product news

Product Review: VizualEdge Performance Training Software

By Ken Krause

See the ball, hit the ball. That's a mantra that is repeated on a daily basis on fastpitch softball fields all over the world. Coaches (and parents) tell their hitters to see the ball big, watch it all the way in, get a good look, etc. Yet while it all sounds like good advice, few can actually tell them how to make it happen.

That's where VizualEdge Performance Training (VEPT™) software from VizualEdge LLC (www.vizualedge.com) comes in. Developed by Dr. Barry Seiler, an optometrist in Vernon Hills, Illinois (who coincidentally happens to be my eye doctor), VEPT is designed to help athletes exercise and improve their visual capabilities the way lifting weights helps build body muscle. In fact, their literature refers to VEPT as "weight training for the eyes™."

According to Dr. Seiler, the genesis of VEPT began when he was working with students who had reading disorders. The students would come to his office and perform various exercises on the large, expensive equipment. On follow-up visits they would report on their progress in school.

During those reports, some began to tell about improved performance in sports as well. In particular, they said they felt they were seeing or tracking the ball better. That's when the light bulb came on; Dr. Seiler knew if he could create a vision training product that could produce similar results at home, he could help a lot more athletes in all sports improve their games.

The result of his research was the introduction of VEPT in 2002. This compact software can be run on virtually any modern PC or laptop, allowing athletes to train whenever and wherever they happen to be.

The core package consists of a CD with the VEPT software along with a pair of 3-D glasses. You then purchase sessions in packages of 30, 60, 100, 200 or 500. (The larger two packages are for teams, and include support, education, and data analysis from VizualEdge's professionals.)

Setting up the software was very easy. The setup wizard walks you through the process. When it's finished loading, the software takes you to the main screen. You will want to read the setup instructions, particularly when it comes to the monitor. I missed that the first time, but once I set it up correctly it became easier for our test subjects to see the various exercises.

To get started, you click "Create" and enter the name of the first user. If you will have multiple users on that computer, create an identity for each one.

Your first step in actually using VEPT is to perform an evaluation of the user's current visual skills. Click on "Evaluate" and VEPT will walk you through five different screens that test the user's depth perception,

eye alignment, visual tracking (ability to track high speed objects), visual recognition, convergence (tracking an object coming at you – such as a pitched softball) and divergence (ability to change focus quickly from near to far and back).
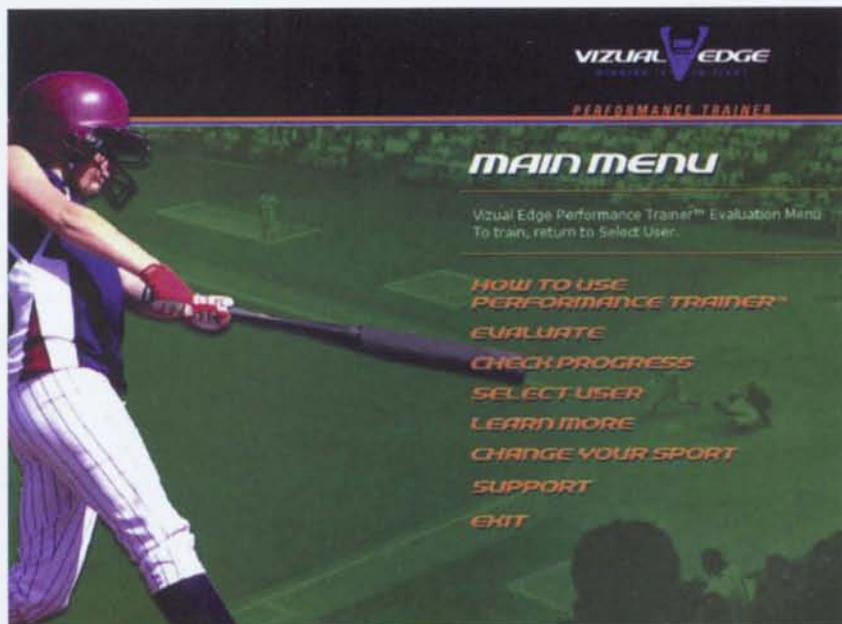
This evaluation process takes roughly 20 minutes. When you're finished, you can save the results to your desktop as a Microsoft® Excel® file. You can also upload the results to a Web site if you have an Internet connection. (That's the only thing you need an Internet connection for, incidentally, making it perfect for training on long bus rides, in hotel rooms, etc.)

