

COACHING YOUTH BASEBALL 101

An in-depth guide for new coaches with tips for experienced coaches too.



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PREFACE

This book is about coaching (or teaching, we use those words interchangeably) youth baseball. It is not a book about coaching techniques in general, except to the extent they help you coach baseball. There are plenty of valuable resources out there that describe general coaching philosophy and how to behave and motivate (e.g., Positive Coaching Alliance). We see no reason to reinvent the wheel.

Nevertheless, there are many aspects of coaching youth baseball that will require a firm foundation of coaching principles and having the right attitude to work with children. If you do not feel you have that foundation, stop reading now.

What follows will not be of value to you or your students.

We are educators and teachers. We are passionate about helping others and seeing them improve. We have taught at the university level (graduate and undergraduate); taught professionals; taught inmates in prison; taught our teams; and taught our children. Collectively, we have more than 50 years of experience.

We have had to adjust and customize our approach to each of these audiences because their needs and capabilities are different. We have seen what techniques work and—more important—what techniques do not work in helping kids learn.

As we surveyed the literature on youth baseball coaching books, we saw many books focus on various drills to build skills.

However, we saw no books available to coaches that helped them teach the drills properly to build the right skills, or to correct drills if they were not being done properly. They all had chapters on THROWING, HITTING, FIELDING, but not “How

to Teach Throwing”, “How to Teach Hitting”. There is a huge difference in knowing how to do something and knowing how to teach it to a youth baseball player.

That is the purpose of this book: **To provide a valuable resource to coaches that helps them teach the fundamentals of baseball correctly to their youth baseball players.**

Our vision is to unleash the power and potential of youth baseball coaches (particularly at the beginning or introductory level) to help ALL players, not just the small percentage who are natural athletes.

Our picture of the future is that all coaches know how to run a fun, exciting and engaging practice that teaches and enhances correct fielding, throwing and hitting mechanics. Youth baseball games become a fun and respectful experience for players, parents and coaches. Youth baseball games are no longer a site of angst.

Children will grow up to have fond memories and will learn life lessons on teamwork, communication and dealing with failure from their youth baseball experience.

We are also believers in the importance of interaction in the learning process. We also embrace technology. While those two statements may seem to be unrelated, we see them as critically intertwined.

We welcome your thoughts on our approach, the drills and the teaching techniques we describe. Through our website www.coachingyouthbaseball.com, feel free to post comments, send videos or request a video conference where we can all interact.

If you have used teaching techniques that have worked for you in the past that are not in this book, please let us know. While we have authored this book and have plenty of experience teaching youth baseball, we are not oracles and are always hungry to learn more. (As we stated earlier, teaching youth baseball is our passion!)

And, we will provide you with the appropriate acknowledgment when we incorporate your ideas into future versions of this book.

We hope you enjoy this book and find it valuable.

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CHAPTER

01

**The Goal and Challenge of
Coaching Youth
Baseball**



Chapter 1: The Goal & Challenge of Coaching Youth Baseball

In this chapter, we offer an objective success measure for coaching youth baseball (and it has nothing to do with winning!). We also outline the unique challenges associated with coaching youth baseball and the tools we have used to help meet those challenges.

The Goal

The goal of coaching youth baseball is straightforward:

At the end of the season, all of the players must want to return to play next season.

That's it.

The goal has nothing to do with winning the most games, or having the most all-stars, or scoring the most runs. It is making sure your kids become repeat customers (or continue being repeat customers) of youth baseball.

There is nothing special about this objective in the business world. Numerous studies have shown that it is much more cost-effective to retain an existing customer than to go out and find a new one.

The same principle holds in youth baseball. Kids (and their parents) have numerous options to spend their leisure time and money. Competition is fierce. Other sports compete with baseball. Many times (especially when kids are younger) parents tend to “sample” different youth sports to find the “right fit” for their children.

Therefore, to hold on to the youth/customer, the coach needs to make baseball as interesting as possible and differentiate it from other youth sports.

Subsequent chapters of this book provide a number of ideas and suggestions that can help you get your “player retention rate” as high as possible. It may not be possible to achieve 100% all the time. Nevertheless, our rates have averaged in the 80-90% area over a wide range of seasons and youth age groups, while our overall league averaged closer to 60-70%, with that percentage declining as the kids got older.

The key to keeping retention rates high is the ability to differentiate your practice plans and drills to accommodate and address the varying skill sets of your players. A typical youth team will have 12 players. Two will be blessed with great athletic talent, two will be clueless and the remaining eight will be somewhere in the middle. The two with talent will probably need little help with doing drills correctly. Either they can figure it out themselves or they have parents who can teach them the right way to do things and reinforce what you teach in practice.

The remaining ten kids (including the two clueless ones) and their development are where a good coach (including his support staff) can make all the difference in a high retention rate and a low one. To achieve that, the coach must be able to provide individualized instruction to each player. If that can be done, the player’s development will improve, so will his/her self-confidence and—ultimately—they will want to come back and play youth baseball again.

Yes, we all enjoy coaching the really talented kids and dream about the day when they are in the big leagues and will thank us for all the help we provided along the way. However, the reality is that so much of their talent is God-given. We are only fine-tuning it. To pat ourselves on the back as coaches because a kid can hit a ball 250 feet as a 10-year old is disingenuous.

Baseball is not fun for you if you continually struggle to get a hit, if you always drop a key fly ball or throw, or if you are always caught in run-downs between bases. You have to be good at baseball to have fun. To be good at baseball is incredibly hard. Therefore, coaches need to teach players how to succeed at the game. This requires the ability to explain steps needed to implement various fundamentals. It also requires that the coach be able to diagnose problems and to make suggestions and conduct drills to fix these problems. Perhaps most importantly, it requires countless repetitions for players to perform the fundamentals correctly, without having to think about what they are doing. A good teaching coach knows that hard work pays off not only on the playing field for the team, but also in the joy the individual player derives from playing the game. And this inspires them to come back for more.

In other words, where we can make a world of difference is getting the average or below average player's skills improved. And get them improved so much that they want to come back next season to learn more and have more fun!

Trust us. It's doable. We've done it, and you can, too.

The Challenge

We will be clear: Baseball is not easy. Baseball is a game of failure.

That is especially true when it comes to hitting. If you were to describe hitting a baseball to someone who had never seen it done before, they would not believe it was possible.

Consider batting average, one of the most visible statistics followed in baseball. The best batting average in the last 75 years in the majors is .406. That's right! The guy with that average, Ted Williams, was one of the finest hitters ever—and yes, you should definitely read his book, *The Science of Hitting*. He was a success only 40 percent of the time *in his*

best career year! If you took a math test and you scored a 40, you would fail the class. In baseball, 40 percent is not a failing grade—it is an all-time record!

“Average” for a major leaguer is closer to .250 and in little league, it’s probably not much higher than .300. So average means getting a hit three out of ten times at bat. Consider all the factors that comprise getting a hit. You can hit a ball as hard as you can, but it might go right to a defensive player. The notion of, “Hit ’em where they ain’t” sounds nice, but actually controlling precisely where the ball is hit is not something youth players can do. Try it yourself. Go to the batting cage –try the fast cage – maybe even try the very fast cage. You’ll see that it is very hard to hit a baseball. Go outside. Tell a neighbor to stand 45 feet away and throw a rock towards you as fast as he can. Pick up a broomstick and see if you can hit it. You get the picture. Hitting is hard!

Therefore, if a player on your team smashes one and the shortstop catches it, run over and cheer. Tell that player what a great job he did and tell him that it’s just fate that he hit it right to the shortstop.

Baseball also teaches kids to deal with failure. In our day jobs, we teach college students. They always want another chance (e.g., extra credit, some make-up work, or some other act of forgiveness that makes no sense to us). They always have an excuse for not finishing assignments. We think to ourselves, “If only they had played baseball when they were little, they wouldn’t make excuses. They would accept what happens, deal with it, try to improve, and move on.”

Every season, we have a player or two who coughs up endless excuses. If he strikes out it’s always, “the sun was in my eyes,” “the ball was outside,” “my mother was cheering for me,” “my mother was not cheering for me,” or some such other lame excuse. We always say, “Listen, the past is the past. Learn from it and move on.” We ask, “Do you think this will be the last time you ever bat in your whole life?” They always say, “No.” Then we say,

“Why on Earth are you worried about this? You get to bat again in about 30 minutes. Start worrying about the next at bat.”

This kind of lesson is not taught in other sports. In soccer, somebody else on the team could have helped. In football, someone could have blocked better; in lacrosse or basketball, there is always someone on the team to help during the play.

In baseball, it's just you.

Finally, as a baseball coach, you also teach kids how to deal with pressure. At the plate, while pitching, or while fielding a ground ball, the player is isolated: There is no one else to blame, and no other player can help. This makes kids nervous. Worse, the anxiety makes their muscles tense and this makes it very hard to hit, pitch, or field the ball. To do well, kids have to learn to be confident and relaxed, even while under pressure.

Coaches can help develop this ability by creating pressure situations in practice once players have learned basic skills.

What a great skill to learn as a youth! It will pay dividends later on. Many things go wrong at work. For example, when the copier doesn't work or the contract for research doesn't arrive on time, we deal with them. We attribute this ability to deal with endless troubles to our baseball experience. We learned early on that, if you sit around and fret over every bad thing, things will only get worse. In youth baseball, if you sit around and fret over a previous strikeout while you are in the field, you won't be paying attention and you'll boot a ground ball. Players have to learn how to deal with adversity—quickly—to take a deep breath and shake it off.

We use a term (“Next Pitch”) to deal with adversity on our teams. We spend several minutes during practices and sometimes during games to remind the players that there is nothing they can do about what has happened. No one has a time machine to go back

and have a second chance at the ground ball that went through the legs or the fly ball that was not caught. We try to get them to focus on what they can affect or influence—which is the next pitch. To the extent our teams have been able to flush adversity out of their systems quickly and follow the doctrine of “next pitch”, they have been more successful.



Meeting the Challenge

As daunting as the challenge of coaching youth baseball may seem, we have used a number of tools successfully over long periods of time and with teams at all levels of youth baseball. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of them.

Practice Plans

You do not get to conduct many practices during a season and each practice only lasts a few hours. While high school teams might practice six days a week, you'll be lucky to squeeze in one or two practices in a week's time. You cannot afford to squander them. Thus, we devote a large portion of this book to running practices effectively and improving players' fundamentals during practice. If nothing else, remember that it is crucial to maximize repetitions. This can only be done with many stations in one practice. This means you have to have a plan that says which coach is helping with which station. It means you have to come early and set up the stations and it means you have to watch the clock during practice and move players quickly from one station to another. If a player is standing around at a practice waiting his turn for something or sitting in the grass waiting a few minutes, you just aren't doing your job. Even after numerous coaching clinics and books, we still see coaches running a practice by throwing a ball to one batter and having a bunch of kids field it. At the lower levels this means most fields are standing around watching the grass grow.

Get other parents to help. Even parents who have never played baseball can work at a station where they toss balls to a player. The best way to learn how to plan a practice is help out a seasoned coach for a practice or two and watch how they do things. You will see a fast pace where players get numerous repetitions. Tailor the practice plan for your team. Work on stations that are relevant to the weaknesses of your team. We'll give you some practice plans, but the truth is we don't reuse them. We modify them every year based on what our players need to learn.

Teaching Fundamentals

A good grasp of fundamentals is necessary for playing the game well. Throwing, catching, hitting, fielding, and base running are all fundamental. Fundamentals are

covered in many coaching books. While many of the current books tend to tell you step-by-step how to pitch, how to hit, and how to field, they tend to forget that all kids play at different levels. You are teaching a one-room schoolhouse. You have kids with widely varying capabilities. So, you have to tailor everything to the individual player. You can't just say, "Everyone must hit precisely like this." Why not? Well, suppose a kid on your team hits with poor technique, but each time at bat, he clobbers the ball. We suggest you simply cheer and say, "Good job!" because by the time you fix whatever in his swing is broken you may have completely ruined the kid. If you see obvious flaws in kids' swings that will affect them at higher levels, then fix them, but do so gradually while continually reassuring them that you don't want to mess them up.

Many kids have acquired bad habits, some from parents, and some from other kids. Parents intend well when teaching these to their kids, but many parents teach what they remember from when they were little. Most parents have not read many—if any—coaching books. Certainly, the other kids on the block haven't. Accordingly, you can anticipate a struggle divesting your players of their bad habits.

Tracking Progress

The best part of coaching for us is watching our players improve. It is great to see a team that looks like the Bad News Bears come together and start winning games. One season, we came home after our first practice and told our wives, "We aren't going to win all season." The team looked small and unable to do the simplest things. However, eventually, they finished 7-2 and we were delighted at how much they improved. Keep practices fun, keep games fun, and focus on getting better and not just wins and losses. Wins and losses often occur because of very small things that occur sometimes due to fate more than anything else. The longer you coach the more you'll realize that it is really not your fault if the team loses some games and you may even see that the baseball fates tend to come and go. One day a ball rolls foul at just the right time and you win.

Another day it rolls fair and you lose. Usually if your team works hard in practice, learns fundamentals and has fun, you'll end up with all the wins you need to keep a team focused and happy.

However, be careful when dealing with the "win monster". Doing everything you can to win every game may well reduce the amount of skill development you are able to do for each player on your team. As a youth baseball coach, focus on your real job: skill development for all your players. Again, focus on getting better, not wins and losses.

The kids will learn if you maintain a friendly atmosphere. You need to give them countless repetitions. If you play catch every day for an hour, eventually a kid will figure out how to catch. Practice is all about setting things up to increase repetitions and it's about teaching.

Write down some notes about each of your players at the first practice and continue to track them throughout the season. You'll be thrilled with their progress, which is a very rewarding feeling.

The concept of "getting better" or "making progress" is very powerful in youth baseball. For example, even if you win your game by a large margin against the best team in your league, sit your team down after the game. Simply ask them, "How many of you can play better than you did today?" We guarantee you that everyone will quickly raise their hand and be looking forward to the next practice opportunity.

Teaching

Knowing how to throw is one thing, while teaching it is quite another. We learned this many years ago while showing our wives how to throw. We quickly discovered in throwing, we do a lot of things without thinking about them. Translating all that into words is hard. Simply saying, "Do it like this!" doesn't always work.

Some coaches have taught themselves how to throw with their opposite hand just so they have the experience of re-learning how to throw. Everything that you take for granted about throwing might be new material for someone who has never thrown a ball properly. Everything! Think about walking. Watching our children learn to walk showed us that walking is no easy feat. It was hell for the child. He took a step, wobbled, and then fell right on his face. Well, throwing, catching, and hitting for youth baseball players is just as hard. They get frustrated when they see major league guys on TV who make it look easy. You will need to de-program your kids in order to be able to teach them the proper mechanics. It isn't easy!



Furthermore, you will have parents who disagree with your approach, no matter which approach you take. One story involves a player who told his coach that he disagreed with what the coach was teaching because, "Manny Ramirez doesn't hit like that." The coach said, "You mean that freak of nature that plays for the Red Sox?" What the coach meant was that almost no one makes the major leagues. There are about 600 players in Major League Baseball. The U.S. population is about 300 million people. Feel free to do the math, but the odds of a kid becoming a major leaguer are about the same as the odds of buying a winning lottery ticket or being struck by lightning!

If youth baseball is not about training kids for a professional job as a baseball player – then what is it about? As we have said, it's about learning to love and respect the game, learning to play as a team, learning to deal with adversity, and learning to deal with failure as well as success. Those things are what the kids must learn, and those things are what you must learn to teach them.

It is also about how to compete. How to build up a work ethic and learn that if you work at something, that gradually you will learn how to do it. One of our sons took a skiing class and went from rolling down a hill to actually being able to sort of ski. He realized that he could practice something and learn how to do it. That happens in baseball more than most sports because almost everything you are trying to do requires hard work. Seeing that hard work payoff is a life lesson worth teaching.

Keep Perspective

You have to discuss winning and losing because that's what kids understand. Youth baseball players are naturally competitive. If you keep score in any drill or if you say, "Run around the field and we'll see who wins," they'll do it eagerly. If you just say, "Run around the field," you won't get quite the same intensity.

Remember, just because kids love competitive drills and are competitive doesn't mean that they will not be upset by a loss. So, if your team is losing, keep your cool and do not ride the players or talk too much about winning or losing. Stay positive and winning will probably happen; however, there is a significant element of chance in baseball, and kids need to learn how to handle losses emotionally.

We are all for emphasizing winning if it doesn't affect the core goal of getting the kids back to play each year. We have coached long enough that we can game the system and can easily increase our team's chances of victory by keeping all the good kids in the infield

and the putting bad ones in the outfield. However, this approach ensures that the kids with lesser ability in the outfield will never ever want to play again.

By teaching the proper fundamentals, you can put kids in a situation where they can succeed and grow.

One of us once put a kid who was—let's just say, mediocre—at first base for an inning or two at the start of a game. We figured we could make up for anything bad that happened as a result of that risky decision. An opposing player came to the plate and hit a grounder back to the pitcher, who then ran over and touched first on his own instead of throwing to this kid. The coach immediately called “time,” stomped out to the mound, and asked the pitcher if he ever wanted to pitch for the coach again in his entire life. He asked the coach why he was so upset. The coach said, “You are on a team and on that play you know that you have to throw the ball to the first baseman.” The pitcher responded, “He’ll drop it!” The coach explained that it would be the coach’s problem, not his, if that occurred.

Immediately upon the coach’s return to the dugout, the next opposing batter hit yet another grounder back to the pitcher, who took a step towards first, then remarkably remembered his recent lecture and threw pretty darned softly to the guy at first. Of course, our hero at first dropped the ball.

The pitcher glared at the coach as if I were the devil incarnate. The coach looked at the pitcher and said, “It’s OK. He’ll catch the next one.”

The moral of this story is that the first baseman kept working at it because by putting him in at that position in a game situation pressured him to get better in a hurry. He realized that if he didn’t learn to catch, things were going to really snowball. Happily, he actually did learn—and he became an adequate first baseman.

In reality, you have to be careful with this type of situation. You have to have a sense that the kid will be able to learn how to catch and that he actually wants to learn.

Summary

In this chapter, we introduced the following concepts:

- The goal for the youth baseball coach should be to have all of his players return the following season.
- Baseball is a difficult sport to play successfully. To become successful, the right fundamentals need to be taught and repeated often.
- Baseball offers many life lessons to youth that will help them as adults. Players must learn to deal with failure, adversity and pressure and maintain their balance—just like the real world!
- Coaches have many tools available such as practice plans and progress tracking to help players improve their fundamental skills, increase their self-confidence and have fun! All of those factors will help the coach reach the goal of 100% player retention.

The next chapter offers an approach on how to get off to the right start with your parents and players once your team has been formed.

CHAPTER

02

**Managing Expectations and
Getting Off to the
Right Start**



Chapter 2: Managing Expectations and Getting Off to the Right Start

The purpose of this chapter is to emphasize the importance of managing the expectations of your players and parents as soon as possible. If you do not have the support of your players and parents in what you are trying to do, it will be impossible to succeed as a coach. Period.

Later in this book, we will stress the importance of structured practice plans to help players learn at all levels. However, before you can have good practice plans and skill development, you will need help from your parents who will also serve as coaching assistants during those practices. **Without the help of your parents, you will not be able to improve the skill level of your players as much as you can otherwise.**

The thoughts and suggestions in this chapter are relevant for all youth baseball age groups. Since each season usually means a new team and new players and their families, this process will be repeated over and over again. Feel free to revisit this chapter and the materials contained within as often as necessary.

The Introductory Call

Once the league determines your roster, call each player's parents **immediately**. It is amazing how quickly word spreads through the hallways of your child's school about which player is on what team. Parents will see any delay in communication as indifference (or worse) on your part toward their child. **Do not let this happen!**

The call sets the tone for the entire season. It tells the parents who you are and how you are going to do things. It is also your opportunity to send the message that you are

somewhat organized and have some good ideas about how to teach kids. To us, it is like the first day of class in a new school year. It is the day when students determine whether the teacher is competent. Here, though, you have to satisfy two groups: the players and their parents. Their needs and outlooks can be totally different. The sooner you can assess the situation, the better off you will be.

The importance of a phone call (over an email) cannot be overstated. You can certainly send an email first and follow-up with a phone call, but do not put off calling. So many things can be gleaned from a phone conversation that are impossible to determine in simply sending emails back and forth.

While the call does not have to be strictly scripted, we suggest something like the following structure:

“Hi, I’m David and I’ll be coaching the Nationals. I am with Reston Youth Baseball and your son or daughter is on my team. Before we say much else, I just want to say that I am happy to have your child on the team and my number one goal is that he or she has so much fun and learns so much this year that he or she will insist on playing next year.”

Responses tend to fall into one of the following three categories:

Most Responses: “Oh, that’s nice!” This means you have an agreeable parent who is swamped, as most parents are these days. They just want to get off the phone as soon as possible.

A Few Good Ones: “Oh, no doubt he’ll play next year. Doesn’t matter what you do.” Now, you must immediately launch into a baseball conversation with this parent. Talk about how you love doing a lot of drills, and how you want the team to be competitive but not at the expense of the players having fun and getting to learn lots of positions. Just talk, schmooze and all will be well.

During this process, you need to start recruiting assistant coaches from the pool of interested parents. The key to real practice success is to reduce the ratio of players to coaches for each drill. Clearly, the more coaches you have, the lower your ratio and the more attention each coach can pay to each player. So, do not hesitate to recruit parents who show a spark of interest.

Needs Attention: “OK, I hope he plays next year.” This one requires careful work. You have to dwell on how it will be fun and how the player will learn some real skills and will improve with time.

The parents’ initial reaction will give you a pretty good idea of how active they are likely to be in helping their kids get better and how many are looking for a low-cost babysitter. If your team is loaded with the latter category, you will need to start thinking immediately how to mobilize them and have them help you.

Also use the introductory call to help with the following:

Get the parents’ contact information: home numbers, work numbers, cell phone numbers, pager numbers, and e-mail addresses. You’ll be glad that you didn’t skip this important step when at some point in the season a player is injured and you need to contact the parent immediately.

Verify the home address. This is helpful so you can send it out to the team and perhaps arrange some car pools.

Verify the school the player is attending. Again, this is helpful for car pools and it can give you some insight into which players might already know one another.

Verify each player’s baseball history. Learn about which teams they have played for in the past, prior coaches, and so forth. This information is especially important with more

experienced players, as you may be able to get more insight into their ability and attitude from previous coaches whom you might know.

Your league will have given you some of this information, but it never hurts to review it with players and their parents. There are two reasons to review this information with parents on the first phone call: (1) Many times, the information in the league database is incorrect. Data fields are sometimes truncated or misread; (2) Keeping the conversation going with the parent gives you more opportunity to feel them out and to learn more about them and their player.

The introductory call is also a great opportunity to speak directly with the player for the first time. Younger players (say, ages 5-9) may not want to talk with the coach directly on the phone, but ask the parents for permission anyway. It can begin to give you an idea of the type of player you may be working with.

Pre-season Parent Meeting

This meeting is critical to managing expectations for the upcoming season.

Invite parents, kids, and siblings to a pre-season pizza party. Pray for good weather so you can have the kids outside (playing a game of wiffle ball is magical) and let them get to know each other at their own pace. That will allow the parents to

mingle in your house. Let the mingling go on for about 20-30 minutes before sitting the kids down for some pizza and drinks. Once that is done, have the kids go back outside (or return to indoor games if it is raining) and tell the parents that you would like to speak with them as a group for roughly 20 minutes.



