practice sliding on grass or another soft surface on a flattened cardboard box in socks with a loose old blanket on top of the box – to make sure that a player can make a mistake and not break her leg or ankle if she slides too late. We can teach the popup, hook, slide-by, headfirst and give 'n take slides with a lot less chance for something to get caught than practicing with full cleats. A player then must "graduate" and practice in the "live" environment with full cleats on a skinned surface a few times to gain confidence in the sliding method of her choice after she has learned the technique in the practices.

Finally, I would also warn the infielders that blocking techniques using a knee or foot without protection leaves them open to an overzealous late slide where a sliding player is jamming a cleat towards you as you try to make a tag. Fielders must be taught to let players slide into tags instead of reaching towards incoming spikes.

Dave Golitko

Windmills (IL)

The main thing we try to do is get our defensive players to straddle the base on tags. So many of them are in the habit of dropping a knee down as they place the tag, and you can imagine the injuries that can come from that.

Mike McKenzie

Aurora University

I'm a travel ball coach, and prior to our college-bound players heading off to school, I usually recommend that they start acclimation to spikes by walking, jogging, sprinting and finally sliding. I place special emphasis on high knee action and picking up the feet, especially with outfielders who may encounter less than perfect turf conditions.

Mike Kelly

Lightspeed Gold (FL)

I don't believe that there is such a transition that coaches need to make a big deal about it.

Our coaching staff recommends that players wear metal spikes; however, it is not a requirement. We only have 16 days of practice for our non-traditional season, and for DIII athletics, that doesn't leave a lot of time to get used to "new" cleats. For our tryout period in the fall, which is the entire 16-day non-traditional season, I want players to feel as relaxed and confident as possible. The last thing I want them to worry about is the shoes on their feet. I would much rather they focus on catching the ball, hitting the ball, and running to first base. Therefore, I don't place any emphasis on the type of cleats they are wearing.

I haven't seen any need to help infielders with a transition from molded to spikes; however, our outfield coach does instruct the outfielders on the mechanics of slide-catching. I feel that regardless of how you teach and transition your athlete, once an athlete cleats herself, she will have all the feedback necessary to be more aware not to do it again.

Annette Shepherd

Ohio Northern University

At FCCJ, we don't really do anything different to help them transition to metal spikes other than have them in time to practice in them. Occasionally, we will have a player cleat herself diving, but I think if you focus too much on changing technique, they'll never catch the ball and would be more likely to spike themselves. We don't make a big deal of it and hope they just go out and play. I think that sometimes when you go on too much about things, in this case preventing an injury; it gets in their heads and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I have been at my school for 22 years and have never seen that to be much of a problem at all. They are more likely to trip going on and off the field the first few times they wear them, but in no time metal spikes become second nature and the players can't imagine not wearing them.

Jami Lind

Florida CC-Jacksonville

The transition for freshmen is a fairly easy one. I think they actually look forward to wearing them – it is like taking another step in their introduction to the college level. The main thing that I do is try to get them in a pair of spikes as soon as possible.

The first day they are in them, I may hear a comment or two, such as "I can really feel them go into the ground" or "listen to the sound they make in the dugout." After that, the newness rubs off, and it is time to get at it on the field. It is about being comfortable and getting used to them naturally. I do not go into any differences between molded and metal cleats with them. I simply pass out their shiny new shoes. We have enough to prepare for, and it is one less thing they need to worry about on the field.

Keith Parr

Christopher Newport University

We require our freshmen to have a pair of metal spikes once they arrive in the fall season. There really is no special formula to get them used to the spikes besides using them daily in practice.

We do all of our warmups in running or cross training shoes. Once we start the skills portion of our

practice, the players will change into their spikes. Lateral movement is key to the adjustment to metal spikes. This is where freshmen usually get caught up, because the metal is longer than what they are used to. So on the defensive side of the ball, we utilize range drills for both the infielders and outfielders where they are shuffling and working on their drop steps and/or crossovers. It does not take long for them to adjust. They must be more aware of how their feet work. They need to get more air under their feet to avoid tripping. Form running drills will also help with their adjustment.

On the offensive side, baserunning drills will help the adjustment (out of the batter's box is key, again working on the crossover step). In regards to sliding, proper technique is key. Make sure you emphasize getting air under your lead foot. That will help them gain clearance between the ground and the longer metal spike. This will help avoid spikes getting caught up in the clay.

