

# **How to Choose the Best Softball Tournaments**

**By Butch Tiller**

## Who's In?

Many times, as a tournament director, "Who's In?" is the first question you get when teams are calling about a particular tournament, especially a signature tournament that either offers some unique prizes or is a tournament that has a history of hosting strong softball teams.

In this guide, I'll give you a few tips on finding a great tournament and then tips on determining if it will be a great tournament, or if it is a tournament with just a bunch of hype.

## Signature Softball Tournaments

If the softball tournament you're investigating has a strong history, it may not be too difficult to figure out if it's one you want to play. Many teams that play in the bigger, better events are usually quality teams with solid players and have a coach/manager, who is on the ball and takes care of business for his team. If it's a tournament you've never heard of, you may need to do a little investigating.

As the President of Softball Nation, which hosts tournaments throughout the east coast and as the director of two signature tournaments the Beast of The East Men's Slow Pitch Tournament and the Queen of The Hill Girls Fast Pitch Tournament, I have some experience conducting big events with lots of teams. Sometimes an event with a lot of teams brings more teams. But to maintain that each and every year, you have to be organized and run a good event. The numbers of returning teams will tell others whether you're doing a good job or not.

## What to Look For When Searching for a Signature Softball Tournament

So, what if you're looking for a good quality tournament in a new location and you're not sure how to find one. Here are some criteria I recommend you use when looking for a good softball tournament:

**1. Honesty:** Honest is the Best Policy when it comes to Tournament Directors. Does he/she answer the phone or email? Are they available to answer your questions? Are they telling you the truth? How well do you know them? Do a little research on the director. This will tell you a lot about an event before you ever enter.

When you are dealing with a tournament director you don't know, you'll have to figure out if he/she is an honest person and delivers what is promised in every way. As a tournament director, I never lie or even fudge the truth, when I'm talking to a coach about a particular event. I lay it right out for the team to know what teams are playing, how many teams have registered at that moment, what the prizes are (regardless of the numbers), and then I tell them what I expect the event to do based on its history. As a tournament director, the last thing I want to happen is for a team to show up and feel like they got

something less than they were promised. In my tournaments, I try to under-promise and over-deliver. What I also hate to see is teams continuing to support tournament directors that are dishonest or less than professional.

**2. Tournament History:** If a tournament has a good history, i.e. it's been held before on the same weekend and you know some teams that have participated, this will give you an indication that, at least, the tournament is good enough that some softball teams are coming back. When checking into the tournament history, see if it's on the way up and growing in number or if it's on the way down and showing decline. If you're not sure, talk to the director.

Remember, a small decline over one year is no big deal, but a decline over several years means something. By the same token, a tournament that's not as big as another on the same weekend, may not be so bad, if it's well organized and all other factors are met. Remember, you can't play all 50 teams in one weekend. So, by talking to the tournament director it will give you a good understanding of what type of tournament it is and how well it is run and organized.

**3. Location: (Destination Tournament):** Many times location is the key factor. The location of a tournament can be chosen because it is convenient and does not require a lot of travel time. Also location can be important, when choosing a tournament because a coach says, "hey, we want to play near the beach." Then he/she starts looking for tournaments near a beach destination. I call these tournaments "destination tournaments." In a sense, the tournament is not as important as the location. But sometimes you can get a great location and a terrible tournament.

If you're checking out tournaments based on location, you may also want to check out other tournaments in that area at other times of the year. This may give you some idea about the tournament director and how he/she conducts business all the time.

So you may want to dig a little deeper and use some of the other criteria in making a softball tournament decision.

**4. Number of Teams:** Depending on how far out you're looking, it's hard to tell how many teams will be in the event. This is where you'll have to make a judgment on the tournament director. If he's being honest, he'll tell you how many teams are signed up and locked in. Don't let that be confused with how many he "expects". Honest tournament directors will tell you how many teams they have, how many they expect and what the history of the event has been. This will give you a clear picture of what "you" should expect from this event. Experienced tournament directors will not hide this information. I also recommend that you not just go by what you see on the internet. Sometimes that can be misleading information just to get you to play. So remember if you are looking to sign up for a tournament that you are not familiar with then it is important to talk to the director.

**5. Level of Competition:** Good teams have no problem looking for competition. It's the trophy hunters you have to watch out for. You know the team. They're good, but they want an easy road. If the

tournament seems to be drawing trophy hunters and they're allowing them to play down, that's a sign that you may be in for a rough weekend. Good tournament directors will keep the teams playing where they should be and that always makes for a good event. You may not win every game, but then no one does. What you should be looking for is good solid competition at the level where you compete. If you're not sure about the competition, then talk to the director.

**6. Organization:** This may be the most important criteria to look at, even though some softball teams don't think about it until it's too late. If a tournament is well organized, then your team will play at the times that are scheduled and not two to three hours late (unless of course weather or some other unfortunate circumstance). When I run a tournament, I always set it up as if I were going to play in it and I try to set up a schedule that is accommodating to each and every team. But remember this, if you're the last team in at the last minute, don't expect to get the most perfect schedule and a late "first game" start.

**7. Communication:** Did you get a phone call or email back? Tournament directors get dozens of phone calls every single day. The good ones will call you back pretty quickly and the really good ones will call you back that day, or at the latest, the next day. We always recommend you email "and" call the tournament director and share some one-to-one communication about the event.

**8. Prizes and Berths:** The basic details of the tournament are the simplest part. What is being offered in terms of games, prizes and berths? The only thing to say about this is in the area of prizes. If prizes are the most important factor to you, be sure you know what prizes are being offered and how they're being offered. Some of the less than honest tournament directors will offer these great prizes and then when you show up, those prizes somehow disappear because they didn't reach the "minimum" number of teams to give the prizes. If prizes are important to your softball team, be sure you ask about the numbers and make sure you know what the guidelines are as far as the prizes go. You don't want to play in a tournament offering rings and then find out there were never any rings to begin with. As far as prizes and tournament details go, I recommend you refer back to the Honesty part of this article. If you can't trust the tournament director, don't trust the prizes.

**9. Entry Fee:** Sometimes people don't pay attention to the details. The entry fee may not be important to a well funded team, but it could be everything to a team that's coming out of pocket for each weekend. The entry fee should be reasonable considering the number of games you're getting in return. Also ask about gate fees. Sometimes an entry fee is low because the gate fee is high. When looking at fees make sure that you ask questions and the tournament directors is very clear and upfront with you.

**10. Field Conditions:** This goes to location, but a more specific location. Good fields at facilities that have concession stands and bathrooms (as opposed to porta potties) make all the difference in the world, when you're out there all day for two or three days in a row. So remember when you are talking to the tournament director ask if about the field conditions and if there are restrooms and concession stands.

**In Summary:** Considering all of these elements will help your softball team plan out a great season. The truth about softball is that it's a recreational sport. While tournament teams are more serious than the rec teams, it's still recreational and that means you should be playing for the fun of it. And you'll get more fun out of a tournament that is well organized and well run, even if you lose. Of course, if you win some games, that always makes things better. By doing a little research, you can help your team and you can help the tournament directors, who are doing a good job by supporting them and playing in their tournaments.