For the discussion, give everyone a prepared agenda. Talk about your baseball experience and discuss why you coach. Talk about how your team will communicate rainouts. Talk about letting you know before a practice or game whether the kid will be there. Tell them that you make careful lineups for each inning so you have to know who will be there and who will not. Talk about RSVPing for all games and practices. Accept volunteers to serve as RSVP coordinator, to nag everyone to submit their RSVPs. Tell them that you track who plays where and you try to balance things as best you can.

At the party, make sure you have an open and honest discussion with the parents. Tell parents that you are available if they become unhappy with anything. Also, make sure they know that you are very eager to hire assistant coaches and that there is no harm in having five or six stations at a practice. In fact, it is preferred!

Never pass by a good opportunity to recruit assistants! Some of our best assistants have been big brothers or sisters of the players. Moms are also great assistants.

At the same time, try to also understand the parent's motivation for wanting to assist. The last thing you or your team needs is an assistant who might create friction down the line.

The main point is this: You do not have to have ANY baseball experience to be a great assistant coach and help out at practices! No matter the age or skill level of the player, there is tremendous benefit to simply rolling ground balls, playing catch or tossing pop-ups during a practice. It takes very little preparation for anyone to walk onto a field and roll ground balls to kids.

Enough of that aside; back now to the parent meeting agenda:

Discuss appropriate behavior at a practice and at a game. Remind parents that at a practice, players are required to listen to the coaches –for their own safety. If a coach says stop throwing the ball and a player throws it anyway, someone can get hurt or at

least scared. Safety must come first. Talk about how players don't need to even get near a bat during a game unless they are ready to hit.

Discuss rules surrounding food at practices and at games. Personally, we do not want teams bringing full dinners into a dugout and dining during a game. However, we realize that kids get hungry, especially if the game rambles on for two hours. Frequently, they rush from school to an early game. Talk about how it is desirable for them to have a snack before they come to the field. We recommend permitting only sunflower seeds and sports drinks in the dugout. We usually bring a large container of water and some paper cups to each game to assist with hydration.

If you want your team to have food after the game, ask for volunteers and appoint a snack coordinator to assign parents to bring a snack after each game. Ask the snack coordinator to ensure that whoever brings the snack also brings a bag of crushed ice. This is useful for treating in-game injuries.

Tell the players that it is not their parents' responsibility to remember all of their equipment. Players need to keep track of their gloves, hats, shirts, pants, socks, cleats, bats (if they own one) without blaming parents if they forget these items.

Remind the players that at the conclusion of a game or practice they don't go leave the field until they pick up all the equipment. They should help the coaches pack up equipment after a practice and help set it up before a practice. Asking for this help will significantly reduce the drudgery of dragging equipment to and from practices and games.

Finally, be honest at all times. With the players with the parents, with anyone else. It is this honesty that will establish trust and will make it so players will really care what you have to say.

Summary

Establish direct voice contact with your parents as soon as possible after you receive your roster. When having your initial team meeting, use the opportunity to brief the parents on your expectations for the upcoming season and your need for their involvement. Most importantly, use the first meeting to recruit assistant coaches to help you during practices. As you will see in Chapter 4, the more assistants you can recruit, the more stations you can have in a given practice and the more fun and skill development your players will have.

CHAPTER

03

Equipment



Chapter 3: Equipment

In this chapter, we discuss the basic equipment needed for practice: balls, bats, gloves, batting tee, bases and pitcher's plate, rope, helmets, gloves, catcher's gear, and first-aid kit.

For coaches in most organized leagues, some type of basic equipment is usually provided. The equipment itself will vary in terms of type and quality, so coaches must be wary of what they receive from the league and what they can do to improve their equipment situation.

Realistically, the coach should be prepared to spend some of his/her money on purchasing equipment that the league will probably not provide. The better and more versatile your equipment, the more stations you can run, the better your practices will be and the more fun and learning your players will have.

Balls

We prefer to start the season with four boxes of balls (12 balls in a box). Over the course of the season, the ball supply dwindles to about two-dozen balls. You need this supply to support a variety of drills. You do not want to



waste time chasing balls if you can avoid it. Nothing slows down practice faster than not having enough baseballs.

Squishy balls, properly referred to as Incrediballs™, are good for batting practice if kids are scared of regular baseballs early in the season. (They are especially good for very

young players at the beginning level. They are easy to grip for small hands and will not hurt the player if they get hit with the ball.) We do not use them much with more experienced players as they are light and we are afraid that learning to throw and catch with these will not translate into throwing and catching with a real baseball, especially as the players reach their second or third season of playing organized ball. Still, they are a great tool for getting in a lot of reps early in a player's development.

Plastic balls (sometimes called Pickleballs as they are whiffle balls without a seam that can be hit by a metal bat) are also great. These don't require a lot of space and the mechanics used to hit one are the same as any other ball. Pickleballs come in a lot of different sizes, like golf-ball sized balls as well as baseball sized balls so that players can improve eye-hand concentration.

Tennis balls are often very useful for fielding drills. And a tennis racket or better yet, a racketball racket can be used to consistently hit fly balls to the outfield. This allows players to start judging the flight of a ball from a distance without fear of getting hit or hurt.

In fact, one of the best drills for a player is "wallball". It is nothing more than taking a tennis ball and throwing it against a nearby wall or fence and fielding the return. The player will learn footwork, hand-eye coordination and throwing accuracy. We have seen kids play this game for hours at a time (for example, setting targets to hit with the thrown tennis ball), have fun and see the results immediately on the baseball field.

Badminton birdies are also fun for the kids as well as small bottle tops. These can be used to teach kids to track a moving ball.

Squishy, foam, nerf-like balls are great for players as well as they require less space, don't break when hit by a metal bat and remove fear of the ball from the equation.

Bats

You will need a fungo bat (see below) and one or more team bats. You will also have to work with bats that the players own. A “doughnut” or small weight that fits on the end of the bat can also be very helpful to build up players arm strength. Often players lack the arm strength to really swing a baseball bat. Building this up can be a key part of improving their hitting. Swiftsticks are small sticks that can be used to work on swinging without requiring players to get used to the weight of a bat.

Coach (Fungo) Bats

You need a couple of bats to hit fly balls and grounders. These bats, properly called fungo bats, can be any type of bat that allows you to hit grounders or fly balls. There are special wooden bats built specifically for this purpose called Fungo Bats. The manufactured fungo bats make it easier to hit fly balls, but any bat will get you started.

Team Bat

You need a bat that players can use if they do not have their own bats. Some leagues provide a bat for this purpose. If your league does not, you will have to buy one. Whether you purchase a team bat or the league supplies one, it is a good idea to make sure it is a high quality bat. Players sometimes struggle in little league simply because their coaches devote too little attention to selecting a good bat that matches their size. A general rule of thumb is that a player aged 8-11 needs a bat that weighs less than 17 ounces. Good bats are roughly 29 or 30 inches long.

Players' Own Bats

Some kids come swaggering to practice carrying a 25-ounce bat; it will be up to you to tell the parents that it is too heavy. Be gentle. Dad probably thinks his son is the next Babe Ruth, so Dad equipped him with a Babe-sized bat. How do you determine whether a bat is too heavy? A good test is to have the player hold the bat out in front of him with one hand for several seconds. Some books say 10 seconds and some say 30. We vote for something in the middle, say closer to 15 to 20 seconds.

Another way to check the bat is to take a hard look at the numbers on the bat. The numbering system in common use involves subtracting the length from the weight of the bat. We have no idea why they do this, but here is how to do it. Start with the length (e.g., 17 inches), subtract the weight (e.g., 29 ounces), and you wind up with a single number (e.g., -12). Don't worry about performing arithmetic on mixed units of measure—the result is just a number. The lower the number is, the better the bat is. A -13 is better than a -12, and because it is made of lighter-weight, more exotic materials, it is certainly more expensive. The selected bat should be light and easy to swing. The lighter the bat, the more bat speed will be generated and the farther the ball will go. Remember, a larger player can use a heavier bat, but it is usually wise to err on the side of a lighter bat. Good bat speed and maintaining balance is essential when hitting a baseball. Check out www.batspeed.com for a lengthy discussion of bat speed.

As we will see later in this book, a lighter bat will help keep the player balanced when he swings. We have all heard the adage, “He doesn't swing the bat, the bat swings him”, and that is important to keep in mind when selecting the right bat. If the bat is too heavy, the swing will be too long and slow. The contact point will not be out in front of the body (where we want it) but close to the body, preventing swing extension and causing the player to be jammed. The result will be a lot of pop-ups.

Moreover, the player with a heavy bat will drop his back shoulder and not hit on top of the ball, which will simply add to his or her frustration.

Still, there is a lot of competition among players in the 10-11 age group to have a heavy bat to hit home runs. Among youth baseball players, we think trying to hit home runs is a horrible concept. We deeply believe that home runs come as a by-product of proper hitting fundamentals and do not come from trying to hit home runs directly. (We will share more of this philosophy with you in future chapters.)

Players' Gloves

Players' gloves should not be extremely large or very small. Generally, kids err on the large side when buying a glove. Most players bring their own gloves. However, over time, you will accumulate gloves players have left at the practice field and at games. These can become the "team gloves." For players with brand new gloves, make sure they know how to break in their stiff, new gloves. Before we get to how to break in a new glove, we will tell you a break-in story. (No, not a burglary!)

A kid once arrived at practice with a new, stiff glove. We told his mom to have him break the glove in before the next practice. She asked what we meant. We were stunned. How could a human being in America not know how to break in a baseball glove?

To us, this is a rite of passage in baseball circles of growing up. Many players have fond memories about how they broke in their beloved new gloves. First, the lucky player experiences the joy of the recent purchase; then, he envisions how he and his glove will soon earn big money in front of thousands of fans; and finally, he daydreams about the great catches he will make with his fine, new leather implement. It is only appropriate that he takes great care in breaking the glove in. He lovingly applies some shaving cream, Neats Foot oil, or Lexol® (or whichever other concoction is reputed to work in his part of

the country). He works it gently into the leather. Once the leather absorbs it, he puts a ball into the glove, ties some rope or elastic around it, and then he sleeps on it. We have heard people say they drove a car over their glove. In either case, the object is to shape and soften the glove so that players will learn how to have “soft hands” where the ball is just quickly absorbed into the glove without a stabbing motion or the ball bouncing off of a hardened glove.

The process breaks down the leather so the slightest twitch of a player’s fingers will snap the glove closed. An equally important purpose of break-in is to create a perfect, ball-sized “pocket” in the glove. Together, the snap action and the pocket conspire with the player to snag balls like a Major League Golden Glove winner. A kid with a stiff glove can try all he wants, but most balls will flop out of the glove.

Getting back to the disengaged mom, I proceeded to explain the break-in process to her. She thought we were joking. “Shaving cream? Rope?” She said, “None of this was discussed at the store. No operating directions or installation instructions were provided when we bought the glove.” We told her that it is a rite of passage; it is part of growing up. We went on to say that each aspiring baseball player must learn this process and take great pride in his mastery of it. We think the bemused mom thought that we were out of our collective mind.

Later, she told us how she and her son had meticulously followed each step, shaving cream and all, and—Lo and behold!—the glove was indeed easier to use.

Sporting goods stores sell concoctions for breaking in gloves. Tell the parents they can save their money. Shaving cream will work just fine.

Batting Tee

You need at least one batting Tee. There is nothing better to work on hitting mechanics than a Tee. Kids will gripe as they feel they have graduated from T-ball, but tell them the pros use tees all the time (which is true). You need more than one tee, as one Tee limits your practice to only one player using a Tee at time. We suggest two tees, at least, and three if at all possible.

Tees are a great example of where your league may not have sufficient equipment for you to run a proper practice. Most leagues will give you one tee (which may or may not be in great condition) but getting a second or third may be difficult.

Ideally, you want to have at least one station each practice devoted to using a single tee. There is simply no better tool for having a batter learn to keep his head still and eyes on the ball than hitting off a tee. Every player should have the chance to hit off a tee each practice for at least 5-10 minutes.

Pitcher's Plate (pitching rubber)

A pitcher's plate (also called a rubber) is nice to have for pitching practice. Alternatively, a piece of tape will work on a hard surface. On the field, you can place at least one pitcher's plate on the grass. Spiked plates exist, but they tend to lack durability.

Bases

We suggest buying two sets of bases. During practices, we set up a full infield in right field and another one in left. Thus, you can have three infields (the real one and your two simulated ones) at the same time. Note that you also can use these "infields" for more than infield practice; you can use them for run-downs and throwing drills as well.

Rope

Baseball is a game of precision where every inch counts. In our practices, instead of just pacing off the bases and guessing where they should go, we use a pre-measured rope. This is important for the infield and even more important for pitchers. Imagine that you have been working with a pitcher and you suddenly determine that you set up ten feet too short or too long—you've just wasted a practice. Get a rope and measure forty-six feet and tie a knot – then measure sixty feet and tie another knot. Forty-six feet is the distance from the point of home plate to the pitchers mound. Sixty feet is the distance between bases.

Helmets

Most leagues provide batting helmets. Be certain that each player wears a helmet when he is running bases or batting.

Catchers' Gear

Very few little league catchers own their own catcher's gear. Most leagues provide at least one set of catcher's gear, which includes: knee pads, a chest protector, catcher's mask, and at least one catcher's mitt. We suggest that you arrive at equipment handout day early, so you can ensure that you get the best possible set of equipment. Shoddy equipment can cause undesirable game situations--for example, where your catcher suddenly informs you, "Coach, my chest protector broke!" At a game, you'll have nothing to repair it with, other than band-aids and bubble gum.

Protective Cup

Make sure players wear a cup at all times. League rules require the catcher to wear one, but who knows which player you'll need as your catcher? So, just ask all kids to wear one. Additionally, even if a player is not a catcher, there are numerous injuries each year caused by players not wearing this protective gear.

First-Aid Kit

The league will probably give you a first-aid kit. Just make sure you have plenty of ice packs and band-aids. It never hurts to bring a bag of crushed ice to practices and games.

Uniform

Players should wear a comfortable tee shirt to practice and their game shirt or jersey to a game. The shirt should be tucked in at all times. The goal here is to encourage players to realize that part of being a well-run, confident, organized team is to look like a well-run, confident, organized team. Depending on the material it may not be good to put it in the dryer for long periods of time. Most leagues will supply a pair of baseball pants. Insist that players wear baseball pants if at all possible to every practice. The league will often also supply a hat. The hat should be on forward at all times.

Your expectations around uniforms and dressing for practice should be declared at your first team meeting. Impress upon your parents the importance of behaving like a team and having everyone pull together.

Lost-and-Found Box

Over the course of the season, you will accumulate personal belongings that players misplace at practice or at games. Bring a box for these items. We call it our lost-and-found box and we leave it in the van during practice. At times, the lost-and-found box comes in handy when a player forgets his bat or his glove.

So, that's really the story with regard to equipment. It is not rocket science, but it is easy to leave something out. Doing so negatively affects practices. However, having this book for reference, you're a few steps ahead of the game. We have told you what is necessary, so you won't have to daunt your practices by not thinking of some piece of equipment you didn't realize you would need.

Now, let's move on to the real fun stuff: What to do at practice.

CHAPTER

04

Team Practice



Chapter 4: Team Practice

This is the most important chapter in the book. Take your time reading it. Understanding the importance of practice planning and execution can be the difference between a successful season (when you get a lot of returning players) and a miserable season where no one learns anything.

Do you know what happens at many Little League practices? Twenty minutes before practice begins, a minivan drives up and a kid jumps out. Two minutes later, another car drops off another kid. Soon, several kids are wandering around the practice field unsupervised. The kids start messing around – killing time. Does this sound familiar?



Don't let this happen! Every moment of practice is precious, especially when the players are young and they can get easily distracted. In fact, we have seen several instances of kids being dropped off for practice and taking a right turn to the playground that is adjacent to the ball field. Practice suddenly got supplanted by the monkey bars.

You have two choices: Be a little league dictator and insist that every player arrive precisely on time and begin practicing at once – or start the practice immediately when the first kid jumps out of the car.

The moment the first kid shows up, shout, “*Hustle on out here!*”

The Importance of Hustling

Our players know that we never sit and wait and waste time. Every practice moment is crucial to our future. Once about seven to ten kids arrive, start the official practice. (If you wait for all thirteen to show, you'll never get started.) Have the kids make two lines, about twenty to twenty-five feet apart and tell them to throw the ball to each other, from one line to the other.

Things get complicated fast. Johnny throws 80 feet over the head of Sam. Megan comes late and asks for a ball. Eldridge arrives and sits down on the bench while you are yelling for Sam to *run* after that ball. *No one is ever allowed to walk towards a ball.* Why? Because what a player does in practice is what he will do in a game.

You have to teach kids how to hustle. Coaching older, more experienced kids, you assume that if a batter hits a ball over the center fielder's head that he will chase that ball. In Little League, we have seen otherwise. We have seen kids on opposing teams amble toward a ball. We want our players to tear after that ball as if their lives depended on chasing it down.

Hustle will win you more games than anything else will. It supersedes talent; it supersedes skill. It boils down to desire. If opponents know that your kids hustle all the time, things change. Opponents worry a little more when your guys are on base and perhaps they make a few mistakes.

Hustling pressures the other team and enables yours. Insist that your players start to hustle on day one and never stop. Make this happen in everything they do from the time they arrive until the time they leave. Demand that players run out of the car, run to the next practice station, and run, run, run.

Sometimes a kid won't feel like hustling. Kids have ups and downs. Sometimes they have had a four-day sleepover. Some are having bouts of insomnia. Some have had a long day at school.

Kids have busy lives: piano practice, religious school, Tai Kwon Do, schoolwork, and so forth. The list goes on and on. You have to work hard to get beyond all that. Get them moving—and fast!

Plan every minute of practice. We will give you a few plans that have worked for us. Arrive early yourself and set everything up. Preparation is critical. When enough kids arrive, start warm ups, then finally execute your plan.

We are presenting an overall practice plan now because we don't yet want you to become preoccupied with the mechanics of running drills, which will be covered in later chapters. Practice is so important that we want you to read and digest this chapter first. **Even if you postpone learning all the gory details of drill mechanics, running well-structured practices is the key to success for your team.** For better or worse, kids tend to pick up mechanics on their own as they play, but discipline, organization, and planning must come from you, the coach. You are irreplaceable in that role.

The old school practice scenario essentially was batting practice and shagging fly balls. If that is all you do, you will essentially guarantee that: few of your kids will want to play next year; you will have a losing season; and you will irritate yourself and all others.

The bring-a-ball-and-throw-to-all-batters plan works only if you have infinite practice time. While one of us was in Puerto Rico, we saw a little league team practicing at ten o'clock in the morning. They were doing exactly what we told you not to do. Fully appreciating the great weather, each batter had about twenty minutes at the plate. It was clear that there was no rush. No one had to leave to go to piano lessons. All these kids had to worry about was baseball, nice weather, and a wonderful green field. It was idyllic. We watched

the surprisingly attentive players for a little while, then we left to grab some lunch and spend the afternoon on the beach.



As darkness began to fall, we walked back to our hotel, passing the same baseball field. The same coach and the same kids were still hitting. They had practiced from nine o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the afternoon. No one appeared to be tired. No parents were complaining about practice running too long. No field regulations required them to get off the field at a certain time.

So, yes, if we lived and coached in Puerto Rico we might just stand out there for eight hours, enjoying the weather. Our firm feeling is that our teams would be significantly better than the teams we coach for an hour or two a day.

Therefore, our challenge is to make up for all that non-existent practice time. We have to focus sharply. We have to perform targeted drills that are crucial to fixing player-specific problems with mechanics. We have to squeeze many repetitions into a very short span of time.

If a player is standing around during a practice, you are just not doing your job.

They need to be moving and doing something all the time. To make this happen requires a number of “stations” during practice with two to three players (at most) at a station. To do this requires a lot of helpers. These helpers do not have to be tremendously skilled in baseball. Dads, moms, older siblings, grandparents all make fine helpers. Just tell them what to do before practice for their station and they will often be fine. Sometimes it helps to arrange things so you can just wander from station to station during practice and have

helpers run the stations. Providing helpful tips here and there and keeping up the pace of each station is often very important. Remind all your helpers to maximize repetitions and never have one player just sit down while they work for a few minutes with the other players. This is what motivates me to encourage players to move quickly as soon as they arrive at practice. Throughout practice, we believe our time with this kid is precious.

It is crucial to have a plan. Also knowing how many players will show up is a key part of the plan. We always bug parents to RSVP for each practice so we know how many players will be at a practice. That way, we can set up the right number of stations for a given practice.

Finally, if at all possible, get your practice plan distributed to your assistant coaches (and players, if you wish) ahead of time. That way, you will not need to waste valuable practice time orienting helpers to what you are trying to do.

Planning a Practice

Practice planning is a dynamic process. The plan you create for your first practice (when you are first getting to know your players) will be different from your second. Similarly, a mid-season plan will be different from your initial plans. As you get to know your players and team, you will have a much better idea of where you need to focus your time.

Practice length will also vary. At the beginner stages (ages 5-7), you are dealing with a lot of energetic kids with short attention spans. Practices should run somewhere between 60 minutes to 75 minutes. (In all honesty, 75 minutes is really pushing the limits with this age group.)

As the players age, their attention spans increase. For 8-10 year olds, 90 minute practices are appropriate. You can move it up to two hours for more experienced 11-12 year olds.

It is also important to schedule short (e.g., 5 minute) water breaks for the kids during practice. We always have a large jug of water handy on the bench (with paper cups), just in case the kids forget to bring a water bottle. The water breaks also give you some time to quickly assess how the practice is going and make any adjustments, if necessary.

For a 60 minute practice, one break should be enough under normal circumstances. For a 90 minute practice, two breaks are appropriate. If the weather is hot and humid, you might add another.

As we have stated previously, having enough helpers at practice will be a critical success factor for you. Finding helpers starts at your first parent meeting. When everyone is sitting around eating pizza and you are reviewing your goals for the season, ask your parents



about their availability for helping at practice. When they avert their eyes and begin to stare at the floor, remind them that many of the drills you will run will require them to do nothing more than roll a ball or supervise calisthenics.

Impress upon your parents that getting THEIR RSVP is as important as getting their player's RSVP. The only way you will be able to plan for the correct number of stations is knowing how many helpers you will have.

And don't think getting help is impossible or even difficult.

One of us coached a “blastball” team a few years ago. (For the unaware, “blastball” is a game targeted to pre-t-ballers that moves quickly because the players run only from home to first base. As a result, each team carries only 6 or so players.) At our first parent meeting, we asked for helpers. EVERY parent volunteered to help! At our first practice, we had six kids and six parents, each running a station. It was glorious. So it can be done!

Initial Practice Plan (8-10 year olds)

Here is a sample plan for a group of 8-10 year olds at the beginning of the season:

5:30 - 5:45	Warm Up
5:45 – 6:00	Throw and Catching (zig zag)
6:00 – 6:15	Throw and Catch (relay drill)
6:15 – 6:45	Station 1: Grounders Station 2: Fly Balls Station 3: Batting
6:45 – 7:00	Fun Games: Pickle (Hot Box), Pepper, One-Pitch

Notice that from 6:15 – 6:45 we break into parallel sessions. We have three stations. Therefore, we have to have three coaches. So, make sure you hire parents as assistants! You can always add more stations. The more stations, the more reps the kids get. And the better they will become as players.

Also, as you try these drills, make sure that the skill level of the players is sufficient to do a particular drill. For example, if a player is terrified of the ball and cannot catch at all, placing him in the middle of a quick throw and catch drill is similar to asking him to run before he can crawl. For some less skilled players you might have no other choice than to set up a simpler throw and catch station with an assistant coach until they are able to participate in drills that are more complex. I watch kids closely during their first practice or two. If I observe that some players are insufficiently skilled for specific drills, either I hold them back from those drills or I build a practice plan that places them in simpler stations while the precocious ones do more involved drills.