The reality is repetition in practice with metal spikes is the only way the adjustment will take place.

Jamie Apicella

C.W. Post-Long Island

There are three main techniques that change when you shift to steel cleats. You must get your feet up off the ground when you slide – we teach landing on your butt while throwing your arms back. When you run the bases, you should stress not stepping in the middle of the bag but pushing off the corners, preferably across the bag on the edge going toward the next base. The third thing that changes is your stance for both fielding and in the batter's box. You are actually a bit closer to the ground with steel spikes, especially if it is a dry field. You're a shade lower in the box, and your strike zone may be different. When fielding ground balls, your glove will be closer to the ground and you may have to adjust for proper glove angle. These are small changes, but years of experience both playing and coaching have shown me that they can make a slight difference in your approach.

Rick Minter

University of Mary Washington

Metal spikes have never been an issue for any collegiate athletes I have worked with over the years, so I have not incorporated any new techniques in the transition. However, I make sure that my cleats are ordered before the end of fall, as to give my athletes more time to adjust to the difference in footing.

Once an athlete acclimates themselves to metal cleats, they feel more confident with their footing and traction. Drills with base running become less of an issue, as they are able to plant firmly into the ground and round properly. The key is to provide your athletes with plenty of practice and scrimmage time with the metal spikes.

Amanda Balduf

Chowan University

The best way to get freshman to adapt to metal spikes is to introduce them as soon as they arrive for fall practice. I suggest they first fit right – not too tight, not too loose. They also need to understand that the spikes are going to hurt their feet until they get used to them, because there is not as much give as with rubber cleats. They also need to understand that they very well might "cleat themselves" if they do not pick up their feet when they run.

The best way to get them accustomed to them is to practice with them on a regular basis. Don't switch back and forth; once they wear the metal, stay with metal until they get used to them.

Krystle Nichols

Northwestern State University

We give our freshmen their metal cleats in the fall and let them fly. It usually takes one time for them to cleat themselves, then they learn to respect and “how to adjust” to their new spikes! There really isn’t a transition.

Jennifer Teague

Eastern Michigan University

We encourage our freshmen to have their spikes grinded down to about half the length until they get acclimated to wearing them. The traction is almost as good as new spikes, and there is less chance of their shoes getting hung up in hard clay or turf. All of our players who have had a history of knee trouble are encouraged to have their spikes shortened as well. Coaching wise, we make sure that our infielders do not put themselves in harm’s way when applying tags and performing pivots. In the fall, we run bases as part of our warmup before practice to help them get a feel for what they can now do with better traction.

Larry Hennig

Temple College

This is my eighth year working with collegiate softball players, and during my coaching career I have only come up with one tried and true method to help players make that transition from molded cleats to steel spikes – lace them up and let them go. Over the years I have coached players that for some reason met this transition with dread and apprehension, and others embraced the idea, maybe looking at it as some rite of passage. Either way, I have stood by my conviction that once you’ve worn steel spikes, you will NEVER want to go back to the high school days of molded cleats. I must admit that my chosen method has its advantages for the coach (and players) with a good sense of humor. As many may know, this transition to the “big girl spikes” can take some getting used to, and that is where the sense of humor comes into play. There are few certainties in softball. One such certainty is that you will NEVER get a hit if you do not take the bat off your shoulder, and a near certainty is that at least one of your freshmen who has never worn steel spikes before will eventually fall victim to a “sniper.” The “sniper” strikes when you least expect it, usually when the unsuspecting victim is jogging across the outfield during warmups or as the team gathers around the coach for instruction or dismissal. This unfortunate player typically falls face first in the grass, and everyone enjoys a good laugh (after it is understood that she is okay, of course). So I say, “Lace ‘um ladies, and remember...pick up your feet, or you may be the next to fall at the hands of a sniper.”

Will Atkinson

University of West Alabama

I think the more practice time freshmen get with metal spikes, the faster they adapt to the change. There shouldn’t be much change to the diving and sliding techniques. The same fundamentals should be stressed and players should take note to emphasize a few fundamentals, such as making sure you are sliding on your back side when sliding feet first in order to avoid getting a metal cleat stuck in the ground, which could cause an injury. Basic agility drills in the dirt and grass should help them become more comfortable. Hopefully they will find it easier to move around in the dirt both defensively and offensively once they become acquainted.

Kerry Casper

Ottawa University