There is a "Print Results" option as well, but the copy I had would only the print the category listings, not the actual results. This is a software glitch that VizualEdge says has since been corrected. In my evaluation copy, once I exited the original session I was able to print the results with no problem by clicking on a name and then "Check Progress."

Once you have the baseline results, the real work begins. VEPT work sessions feature many (but not all) of the same exercises used in the evaluation process. The difference, however, is you can set options to make the exercises progressively more difficult as the user improves his/her ability. For example, the visual recognition evaluation flashes three arrows that point up, down, left or right. The arrows appear for three seconds, then disappear, and the user must punch in the same pattern using the computer's arrow keys or a game controller (sold separately). In the exercise, however, you can vary the number of arrows (up to 12), the length of time they flash, and the size of the arrows.

For softball players, one of the most valuable exercises is called Alternating Flexibility. It combines the convergence and divergence exercises using the 3-D glasses. Softball players must be able to track fast-moving objects and change their focus quickly. This exercise helps them learn to shift between both.

From the user's perspective, the exercise appears to show a gray box with a diamond shape floating above it, again either up, down, to the left, or to the right. The user enters the position with the arrow keys or game controller. A correct answer causes the red and blue boxes that are overlaid to separate one step. This continues until either the time for the exercise is up or the user gives an incorrect answer. In the latter case, the boxes return to a closer set point, and the exercise continues. Two wrong answers in a row and you go back to start. The

object is to get the boxes as far apart as possible, which means better convergence and divergence tracking ability. Again, various parameters can be set to increase (or decrease) the level of difficulty.

Each of the exercises is designed to develop a different visual skill. The test shows which areas need to be developed most, based on years of research, studies with collegiate athletes, and results from players of various levels. The user can then focus the bulk of each 30 minute session on those skills while continuing to develop the ones in which they are already strong.

To test the VEPT system, we used several players from our team, broken into two groups for convenience. We started with the evaluation, then worked on areas that needed shoring up. It did seem to have an effect. After three weeks our players seemed to be seeing the ball better, and making more hard contact. (VizualEdge recommends running sessions at least once a week for six weeks and more if possible.) It certainly gave them more confidence in their ability to see the ball.

On my wish list would be a reference chart of which exercises to do to improve a particular skill. For example, if the problem is swinging under the ball, VEPT would recommend exercise X to improve it. If a third baseman is slow to react to line drives, then VEPT would recommend exercise Y and so on.

On the couple of occasions I needed help or a question answered, the VEPT staff was very friendly and responsive. It is obvious that they are very proud of the software and committed to user success. If you have any problems, or can't figure something out, one phone call will take care of whatever you need.

VEPT is not inexpensive. The basic 30-session package costs $199, while the 60-session package runs $299 and the 100-session package runs $499. Before entering into it, you'll want to make sure your players are committed to it. If they are, however, VEPT is a great investment. Look at it this way: these days a decent bat will cost at least $200, and a high-level one considerably more. VEPT will help those hitters get their money's worth out of those expensive bats.

The VEPT system is available through Higher Ground (http://higher-groundsoftball.com) as well as directly from VizualEdge.

MENDOZA FINALIST FOR THE WSF SPORTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR

Courtesy of ASA Softball/USA Softball

The Amateur Softball Association is pleased to

Sportingo to give fans the opportunity to write articles about the sport, for publication on the Internet. Sportingo (www.sportingo.com) is a dynamic sports media platform where all the content is generated by the fans.

"This is just the latest in a line of steps we're taking to more closely involve our fans in the sport they love so much," said ISF President Don Porter. "We get emails from our supporters worldwide, they post in the various categories in the Message Board section of our website, and, of course, we see them come in large numbers to our events. Thanks to what we're doing with Sportingo they now have another outlet for showing their passion for softball."

Ze'ev Rozov, Managing Director of Sportingo, commented, "Sportingo is delighted to be working in partnership with the International Softball Federation to allow softball fans to

enhancement. Sportingo will then publish the article, including the author's name, on their website, and forward the piece on to the ISF, who will then consider the article for posting on www.internationalsoftball.com.

The ISF-Sportingo relationship will also provide for links to online softball video being incorporated into the What's Online video guide at www.getsport.tv under More Sports.