Finally, note that we end the practice with a fun drill like pickle, or a simple competition like running the bases. These are very important for building team morale. They are also a high-energy ending to the practice, ensuring that your parents will love you because you have exhausted their kids and have them primed for an early bedtime.

More Advanced Practice (8-10 year-olds)

As you progress and if you have four helpers you can migrate to a more advanced practice plan with up to five stations. Here is a very fast paced practice plan that kids love, but you have to really watch every minute. And yes, it's a real one that has actually been used many times.

5:30 - 5:45	Five Warmup Hitting Stations, two minutes a station and one minute for moving from one station to another.
5:45 – 5:50	Talk to players about base running drill. Note the base running drill is done early in practice to emphasize the importance of base running.
5:50– 5:57	Base running Drill. Work on taking lead as pitch crosses home and then breaking after a wild
5:57- 6:00	Brief discussion of the next set of hitting stations
6:00 – 6:20	Four more hitting stations – 3 minutes a station, 1 minute to move between them, one fielding station
6:20 – 6:25	Water break / talk to players
6:25 – 6:55	5 fielding stations for five minutes each, one minute to move between stations
6:55 – 7:00	Wrap Up

The five warm up hitting stations include selections from the following: rollups, soft toss, pickle balls, dry swings, stride drill, one knee drill, cement feet. You can vary these just to

add some variety. Rollups should always be included and pickle balls should always be included. We will discuss some base running drills, but in this one, runners can be on any base and learn to advance on a wild pitch. The idea is they are taking a couple of steps off the base as the ball crosses the plate and once they see it go past the catcher they continue toward the next base. The next set of hitting stations should include one where coaches throw live to batters and two players are in the field (i.e., the one fielding station). The two fielders are at second base and shortstop so they can learn how to field balls hit from a live batter. The five fielding stations should include some ground ball drills and some fly ball drills. Do not expect your first time at running this practice drill to go so smoothly. You will lose track of time talking to one player and find yourself way behind. Over time you will get better at having a sense of how much time has elapsed. When one of us first started, sometimes we enlisted an assistant to do nothing but help keep the practice plan on track.

Clearly, the key is you need a number of assistants. You can never have too many willing helpers. Remember the best way kids learn skills is through repetition. They clearly need some correction if they are doing something really wrong, and you don't want them practicing the wrong thing, but overall, they will benefit from a tremendous amount of repetition.

Warm-Up

Have the kids form a semicircle in front of you on one knee, looking you in the eye. We work on this in the first practice. We tell kids to stand up, and then get down on one knee. Why do we do this? Because in a game situation when time is short, it is a way to quickly assemble the team for instructions.

So, get them on one knee, tell them what you want to accomplish in this practice and why, and then get started.



Start warm-ups with the team in one or two lines spaced about twenty feet apart. We always tell them to pretend that there are two ghosts standing between each two of them. Warm up their arms with some jumping jacks. Have the team count together. This builds team spirit from the start. Then, do some big arm circles forward and some big arm circles backwards. Have a kid lead the drills for arms. Then, switch and have another kid lead the drills for legs: touch toes and hold them, touch left toe with both hands, touch right toe with both hands, put right foot over left and touch toes, put left foot over right and touch toes. Once you are done, do some leg stretches, and then have the kids run one lap around the field.

During one particular practice, a parent asked one of us why we run the kids so much. We said, "Wait till 'til the end of practice and you'll see." At the end, we asked the team, "Who wants to run?" A vast majority of hands shot up. We looked at the parent and said, "Running is one of the things they love to do. It helps them get into better shape, it helps the team, and they love it."

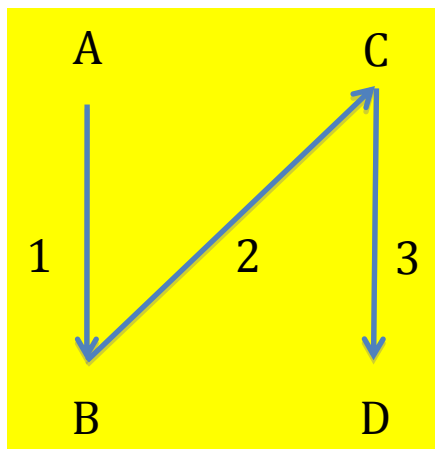
That is enough of a reason for us to make sure that they run at least one lap around the field at the start of practice and another lap at the end. If practice was tough and they are all dead tired, you can limit it to running once or twice around the bases.

Zig Zag

This is an easy drill. Have the kids make two lines facing each other.

We'll space them twenty feet apart.

Figure 1: Zig Zag



Give the player labeled A, a ball, and have him throw to the player directly across from him to the player labeled B (the arrow is labeled with a one to indicate this is throw number one). Now have B throw to C (throw 2) who then throws to D (throw 3). You can add more players in this zig zag pattern. The drill works best with 8 or more players with at least four on the top line (where we have A and C) and four on the bottom line (where we have B and D). If all goes well the ball will work its way to the end in our diagram.

If the ball falls on the ground, complain loudly. Admonish them, “No balls on the ground! *No balls ever on the ground!*” Talk to them about the consequences of balls on the ground. Balls on the ground mean lost games later on.

Paint a mental picture of opposing runners happily circling the bases while a ball lies on the ground. Tell the kids to close their eyes and picture the other team with the bases

loaded and two outs. Have them conjure up an image a nice, slow grounder to second being deftly fielded by the second-baseman, who then wings it eighty feet over the head of the shortstop covering second. Tell them to imagine the sorry scene as all four base-runners take turns stomping on home plate as each of them scores. Then, start the drill all over again, repeating the mantra, “No balls on the ground.”

Once a ball is making its way back and forth down the lines, start another ball with the same player who began the last sequence. Have assistant coaches back-up players so that you don't lose balls in the woods. A side benefit of this is that players tend to focus better if an assistant is nearby. If a throw goes past a player, tell him to let it go. Moreover, make sure that players do not chase balls. You cannot afford that waste of time. Point out that the ball is on the ground and start over. Once again, ball on ground = bad!

Is this beginning to sound redundant? It is, and intentionally so. We are rubbing it in because it needs to be rubbed in with your players. Unless they can catch the ball, you are not really coaching a baseball team. Call it soccer; call it kickball; call it whatever you want. It is not baseball. A very big part of your job is making players associate ball on ground with very bad thing. This, like everything else we'll talk about, requires frequent repetition. However, when you finally get this point across to them, much improved ball handling will be your reward.

A nationally-known high school baseball coach has said on many occasions, “Know how to catch and throw a ball reliably and there will always be a place for you in baseball.” So very true.

Box or Triangle Drill

Have the players form a box if there are four of them and a triangle if there are three of them. You can have players throw around the box or triangle in a sequence or they can

just throw to whomever they want. To make it more fun you can shout a number right when a player catches it that indicates where they throw next. The players should be spaced at least 15-20 feet apart to start and ultimately as they progress they should be as far apart as the bases (60 feet). The key is to catch the ball, get it out of their glove and throw. So its catch, set your feet, throw. Players should not be throwing off balance and they should catch and cover the ball when they catch it. Players can work on getting their fingers to the sky as they prepare to catch a ball with their feet wide and knees bent. Throws should be right to the chest. Players tend to like scoring games so you can one box compete against another with points being awarded for each good catch and each good throw. As they progress they can work on “shuffling” their feet toward the target prior to the throw. They can do one round of “shuffle shuffle throw” and another round of just “shuffle” throw.

Line Drill

Players can form a line and you can roll them a ball about five to ten feet in front of them so they can work on charging the ball rather than just waiting for the ball. Once they get the ball they can work on setting their feet and throwing to the target. Work on stance at the start, feet wide, knees bent, ready position. Creep before the ball is hit (or rolled in this case) and then an attack to get the ball and finally engage when the ball arrives. Work on landing the plane as the ball is approached – a gradual descent to the ball instead of a helicopter where you just run to the ball and squat over it. The back should be flat at all times. To teach, place a ball on the ground and have players go through the steps in slow motion. Also put them in perfect position and hold for thirty seconds. To check that the back is flat, put a ball on their neck and see if it rolls off. As players progress work on getting the right foot slightly behind the left when the players pick up the ball. This enables an easier transition to throwing to their left which is what they will usually be doing (throwing to first or second). Perfect position includes the following key check points: right foot cocked, top hand covers the ball like an alligator, glove underneath ball back flat,

knees bent, right foot slightly behind. Again, hold this position for 30 seconds to reinforce how it feels.

Relay

The relay drill is simple. It is competitive, and that is what makes it work all the better. The object will be to line up two groups of players and see who can move a ball from one to the next all the way down their line and back before the other line completes the same task.

Create two lines with equal numbers of players. (If you have an odd number of players, you don't want to leave anyone out, so feel free to improvise here.) Separate players in each line by about fifty feet. Separate the two lines by about twenty feet to avoid interference between the players. Tell the players in each line that they are a team. Instruct the teams that this is a race to see who can get the ball all the way down and back before the other team does. Hand a ball to the first player in each line. Tell both lines to start throwing on a count of Ready-Set-Go. When you say, "Go," the first player in each line throws to the next player in the same line, who turns to throw it to the next, and so forth. They continue down the line until the last guy has the ball. That player sets his feet and throws back to the guy who just threw him the ball, who turns and fires it to the next kid in his line. This continues until the ball returns to the initial players in both lines.

Executed properly, the balls travel up and down each of the two lines and eventually return to the players who began the drill, ending the game. The kids will probably want to do it again to see if they can improve upon their performance.

Kids love to see who can get it done the quickest. This game requires a balance between throwing hard and throwing accurately. If a player merely lobs the ball, the next player will catch it, but his team will probably lose the drill because it will take too long. If he throws

very hard, odds are that the player he is throwing to will muff it, or that he will throw it inaccurately and the ball will roll far away. Once a line makes a bad throw, it's awfully hard to recover. The kids quickly learn that a hastily made poor throw costs more time than a quick, under control throw.

As a fine point, have the players aim, not for the chest as in a typical throw and catch, but instead to the glove hand of the recipient. In a game cutoff situation, the goal is to get the ball into the infield as quickly as possible. If a player throws to the chest of the recipient, the relay man will have to catch, then turn and throw. If the ball goes to the glove hand, the recipient can catch and throw all in one motion.

Players have trouble with this drill. They panic, and then they don't set their feet before they throw. Planting the feet is crucial to learning to play good defense. On defense, one must play with poise. Players must not panic; on the other hand, they must not simply toss the ball around amicably. Finding a balance point that's the fastest a player can throw yet still maintain control is the key. Emphasize this throughout the drill, reminding the kids that it takes a mere four seconds for a player to make it from one base to the next. Therefore, they don't have a whole lot of time to be casually tossing the ball around. Again, repeat the "no balls on the ground" mantra. Balls on ground: bad, very bad.

Also, emphasize throwing as soon as a player gets the ball. A classic Little League problem arises when an outfielder runs a ball into the infield instead of throwing it. Players must make the decision to throw quickly. Indecision here loses ball games.

Performing a sufficient number of repetitions of this drill reinforces the notion of players throwing as soon as they catch the ball. However, an unfortunate problem arises when one of the players cannot catch well. He will ruin it for his entire line. His line will get mad at him, which certainly detracts from the little league experience. Make sure you balance the lines with an even number of players who can throw and catch well.

To help kids who have lots of trouble catching, encourage the players across from them to throw very accurately and with less speed than usual. While you will initially get some grumbling from the better, you must emphasize the spirit of team cooperation and mutual help. This tough situation demands your patience and nurturing skills. The best way to handle it is to give the lesser skilled kids a lot of encouragement and advice that will help them catch better in the future (See Chapter 6 on Catching).

Ground Balls (Simple)

Here is the simplest ground ball drill: Have two or three players line up side-by-side. Roll the ball to the first player. Then, have him throw it back to you or to an assistant coach. Then roll it to the second player and have him toss it back, and so on down the line. Assistant coaches for these drills need not be experts. Almost anyone can roll a ball on the ground toward a player.

This drill needs to be repeated thousands of times.

Ozzie Smith, Hall of Fame shortstop for the San Diego Padres and then the St. Louis Cardinals, insisted on fielding 100 ground balls a day from his coaches-- in addition to his normal practice. If Ozzie recognized the need for himself, a player at the very pinnacle of baseball perfection, then it certainly makes sense that these raw kids need repetitions too. Tell kids to work on this drill at home. If there is a tennis court near their home, they can bounce tennis balls off the practice wall. If their house has a brick wall and their parents let them throw a tennis ball against the side of the house, that's great. Just don't let them practice with a real baseball, especially if that brick wall happens to have a window in it!

The hardest thing about the ground ball drill is that it is boring. You are now in the position of having to make a boring drill exciting. You can make it interesting for kids if you tell them that they have four seconds to make the whole play. (Recall that four seconds is the approximate time required to run from one base to another.) So, after a couple of



practices, have the assistant coach count down from four to one. Let the kids know that if they don't get it back to the coach by the time they hear "One," the mythical runner has just reached base safely.

Yell either "Safe!" or "Out!" depending on whether the ball smacks into the coach's glove in time. This allows players to visualize a real runner. When they first hear counting, kids tend to panic and miss ground balls they easily fielded before you subjected them to time pressure. Advise players that four seconds actually represents a slow base runner in little league. They need to do better than four seconds. To build their confidence at first, give them five seconds. When the players get the hang of it, drop the allotted time from five seconds to four seconds. If they become very good at it, go for three seconds. If they can do it in three seconds, they can nail anybody at all on the base paths.

This drill is a key to winning ball games, and every player can do it. Working hard on it will increasingly turn grounders into outs, and the results will be apparent on the scoreboard. A nicely executed groundout on defense does wonders for your pitcher's overall happiness and adds a little bounce to the step of the entire team.

On the other hand, a booted grounder produces a significantly more negative result. The kid who booted it looks like he just lost a close relative. The pitcher is filled with anger toward this player and the entire team wishes it were doing something else. Worse,

members of the opposing team are now confident that they don't have to try to hit the ball hard, so they relax at the plate. What do you think happens then? They wind up hitting the ball hard anyway because they're relaxed! Your pitcher now feels that he has to strike everyone out so he starts over-throwing. This downward spiral inevitably shows up as a big deficit on the scoreboard. Hence, we work ground balls at every single practice. You should, too.

Hitting Ground Balls

There is a difference between rolling a ball to a kid and hitting a ball to a kid. When possible, have a coach hit live grounders. (We say "when possible" because not all assistants are good enough with a bat to do this.) Practicing grounders is a lot easier than fielding them in a game. You don't always practice on the same fields on which you play the games, so kids might be a little unfamiliar with the territory. This disappears after a few games, but makes it tough at the start of the season. You need to apply lots of pressure in practice so kids get used to it. We like to set up bases and positions, hit a player a ground ball and have a real runner try to advance to the base that is being thrown to. The effect of this added pressure is amazing to observe. When you remove the runner from the situation, the team will do great, but when the runner is there, they'll panic. You obviously don't want them panicking in game situations. Running this drill frequently will reduce the possibility of that happening.

Fly Balls (simple)



During your first few practices, do what is sometimes called the “Wide Receiver Drill.” Put a coach at a station with a ball and have him line up two or three players as if they were wide receivers on a football team. Have the coach say, “Go!” The player now takes off and the coach throws the ball high in the air to where the player will be. Kids love this one. Make the players yell for the ball. Tell them they have to call for the ball and they have to use only one word to call for it. They can pick whatever whichever word they want: They can shout ball or mine. Of course, you will always get some wise kid who will say spell out B-A-L-L just to be smart, but you’ll nip that in the bud!

Teach players how to track the ball, get their noses under it, and make the catch. Then have the player set his feet and peg it back to the coach who is throwing the ball. Once he does this, the player should return to the end of his line. You do not have to do anything else to make this drill fun. Kids are naturally enchanted with catching fly balls. Put a helmet on the players and throw them a tennis ball and see if they can “catch the ball with their feet” and move to the ball and get their helmet to hit the ball. Once they can do that, use a helmet with a facemask and have them get the ball to hit their mask.

In addition, as with grounders, a big difference exists between a thrown fly ball and a hit one. If you have an assistant who can hit nice fly balls, have him do it, because the kids need practice in tracking batted balls.

Batting Tee (simple)

Set up another station where hitters can use a batting tee. You may want to man this station yourself, as good hitting is essential to kids returning to play year after year. If a kid does not hit, he will not keep playing. We'll cover hitting mechanics later, but for now, just set up a ball on the tee and have the kids hit the ball. You can put one fielder out in the field to catch the ball and return it or you can have the kids hit into a net. We like to let them hit into the field so they can see how far they hit it, but sometimes this just isn't feasible due to time and space constraints.

Have each player take no more than ten to fifteen swings. Do not let a player take forty to fifty consecutive swings, as their arms will get tired and they will stop learning. Insist on quality swings for now. Eventually you will review all their swing mechanics (See Chapter 8). Remind kids that every major leaguer spends a lot of time working with a batting tee. You'll encounter a lot of resistance at first, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, because kids think they have graduated from T-ball and that a tee is only for little kids. Tell them about how famous players use a tee all the time and that if they can't hit it off a tee, they sure as heck can't hit it when it is thrown at high speed. Tell them you expect balls to be rocketing off the tee. If that is not happening, there is a problem with their mechanics and you need to work together to fix it.

Have players regularly switch hit as, when they are young, they will have no fear of it. Many young players between the ages 5-8 really do not have a dominant hitting hand. They often aren't sure what handed they are anyway. So why not take advantage of it and teach them to hit from either side of the plate. When they are older they will probably

be afraid of switch hitting, Why not teach them when they are young? The authors are both not very much into skiing because they didn't do it when they were young. Our kids ski because they learned before they learned how to ski before they had a chance to cultivate a fear of skiing.

End of Practice Drills

These are fun drills to use as practice draws to a close: Pickle (a.k.a. Hot Box), Petter, and One Pitch.

Pickle (a.k.a. Hot Box)

Pickle, sometimes called “hot box”, is a blast. Here is how it works: First, find a soft ball (like a tennis ball) to use as the “baseball”. Safety always comes first, and a player getting hit accidentally with a tennis ball is not likely to get hurt. Second, put a player between two bases as a runner and station a fielder on each base. Have the fielders throw the ball back and forth while the base runner tries to advance. As you can see from the pictures below, you can have several kids running between the bases at the same time. Kids love the drill and so do the coaches (who usually wind up being the fielders at each base).



A more advanced version teaches the proper way to deal with a run-down. Put two kids at each base as fielders and have them take turns chasing the runner. Once he releases the ball, the player follows his throw, running to the next base. The next player at the base then takes over as the fielder.

Emphasize the need to get the runner to actually commit to the base. We played pickle for hours as a kid and we still love to play. Make sure fielders create a throwing lane away from the runner. Hitting the runner does no good at all.

Pepper

One player holds a bat in a bunting position. Two or three players stand a few feet away. The fielders toss the ball underhanded to the batter who then bunts the ball either on the ground or in the air toward one of the fielders. He fields the ball, puts it back in his throwing hand, and flips it back to the batter. This drill teaches quickness on the part of the fielders, and eye-hand coordination for both hitter and fielder. You can have three or four pepper squads going at once. Have them rotate, changing from a fielder into a batter every few minutes.

One Pitch

Make a lineup, and have the whole team sit on the bench, simulating a real game. Give your bench coach the lineup. Your bench coach will be the coach who maintains discipline in the dugout during a game and make sure hitters are always ready to bat. It is good to give both your bench coach and your team some practice in how to behave on the bench.

Set the rules. The on-deck hitter always puts on a helmet and identifies his bat's location. He does not touch the bat; he just knows where it is. After the batter at the plate finishes, the next batter comes up and gets his bat. He should already be wearing a helmet. Throw pitches to the kids. Tell them that they get one good strike and that's it.

This teaches players to value every pitch. They have to be ready. Station a couple of assistant coaches and any parents floating around in the field. Tell kids that if they hit the

ball in the infield they get one point and if makes it to the outfield grass it's two points. If the ball is caught in the air, they get no points regardless of how well they had hit it. Keep score and, at the conclusion of the drill, determine who has the most points. This helps prepare them for the reality of a game.

In baseball, a batter can smash the living daylights out of a ball that sometimes unfortunately winds up going straight to a fielder. Few other games have such a great element of chance as baseball. That's what we like about baseball, as it parallels life in many ways. Sometimes in life, you do something great, but for whatever reason you still end up on the short end. Where else besides on the playing field do kids learn this? Elsewhere, they typically are taught that life is fair. That's a laugh! Life is not fair. You can be minding your own business and then be run over by a bus. **Why teach kids that life is always fair? Teach them that sometimes they can end up on the short end – but the key is to get back up and try again. This is a lesson that baseball teaches repeatedly.**

Summary

You now have learned the basics of a decent practice. We suggest you that you end each practice with all players once again in a semicircle on one knee, discussing what they learned and letting them know what you want them to work on at home.

End the practice as you began: with a short run around the field.

At this point, you should have some idea about what equipment you will need and how to set up a practice. Now it is time to start talking about how to teach the mechanics involved in the fundamentals. As important as it is to know the right way to do these things, it's just as important to know how to diagnose problems and to have a repertoire of drills that are designed to fix these problems. We'll start with teaching how to throw.

CHAPTER

05

How to Teach Throwing



Chapter 5: How to Teach Throwing

Picture this game situation: There are two outs, with the opposing team batting in the bottom of the sixth inning, and your team leads by one run. With runners on second and third, the batter hits a weak grounder back to the mound. You've been nervous all game, but finally, you see hope. All of the hard work, the practices, and the speeches have come together and your team is about to win a game. The pitcher picks up the ball, sets his feet, takes his time—just as you taught him—and then, he calmly throws it six feet over the head of the first baseman. The opponents' fans cheer loudly, and your win has just turned into a heartbreaking loss. Why? That one bad throw.

Throwing is such a simple action, yet one hard to do consistently while under pressure. This chapter describes the mechanics required to throw well. In addition, we focus on how to *teach* throwing. Finally, we offer some suggestions on how to diagnose problems and we suggest drills that address those problems.

Throwing errors comprise most of the errors in baseball. Eliminate them and you dramatically improve your defense. The problem is that you can't eliminate them. This is borne out by the truth that *major league* ballplayers, who are paid millions of dollars to play the game, *commit throwing errors*, too! They practice throwing several hours a day, they watch tapes of the practice, and then go have a beer and talk baseball. They're competitive professionals and they're immersed in the game. There's a lot of money riding on their abilities. Yet they still make bad throws from time to time. Thus, it follows that 10-year-olds are going to make plenty.

Because of its fundamental importance to the game, all coaching books have a section on throwing. Here, we will try to set the record for the longest discussion on throwing a ball. We believe that teaching the art and science of throwing is a central concern in coaching baseball.

All of our practices start with kids just throwing and catching. So before anyone can hope to learn to catch, he has to learn to throw.

The challenging part about teaching throwing is that none of us can recall what we were taught, if indeed, we were taught.

You frequently have to work hard to break deeply entrenched habits. Remember kids have been throwing stuff since they were two or three years old and they may not have had anyone watching their throwing mechanics. This is difficult, but with persistence, you can have success.

In this chapter, we will present throwing drills and point out common errors in throwing technique.

Mechanics

Here are the steps that a young player must master to throw a ball accurately to a target:

Step 1: Grip the ball correctly.

Step 2: Stand correctly before the throw.

Step 3: Bring the ball back before the throw.

Step 4: Step toward the target with the lead foot.

Step 5: Turn the rear foot.

Step 6: Release the ball while bending the back forward.

