One of the many things that I have learned from legendary University of Arizona softball coach, Mike Candrea, is the difference between male and female athletes. “The men need to play good to feel good, but the women need to feel good to play good.” This is why investing valuable time into team building will pay off.

The most critical component of team building is getting the team to buy into the process. The best and most creative ideas in the world will not work if the players are not on board. Players, coaches and support staff should be included in these sessions and are all important to the success of your efforts.

For this reason, we get feedback from players and involve them in planning our team building sessions. Having team rules and team goals that are actually created in part by the players themselves are much more meaningful than those that are imposed by coaches. We create a mission statement as a team and then turn our focus to the process of meeting the mission by setting specific controllable goals.

It is important to remember that your team’s mission must come from the team itself. As a coach it may be difficult to sit back and be quiet while the team talks about their goals for the year.

One activity is to have the players begin with the end in mind. Have the team project forward to the end of the year banquet (or even further: their 10 year reunion). Give them the task of writing what they would like to have said about their team. Ask them how they would like to be remembered. Their responses will be a good springboard into a mission setting meeting.

Fostering leadership is another important part of team building. Leaders will often emerge on their own. As coaches, we hope that our seniors will step up and fill this role, but it does not always happen. Developing leaders on your team depends on the setting in which you are coaching, as well as your personal philosophy. I have coached teams with and without officially named team captains. As a junior college coach of a first year program, I really felt the team needed some leadership (we had 14 freshmen and one sophomore transfer). This was the first year that I had the team select captains. Simply expecting your players to know how to lead is not realistic. You must teach them your expectations and give them responsibilities in order for them to be effective.

Communication is the cornerstone of team chemistry. Players need to be able to communicate with one another effectively. Coaches need to have clear lines of communication with each other as well as with players. Team building activities can teach players how to resolve conflict, as well as how to approach the coaches with issues. I like to have fairly regular (2-3 times each semester) individual meetings with players. This is a good time for me to give them an evaluation of their progress, and an opportunity to talk without teammates present.

There are many fun activities to build team camaraderie. Halloween comes at the perfect time in the fall to lighten things up with a costume contest. We have also had the players prepare skits and participate in games including a pumpkin carving contest and an over the line tournament.

We usually see at least one movie as a team and process any lessons learned or messages received. Some inspirational movies to watch when practice is rained out are: Miracle, Akeelah and the Bee, The Polar Express, Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium, and Secretariat. Of course there are many more, these are just a few of my personal favorites.

At the beginning of each spring we try to plan one big team building event to kick things off. Some ideas that we have used in the past are: a mini Olympics, paint ball tournament, ropes course challenges and rock climbing. Most of these types of activities are best monitored by professionals. Group rates are usually offered and can be tailored to fit the specific needs of your team.

There are many excellent resources for team building ideas and games for any budget. Do some research on the internet and you will find lots of fun activities to try with your team. I highly recommend Jeff Janssen’s book Championship Team Building as a starting point.

I know that it does not seem like there is enough time to fit everything in to a practice session, but the time that you devote to team building will give you an excellent return on your investment.