Step 7: Follow through

Teaching

To teach the steps listed above you must understand that the first three steps represent preparation for throwing the ball. In addition, you'll need to quickly diagnose throwing problems and design drills to remedy them.

Realize that throwing a ball is a complicated dance. Timing is everything. Throwing became almost intuitive for you long ago. Now, you are a teacher. You must be capable of learning to break down the throwing motion and reassemble it for your students. You also must be a throwing doctor—able to diagnose throwing problems before they become nasty habits. Finally, you must be an observer. Alas, miniscule, yet important, errors are difficult to identify when you watch a player. Look for problems that identify telltale cues. Does the ball always loop skyward before it comes down? Does the player throw as if he is a shot putter? Does he properly reach back before the throw?

To gain a sense of the nature of timing problems, let's try doing it incorrectly in a variety of ways. For example, take a short step and hold the ball far behind you. We call this **foot-ahead-of-arm disease**. **Feels wrong**, doesn't it? How do you know it feels wrong? Because you've been throwing forever and your body has ingrained the correct, timed sequence of motions that comprise a good throw. Let's do another one.

Try this: bring your arm back, start to throw, but don't move your feet. Now while your arm is moving forward, step toward the target. **Feels wrong again**, doesn't it? Now you are experiencing **arm-ahead-of-foot disease**. Next, try doing the timing right and step a few inches to the right or left of the straight line between you and the target. Whether you go left or right, you'll note that either feels wrong. So now, you have another cue to look for. The players should be stepping directly towards the target.

We find it useful to go over each step with players, nice and slow (especially at the introductory levels). First, you must break the steps down in your mind and think about what you haven't thought about for many years. We will give you a boost by listing the steps comprising the throwing motion below.

Step 1: Grip the ball correctly

This one is very hard to teach. Kids learn it initially, but later, after a few practices, we will stop a kid and ask to see how he is holding the ball. You guessed it! He is right back to how he's held it all his life. Little League players' hands are small, so it is not comfortable to hold the ball the way we want them to hold it, and they think they have better things to do than to concentrate on something silly like how to hold a ball.

How a player holds the ball can affect the spin and the spin affects where the ball goes. When we discovered this, we realized that by only half-teaching how to hold the ball, we essentially created a situation in which balls would be flying all over the place. This is as much a scourge in Little League as it is in the pros. You want the ball to go straight and true! There are no two ways about that. You do not want your third baseman throwing tailing, sinking fastballs to the first baseman. For a pitcher, a four-seam fastball goes straight, whereas a two-seam fastball has movement. Thus, fielders should grip the ball as if they're throwing a four-seam fastball, which we will explain below.

Turn the ball so the seams make the shape of a horseshoe on its side, where the open end of the horseshoe is on the left. The player should place his index and middle fingers on the top seam and then allow his other fingers to wrap naturally around the seam at the bottom. A ball thrown using this grip is called a **four-seam fastball** because the four parallel seams spin towards the recipient of the throw.

So how do you teach this? You take each player aside and you say, “Let me show you how to hold the ball.” Show him how to rotate the ball so the horseshoe is in place. You will want to do this a couple times to ensure that it sinks in. Then, using your fingers, show the player where his fingers should go. Then take the ball from his hand, spin the ball, then hand him the ball and see if he can put his fingers on the right place.

The hard part is that **your** fingers are big and they fit around the ball, while his little fingers barely manage. When we first discovered this, we realized that players were going to have a very hard time throwing balls. If life and baseball were fair, we’d let them play with a smaller ball until their fingers grew. However, this is not going to happen, so you are stuck teaching something that for many players is almost physically impossible. Recognizing this should lead to some sympathy when your players make bad throws.

If the kid has tiny fingers, you can say, “I know this is not easy for you because your fingers are small, but it’ll get easier as you grow.” If the kid is having too hard a time, it is okay to tell him to use his third finger (ring finger) alongside the first two fingers on that top seam to enhance his grip. This three-fingered, compromise grip enables a kid with small hands to throw the baseball. While coaching clinics and even special baseball schools condone three finger grips, we hate the notion of using three fingers. We feel as if the kids are acquiring habits for life here and we are afraid that if they fall in love with three fingers on the ball, they will continue to use it after the need for it has passed. We feel that they lose control when they are throwing with three fingers. If throwing with a three-finger grip is such a great idea, every major-leaguer would be doing it! So, while two fingers is by far the better way to go, if you have a kid with very small fingers, you’d rather live with a three-finger grip than watch him continually dropping the ball as he is about to throw it. Always bear in mind that with growing bodies, compromises will be necessary. When they develop bigger hands, you can constrain them to a two-finger grip.

In teaching ball holding, you have to drill it. Have your players pick up a ball, find the seams, and show you how they are holding it. Run a drill where you roll a ball to each of them, then tell them to grab it, bring their arm back, and stop. At this point, run around and check to see how they are holding the ball. Do this ten times. Switch to something else for a while, then repeat the drill and see how many of them are still holding the ball correctly. You will find that a lot of them will need to work on this throughout the season. That is why you're there.

Step 2: Stand correctly before you throw

Once the players can hold a ball, teach them how to stand in the right position when they throw.

Have the players stand on the third-base foul line with feet about shoulder-width apart, and their knees slightly bent. The balls of their feet should be on the foul line, with toes hanging over the line. In one hand is the ball; in the other is the glove. Instruct the kids to bring their hands together about four inches in front of their chest, putting the ball in the glove. This is the basic setup for this drill.

Now we have some sub-steps to work on:

Substep 1: Put ball in throwing hand and grip correctly.

Substep 2: Hands at chest level, a few inches from the chest.

Substep 3: Feet slightly more than shoulder width apart.

Substep 4: Knees bent slightly.



Drill this repeatedly. (More advanced players can begin this drill from a variety of positions, such as ground ball fielding, fly ball fielding or the catcher's stance.) Count out, "One!" and have players pick up a ball and freeze. Check the grip.

Now say, "Two!" The players should put hands at the chest and freeze. It is imperative to get this into long-term memory. To accomplish this, do a couple of repetitions of the steps and then have the kids take a break. After the break, return to the drill. Drop a ball and yell, "One!" When the kid picks up the ball and freezes, stop and look to see whether he is holding the right seams. If not, be patient, fix it and, drop the ball again, and go back to, "One!" Once substep one works, start evaluating substep two.

Yell, "Two!" When the player raises his hands to his chest, his hands will most likely touch his chest – even though you told him to keep them away from his body. There is a substantial increase in balance if you can get the hands a few inches from the body. In remedying this, a technique that sometimes works is to turn the player into a coach. Tell the player, "Hey, buddy, teach **me** what I'm doing wrong!" Now hold your hands so they touch your chest. Some kids will say, "Looks good to me!" Others will pick up the error right away. You can expand on this concept by dividing the drill group in half, pairing up one "coach" with one player. Have the kid who is the coach tell the player what he is doing right and what he is doing wrong. They all have fun and everybody learns in the process.

When they can call out these errors, they are really starting to get it. Furthermore, the role reversal of coaching a coach is entertaining for the kids. Have the kid yell, “One!” and watch you move. Have the kid yell, “Two!” and so on, following the drill. Kids get a kick out of this. Now you are taking something utterly boring and making it kind of **fun**. That’s your job.

The next substep is “Three!” where players spread their feet to shoulder width apart. Take a look at the feet. They should both be pointed facing the direction that the rest of the body is facing. Weight should be more towards the ball of the feet than the heels. Now say, “Four!” and have players bend their knees into an athletic stance. Not too much bend, but some bend must exist. You should be able to lightly shove a players chest and they should not move if their knees are bent correctly. They should look balanced and comfortable with their knees bent. Repeat substeps one to four until they are a habit.

Step 3: Bring the arm back

The key here is to make sure the arm is straight back behind the player with the elbow slightly bent. Tell the kids to act like they are making “rabbit ears” with their two fingers.

To drill it, shout: “Bunny ears to center field (if they are standing on the pitcher’s mound)”. Players will reach back and then freeze. Practice this by saying, “Ready,” to get their hands together and then, “Break,” to get them to separate, come down, and pull back. A few thousand reps would be great.

Most kids can do the drill for about five to ten minutes before they start losing focus. Stand behind them and see if each of their throwing arms comes back on a line. If the arm does not, correct it. Again, as before, get them to correct you as you show them different incorrect postures.

When their arm is all the way back, make sure that the elbow is not bent too much. If it is bent significantly, it is called **short arming**, which will prevent good extension. Some players will completely straighten the arm. This is bad technique. A slight bend is preferable.

Let me quote from a well-known pitching bible, *Coaching Pitchers*, by Joe “Spanky” McFarland. His book is well respected by college coaches. He goes into very intimate detail on every aspect of pitching. He says:

Make sure the elbow is *above* the shoulder. Many players drop the elbow and push the ball upwards. Others sort of “throw darts” and bring the ball right to their ear. Raising the elbow above the shoulder and pivoting the rear foot enable the throwing hand to move to a point about 12-18 inches from the ear. Thus, the player uses the entire arm instead of just the forearm in making the throw. Furthermore, when initiating the throw from a position with the elbow above the shoulder, the ball is more likely to travel in a downward or level trajectory instead of a high arc when released.

Step 4: Step with the Lead Foot

While the player is cocking his throwing arm, he steps toward the target with his opposite foot. The step must be exactly in the direction of the throw, precisely on an imaginary line between the player and the target. Make sure that the player bends his knee when he hits the **strike point**. This is the point at which the lead foot hits the ground.⁽¹⁾ A step somewhere between one and two feet is comfortable for a Little League-sized body.

¹ The strike point is a term that Tom House uses frequently in his book, *The Pitching Edge*.

Step 5: Throw

At the instant the front foot lands at the strike point, the throwing arm must begin to propel the ball forward. To use the lower half of the body in the throw, it is vital that the rear foot pivots, turning from 12:00 to 3:00, the very instant the front foot lands. This is the only way to allow the strength of the lower body to be applied to the throw. If you see a player who throws without turning this foot, you can rest assured that he is only using his upper body to throw the ball and that he'll always have problems throwing with any kind of velocity. He'll also have trouble throwing for distance.

Throwing has more to do with feet than with hands. Major League pitcher Pedro Martinez, a Hall of Fame pitcher opined, "without legs, there is no arm."

Step 6: Bend the back as ball is thrown

Bending the back while throwing maintains balance. Young players seem to want to throw standing straight. This causes problems with balance. In order to get players into the habit of bending their backs, we tell them to throw the ball, lean forward, touch a blade of grass, and hold that position, for a count of three. Some coaches refer to this position as "Superman" because the back is flat the back (non-landing) leg is up and the throwing arm is stretched forward.

Step 7: Follow Through

A player's arm must not stop abruptly after the throw. Instead, the arm must continue to move smoothly along the established target line. This allows the arm to slow down and avoid stress from throwing.

One-Knee Drill

All the steps involved in throwing are very difficult to teach to young players. Getting enough of the “right” repetitions is the goal. To that end, we offer a drill that can help build good throwing fundamentals.

Often times, it is better to begin throwing drills with isolating the upper body movement from the lower body. Consequently, we use one-knee throwing just to focus on things like getting the proper grip, pointing the non-throwing hand at the target and getting the upper body rotation necessary for accurate throws.



There are several variations of the one knee drill, as shown above. Since the player is not using his lower body by design, keep the throwers closer together (say 10-15 feet). That allows you to coach the mechanics of the throwing motion and make sure everything is working properly.

Throwing Problems & Drills to Help

We believe that if you have a kid throw every day to a person who will catch for him, the thrower will eventually figure out how to throw. Thus, you should encourage kids to throw every day. It is the same story every season. On the first day of spring, new players can barely throw but by the last day, the kids are firing the ball around the infield. We are not convinced that our teaching has nearly as much impact as the time a player devotes to throwing. Nevertheless, as an observant coach, you can identify problem areas and institute drills that will enhance the learning process. Here are a few that have worked for us.

Bad Grip

Observation: You see some balls not rotating as they are thrown and you see players with a lot of control problems. Typically, this stems from either a poor grip or a poor release.

Drill: To isolate this, remove the legs and weight transfer from the process by watching players throw to each other while on their knees. You can now focus on how they grip the ball before they throw and on watching the rotation of the ball when they release it. To see the rotation more clearly, color the sides of the ball.

Arm Not Extended

Observation: As they get set to throw, some players bring the ball back by their ear and therefore do not get good arm extension.

Drill: Again, isolate the upper body. Have players kneel on the ground, extend their stride leg, and throw to a player on his knees a few feet away. You can now work on the “break”

(where the hands separate), the path of the ball, and the release without having to deal with lost balance. Make sure they reach back before they throw by having them touch the glove of a coach standing behind them before they start their throwing arm forward.

Arm Extends at an Angle

Observation: Some players reach more to the side than straight back. You will notice that their throws are often very inaccurate and that they are pulling themselves off balance as they reach back before the throw.

Drill: Without giving them a ball, stand the players on the foul line as if they are going to throw. When you say, “Break!” players should separate their hands, and bring their throwing arm back along the foul line. At the same time, they should be striding towards the target. Once the players reach the point where their arms are far enough back to throw the ball, tell them to freeze. Now, look at the position of the arms, checking to ensure that their arms are directly over the foul line. Check to see that the knees remain bent slightly. Check to see that the stride foot is on line with the target. Then hand each player a ball, and say, “Turn and throw!” They should then pivot their back foot, throw, bend their back, and follow through correctly.

Ball Thrown with Large Arc

Observation: Players throw the ball with a large arc in the air on the way to the target—a blooper. They tend to lean back as they throw the ball skyward.

Drill: Tell the blooper boy that you want him to throw the ball so that it bounces once before it hits the target. This forces the player to make mechanical changes such that the ball heads downward instead of upward when it leaves his hand instead. We find that we

rarely have players who naturally bounce the ball, but we have lots of players who throw it high into the air.

Throw Does Not Travel Very Far

Observation: Many players lack good arm strength. Throws fall short of the mark.

Drill: To build arm strength, have the players perform a drill called long toss. After warming up throwing at the usual distance, have them gradually back up until they are two-and-a-half times their normal throwing distance. All the fundamentals of a good throw are in play here. Your students must throw harder, yet accurately. They cannot throw bloopers. About ten to twenty long throws are sufficient.

Keeping Proper Balance

Observation: Many young players lack good core strength. As a result, they often throw off balance and the ball does not travel straight.

Drill: To build balance, young players can throw off a 4" by 4" plank of wood. The piece of wood needs to be long enough to accommodate a player's stride.

The drill is a great way to make all the pieces of throwing come together in a fun way. You can have competitions on how many times a player can throw without falling off the plank.

The steps are pretty straightforward. The player starts in the ready position:



Step 2: The throwing arm goes back with the “peace sign” facing centerfield. The front arm serves as a pointer for the ball’s direction. The thrower is facing his target



Step 3: Weight shifts forward as the ball is released. Note that the hips and upper body rotate while the player maintains his balance. Eyes are still on target.



Step 4: Follow-through. Eyes are still on target. Throwing arm has come through the release point. The back is bent forward. Throwing hand is now resting close to the opposite hip.



Summary

We have described basic throwing mechanics. Players should throw the ball about thirty to fifty times at every practice. Keep an eye on their technique and make corrections as necessary. All this drilling builds arm strength and ingrains basic mechanics. You'll want to spend lots of time on throwing.

Now that we have discussed throwing, let's move to what happens on the other side of the ball. When someone hits a ball, someone has to catch it. When a pitcher pitches the ball, someone has to catch it. When a shortstop throws a ball across the infield, someone has to catch it. You get the picture. That's where we're going next: teaching kids how to catch.

CHAPTER

06

How to Teach
Catching a
Thrown Ball



Chapter 6: How to Teach Catching a Thrown Ball

Another game situation: with two outs in the bottom of the fifth during a playoff game, runners are on first and second. The batter hits a weak dribbler to your pitcher, who moves to his right and scoops it up. As you rejoice in your heart that you are about to get out of the inning, the pitcher decides to fire to third – not a bad choice, as his body is moving towards third. One could even argue that this is the textbook play. Yet, you start to pray feverishly as you know you have a fielder at third who is not so adept at catching (translation: he might catch it if you were to throw him a big, soft balloon). Predictably, the third baseman jumps out of the way of the ball as it comes. Two runs score, while your pitcher bursts into tears and becomes furious with the third baseman. You call time-out and go to the mound.

No matter how great a throw might be, it is no good if a player can't catch it. On the other hand, a player who can catch well can salvage a poor throw.

In this chapter, we focus on the mechanics of catching, presenting some methods for overcoming the fear of the ball--which is a key part of catching--and discussing some drills designed to improve catching skills.

As we just mentioned, in teaching how to catch you must confront the number one problem of all Little League coaches – **getting kids over fear of the ball**. We are amazed at how little discussion of ball fear exists in the coaching literature and in coaching clinics. Most books and senior coaches talk very little about ball fear, and yet, it has a tremendous impact.

Fear of a rock being thrown at you is a good survival instinct. Overcoming it takes real work and time. Some kids are able to quickly recognize when they will be hit and will not exhibit as much fear. Others will have no idea and will run for cover even before the ball is thrown. Depth perception and mental processing (the work done by the brain to recognize where the ball is and where it is going) varies from one kid to another. It also varies by age. Also, there are cues people recognize even before the ball is thrown. A group of major leaguers



were unable to hit a fastball from one of the top youth women pitchers. It wasn't the speed – she threw around 95-100 miles and hour, which is about what these players see on a daily basis. It was the windup, it was the release, and any other small cues players use to guess where the ball will end up.

Most coaches just say “well they will grow out of it.” Many players are naturally afraid of the ball, but no magical cure exists. Therefore, when you first talk about catching, you have to address fear. If they have no fear, then they will move toward the ball, put their bodies in front of it, and catch it. If they are afraid, they will pretend that they are bullfighters and sidestep the ball as it whooshes by.

Remind the players that getting past ball fear resembles fear of a roller coaster – once you get past the first ride, you want to ride all day.

Teaching catching requires patience, especially in getting kids over ball fear. Here is a progression we use. Start with no glove at all. Teach the kids to catch with soft hands. They must not stab at the ball. As the ball comes tell them they are catching a baby chicken – catch it and bring it in slowly to the body. Watch to see whether they take a step

back or even lean backward when you throw them a ball. If they do, try using a tennis ball. If they still do, try a whiffle ball. Throw from one knee at a few feet and then gradually work to longer distances and harder balls.

Once they start to get the hang of things, add a glove. Make sure they hold their gloves chest-high, a few inches away from their body. Make certain that they squeeze the ball with the glove hand and that they cover the ball with the bare hand. Players do not catch with two hands – they catch with one hand and cover with the other. So encourage them repeatedly to “catch and cover.”

It is important to ensure that they catch with the correct glove position. Let's say the ball is a pop-up. The player must get **his nose under the ball** and keep it there. Then, he must raise his glove, lining it up with his nose by turning the palm of his hand away from his face. The glove must be held a few inches in front of his face, away from his body, or it will block vision.

Some kids will want to catch the ball by reaching out with their palms facing up as in Charlie Brown cartoons. This is fine for a ball that is going to land below the waist, but if the ball comes at chest height, the ball is likely to hop out of the glove and hit the player's face.

Players need to learn when to use a forehand catch (for right-handers, glove turned to the left, palm facing out) and when to use a backhand (for right-handers, glove turned to the right). This is analogous to a forehand and backhand swing in tennis. Since their natural inclination is simply to extend the glove, palm facing up, hoping that the ball will land in it, implement a drill directed at remedying this tendency. One drill we use is to tell kids that their glove hand is like a windshield wiper on a car. Right-handed players* must move the

* For left-handed players, just do it right to left instead of left to right, and so forth with the rest of the drill.

glove from left to right in an arc similar to the car's windshield wiper. As it begins on the "driver's side" on the left of the player, it's palm-facing-up (commonly referred to as a forehand catch) and as it moves in front of the player it's palm-turned-out and it's now a backhand catch. To emphasize this throw balls a couple of steps to the left of the player and make sure they catch with a forehand catch. Then throw balls a couple of steps to the right to work on the backhand catch.

Watch kids play catch in the park. Jamal throws to Bernie. Perhaps Bernie catches it (maybe not) and then he notices a butterfly. Bernie then chases the butterfly. Eventually, Bernie throws back to Jamal. Jamal then observes a bubble gum wrapper two feet from him. He picks up the wrapper. Jamal and Bernie examine it, hold it up to the light, and maybe even call out to another friend to examine the wrapper. Note that they have completed **only one rep** of this impromptu throwing/catching drill.

In teaching catching, you must give players countless repetitions. You must diligently combat the natural tendency to lose focus on each repetition in a drill – throughout practice and all pre-game warm-ups. Tell players to count the number of times they throw the ball back and forth; the drill is finished when they succeed in throwing it ten times back-and-forth without the ball hitting the ground.

*Kids need tons of reps, yet they are easily distracted. Their natural tendency is to take very few reps. **You** must keep them focused.*

To encourage more repetitions we usually start my first few practices with one or two kids standing next to each other taking turns throwing to a coach. We start with no glove and eventually we add a glove. Having a coach to throw to dramatically speeds up the number of throws and catches a player gets in practice. The coach should encourage players to catch with soft hands, he should watch for signs of ball fear, and he should ensure that players catch in the correct position – either forehand or backhand.

Drills

To practice, get players in the ready position: feet slightly more than shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, and glove in front, chest high. Tell them that if the ball is more than a few inches away to their left or right, they have to move their feet. If they do not, they will just be stabbing at balls and things will not go well. If they make a few catches in a row, tell them to take a few steps back and repeat.

Ball Fear – Part I

Remember, players will be afraid of the ball. Remember that they need to get over this just like fear of riding a roller coaster (see the start of the chapter). Fake a throw and see if they recoil. Fake another, and another. Eventually, they will stop reacting before you even throw it. Now throw it for real. If they duck or move their heads, you have real ball fear on your hands. Yelling, “Don’t be afraid!” does no good.

Include a Helmet

Have kids wear a helmet with a face-mask and ask them to position their head under a fly ball such that the ball hits their mask. Do this with tennis balls.

Kids love this game. Some kids duck at the last second. While these kids may have been able to mask their fear from you by ducking imperceptibly, the tennis ball drill reveals whether or not they are still nervous.

Ball Fear – Part II

Be warned that as players get better about standing in there and trying to catch, they are more likely to get hurt. We had one kid who was deathly afraid. Eventually, we got him to focus on the ball and he finally stopped moving away. One day, a ball glanced off the top of his glove and hit him in the nose, causing a nosebleed. We got a call from his mom later that night saying that the boy just did not have time to be on the team. We tried to explain that he was coming along well and that being hit is a sign of **progress**. There was no talking her out of it – she didn't want her son to play anymore.

You can do nothing about overprotective parents once they get into this sort of mindset. Kids will indeed get hurt from time to time, which you'll obviously try to limit. Therefore, the lesson here is to keep a bunch of ice packs with you at every practice and hope that the parents understand that minor injuries are part of life and part of growing up.

If a kid is hit by a ball—and is hurt by it – try to get him right back up on the proverbial horse as soon as possible so he does not develop an even worse fear. We had one batter with a fabulous swing, who did not hit the ball all season. He had been beamed early in the season and had gone down in a heap. He did not hit at all again until the playoffs. We will never forget his towering triple to right that broke him out of his batting slump, but he had required almost an entire season to recover from that early beaming.

Just be patient and, in many cases, the fear will diminish. It may take more than one season to vanquish the fear completely.

As a final test, throw a tennis ball right at the kids' faces. If they stand in and catch it, you are in good shape. If not, keep working on it.

Examples of the “face throwing drill” are presented here:



Position the player so his/her back is literally against a fence or wall. The coach should be standing roughly 15-20 feet away (for beginners). The coach throws a tennis ball (or some other soft ball) at the players face. The goal is to have the player catch the ball in his/her glove without moving their feet or trying to move to the side. The coach should not throw the ball hard. A soft, arcing throw is fine to begin with. As the player gets better, the coach can throw a longer distance and increase the speed of the ball. We suggest sticking with a tennis ball in this drill until you feel the player has overcome his fear of the ball.

We have had tremendous success with this drill in our collective coaching experience. Literally putting the player's "back to the wall" is a great way to overcome the fear of catching the ball.

Goalie Drill

Place two cones about fifteen to twenty feet apart. Position a player midway between them and tell him that he is the goalie defending the goal (the area between the cones). Now throw the ball either directly to him or to his left or right side. His job is to catch it and throw it back. Now throw it toward a different part of the “goal.” The player must move to “protect” his goal and catch the ball. Kids love this drill—particularly kids who are also soccer players. It gets them used to moving their feet instead of merely reaching for every ball.

Summary

In this chapter, we have described the basic mechanics of catching a ball and we have presented how to teach catching from the Little League coach’s perspective. Now, with the basics of throwing and catching as a foundation, Chapter 7 brings these concepts together as we discuss the fundamentals of fielding.

CHAPTER

07

How to Teach Fielding



Chapter 7: How to Teach Fielding

Teams that make the routine plays win games. Making the routine plays on balls hit right to the fielders is sufficient to guarantee a successful season.

Making those routine plays is not about talent. The keys are:

- Be in ready position every pitch
- Be poised under pressure

These can be coached and utterly talent-independent. Teaching kids how to make the routine play is the focus of this chapter.

We begin by giving you some insight into players' mindsets, for if the team's mood turns negative, bad fielding is an inevitable consequence. Once we get their heads back into the game, we can discuss mechanics as well as plans for some key defensive situations.

Mindset is an important part of fielding

Here is a game situation that exhibits the need for making fundamental, easy plays:

The opponent has scored a couple times in the first inning, and the bases are loaded with two outs. The batter hits an easy ground ball directly to our shortstop. We breathe a sigh of relief. Our shortstop moves forward, clearly ready to flip the ball to second. We see our second baseman gliding over to second. We are elated, thinking that we are going to get out of this inning on a positive note. However, the ball continues right under the shortstop's glove and into left field. Two runs score. The pitcher looks like he has just seen a ghost. Teammates all look down at the dirt and kick sand lightly into the air. Unfortunately, the tone now has been set for the rest of the game.

Baseball is more of a momentum driven sport than people might think. With all the long pauses between pitches, with batters putting helmets on, with catchers fixing their gear and with the umpire sweeping home, you'd think that maybe kids would forget about the bad thing that had just happened and be ready to go on the new pitch. Nothing could be further from the truth. The delays simply make the emotional pain linger, grow and snowball.

In basketball, the opponent steals the ball, starts a fast break, and finishes with a dunk. The crowd goes nuts. However, two seconds later, your team can run the offense, settle down and hit a nice lay-up. About twenty seconds have elapsed since the really bad thing occurred and it is largely forgotten.

In truth, none of these "routine" plays is very easy. The infielder usually has less than four seconds to get the batter out. A simple infield grounder requires the fielder to get to the ball, pick it up, set his feet, transfer the ball from the glove to the hand, decide which base to throw to and make an accurate throw. Many things have to go right before the play is successfully completed. The problem is that it looks like an easy play, so when it doesn't happen, the team becomes depressed and things tend to go downhill.

Now we need to talk about the ready position and dealing with errors.

Ready Position:

Most errors result from a lack of readiness. To practice fielding ground balls, you hit a bunch of grounders toward an infielder. He knows that the ball is coming, so he gets ready and he looks good. However, in a real game situation he sits on his heels for a long time before a batted ball comes to him. When it does happen, it takes him by surprise and that fraction of a second of surprise often results in an error.

We haven't found the magic formula for keeping an entire team awake. However, to offset the surprise factor, we tell players to think about where they are going to throw before the ball is hit. When we pitch batting practice, we always look at the infield and the outfield and say, "Remember, as I release the ball, you have to be ready for the batter to hit the ball and know the game situation." Sometimes we do a drill where we have a fielder yell, "Down!" with every pitch. The notion is that "down" implies that a player get down into a ready position to prepare for fielding the ball. By doing this for every pitch during batting practice, the team gets into the habit of being ready for every pitch.

During the game, we try not to scream, "Frank! Dam it! Wake up!" When we see someone playing with his hat in the outfield, we just yell, "*Frank! Where's the play?*" This isn't as negative.

Poise Under Pressure

You can hit ground balls all day and kids will often field them. Then you hit them in a game with live runners and they start kicking them around. We teach the basics and, as soon as possible, put runners on base with helmets on and teach those runners to act as real as possible. The first time you do this you'll watch the team sort of disintegrate. Then they'll get used to the runners and when things happen in a game, maybe they'll be less likely to make an error. During infield practice, we like to move my live runners around to simulate as many different situations as possible. A side benefit of this is it teaches the runners about base running (see Chapter 11 for more on that topic).

Speeding up the Pace of the Defense

Another thing you can do to ensure that fielders remain awake is to work with pitchers and catchers on being quicker delivering the ball to the plate. This must be balanced with

their need to throw only when they are ready. However, be aware that the more time your pitcher takes between pitches, the more time your fielders have to become bored.

Handling Errors

This leads us to the difficult coaching problem of how to react when an error occurs. Despite whatever you are thinking, take a deep breath, remember that we aren't playing for money and that we really are about teaching and yell to the kid who booted the ball, "It's OK! Now, shake it off!"

If you yell something like, "Dam it, *Frank*, get your head in the game! That was an *easy one!*" you are discouraging the kid to the extent that he might not return next year. If you think Frank wasn't trying to make the play, you are wrong. Frank wanted to field that ground ball more than anything in the world. True, he was probably asleep when the ball was hit, but once it came to him, he really wanted to make the play. So there is no need to tell him he failed – in baseball, it is abundantly clear to all involved that a failure has occurred. In some cases, if the kid really was trying hard but just could not quite get to a ball, please yell, "*Great! Great try!*"

If you see your pitcher stewing around, call time and go out there. Say to him, "Listen, we all make mistakes. The key to being a really good pitcher is to learn how to overcome adversity, to learn how to stay calm at times like these and to learn how to deal with this very situation."

If you have a kid who is new to baseball, tell him something such as, "The way you will learn is to have some balls hit to you during the game. You won't play them all perfectly – but you will learn from each one." Continually remind the team that everyone makes errors – even major leaguers.

Next Pitch

Mistakes will happen at all levels of baseball. One thing that has worked for us is to teach the team to tell the team to really focus on the next pitch and to try to stop dwelling on the evils of the past. One cue we use is to teach the phrase “Next Pitch” which means worry about the next pitch and not the past (which they can’t change). During a game after an error we will often yell, “NEXT” and have the team yell “PITCH”.

You, as coach, must constantly battle negative team psyche arising out of screwed up fielding plays. This is where you earn your big bucks as a volunteer coach.

Now that we have discussed the mental aspects of fielding, it is time to talk about the mechanics.

Ground Balls

Initiate a practice sequence with the player in a stance with feet slightly wider than shoulder width, knees flexed, both gloved hand and throwing hand out in front and body weight on the balls of the feet. Roll the ball slowly to the player. He must lower his glove as if it were an airplane coming in for landing, instead of as a rock dropped from the sky. The player’s glove glides down as he moves forward to field the ball. As his “plane” lands, his feet glide to a stop such that the ball is directly in front of the player.

The player remains low to the ground with his rear end almost in a catcher’s crouch. The fielder does not just bend over and pick up the ball; he lowers his whole body to where the ball is coming. This way, if the ball hops around, the player’s arms and chest are close to ball height and the player can block the ball.

As the ball comes into his glove where he can make the play with the forehand the player should cover the ball with his throwing hand as if the throwing hand were the upper jaw of an alligator. Hence, our screaming all the time, “LIKE AN ALLIGATOR - LIKE AN ALLIGATORRRRRRRRRRR!”

Here is a quick demonstration of what we mean by being an alligator with the ball. In the picture, the player is not being an alligator when fielding the ground ball. You can see that his glove is angled to the side of the ball. It is not directly on the ground (palm facing upward) or under the ball.



This is a big deal in youth baseball. Many fields are in mediocre shape. Bad hops occur frequently. By keeping your glove (and top hand) angled and not straight up-and-down (like an alligator) increases the likelihood of a bad hop going into the fielder's face.

The second picture shows the corrected fielding position with the hands in an alligator position. Now, the fielder is in the proper position to field the ball and throw to a base. Note that the glove is flat to the ground with the palm raised. The top (or throwing) hand is directly on top of the glove; not off to the side.



If the ball goes far to the left of a right-handed player, he should move his feet to the left and pick up the ball. If the ball goes far to the player's right, the player must backhand the ball. Our experience is that these plays aren't made too often in youth baseball (especially at the lower levels) and that no emotional damage occurs if they are not made. What we are mostly after is making the easy play: the routine one where the ball is hit right to the player or maybe a step or two to the left or the right. As a fundamental affecting the majority of fielding situations, it is important to teach players to move their feet in short, quick steps to field balls to their left or their right, such that the ball is in front of their bodies. For a ball that can be fielded with the forehand, the hands, if at all possible, should cover the ball once it has been fielded.

Talk to players about using *soft hands* when they field the ball. Some advanced books talk about having fielders try to field with blocks of wood in each hand. No matter which technique you use, the goal is to ensure that players field the ball and bring it toward their bodies in one smooth, fluid motion in preparation for throwing, while remaining in balance. If a kid is slamming the alligator's jaws shut, his fielding will be jerky, which increases the likelihood of an error. Similarly, a kid being off-balance when he attempts to throw almost guarantees an error. Smooth fielding and remaining balanced at all times are keys to good defense.

A good "soft hands" drill is to a piece of equipment called a "pancake mitt". There are several types of these mitts on the market. They are flat (hence, "pancake mitt") and have some padding like a regular mitt, but they do not close. Since the mitt does not close, it forces the player to use two hands to field and "alligator" a ground ball.

These images give you a feel for how to run such a drill:



In the lower left corner, the fielder starts at the ready position. He is on the infield dirt, feet wide knees bent. He is watching the coach and his glove and throwing hand are in front

of his body. Think of this as the fielder's starting position in the field. It is how he should look just prior to the pitcher going into his wind-up.

The player then goes into a deeper crouch and "creeps" forward a few steps as the coach prepares to roll the ball. (This is shown in the lower right corner.) This small movement gets the player's momentum going forward and get him on the balls of his feet. He is ready to move!

Step 3 of the sequence is shown in the upper left. Note that the ball is being caught in front of the body. Knees are bent; head is down. The ball is being "alligatored" by keeping the pancake mitt underneath the ball and the throwing hand on top.

The upper right shot completes the sequence. The fielder comes up, turns his body, positions his feet properly and is ready to throw the ball back to the coach.

(Note: The drill described above works perfectly well with a regular mitt, too. All of the basics of fielding the ball are the same.)

A fun thing to do is to practice with water balloons. Toss a kid a water balloon and tell him to catch it without smacking his hands together and breaking it. Kids love this, although on a hot day the good ones might become angry and say, "I want to get wet." After a while, change the game to say, "Throw the water balloon so that it is no longer a toss but simulates a line drive. See how well it can be caught." This starts a good water balloon fight and promotes team happiness, particularly during the dog days of summer.

Once kids master easy ground balls rolled to them, try a few where you bounce them the ball on one short hop. Then start hitting numerous grounders on the real infield. Rolling balls in the grass is one thing, but fielding a batted ball that bounces first on grass and then on dirt is quite another. Hitting grounders to players forces them to improve getting in front of the ball. In practice, you'll see a lot of kids sort of stop the ball and bobble it before

actually grabbing it. Do not let this go. Remind kids they have four seconds to get the ball to first base.

Easy grounders have to be fielded perfectly. The litany with all sports – perfect practice makes perfect – really applies. If you let them get away with sloppy fielding in practice, it will not get any better in the game. You can certainly be encouraging – you can say, “Nice try,” or “You are learning,” – but we have seen some parents and coaches say endearing things like “GREAT JOB!” on a bobbled or halfway stopped ball. This is not good. It generates a terrible habit of lazily ambling over to where the ball will come, kind of bending over and stabbing at the ball with a glove, thus stopping the ball. We do not want to stop it. We want to field it. This means gliding to the ball, landing the airplane, applying the ol’ alligator and making the throw.

It is also absolutely critical that players learn to attack a ground ball. This is especially true at the introductory level of play where balls are not usually hit very hard. If a fielder sits back and waits for the ball to come to them, the runner will be safe and a potential out is lost. (Remember, your fielding mantra as a coach is to “collect outs”. If your young players like “Sesame Street”, tell them you want them to be “Out Monsters”, like “Cookie Monster”).

Here is a drill that focuses on having players attack ground balls.



The player starts in the upper left panel, standing at the edge of the outfield grass. The coach is standing on the infield grass, about 20-25 feet away. The player takes the ready position, then charges toward the coach, who has rolled a ball in front of him. (The ball should be rolled softly enough that the player needs to charge about 10-15 feet to field the ball.) This is shown in the upper right and lower left panels.

Note that, even when the player is charging the ground ball, he is still fielding the same way: Ball in front of the body and between the legs, head down, knees bent and back bent parallel to the ground. And, of course, the ball is being “alligator-ed”.

The player then comes up smoothly and begins the throwing process to the proper base. This is shown in the lower right panel.

If a player has ongoing problems, you can encourage him to take a tennis ball to a practice tennis court and throw the ball against the wall, fielding it as it hops around. He can do this with bare hands. In fact, drills with bare hands aren’t bad with baseballs, either, as they show the kids what the alligator will do for them and how it actually works.

Fly Balls

We will never forget a playoff game in which a long, high, fly was hit to left. It was a close game and we had one of our best players in left. He glided over and caught the ball as if he had been doing this all his life. It deflated our opponents and we could overhear our parents saying, “We were lucky that kid was in left field.”

It wasn't all luck. We knew that the opponents' best hitters were coming up. Our pitchers weren't blowing balls by them and before that inning we shifted our good outfielder over to left. We pleasantly remember it as it was one of those special times when as coaches we felt we were great chess grandmasters who knew exactly where to put all the pieces. Seriously, though, as much as we would like to believe that it was our great coaching move, the point is not that we put the right guy in the outfield; the point is that merely making the play and catching the routine fly can demoralize the opponents. So, work on fly balls.

The mechanics for catching fly balls are easy to teach. Start with the athletic position with feet slightly more than shoulder width apart. As the ball descends, **move the feet** to position the nose under the ball, raise the glove in front of the face so that the palm faces outward and then, catch the ball.

As the ball comes into the glove, **cover it** with the throwing hand.

Simple enough? Well, the hard part is not actually catching the thing; the hard part is *knowing where the ball would land and moving one's body to that point.*

We are convinced that this is not a natural skill – it is one that good players learn over time.

Start by tossing them a ball from a few feet away. In this manner you can work on mechanics such as putting the nose under the ball and covering the ball with two hands. Once that's done, you can have them play "wide receiver," "passing" them a ball so they can work on tracking the ball.

Here is a quick summary of how "wide receiver" works:



Have the players line up in a straight line in the outfield. Have a cone positioned about 30 feet away from the starting point. Again, for this drill, you can use a tennis ball for younger kids and a baseball for older ones.

When you say "go", have the player run toward the cone (shown in the upper left corner). When they reach the cone, they should break either to the left or right and turn back to face the coach who is tossing a fly ball in their direction (lower right panel). Success comes when they catch the ball (shown in the lower right panel), just like a wide receiver catches as pass from the quarterback.

These are good drills, but sadly, this doesn't equate to tracking balls hit off a bat.

We have had tons of great "wide receivers" drop everything hit off a bat. So you have to bite the bullet, have them stand in the outfield, and hit them long lazy flies. A tennis racquet hitting tennis balls high in the air is not a bad substitute. It is hard to generate a lot of reps of this drill, as each fly takes a lot of time to reach the outfield and then it has to come back in. Furthermore, while the players are still judging balls poorly, they will be chasing many balls that they miss. This explains why it's often the 11-12 year olds who finally, over time, have gotten enough reps so that they can make the catches.

Once our team hits mid-season (even at the introductory level), we try to spend good time on fly balls and the kids love it. Few things are more fun than hitting some fly balls at the end of practice as dusk settles in. Station an assistant at shortstop to cut off throws from the outfield and just hit fly ball after fly ball. We usually play a game where a catch is equal to one point and a stopped grounder (in case we don't hit a fly ball, which does happen) is good for half a point. Just hit them a bunch of balls until someone gets to ten.

Once the players get the hang of catching balls hit in front of them, you can work on balls behind them. We usually don't get this far because we are happy if they make the easy ones. But for completeness, the right way for a player to catch a ball behind him is not to backpedal. Instead, he should take one short drop step back and pivot. Then, the player should, if possible, drift back with his body half turned away from home plate.

Throwing to the Correct Base

Throwing to the correct base is easy if the player has already figured out where to throw the ball *prior* to the batter hitting it. On the other hand, throwing to the right base is almost impossible if the player tries to figure it out in the four seconds he has to field and make

the play. We will now look at a few simple fielding situations, discuss how to practice them, and see what you can tell your team to better prepare them.

Runner on First

This is the easiest defensive situation for Little League. With few exceptions, if a ground ball goes to any infielder, he just has to flip it to second base. If it is a grounder to short or to third, the second baseman covers second. For a grounder to second, the shortstop covers second.

We work on this situation a lot at all levels of youth baseball. As we have noted, we are “out collectors” and we think having a runner at first gives us a good chance of collecting outs.

An easy drill is to hit (or roll) balls to the second baseman or shortstop and have the other person cover second base. The pictures below illustrate the situation. The coach rolls a ball to the second baseman and the shortstop stands on second base to receive the flip. Once that is done, the person playing shortstop slides over to play second base and works on flipping the ball to the next player in line (who has now become the shortstop).



There are several variations of this drill. For example, you can start with both the shortstop and the second baseman in their normal fielding positions. Hit (or roll) the ball to one of

them and have the other one cover the base. You can vary the speeds and directions of the ground balls and make the throws shorter or longer. The possibilities are endless.

We always tell the players to think about what to do when they get the ball BEFORE the pitch, not when the ball is coming. There is nothing special about this mantra. We remember being told the same thing when we were playing little league some 40-50 years ago.

To work on this play is easy. Put a runner on first, give him a helmet and then hit ground balls. The second baseman will forget to cover second. The loudest one of us screamed this past season was at a second baseman in the very first practice of the year who didn't even move on the grounder to short. We wanted him and the whole team to know they have to be awake all the time. No one forgot to cover second the whole rest of the season. Nip mental mistakes in the bud. Scream "WAKE UP!" whenever a fielder forgets to cover. Once the runner gets to second, send him back to first. Do this over and over until everyone covers promptly. If you have extra time you can work on throwing the ground ball back to the mound and having the pitcher wheel and fire to the shortstop covering second. In baseball textbooks, the fielder who covers second on this play should be the one guy who is positioned to the *opposite field* of the hitter. (For a right-handed hitter, this is the right side of the field. For a left-handed hitter, this is the left side of the field. It is called opposite, because the batter is hitting it to the field opposite where you would expect him to "pull" hit it.) Therefore, for a lefty who is likely to pull to second, the shortstop is positioned to the opposite field and should take the throw.

In youth baseball, especially at the lower levels, spare yourself the trouble. Just tell the shortstop that is his job to cover second on all balls hit back to the mound, regardless of who is batting. Work this play a lot because it's one of the easiest. Have the fielders set their feet and throw the ball right to the chest, or for extra credit, the glove hand, of the

target at second. If the ball is hit close to the base, have them flip it underhanded right to the chest.

No runners

This play is tougher overall than the runner on first so do this one after your team has mastered the runner at first. Long throws from third or shortstop are required. Only the second baseman has life easier, as it is only a short throw to first.

Your first baseman has a tougher job to do. He has to place his rear foot on the ground so that it touches the corner of the base. He should position himself so that when the ball is thrown, he can stretch toward the ball. He cannot step on the bag, or drift to the bag after the catch, or there will be a huge collision at first. I have heard that more than 40 percent of Little League injuries occur at first base. It makes sense when you think about it – the kid is standing on the bag, while another kid is running full tilt toward him. The first kid doesn't move, so the runner slams into him.

If you have a left-handed infielder, put him at first, as it is desirable to have his glove hand inside the field of play instead of near foul territory. In professional baseball, there are no left handed infielders (other than first basemen), as they would have to shift their whole body before the throw, and throw with their backs to home plate, but in Little League it's okay. You can put a lefty at short, second, or third and you'll still get plenty of people out at first.

The throw from third to first requires a long throw, so work on this only after fielders have shown they can make easy throws. For the longer throws, have fielders do a little *crow hop*.

To do a crow hop, a player skips his back foot towards the front foot to build momentum; when his back foot lands he strides toward the target and throws.

Throwing to Third

Throwing to third is a tough youth baseball play. Generally, a miss here means the other team gets a run. With runners at first and second and two outs we would rather see the shortstop throw to second than to third, which seems like an easier play. This is probably because our teams work the play at second much more than the play at third. Also given that you only have so many kids who can reliably catch on a team, it's often the case that you will have someone not so great at catching a ball at third base. Furthermore, on a grounder hit back to the mound with first and second occupied, we would rather have the pitcher simply throw to first and get the out.

In youth baseball, the secret is to get outs. Emphasize over and over again to your players to “collect outs”. Getting the lead runner is great, but if there is any risk of not getting the out, don't go there. Always applaud outs. Again, the players should know where to throw **before** the ball is hit.

Sometimes, in this situation during a game, some parents yell, “Third!” others yell, “Second!” while the coach yells, “First!” The kid then holds the ball in a state of utter confusion and does nothing. We hate it when this happens. We always talk to the youngster between innings and say, “Please, please throw the ball somewhere. Holding it guarantees that we won't get anyone out.” Typically, they just freeze because they haven't thought about where to throw **before they get the ball**.

Weak Grounder back to the Mound

This happens a lot in Little League, so be prepared. Work on this with your pitchers so that they are in a fielding position when they finish their throw. They should come off the mound for a weakly hit ball and bare-hand it. They do not pick it up with the glove; they just pick it up off the ground where it is resting or slowly rolling to a halt. To pick up the ball teach them to **push down** on the ball instead of just picking it up. Pushing down makes it harder for players to drop the ball. The key is to make sure that they don't rush the throw to first.

Tell players to set their feet and calmly throw to first. What we don't want is an off-balance throw.

Weak Grounder over to First

In this situation you'll typically see the pitcher and first baseman go after the ball, while the second baseman freezes. So the pitcher or first baseperson gets the ball and no one is at first. The result is much like a perfect drag bunt. Work on having your second baseman run over and cover first.

Play at Home Plate

This situation is for the final third of the season, but it's nice when you get it all working.

With the bases loaded, the catcher functions like a first baseman. Tell him to get his mask off quickly so he can see the ball, and then be a first baseman as the ball comes in from the field. With the bases loaded, the catcher should be alert to the possibility of a play at the plate **before the ball is hit**.

Defending a Wild Pitch

Wild pitches are a common occurrence in Little League. The only situation about which you have to worry involves a runner on third with the pitcher throwing a wild one. If the runner is on first or second, forget it and let them have the base. If the runner is on third, you can't let the opponents have a run on a wild pitch. Therefore, the catcher needs to quickly remove his facemask and go get the ball. The pitcher needs to race home to cover the plate. The distance from the pitcher's mound to home plate is forty-six feet. The distance from third base to home plate is sixty feet. The base runner should never, ever win this race. (However, in real game situations, when the pitcher gets a slow start, the runner beats the pitcher to the plate. Don't allow your pitcher to hesitate. We always telling our pitchers, "You've got a fifteen foot head start – you should never lose this race.")

You want the pitcher to get home before the runner. This way he can set his feet and await the throw. The catcher should throw to a spot where the pitcher will be. He cannot wait for the pitcher to get there. We work on this in practice repeatedly. We set up a pitcher and a catcher, we put a runner on third, and we throw wild pitch after wild pitch.

The hardest thing for the kids to grasp seems to be where to stand. The pitcher cannot stand on home plate as this allows the runner to slide in safely. The pitcher needs to stand a couple of feet up the line toward third with his feet off of the baseline. When the throw comes, he should place the tag low so the runner cannot slide under it.

Nothing is better than having the opposing team run on a wild pitch in the first inning and get nailed at home. They'll stop running the rest of the game. Dedicate a station to this at each practice until you are confident that teams are not having an easy time running on you.

To teach this, walk through it in slow motion step-by-step with both the pitcher and the catcher. Show them where they need to be, how you want the pitcher to apply the tag, and where you want the pitcher's feet to be. After a few repetitions they'll get it and when it is done successfully in a game, it is great for team morale.

Baseball is all morale. You'll never see a team come from behind when its morale is poor.

Defending a Steal

Defending steals is very hard for Little Leaguers. Your catcher must be able to make the long throw to second or third base. In Little League, just have the shortstop always take the throw to second. The second baseman should be backing up the throw (he should be on the edge of the outfield grass so that he does not collide or impede the shortstop) and the center fielder should be about 10-20 feet behind the second baseman as an additional backup. Drill the shortstop, second baseman, and the center fielder until they all move in unison when the runner is stealing second. When the runner steals third, the throw comes to the third baseman, the shortstop is the first backup and the left fielder is the second backup.

The catcher has to get rid of the ball quickly. He can't wait for the shortstop to be at the bag. He's got to fire down to the bag and hope the fielder will get there. Nothing is worse than watching your catcher make a beautiful throw to the bag while the shortstop just stands in position, forgetting that he should have moved toward the ball.

Covering steals at third is the same story, but requires a shorter throw. The key here is that the left fielder has to come in to back up the play. It is a major annoyance to a coach to see a play developing at third—which the left fielder failed to notice. While the left fielder is dreaming, we leave the dugout and walk over to the kid, who is swatting flies, and say, "You know big fellow, there was a **play at third just now!**" This one is hard to practice.

Generally, you have an outfield station and an infield station performing different drills at the same time. Nevertheless, you can work with outfielders on backing up plays in general such that this play eventually becomes routine.

Hitting cut-offs

Outfielders who field any ball need to get in the habit of quickly getting it back to the infield. The infielder he throws it to is called the **cut-off man**. This is the second baseman for balls hit deep to right field and the shortstop for balls hit deep to left. The cut-off man must run out to short right or left field to await the relay from the respective outfielder. Most coaching books we have read present countless varieties of drills for cutoffs, but here we emphasize the fundamentals. If your team gets them right, it will cover most situations and you will be happy with their performance.

The outfielders should throw to the glove side of the cut-off player so he can catch it and relay the ball into the infield. The catcher should be screaming where the play is to be, as in, **“Two! Two! Two!”** or **“Three! Three! Three!”** to indicate that the ball should be thrown to second or third base, respectively.

You must spend time with your catchers to enable them to make the right decision in game situations. Teach the catcher that if a runner is on first, and the other team sends the runner to third, a throw to third will automatically put the batter on second. If the play at third is unsuccessful, his team will be looking at runners at second and third, and they will not be able to make the force at second anymore. Thus, the catcher must be careful about sending the cut-off guy to go blasting it down to third.

Summary

We have covered the basics of fielding and we've presented some drills to focus on improving defense for both ground balls and fly balls. We also covered almost all fielding situation that arise during games. While these may seem like too many cases to have to worry about, we suggest that, as a new coach, you write these down and work on them throughout the season. You can focus on specific plays that come more frequently in your league or plays that have been difficult for your team. Once your guys master one of these, move on, as the goal of practice is to spend time improving your weaknesses.

Now that we've devoted a few chapters toward defense, it is time to move on to offense. Chapter 8 tells you what you need to know about teaching the mechanics of hitting.

CHAPTER

08

How to Teach Hitting



Chapter 8: How to Teach Hitting

With two outs in the bottom of the sixth, your last batter in your batting order steps up to the plate. You are down 14-13 and the bases are loaded. The batter timidly gazes at the pitcher. You sigh. You ask the baseball gods, “Why, oh why must it be my last batter?” Then you start to pray.

You pray for a wild pitch, for a walk, for anything but a strike. Then you think about all the time you spent with this kid trying to make him into a hitter. The book on him is that sometimes he walks, sometimes he strikes out and very, very rarely, on very special, goose-bump inspiring occasions, he smashes a shot to center to drive in the run.

So what happens? He strikes out, bursts into tears, and throws his helmet on the ground in frustrated disgust.

This will happen to you no matter which coaching books you read, but your goal is to reduce its frequency. The good news is that when players have learned to hit, it is like riding a bike: they keep hitting. As their confidence grows, they hit even better. The trick is getting to that launching point. We never forget the kids who did not hit all season but toward the end smashed deep drives. The big smiles on their faces after a big hit are priceless.

Along with the obvious benefits, there is a very important, yet subtle, reason to work on hitting: players who can hit seldom quit the game! We have yet to see a player who hits a healthy .450 not play the next year. Hitting is fun – it breeds confidence. Few things are as much fun as smashing a ball deep into the outfield. There is only one big problem: **hitting a baseball is among the most difficult things to do in sports.**

The scenario is ridiculous. Think about it: A guy stands 46 feet away with a spherical rock. He throws it as hard as he can toward a batter who wields a ROUNDED stick. The

batter's object is to clobber that hard sphere with the rounded stick. (Leave it to Americans to make our version of cricket hard. We have watched cricket. The stick is FLAT. If a cricketer hits the ball hard anywhere on the bat, it is going to go somewhere. Nope, here we play baseball with a nicely ROUNDED stick so that only if the ball is struck at a miniscule, so-called SWEET SPOT can it be hit properly.)

As if the improbability of hitting a small, round, flying object with a small, slender, cylindrical object doesn't make it difficult enough, one of the hardest aspects of teaching hitting is that you, as coach, rarely get to be the first to show a kid how to do it. You are following in the footsteps of teachers of all sorts of horrific habits: parents, peers, and other coaches. We wish we had a nickel for every parent who, after watching us teach his kid, says, "Well, I teach him a different way." A coach must be the consummate diplomat. We usually say, "That's fine! There are lots of ways to hit the ball."

We do not try to retrain kids who already can hit. We suggest that you adopt this practice. Throw a kid a few pitches. If he smacks them around the ballpark, pat him on the head and leave him alone. A few kids are born to hit and you do not want to be the guy who messes them up. You will have plenty of time to work on kids who do not hit.

You have to be diplomatic when you deal with parents in order to gain their confidence. When parents tell us of their "different way," we have them show it to us and then we usually suggest a few minor changes. For the most part, they are happy. We support our method by stating that the hitting books and the coaching clinics say the same things so they know that it is not just our opinion. What more could we possibly know than any parent? It usually takes two or three practices after which parents can see a little improvement that they finally develop enough confidence in us to say, "Hey Johnny, LISTEN TO THE COACH!"

Hitting is sometimes more of an art than a science. There are so many different ways to hit a ball that the books generally avoid specifics. No one would dare say, for example,

“start with feet eighteen inches apart,” because there are almost as many different stances as there are successful hitters.

Watch a professional game on TV and you will see that every player has a different stance. Worse, players change stances as a game progresses – or sometimes over the course of the season. Mechanics such as stance are important, but the most important key here is building confidence and hand-eye coordination. A batter has to see the ball and coordinate his hands to move the bat toward it.

Think of hitting as being like catching with a bat. We even had a few players this year stand at the plate with a glove, assume the batting stance and “catch” our pitches with their gloves while taking a swing, as if the glove were a bat. It was fascinating. The guys who could hit could do it, while the ones who could not hit failed.

When one of us started coaching, he got Ted Williams’ book called *The Science of Hitting*. He makes a few great points on bat speed and hitting good pitches, but this book is probably not the best place to start. For example, Williams suggests that batters vary their stride to the ball. If it is an inside pitch, the batter takes a short stride, whereas if it is an outside pitch he takes a long stride. Having watched Little Leaguers on videotape, we can assure you that NOT ONE OF THEM DOES THIS. Ted probably did it and a few Major Leaguers can do it, but it is well beyond what you can expect from a Little League player. We heard a discussion of this notion as it affects Little Leaguers at one coaching clinic where they talked about the location of the pitch driving the contact point (the point where bat hits ball) but the coaching gurus there were adamant nevertheless that the stride should not change. Aside from the stride, what ended our desire to adopt Williams’ book as a basis for teaching Little Leaguers batting occurred while watching a Major League All-Star Game a couple of years ago. The broadcast included a clip of Ted talking to the big hitters of the day, asking them if they could “smell the burn.” The announcers explained that he was talking about smelling the burning wood, which occurred when he

hit a ball. Apparently, a couple of the big hitters recalled that occasionally they have possibly smelled something. Is he NUTS? You gotta be KIDDING??? The act of hitting a ball is supposed to generate enough heat that someone can smell something burning? We were stunned. We realized that there was no further point in studying Ted Williams' approach to hitting, for he was capable of doing things that no one else can do. It was almost like Ted was from another world. Perhaps he was.

Since we are both teachers, we can tell you that one of the most difficult challenges in teaching is understanding the capabilities of the student and arriving at an appropriate level of instruction that will get through to him or her. In Williams' case, it appears that he thought that everybody was capable of hitting .406 in the Major Leagues, as he did in 1941, and he took a lot for granted. Thus, most of his finer points went over his intended audience's heads. Ted strikes me as the classic case of a guy who knew how to do a complicated baseball thing but had no idea how to teach it. Thus, we challenge you to develop your own techniques for teaching hitting, using ideas that your coaching brain and common sense tell you will work. We will try to point you in the right direction, clueing you in to the processes that work for us and the pitfalls of doing things "by the book."

When we read other books, we see many contradictions. Feet should be wide. Stance should be closed. Stance should be open. The divergence is distressing, leaving us in a quandary as to just what to teach. Accordingly, we will go over the core mechanics, but we think it is just as important to know how to diagnose a flaw in a hitter's swing and to suggest corrective drills. Some of these flaws have developed over many years so it may take a whole season or more to correct them. The key is to be patient and to encourage your players whenever you see any improvement. Therefore, after lots of practice trying to teach hitters, what follows is our advice on teaching the mechanics. Once we finish with that, we will talk a little about diagnoses of common problems and prescribe drills that often help correct them.

When we first started coaching, all the batting instruction we ever did was fixing obvious flaws in kids' stances (e.g.; feet too close together, knees not bent) and then telling them to watch the ball, swing level and "squish the bug" (turn their back foot when they swing). Many kids improved because of the repetition. After gaining a lot more teaching experience, we now have an arsenal of experiments to run if a player is not improving and some drills to fix more subtle flaws. It is one thing to say SWING LEVEL, but it is quite another to give a drill to a player that shows him that his swing is not level and to set him up so repetitions ingrain level swinging into his muscle memory. With our collective experience, we are now more confident in trying things out if a player is not hitting. We have learned how to talk to players more about what feels comfortable to them and we try to adjust our advice to keep them in a position that feels comfortable. It is not always possible, but it is often worth a try.

First, we will work on the stance. Then we will cover the swing. A nice stance looks balanced, feet are wide, knees are bent, the bat is erect, the grip on the bat is light and the players eyes are focused on the pitcher.

When the ball comes, the swing is a short, violent motion generating bat speed. The swing starts with a short, soft stride toward the pitcher and a quick, powerful turn of the back foot and rotation of the hips that launches the weight shift from back to front, causing the hands to start the swing. The hands stay close to the body throughout the swing to generate a compact, fast swing. At contact point, the hitter's eyes are locked on the ball as it hits the bat. After contact, the bat never stops and it continues its motion into a gradual deceleration or follow-through.

Stance

The key to the stance is balance and comfort for the hitter. It starts with wide feet to establish a strong foundation and works its way up to a light grip. All the while, the player's

eyes remain focused on the pitcher. We now introduce drills to develop players' skills in taking a proper stance at the plate.

Wide Feet

Here is a good way to show your players how to gauge the proper, wide stance. Put the bat on the ground and have the players stand so their feet are as wide as the bat. (We got this from a coaching video.) This creates a stance that sometimes is too wide for some batters, but it beats the more serious problem of hitters setting their feet too close together. If their feet look too wide such they are going to be off-balance, tell them their feet can be “about” as wide as the bat.

Players should perform this drill a few times. Put the bat down on the ground, clap your hands and say, “FEET WIDE!” and then have them do it. Then reset and try it again. When they do this, do it so they end up so that each foot is just as close to the plate as the other foot. If the lead foot is closer to the plate, we refer to the stance as “closed”; if the lead foot is further from the plate, the stance is “open.” We like to start in a balanced stance, which is neither open or closed, in which both feet are positioned equally close to the plate. As you work with players, you can experiment with them and see if a slightly open or closed stance works better for them. A slightly open stance helps some players to see the ball leave the pitcher's hand more clearly, whereas a slightly closed stance can sometimes help players who stride toward third base with their lead foot instead of toward the pitcher.

Think of “wide feet” as the base of a pyramid – if feet are not wide, the rest of the batting stance will topple. You must have a solid foundation.

Watch the big league hitters: some who position their feet about shoulder width apart take a short stride to hit the ball, (about six inches), while others who position their feet very

wide (about six inches greater than shoulder width apart) take a very small stride (about an inch).

The players' feet have to be a minimum of a little more than shoulder width apart but it is not a disaster if they are wider. When they get too narrow, however, everything sort of goes down the drain. A pyramid is a stable structure because of its wide base. An inverted pyramid, with a narrow base and a wide top, easily topples. You can show this to a player by having him put his feet together and then giving him a light push. Then, have him spread his feet to shoulder width and give him another push. When his feet are together, he will take a couple steps backward when you push him. When his feet are apart, he will not move.

Once you have sufficiently drilled your players to keep their feet wide, the next step is crucial.

Bend or Flex Knees

Wide feet are useless if knees are either locked or overly bent. What you are after is a middle ground between these two extremes, where the knees are slightly flexed. Demonstrate the extremes by having players stand up and lock their knees, then have them crouch like a catcher with knees completely flexed. From this point, explain to them the need to slightly bend their knees so they are in an athletic stance. If done correctly, the knee bend should stabilize them so if you give them a light push, they will not move.

Drill this by putting the team in a line and saying "FEET WIDE!" and clap your hands. Check the kids' feet. Next, yell, "BEND KNEES!" and clap. It is one thing for a player to stand with wide feet right after you have positioned him. It is quite another for him to build enough muscle memory so that he automatically does it when he is at the plate. Repetition is the key. To check on whether the players have acquired muscle memory,

have them back away from an imaginary plate (a paper plate works fine) and then have them approach the plate as if they were really batting. They should automatically get into a wide stance with knees lightly bent.

Check Distance

Now, that our batter is aware of **how** he should be standing, he needs to determine **where** he should be standing. Put a home plate in front of the batter. The time-honored tradition for establishing proper distance from the plate is for the batter to lean over with his weak hand extended (left hand if he is right-handed), touching the outside corner of the plate with his bat. This ensures that the batter has “plate coverage,” which means that his swung bat can reach a ball over any part of the plate. Kids always find a way to make this hard. They stretch really far to get there and tell themselves that they are nicely lined up when they really are not. Tell them not to stretch, just to reach out comfortably.

The idea is that the bat should be able to reach the outside corner of the plate when he swings. You want your player to set up, if anything, a little too close to the plate, because in Little League, pitches typically arrive over the middle to outside part of the plate. The usual tendency of Little League batters is to stand relatively far from the plate because they do not want to be hit. Couple this with Little League pitchers’ desires to avoid hitting batters by not throwing inside, and you get a ton of pitches on the outside corner where the batter is a mile from the ball. The batter watches the pitch and thinks, “WOW! IT’S WAY OUTSIDE!” when actually, the pitch is fine. The batter was merely too far away. Worse, umpires do not like to be in the heat all day, so they are inclined to give Little League pitchers a slightly broader strike zone. So now, it is a couple inches off the outside corner and there you have it – STRIKE THREE! – In addition, of course, your player comes back to the dugout with a pained expression as if there is no justice in the world.

You can avoid having to deal with this pain and sorrow if you teach your players to make certain that they are ABLE TO EASILY REACH THE OUTSIDE CORNER of the plate. As far as we are concerned, another inch or two beyond the outside corner would not hurt a thing.

Checking distance primarily refers to making sure that the batter has adequate plate coverage so that he can reach balls thrown over the outside corner. This drives his “horizontal” adjustment: how close or far away from the plate to stand. He can also make a “vertical” adjustment: how close or far away from the **pitcher** to stand.

As a rule of thumb, tell batters to place their back foot so that their toes point directly to the part of home plate farthest from the pitcher. During a game, you might want to adjust this. For a very fast pitcher you can tell batters to stand closer to the catcher, whereas for a slow pitcher you can tell them to move toward the pitcher. Standing back gives them additional time to see the ball and standing closer can help batters time a slow pitch. However, we would shy away from these adjustments unless a batter is very experienced, because any change during a game is apt to reduce the batter’s comfort level.

Therefore, we now have three components for our batting drill. At this point, it goes: FEET WIDE, KNEES BENT, and CHECK DISTANCE.

Slightly Cock Hips

Cocking the hips is an important step in creating the potential for generating power in the swing. During the swing, the body uncoils like a spring and launches the bat toward the ball. Uncoiling is done through the hip turn, which must occur **during** the swing. You will frequently encounter the problem that some players want to turn their hips before they

swing. Turning the hips creates power. If the player turns his hips before swinging, swinging only with his arms, he has no remaining power to hit the ball.

To illustrate this, imagine that you are going to punch someone in the face. If you turn your hips first, and then punch, you are punching only with your arms. If you synchronize the hip turn with the punch, you will have your entire body behind the punch. You can try this. Sit down, so your hips cannot turn, and punch. You will note that the punch is very weak. Now, stand up and turn your hips into the punch. You should feel a substantial difference.

So, to encourage proper hip turning, we have the following drill:

Put a home plate in front of the player. Tell him that his knees are “eyeballs.” Tell him his knees need to “look” at the center of the plate. This forces him to turn his toes inward on each foot **and** cock his hips. For the back foot, this is not a big deal – the goal is to keep toes of the back foot pointing directly at home plate instead of at the catcher. The front foot needs to be pointed toward the plate because it keeps the front hip from turning prematurely.

Despite running this drill and achieving excellent results on the practice field, keep a watchful eye on your hitters’ feet during real games. Many of them revert to bad habits in the heat of battle. You will inevitably find several who turn that front foot (sometimes very slightly) toward the pitcher before they even start to swing. This is a disaster in the making because their hips have turned before the ball has been pitched. By doing this they eliminate the entire spring – and all the associated power – from the swing even **before the pitcher has released the ball.**

This observation gives you something concrete to work on in practice. Tell the kid to turn his front foot slightly toward the center of the plate so that the knee “eyeballs” face home and – voila! – you have conquered the disastrous front-hip-turning problem.

The drill litany is now: FEET WIDE, BEND KNEES, CHECK DISTANCE, and FIX EYEBALLS.

Hold Bat with Fingers, Not Palm

First, we start with the grip. Hand placement is instinctive for most kids, but you'll always have a few who act like they are holding a shovel or a hockey stick. So, here are the fundamentals. If a player is a right-handed batter, let's call the right hand the "strong" hand. His "weak" hand will then be his left hand. (Reverse this for left-handed batters.) Have players pick up the bat and hold it upright with their hands positioned all the way down the handle, next to the knob. The weak hand should grip the bat immediately above the knob, while the strong hand should be above the weak hand on the bat handle, with no gap between the hands. New players should always "choke up" or move their hands an inch or two away from the knob unless the bat is really short for them. This gives players more control over the bat.

A mistake players often make is holding the bat deep in the palm of the hand close to their wrist. If you see a player do this, have him put the bat down and pick it up again, but this time hold the bat in the front part of the palm close to his fingers. If the bat is mired deeply in the palm, bat speed will decrease. Therefore, make sure he has a light grip. How do we define *light*? Examples are useful to illustrate this point. Tell your players to pretend they are holding a bird. Alternatively, tell them that a three year old should be able to take the bat from them.

Line Up Knuckles

Tell your players to pretend that they are knocking on a door so they can observe which knuckles do the knocking. Have them pick up and grip a bat. Show them that with proper hand position, you can draw a single, straight line through all the doorknocker knuckles in

both hands. Some kids have the tendency to wrap their upper (strong) hand further around the bat so that the doorknocker knuckles of the two hands are NOT positioned in a straight line. This causes them to lock their wrists in place, which makes it hard for them to turn their wrists when they swing, once again limiting bat speed and power. Work with them until they always line up their knuckles when they pick up a bat. A quick way to help a player remember to check knuckle position is to have him extend the index finger of each hand once he is holding the bat. Instead of having to check ten knuckles he merely looks at his two fingers. If he can draw a straight line parallel to the bat by connecting the tips of his two index fingers, his hands are positioned correctly.

Bring Bat Into Position

After the batter has the correct grip on the bat, it is time to position the bat to a good point from which to launch the swing.

First, the batter sets his feet as we previously discussed. He brings the bat up from the ground as if he is about to swing an axe. Next, he raises the bat to head level such that his strong hand is able to “tickle his ear.” The bat must not be pointed toward the sky (completely vertical) or flat across the player’s rear shoulder (completely horizontal). We recommend that players start by placing the bat on the rear shoulder and then simply lift it an inch or two off their shoulder.

The first step in being able to hit is to look like a hitter. If the batter’s feet are wide, his knees are bent, his hands are close to the ears, his “knee eyeballs” point to the center of home plate, his eyes are locked on the pitcher, his grip is light and his knuckles are lined up, he looks like a hitter.

At this point, we have the proper stance and our guys are looking like hitters. The important static elements of hitting are in place. We are now ready to discuss the dynamic element: the swing itself.

Swing

The swing has several components: the player must locate the ball, take a short, soft stride, transfer weight by turning the back foot, hit the ball and follow through. Timing is crucial. The player has to time the stride so that as the ball is coming, momentum begins to build as the swing starts towards the pitcher and the ball at the right time. If he strides too soon, the player is off-balance when he starts to swing. As the stride foot lands on the ball of the foot, the swing begins. Bat speed is generated when the player turns his back foot and lifts his back heel as if he is squishing a bug. By turning the back foot, the batter's hips turn and he is now applying a LOT of force to the swing. As his hips turn, his hands move toward the pitcher, leading the swing. His upper body must be relaxed so his hands and arms can move freely and generate bat speed. Bat speed is crucial. A huge bat is impressive, but if it is not moving very fast, the ball is not going to go very far. We covered bat selection in Chapter 2. If the bat is the right size and weight for the player, it will be more probable that his swing generates effective bat speed.

A player first pulls his bat with his weak hand toward the pitcher. Players who throw with one hand and bat with the other are often excellent hitters as their weak hand is stronger than most. This generates a more compact and powerful swing as the hitter is not reaching far from his body. Many players naturally drop their shoulders and swing up at the ball in a big arc or they chop down at the ball as if they were using a tomahawk. The primary reason for a level swing is that it increases the chance of hitting the ball. If the swing is level, the bat is on a path to meet the ball as it is thrown in a straight line.²

At the contact point, the player's arms are not yet fully extended. The remainder of the swing is a push as the arms extend, the wrists turn and the swing finishes with a nice follow-through.

¹ We assume that the pitcher does not lob the ball. While there is always some arc, it is slight enough to consider the trajectory a straight line

So to summarize, the key steps are:

- Locate the Ball
- Stride
- Turn the Back Foot
- Hit the Ball
- Follow Through

The next few sections discuss each component of the swing.

Locate Ball

This is the easy part. The third base coach screams, “Buddy, WATCH THE BALL AND HIT IT!” – as if the kid is not watching the ball.

Batters have to keep both eyes on the ball at all times. Their head should be turned toward the pitcher so that both eyes are locked on the ball and they must watch the ball come off the fingers of the pitcher’s hand. Once the ball is released, their eyes need to follow the ball all the way to contact point – the point at which the bat hits the ball.

Players often do not watch the ball because they are afraid of it. Instead of watching it, the fearful player starts to duck away from the ball even before it is halfway to him. Hitters must overcome “ball fear” (see Chapter 6).

Another error is watching the ball with only one eye — the eye closest to the pitcher. Batters have to watch the ball with both eyes or they will lack the depth perception needed to hit.

Some batters tend to turn away from the pitcher in an attempt to “cock” their whole body immediately before they swing. These batters have to be told to rotate their body so that both eyes can see the release point of the pitched ball.

Stride

As the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand, the batter’s front foot moves toward the pitcher in a soft stride. Some batters take long strides, while others take almost no stride. The length of the stride is an adjustment you can make based on the individual hitter and what works best for him.

Regardless of stride length, the front foot should land softly on the ball of the foot, as if it is landing on ice. It should be a glide, a couple inches above the ground. You will see major league ballplayers picking up their front foot and making what looks to be a huge stride. If you watch it frame-by-frame, you see that their front foot often comes down precisely where it started. These guys are picking their foot up high and putting it down to help with their timing.

For youth baseball players, a huge stride, which involves lifting the stride leg high off the ground, is one more complication they do not need. They are more likely to lose balance when one foot is in the air. Remember that big leaguers have very strong legs and can easily balance themselves with one foot in the air.

The stride does not have to be a big step. During the stride, the player’s weight does not shift. Watch out for players whose weight comes down on the stride leg. This technique was popular in the early twentieth century, but it is something you need to avoid. It is a good way to get hard ground balls because the swing naturally ends up in a downward arc. Nowadays no hitting coach recommends shifting weight to the stride foot. Work with the kids a LOT on not shifting their weight forward while striding with their stride foot.

Some books talk about a stiff lead leg. We suggest that you bring to practice baseball pictures from the sports section of your newspaper to show your players a completed swing where the stride leg has no bend at all. Have the guys take several “dry swings” – swings with no ball – and tell them to freeze at the end the swing and see if the stride leg is unbent or at least close to being unbent. Tell them that after the stride foot lands, they can press back on the heel of the stride foot to straighten the leg. This works, but not always as effectively as simply saying, “LOOK AT YOUR FRONT KNEE!” If the knee is bent, then try the swing again. Also, watch the head. It will often drift far beyond the front knee whereas it should remain directly over their belly button.

Many players have a long ingrained habit of transferring this weight during the stride and ending up off-balance. To fix this, have them stride on an uphill slope. This makes it very difficult to transfer their weight when they stride.

To summarize, the stride is a soft one toward the pitcher that does not result in any loss of balance. The hip must not turn during the stride and the lead knee should not bend at all after the stride.

Turn the Back Foot

Now that we have the stride, the last thing to do is to turn the back foot so that the toes of the back foot end up pointing toward the pitcher. Throughout the turn, the batter’s weight stays on the ball of his back foot.

We usually say, “SQUISH THE BUG!” so kids can picture the front part of their rear foot squishing a bug into the ground. What happens when the back foot turns is that the hips turn, which generates all the power of the swing.

Here is a visual example of what we are talking about. The image below shows a swing with no hip rotation. As you can see, there is no real power being generated. The swing is “all arms”, with a little bit of upper body rotation. Note that the legs and hips are not engaged at all in the swing.



The next picture shows the same batter when the lower half of the body is engaged in the swing. You can see how the back leg is bent, the “bug” is being squished by the back foot and—most important—the hips and the lower part of the body are engaged in the swing. While it is the same kid, it looks like a totally different hitter at the plate. And, he is!



Therefore, as you can see, you can spend a healthy ten minutes in an early season practice focusing only on the mechanics of the lower body during a swing. FEET WIDE, clap and check, KNEES BENT, clap and check, CHECK DISTANCE, clap and check, FIX EYEBALLS clap and check, STRIDE, clap and check TURN THE BACK FOOT, clap and check. Six things! In addition, we have not even gotten to arms. It is said that short-term memory can only store something like seven items and here we are, already at six. So the thing to do is just work with feet until they are second nature and then stop for the day. Save arms for the next day's practice.

If you are thinking that kids will get very bored with this approach, you are right. Keep them interested by throwing a little batting practice or letting them hit off a tee even if you have not made it to arms yet.

Come back here when you are ready to work on arms. That is where we will go next.

Contact

When the bat strikes the ball, the player's head must be focused on where the ball hits the bat – that is, he is looking at the end of the bat. Without throwing an actual pitch, the players extend the bat to the contact point and freeze while positioning their heads so they are looking down at the bat instead of at the pitcher. A good question to ask kids is, "Who should watch where the ball goes when you hit it?" The correct answer is: "My parents!" Players should not be turning their heads to watch where the ball goes. They watch it at the contact point and then start running.

Follow Through

The bat must keep moving through the contact point instead of stopping there. The bat continues on its natural path and eventually comes to a stop. Many players stop swinging their bats immediately upon contact, which dramatically reduces the overall power of the swing. You must not allow this practice to become ingrained.

To summarize, the swing starts with a strong turn of the back foot. This causes the hips to turn and the bat to move on level path through the strike zone toward the ball. The eyes stay focused on the ball and they lock on the contact point as the ball meets the bat. The arms extend after contact and the batter continues to follow through as the bat gradually slows down.

Bunting

Some books recommend teaching players to bunt before they hit to get the feel of meeting the ball with the bat. This can serve as a supplemental teaching aid, but we

would rather not cover bunting here. There is no need for most Little Leaguers to learn this technique. In a typical Little League season a batter has only fifty to sixty at-bats, of which many will be walks. With so few chances to swing a bat and hit a ball in a game, we strongly recommend that coaches avoid telling players to bunt during games. They can wait until they are past Little League or at least on a Little League all-star team to learn bunting.

Drills

Here are a few drills you may find useful.

Clap Drill

We recommend a simple clap drill to work on swing mechanics that goes like this: CLAP, stride, CLAP, swing. This helps to work on keeping weight back, but it can be bad because the players will potentially learn a natural delay between stride and swing. You want it to be stride-swing, all one motion. Isolating the components is good, but make sure you do enough CLAP stride-swings to ensure that your players do not develop a hesitation between stride and swing.

Hitting off the Tee

Hitting off the tee should be a part of every hitting practice. You can clearly see the kids' mechanics and their flaws if a ball is not moving. Most big leaguers practice for hours on the tee. Expect some resistance to using the tee. You will pull the tee out and the kids will all groan and say, "We are NOT in T-Ball." They all played T-Ball when they were five so

they view the tee as kid stuff. Just say, “Every Major Leaguer practices for long hours on the tee!” and leave it at that. Most leagues provide nets for the kids, so they can hit off the tee into a net.

Personally, we prefer to station one or two kids on the field during hitting practice to field “live hit balls.” This also allows the player hitting off the tee to see if he smashed a good line drive or not.

Make certain that when a player hits off a tee he stands such that his front foot is lined up with the rear of the tee. Tell hitters to stand about a foot behind the tee. The reason for this is that you do not hit a ball directly in front of you when you swing. You stride and hit the ball a little out in front of your body. So put the tee where you want the contact point to be.

You can work on inside or outside pitches by adjusting the tee, but for now just work on hitting the ball. Make sure you adjust the tee to the height of the batter. Also, plan on short lives for your rubber tees as players will hit the tee with the bat and sometimes break the tee. For this reason we have sworn off rubber tees. Our advice is to have your players hit off the tee for a while with an assistant coach watching their mechanics. Afterward, they can come in and take batting practice with a coach pitching.

Don’t let players hit off a tee for too long – about ten to fifteen swings is sufficient. The players’ arms get tired after that many.

In addition, you have to warn the players against taking a casual approach. It is painful to watch them properly executing the mechanics on a tee but suddenly reverting to horrific habits when a pitch is thrown. If they take the tee seriously, it is less likely that they will revert to bad mechanics when hitting pitches.

The goal when hitting off a tee is to hit a line drive directly to the pitcher. To do this requires the player to really keep their head still and eyes on the ball. Focus quite a bit on where the ball goes when the player hits.



The pictures above give a feel for how the single-tee drill is supposed to work. On the left side, at the point of impact (where bat meets ball), the player's head should be still and focused on the baseball. He should be balanced with his front foot planted. He should be on the ball of his back foot with his hips rotating toward the ball. Note that the barrel of the bat is level at the point of contact.

The right side shows the result of the swing. A perfect line drive back at the pitcher. The batter's head is still down and looking at the tee and the swing is continuing, even though the ball has left the bat.

Hitting off Two Tees

As you can probably tell by now, we are crazy about using tees as hitting tools. And for us, the only thing better than using one tee in a drill is using TWO tees. Plus, there are several drills you can do with two tees.

Option 1: Line up two tees such that one tee is a few inches behind the other. This presents two balls to the batter, one immediately behind the other. Now say, “Hit the ball!” What should happen is that they should make a level swing, hitting the first ball and then the second ball as they reach full extension with their bat.

Sometimes the first ball will just hit the second ball like a pool shot. This is fine, too.

A fascinating scenario presents itself when they hit only one ball. This is a wonderful diagnostic tool to ingrain the concept of a level swing, because the only way to hit one ball is to swing upward or downward. With two tees, hitters make the adjustment quickly. This drill is VERY unforgiving. A player’s swing can be fairly level but if it is not perfectly level; he will not hit both balls.

Option 2: Once again line up one tee right behind another. This time, however, have the back tee (the one closest to the batter) be shorter by the diameter of a baseball. In other words, the very top of the baseball on the first (back) tee should be the same height as the front tee without the baseball.

Once you have this aligned properly, have the batter swing to hit only the front (higher) tee. If they hit the lower tee first, they are not swinging level .

Option 3: Now space the tees about six inches apart. Have the back tee about six inches higher than the lower tee. The back tee does not have a ball in this drill. The front tee has a ball and is at normal hitting height.

As the batter swings, the goal is to miss the higher (back) tee and hit the ball squarely on the lower (front) tee. This is shown in the picture below.

This drill is especially good at correcting something called “casting”, which is when the batter has a long swing. If the batter is casting, he will hit the higher tee and will not be able to hit the ball on the lower tee. Missing the higher tee means the batter has a short, quick swing to the ball.



Soft Toss

Pretend that there is a line about seven feet from the batter's feet to you. Get on one knee or sit on a bucket and toss balls underhanded to the batter. In this manner he gets the sense of hitting a ball that is moving. You can adjust location and speed by adjusting the arc with which you toss the ball so that the player can work on bat speed and pitches in several different areas of the strike zone.

The essence of a basic soft toss drill is shown below. In the upper frame, the coach is on one knee, about 7-10 feet from the batter, just outside the first base foul line. When the batter is ready, the coach tosses the ball softly on an arc toward the batter. (The arc can be varied. In this example, the peak of the arc is around the player's chin. The ball will drop into the hitting zone as it nears the plate.) The batter is balanced, with his eyes on the ball. He is ready to hit!



In the lower panel, you can see the batter's swing extension after contact. The same principles hold true with soft toss as any other batting drill: The batter's head should be down and focused on the ball; the stance should be athletic and balanced; the hips should rotate in the direction of the swing; and the swing should continue after contact has been made.

A soft toss scrimmage is a great thing to do in practice. Divide your team into two groups of five or six and have them actually bat against a coach doing soft toss. They will have fun and good things can be learned from a soft toss scrimmage. However, this is not a replacement for ten to fifteen good swings off a soft toss.

A key during soft toss is not to reinforce bad habits. What is nice about soft toss is the coach, not the player, controls when the swing starts. Therefore, we will normally say, "FEET WIDE, EYEBALLS, BAT BACK!" while looking at the hitter.

If he is in a good stance, then and only then, do we toss the ball. If he does some other thing like not bending his knees, then we focus on that.

Merely repeating the mantra FEET WIDE, EYEBALLS, etc. does not necessarily teach anything. The kids are reacting to your commands and it is possible that information is not being stored for future use. So after a few of these, we set ourselves as if we are about to toss the ball and say, "FIX YOUR STANCE."

This forces the player to figure out the problems, adjust and perhaps REMEMBER what the problems were. This basic technique of having players coach themselves is extremely important. The first time we do this, the player looks at us with sad eyes that say, "PLEASE GIVE ME A HINT."

We say, "WE JUST TOLD YOU THE LAST FIVE TIMES!!!!!!!"

He smiles and looks at the ground.

We say, "Fine. We will do it one more time. FEET WIDE!" and usually, before we get to the next word, he says, "Oh yeah...EYEBALLS and uh...it's coming to me ...BAT BACK."

When you hear them repeating your words, you know that you have crossed the chasm between coach and player.

If players are getting good at soft toss, toss two balls in the air, say HIGH or LOW, and ask them to hit the one you called out.

Two-ball soft toss works the same way as single-ball soft toss. The coach is in the same position; only now two balls are arcing toward the batter. Now look at the batter. He is ready to hit. It is at this point that the coach should tell the batter to hit the “high” or “low” ball.



Forcing the batter to focus on hitting only one ball improves reaction time and concentration.

As the batter hits the ball called by the coach, the other ball hits the ground near the batter. Once again, the batter should be in the same position after hitting the ball: balanced, hips rotated, up on the ball of the back foot and full extension through the swing.



One Hand Drills

If you sentence us to a world without tees (say it isn't so!), we would then strongly suggest you work on a series of one handed batting drills. You can use these drills with tees (yay!) or you can use soft toss. Either works fine.

The beauty of one-hand drills is that the batter gets to alternate swings with each hand to build strength, quickness and confidence. We suggest you have the batter choke up a little more than usual when doing the one-hand drills. Otherwise, the bat will feel too heavy and the swings will be too slow.

Top hand only: This is the favorite of most players because it is their stronger side. For a boxer, this is the side where their “knockout punch” begins. The picture below shows the proper form for the drill. The batter’s stance, hip rotation and eyes are all in good position. Note the choking up on the bat, even with this being the batter’s stronger side. The “off hand” is behind the batter to aid balance.



Bottom hand only: This drill is the bane of most hitters because it forces them to use their weaker side. As such, it is a great way to build strength and balance. The key to this drill are to keep the batter's form consistent and make sure the batter does not pull off the ball to compensate for their weaker arm swinging the bat.

Expect to encounter a lot more frustration with batters during the bottom hand drill. There will be more swings and misses, pop-ups and the ball will not go as far.

We always end one-handed drills with each batter then going back to two-handed swings for 5-6 reps. This ends the drill on a high note and most kids hit the ball harder after focusing on each hand separately.



Clap Drills

We have already alluded to this one. You can say CLAP and stride, CLAP and swing. You can do this off the tee as well.

Coach Pitches to Batters

This teaches selectivity, among other things. We have not yet talked about pitch selectivity but it is clearly crucial to success. Selectivity by a batter is the act of choosing pitches that are appropriate to hit—that is, those that will increase his chances of hitting successfully and “defending the plate” against called strikes.

Stand forty to forty-five feet away and throw the ball to the batters. Give each batter five to ten swings. Tell them to be **SELECTIVE**. If a player swings at bad pitches, he is helping the pitcher immensely. The best hitters are extremely selective.

Do not, under any circumstances. yell, “Come on guys—it is only batting practice. **SWING AT EVERYTHING!**”

No! No! No!

Teach them to be selective. If a player swings at a ball over his head, nip this in the bud. Go in and talk with him. Get on one knee so you can look deeply into his eyes. Say, “Listen, I have only one major hitting lesson for you.” Let your voice get quiet and say, “It’s so important, this lesson, that I hate to tell batters at such a young age because they might not appreciate how terribly important it is.”

Then, when he is dying of curiosity to hear your lesson, whisper, “Don’t swing at bad pitches.”

Batters must get the message that they have to be selective.

Now, the other side of this is the player who only swings if the ball is over the middle of the plate. If it is on the outside corner and he takes it, yell **STRIKE**.

Throw harder over time. You want to avoid lobbing pitches that do not look like they are coming from a real pitcher. However, do not rear back and try to blast it past them. Coaches smoking ninety-six mile per hour heaters toward ten year-old batters is not productive. Your object is to teach them how to hit, not to show them how to strike out.

We need to spend our practice time focusing on batting and good mechanics. Striking out is something they do naturally, anyway. However, if they learn sound batting techniques, they will do it a lot less.

Finally, we recommend that you watch the player's rear foot as the pitch is coming. If the rear foot moves away from home plate or even flinches just a little the player is still battling ball fear (see Chapter 6) and some fear of the ball exercises are needed before hitting will improve.

Player Pitch to Batters

In this drill, suit up a catcher in full gear and get one of your real pitchers, warm up the battery on the sideline and then pitch to a batter. Some coaches hate this one, as they do not want their pitchers' confidence eroded. My experience is that this is a good drill, but it is more useful in the preseason than during the season.

The problem during the season is that you do not want your pitchers throwing many pitches in practice. You want to save them for the game. However, if you have a few players who are dying to pitch but have not looked so great on the mound, you can use them as batting practice pitchers to see how they do. Be careful, though, as these are probably the wildest of your pitchers, who you don't want hitting all your batters with their wild pitches. We usually start out with a squishy ball and then move to the hard ball. Simulate a real at-bat and move to the next batter.

Be the umpire. Yell, "STRIKE THREE!" if they swing and miss. Kids love simulated at-bats and simulated innings.

Some Batting Diagnoses & Some “Fixes”

Full books exist on “common hitting problems” but here are several that we see repeatedly.

Diagnosis: Player is afraid of ball.

Quick Fix: Fake a throw and see if he jumps back. Keep doing this until he does not jump.

Diagnosis: Back foot does not turn; swing is ALL arms.

Quick Fix: Have the players lean forward against a fence and turn their back foot a few times. The clap drill works for this too. Say “feet wide,” then turn back foot, then swing. You can even have them cheat and halfway turn their back foot before the swing to start to get the hang of it.

Diagnosis: Head turns toward pitcher instead of looking at contact point.

Not such a Quick Fix: We have tried yelling, “do not turn your head” one million times. Sometimes it works. You can also try to have your players swing in slow motion and freeze at the contact point. Throwing them a million plastic balls seems to help this one as any assistant can do it quickly and the assistant can be trained to focus only on their head and remind the players with each swing. This one just takes constant, quick reminders.

Diagnosis: Too much weight transfer during stride.

Quick Fix: Stride on a hill to get the feel of soft weight transfer. If it does not work, get rid of the stride.

Diagnosis: Bat stops when it hits ball.

Quick Fix: Lots of dry swings (no pitch) and follow through. Again, plastic balls work well. An assistant can look for the problem and quickly provide guidance.

Diagnosis: Back foot comes off ground during swing.

Quick Fix: Clap drill through all the steps of the swing as well as a clear focus on turning the back foot.

Diagnosis: Swing is not level.

Quick Fix: Lots of work with the TWO TEE drill to ensure a level swing.

Summary

It is often said that nothing in sports is harder than hitting a ball. We fully concur. Be patient with your team. Many hitters will improve simply by playing a whole season. They will also become more relaxed at the plate. Preach pitch selectivity, work on the mechanics, and do not try to accomplish too much at one time.

As you can see, there are dozens of components of a good stance and a good swing. It is a lot to ask of a kid to get it right on the first day – or for that matter, even the first couple of months. It takes numerous repetitions and tons of practice.

Honestly, our biggest successes have been when we have worked with kids one-on-one for a few hours. We can make some minor adjustments in practice, but telling parents that we will work with kids if they want to come over to our houses on off days has been our best means of effecting dramatic improvements. It is important that you correct errors immediately; however, if you are working with too many kids, you really cannot.

Some coaches delegate other assistants to work with the batters. This is fine if you have other coaches who are comfortable with hitting mechanics and are not teaching two different things. We often have a separate meeting just with any parent who is going to be helping out with hitting to make sure we use common terminology and we provide the same set of corrections for hitters. It's tough on a youth player to have one coach say "ELBOW UP" and another say "it doesn't matter."

The key is to balance your time – spend some quality time with your hitters but remember you only have 5-10 minutes to really work with an individual hitter. Sometimes we invite players over to our houses if we really want to work on detailed mechanics with them. The best solution is to have an assistant who is good at teaching these mechanics and let that assistant be the person who always works with your hitters so they hear a consistent voice. You can fill in from time to time, but be careful of letting hitting mechanics eat up all of your time.

Finally, every one of our practices starts with 45 minutes of one station where a coach pitches to batters. We always include at least one batting station in the midst of practice and we usually play some kind of batting game at the end. Hitting is contagious: if a few players start to get it, many more will learn from watching them. Remember, you probably are not going to have many low scoring games and it is no fun sitting around hoping for walks. So, spend a lot of time working on hitting. It will build players' confidence and it will substantially improve your team's level of success. Our experience is that not everyone can pitch, but all players can learn to hit the ball, given sufficient desire, practice, and good coaching.

Your teams will not succeed until they hit. Moreover, hitting breeds confidence and once a hitter learns how to hit, he does not forget. He only gets better. You will see some players who start a season nervous about each plate appearance but who end a season looking forward to each plate appearance. They know it is hard to do, they know it helps their

team, and they know it is an individual task. There is no one else to blame and no one else to take the credit.

This chapter has been an overview. Start making your guys look like hitters with a good stance, next work on the swing, and next practice these steps until they develop the necessary muscle memory. Once the swing is ingrained, teach your batters how to be selective at the plate. All the while, you should be looking for and correcting flaws in hitters' technique. Toward this end we have presented some simple diagnostic tools, and countless more can be found in other books (see Appendix).

Now, I suggest you take a break as the next chapter covers the hardest thing to teach – pitching (Chapter 9). After that we talk about catching (Chapter 10), then base running (Chapter 11), and finally, we conclude with a chapter on game management (Chapter 12).

CHAPTER

09

How to Teach Pitching



Chapter 9: How to Teach Pitching

Good pitching is the key component of a successful baseball team. In this brief introduction we first discuss selecting pitchers, pitching mechanics, and working with pitchers during the game. Next we discuss some relevant drills and, finally, we end the chapter with some diagnostic tools.

Selecting Pitchers

Our experience is that, in order to be a pitcher, a player needs to start with some natural throwing ability. Not everyone can be a successful pitcher.

However, by itself, this does not make him a pitcher. To invoke one of our old graduate school phrases, having natural throwing ability is a “necessary but not sufficient” condition to being a successful pitcher. There is much you can—and must—do to improve on raw ability. It is easy to see who “has an arm” and can throw hard. We look for kids who naturally throw hard and far, for we believe we can improve their accuracy. On the other hand, if a kid cannot throw, it is much harder to build arm strength and arm speed. So, choosing kids who already can throw give you a good starting point from which to mold pitchers.

The most effective indicator of throwing ability is to watch players take ground balls at third and throw to first. Some kids can barely get the ball to go to first. Some hit the first baseman’s glove with a nice, hard throw. One young player consistently threw the ball ten to twenty feet over the first baseman’s head in the first practice. The boy’s dad came over and said, “Sorry my son is such a disaster. He has a long way to go before he’ll be any good at baseball.” We looked at him and said, “Your boy is going to pitch for us.” And lo, he did, finishing the season with a sub-1.00 ERA, typically striking out eighty to ninety

percent of the batters he faced, and making us look brilliant. (He is still pitching seven years later, as a starting pitcher on the local high school team.)



You also have to determine how coachable your potential selections are. Remember, you need only five or six pitchers for a typical Little League season. I suggest you identify them in the first couple of weeks so that you will have enough time to work with them sufficiently. This may cause strife with some parents because many parents believe their child will make a great pitcher regardless of whether not he can throw at all. However, if you are honest with them and explain the rationale for your decisions, the confrontation will usually end well. An important lesson we have learned is that it is not helpful to guarantee anything to a player or parent, announcing, for example, “You are definitely my number one pitcher for the year.” Things may change and you do not want to be in a position of not being true to your campaign promises. One thing to remember is that if one

of your pitchers doesn't work out you always want to have the option to try out another kid to pitch. So you don't have to—and you probably don't want to—finalize your pitching roster at the season's outset.

Do not hold secret pitching practices. Make it clear who you have selected and why. You might decide to hold extra practices specifically for pitchers, but there is no reason to make them secret.

Mechanics

It is usually best for Little League pitchers to pitch from the stretch. However, if a player comes to you with vast knowledge of the wind-up then let it be. You might later recommend that he try the stretch if he runs into problems. We advocate the stretch because it has fewer steps with fewer moving pieces. Pitching is hard enough without adding steps. As for the suggestion that it negatively impacts velocity, keep in mind that Mariano Rivera pitched solely from the stretch.

Note that lots of successful pitchers vary many different things in their windup. The mechanics given here are meant to be a starting point to teach young pitchers. If you get a pitcher that already throws hard and with control you may want to just leave him alone.

We need to label the legs and arms to get through this section. A pitcher pushes off with one leg and strides with his other. For a right-handed player we'll call the right leg the push-off leg and the left leg the stride leg. Reverse this for left-handers. For arms, it's the throwing arm and the lead arm. Again for a right-hander, he will throw with his right arm and lead with his left arm. A lefty does the reverse.

We will now give you a brief overview description of the steps involved in pitching, immediately following which we will expand each step in greater detail.

The core steps of pitching are:

Step 1: Start at Ready Position. Hands together at chest level and ready to pitch, glaring at the target and ignoring the hitter.

Step 2: Move to Balance Point. Knee up and hands up. The pitcher should be very comfortable and balanced and ready to spring toward the hitter.

Step 3: Stride to Power Position. The stride leg moves toward home and lands in what is called the power position—a position where the pitcher is poised to blast the ball to the plate.

Step 4: Push off with the push-off leg and start the throwing arm toward the plate. Push-off occurs immediately when the ball of the stride foot touches the ground in power position, the push-off foot turns, the hip turns, and the throwing arm is whipped toward the plate. The push-off foot turns so hard and pushes off with such force that it leaves the ground.

Step 5: Throw. As the throwing arm starts to move toward the plate it travels in front of the body and the pitcher releases the ball (this point is called the release point).

Step 6: Follow-Through. The throwing arm continues to move, while beginning a gradual deceleration, and the push-off leg returns to the ground, resulting in a natural fielding position.

Step 1: Ready Position

For a righty, have your pitcher put his right foot (or push-off foot) immediately in front of the rubber with his toes pointed toward third base. His stride foot should be slightly more than shoulder width apart and his weight should be balanced and knees slightly bent.

Teach him to focus on the catcher's mitt. This is the moment when he is locating the target and getting his brain ready and focused to pitch. Teach him that good pitching, like hitting, is dependent on confidence. If he's not sure he will throw a strike past the hitter, he probably will not. Also, if a young pitcher has trouble throwing strikes, emphasize that he gets to decide when to pitch. He sets the pace of the game. Coach him to understand this: "Take your time, take a deep breath, focus, and then pitch." Some coaches watch our pitchers and say we are teaching them too slow a pace and that the fielders are going to go nuts waiting for the pitcher. However, we are firm believers in pitchers taking just the right amount of time to throw. Some can work quickly; others cannot.

Many kids have wandering minds. We find that if they do not focus before the pitch, bad things can happen. Obviously, if they are throwing strikes, we tell them to work quickly. They do not have to stare at the target very long —just long enough to be focused.

To teach this, say, "READY POSITION." Correct their foot position. The push-off foot has to be touching the rubber – NOT STANDING ON TOP OF THE RUBBER! (Yes, pitchers slip around on the rubber while doing this in a game.)

Per the rules of baseball, pitchers are required to stop at the ready position for at least an instant or a balk can be called. (The balk is a rare call.) Tell your pitchers to come to the READY position, take a deep breath, and then pitch.

Some pitching books talk about how a specific grip can add a few miles per hour to the pitch. We have not talked much here about how to grip the ball, but we did cover it in Chapter 5. For now, let's just have the pitcher throw four-seam fastballs from the stretch. Once he is throwing strikes with that grip, go get one of the books we mention in the reference section and work more on some other grips. If the player hasn't pitched before, give him a season of nice, four-seam fastballs trying to throw sixty to seventy percent strikes and the pitcher will be on his way to a successful career.

Step 2: Move to Balance Point

At the balance point the front leg is at its highest point in the delivery. To get to this point, the pitcher has to lift his stride leg. The leg lift must be done with complete balance. If it is too high, the pitcher will lose balance. Ask your pitchers to balance with that leg lifted for a minute or two every day.

The stride leg should move in sync with the arms as if a string is attached to the leg and the arms like a marionette—when the string is pulled the arms move up and the legs move up at the same time. So it's leg up, arms up – at the same time. Say this to them over and over, “LEG UP - ARMS UP.”

If the arms do not move as they come to the balance point, the arms will be behind the leg as the pitch is completed, with correspondingly poor results. You really need LEG-UP ARMS-UP to happen simultaneously. For this, we have no magic sauce. Just do it enough times but not enough to make it a drill. Do it three to five times and then say, “OK, throw a pitch.” Ultimately, the stride leg should rise to at least knee height.

Coaches disagree about where to point the toes of the stride foot. We let them naturally point toward the ground at about a 45-degree angle. In any case, make sure that the stride leg does not get so far out in front of the body that it causes a loss in balance.

You also can have your pitchers throw from the balance point. Take a pitcher who is throwing wildly and have him start throwing directly from the balance point. You'll notice that he will start throwing more strikes. The reason for his wildness is that the act of moving to the balance point from the ready position often causes a loss in balance that results in a wild pitch. (This is the primary reason why we do not advocate little league pitchers using a wind-up. The extra movement of the arms and legs increases the

likelihood that the pitcher will lose balance and/or waste energy before delivering the pitch.)

One problem associated with focusing too much on this step is that pitchers might ingrain the bad habit of coming a complete stop at the balance point. This causes a halt in momentum and reduces power. So work on the balance point but make sure your pitchers don't come to a complete stop.

Step 3: Stride to Power Position

The pitcher brings the stride leg down from the balance point and directly toward home plate. The point at which the ball of the foot on the stride leg touches the ground is called the power position. The purpose of the stride is to start the body moving directly toward the plate and to put the body into a balanced position from which to throw the ball.

From the balance point, the pitcher lowers the throwing arm alongside the rear thigh and then swings it back toward second base. He does this in concert with the stride leg moving toward home. Earlier, it was LEG-UP ARMS-UP and now, it is LEG-DOWN ARM-DOWN.

When the throwing hand is as far back as it can go (let's call this the arm-back point), the throwing fingers point toward second base, the throwing hand is a few inches above the player's head, and the elbow is slightly bent. The throwing elbow is at least as high as the throwing shoulder and it may be higher.

The stride foot must land when the ball is at the arm-back-point. If the stride foot lands before the ball is all the way back, the pitch often will be wild. This is referred to as rushing, as the lower body is ahead of the upper body. If the ball gets to the arm-back-point and the stride foot has not yet landed, then the arm will have to stop and wait for the

stride foot to land – thus breaking momentum. It should be clear that timing and balance are the two main keys.

At the end of the stride, the stride foot lands on the ball of the foot with toes pointed halfway between third and home (between first and home for a lefty). The ball of the foot should have landed on an imaginary line drawn directly from the center of the pitching rubber to home plate. Watch these points closely, as many pitchers land on the heel or point their toes directly toward home. Landing on the heel makes it harder for the body to pivot on the move toward home. Landing with toes pointed toward home forces the hips to slightly turn toward home before the throw. The goal is to save the strength and power of hip turning for the moment of the actual throw. As the hips turn, the body moves toward the plate and it is the turning of the hips that drives the speed of the arm which provides key arm speed and ultimately good pitch velocity.

It is time to talk about stride length. Legendary fast-baller Nolan Ryan says a good stride length is seventy percent of the height of the body. We have seen other references that say ninety percent. Try this and you will see that it is often hard for young players, as a long stride requires more flexibility than many young players have. We see numerous Little League pitchers stride about thirty to forty percent of body height, which is clearly not long enough. A short stride limits arm speed and balance. We work toward as long a stride as possible with the constraint that the pitcher must remain comfortably balanced.

Make sure the stride moves directly toward home. To check on this, position a string from the center of the pitcher's mound to home plate and have the pitcher stride. Make sure the ball of the stride foot lands on the string. If a right-handed pitcher strides toward third, he will throw across his body and if he strides too much toward first he will be off-balance and forced to push the ball toward home.

Remember, the ball of the stride foot should hit the string but the toes should point toward third base. This way, when the hips turn the toes will naturally rotate to face home plate.

This works the same as it does in hitting. The batter strides toward the pitcher, but the toes continue to point toward home plate so the hips stay closed.

The lead arm should be bent with the elbow pointed toward home plate with the glove facing forward toward the batter.

As pitchers become more adept at the basic mechanics, work with them to use the glove to block the batter's view of the ball. Doing this well will make the pitcher appear to be "sneaky fast" to the batter as the batter will not have as much time to pick up the ball as it comes toward the plate.

Step 4: Push Off and Start Throwing Arm to the Plate

With fingers on top of the ball, the rear foot turns (recall "squishing a bug" from our chapter on hitting). This forces the hips to turn. The same massive weight transfer that generates the power for hitting is now used for pitching. Instead of generating bat speed, the pitcher is generating arm speed, which translates to ball speed.

The arm moves forward like a whip. This does not require a big effort, because the pitcher's entire body acts like a catapult. If the hips do not rotate, then the kid is throwing only with his arm. He is not pitching with his entire body.

Note that some books refer to a "Tall and Fall" technique, in which no push is taught, while others insist that pitchers do not actually push off the mound. Still more books talk about a "Drop and Drive," advocating a strong push. We have found that telling young pitchers to strongly push off the mound can cause them to think about pitching too much, which disrupts their balance. On the other hand, never talking about a push from the

mound seems to cost them some velocity. We think the thing to do is tell them to push off, but don't make such a big deal of it that it is all they think about.

Step 5: Throw

Once the push-off occurs, the pitcher turns his hips while his body turns to face home plate. The throwing arm turns with the body and the ball moves past the ear and out in front of the pitcher. As the throwing arm is moving toward the release point, the glove arm must be properly positioned. This is far more important than you might think. The glove arm must pull into the body such that the glove winds up by the hip. The glove arm must stay close to the body and not flail off to the side, which pulls the pitcher off-balance. Instruct the pitcher to have his glove arm come down close to the body and next to the hip.

The wrist is cocked such that additional power can be generated by snapping the wrist at the moment of release. The hand starts flexed backward at the wrist toward the pitcher's body; snapping the wrist is the act of abruptly pivoting the hand forward toward the target, which happens when the ball is released.

The pitcher's eyes remain fixed on the target throughout the delivery. As the body comes forward the back bends so that the player's nose is over the belly button. The rear leg is now off the ground so all weight has transferred to the stride leg. The ball is released out in front of the body. At the release point, the wrist snaps as the ball is delivered to the plate.

It is important that the pitcher be leaning forward before the ball is released. Some books call this "throwing over the wall." The pitcher leans towards home plate before the throw so that the release point occurs relatively farther out in front toward home plate. The more

the release point is delayed, the less distance the ball has to travel, resulting in greater velocity as the ball crosses the plate.

The location of the arm as the ball is released is called the arm slot. Most books refer to the arm slot by comparing it to the hour hand on an analog clock. The arm slot for a directly-over-the-top pitcher (who throws straight up) is called twelve o'clock. A side-arm pitcher's arm slot is three o'clock. In either case the mechanics stay the same – the only difference is the arm slot used by the pitcher.

Most youth baseball pitchers end up at one o'clock. A useful note is that you will get some parents who constantly yell THROW IT OVER THE TOP (probably because this was yelled to them, as throwing over the top was commonly taught twenty to thirty years ago). Tell these parents to relax because most kids' arms tend to do better at around one o'clock. Some pitchers may throw comfortably in other arm slots. Pitchers may be sidearm pitchers or submariners by their very nature and there really isn't anything good or bad about it. If their mechanics are solid, their arm slot is not a key success factor. The key is to encourage pitchers to be comfortable and do what they can to use a consistent arm slot. Be firm in the face of criticism by parents who will tell you they have seen major leaguers vary the arm slot to confuse hitters – since our guys are not yet professionals.

Step 6: Follow Through

The follow through is the process of gradually slowing down the pitching arm. If the steps are followed, the pitcher generates a tremendous amount of arm speed. In order to slow down gradually after the release, the arm must keep moving.

Tell pitchers to keep moving until the throwing arm hits the ground. The throwing shoulder should ultimately face the batter (called throwing shoulder-to-shoulder) as they begin the pitch with the shoulder on the glove hand side.

Many Little League pitchers will release the ball while bringing their arms to an abrupt stop. This puts stress on the pitcher's arm, much like driving a car full speed into a brick wall puts stress on the car. A reasonable deceleration time is easier on both the car and on the pitcher's arm.

At the end of the pitch, the pitcher becomes another infielder and must be prepared to field the ball. After the ball is released, the pitcher should be facing home plate with feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, and glove ready, should the ball be hit in his fielding area.

Managing Pitchers

You cannot overlook the mental aspects of pitching. In coaching pitchers, you have to find the right personalities to start a game, to work in the middle, and to work in the end. As the coach, you have to know when it is OK to go to the mound to talk to the pitcher and when to stay in the dugout because he clearly needs to continue pitching.

Remember that during a game it can be very lonely on the mound when things are going poorly. Everyone has bright advice and most of it is useless to the pitcher. Parents yell, "Throw strikes!" – as if the kid didn't want to throw a strike! Other players chime in to "help" with mechanics. "Come on Joe, just step towards home," parroting what you've taught them in practice.

Sometimes we yell out to a pitcher, "Fix your hat!" In doing so, we are trying to get him out of a bad groove. If he settles down, takes his hat off, and takes a deep breath, he'll likely be good as new. Pitchers get into positive grooves where they throw twenty strikes in a row and they get into negative grooves when they throw twenty balls in a row.

The difference between a ball and a strike is subtle. One book talks about how fractions of inches at the release point equate to feet at home plate. If the pitcher is throwing strikes, encourage the catcher to get the ball back to him and keep the rhythm going. If the pitcher is throwing balls, tell him to take a deep breath and fix his hat – do something.

We like to go out and talk to my pitchers during a game. Some coaches avoid it. My goal when we go visit is to calm the kid down. One of my favorite stories involves a pitcher who had just given up a long shot to left field. One of us came out to the mound because he looked so shocked.

The pitcher exasperatedly exclaimed, “He hit it FAR!”

The coach told him, “Son, Petey (the left-fielder) found the ball. When I was little, I played in games where the hitter hit it so far into the woods that the ball could not be found.” The coach told him to start worrying only when we can’t find the ball: “That last one landed INSIDE THE PARK SO IT WAS EASSSSY TO FIND!!!!”

He laughed and relaxed. We knew he’d be fine. He threw well the rest of the game.

In the first league level where kids pitch (usually ages eight and nine), we have never taken a pitcher out in the middle of an inning. Some coaches do. We are sure we have lost a few games by leaving kids in there, but at that level we feel that it’s their first time pitching and it’s better to build up confidence than show off your great managerial skills. It is another example of not confusing winning a game with doing the right thing and letting your players (especially your pitchers) develop.

At the higher levels (ages ten through twelve), the kids are older and more mature. They work harder and throw harder so they actually get pretty tired. Thus, our kids don’t mind coming out when we think it is time to pull them.

When we have to take a kid out, we always try to get the parents to give the player a big hand when he comes out of the game.

We are amazed at how little coaching of pitchers tends to occur in practice. I hear a lot of comments from coaches to pitchers that go on the order of:

WATCH THE TARGET

THROW THE BALL HARD

THROW STRIKES

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

FIX YOUR RELEASE POINT

Pitchers tend to tune out advice like this because it is right up there with “make the world a happier place.” Of course, the kids are trying to throw strikes and they are trying to throw hard. Kids are not stupid. They already know that is what they are supposed to be doing on the mound. Instead of insipidly shouting vacuous platitudes, address specifics. Learn the mechanics and develop some cues for each pitcher.

An extremely important rule of thumb: **Never teach pitching mechanics during a game.**

The right thing to do is look for something you have fixed previously in practice that is now broken. In practice, identify cues for each fix such as “If I look at you and say, ‘STRIDE,’ it means you HAVE to take a longer stride to the plate.” In a trip to the mound to calm down a pitcher you can say, “Hey buddy, relax! Take a longer stride like we worked on yesterday, and you’ll be fine.”

We like to give kids a chance to pitch out of tough situations because we want them to learn that they can do it -- and we want them to learn composure under pressure. Most of all, we want them to learn that we believe in them.

Importance of the Catcher

Spend time choosing catchers who work well with your pitchers. If a catcher takes an hour between pitches to find the ball and get it back to the pitcher, the pitcher loses concentration and gets frustrated. A good catcher who stops pitches that are a little off, fires the ball back to the pitcher, and yells out encouragement is worth a great deal to pitchers. Sometimes we team up my less experienced pitchers with my better catchers to help them learn. In the opposite situation, it is our hope that more seasoned pitchers can still throw strikes even if the catcher isn't doing well. We will talk more about catching in Chapter 10, but there are times when we deliberately pair a pitcher with a specific catcher because we know the two have built a rapport and work well together. Sometimes we will pair a struggling pitcher with my best catcher. This



improves his concentration because he doesn't have to wait forever to get the ball back or worse, have to chase one that goes sailing over his head. A good catcher does wonders to improve the pace of the game and keep the pitcher in rhythm.

Drills

There are entire books dedicated to pitching drills. We will concentrate on just a few good ones. So here are a few that work for us.

Release from the Finger Tips

This first drill starts with the pitcher on his knees, facing another player or a coach. Have the player raise his throwing hand and then release the ball, tossing it to you a few feet away. This ensures that he has a good grip and that he is releasing the ball off his fingertips instead of pushing the ball toward you. Have the pitchers work on snapping their wrists as they throw.

The ball should spin evenly and not wobble or be a knuckle ball. You can color the ball on one side to display its rotation, which provides immediate visual feedback to the pitcher.

Separate Hands

Have the pitcher face to the side as if he is pitching, while stretching the stride leg toward the target. His back knee should be on the ground and his stride leg should be straight and stretched toward the target. His hands should start together.

Say, “BREAK.” The pitcher’s hands break, and the throwing hand goes down and back, while the glove hand moves towards the target. The goal is to get the hands in sync so the ball is at the arm-back-point with the elbow pointing to the plate while the glove hand is bent slightly and blocking the hitter’s view of the ball.

If the ball moves back too quickly or if the glove gets to where it needs to go too quickly, there will be problems. The movements must be in sync. The problem here is that kids perform the drill properly in practice and then turn their brain off in game situations. Thus, you must try to simulate game conditions. Say, “OK, it is 2-2 count and the bases are loaded. Pretend you are on the mound. Now...BREAK.”

You need pitchers to build muscle memory and not just put up with what will seem to them to be a boring, stupid drill.

Balance Point

Next, we bring legs into the drill. Start with the pitcher's feet slightly greater than shoulder width apart and hands together a few inches away from the body at chest level. When you say, "BREAK," the pitcher raises his hands toward the sky as he simultaneously lifts his stride leg. He lifts his stride leg at least to the height of his other knee. His back leg should not shake or quiver. If it does, tell the pitcher to do this drill at home every day until the quivering stops and his position at the balance point is stable.

In addition to using this during specific workouts with pitchers, we suggest you add the following to your regular calisthenics as all players can benefit from good balance and strong push-off legs. (Remember, there are a number of similarities between pitching, throwing, hitting and fielding. Having good balance and strong legs is critical to all of those activities.)

Once the pitcher is at the balance point, count to thirty. Once the pitcher can hold it for thirty seconds, he probably has enough push-off leg strength. (Early in the season, you can temper this drill by starting at ten seconds and adding five at each subsequent practice.)

Balance point means what it says: there must be no wobbling at the balance point. This is of such paramount importance that we will tell you once again that if any wobbling exists the pitcher must be encouraged to practice until the push-off leg is strong enough to support the body.

Balance Point: Step-By-Step

Have the pitcher begin in the balance point. When you say, “BREAK,” the pitcher separates his hands and strides toward the target while moving the ball hand back to its highest point. Have the pitcher stop when the ball of the stride foot hits the ground.

Then say, “TURN!” and have the pitcher do nothing but turn the back foot. Now the glove hand is still blocking the batter’s view of the ball and the back foot has turned. This teaches pitchers that the back foot has to turn, as this is how the power is generated. When the back foot turns, the hips turn, unleashing significant power toward home plate which improves arm speed and, consequently, ball velocity.

Then say, “THROW” and have the pitcher bend his back and throw the ball. He should lift his push-off leg while his throwing arm continues its smooth motion, releasing the ball and following through. Have him finish with his fingers on the ground and his rear leg in the air (like a seesaw). You can tell pitchers this is the second balance point, as it will teach them to get that back bent and thereby impart more power to the ball. This drill is crucial for the pitcher who is not striding or bending his back.

Again, boredom is your enemy with this drill. Have the player repeat the drill a couple of times. Then get him to pitch and see if anything is being assimilated. If not, then do the drill again while telling the player, “Hey, I need you to apply this when you pitch.” Encourage players to practice this at home in front of a mirror.

We often encourage parents to videotape their kids and then show them what they are doing on television. Pitchers benefit from a video aid. Sometimes, they need to see what they are doing wrong before they can fix it.

Simply saying GOOD when a pitch is a strike and BAD when it is a ball doesn't buy you much. Pitchers need to feel what is right and what is wrong, which takes time.

To make this happen, they need to concentrate on what they are doing. This is not easy to accomplish. The role reversal technique is sometimes effective here: having the player correct you when you pretend you are a pitcher will help him correct himself.

Pitch To Batter

We always bring a forty-six foot rope to practice, as we mentioned earlier in this book. It is poor practice to merely guess how far it is from the pitcher's mound to the plate. Imagine practicing with a pitcher, and then getting to a game and finding out you were four feet too far away.

First, set up the pitcher's "rubber," which is officially called a **pitcher's plate**. (You can buy a pitcher's plate at sporting goods stores for \$9.99. We have seen a good one with cool spikes that anchor it in the grass at several stores.) Next, set up your home plate forty-six feet away, using the rope as a measuring device. You should have several sets of hard plastic bases so as to set up at least a couple of stations. Leave the rope in place, to serve as a guide for gauging proper foot position.

You don't need an actual mound. In fact, big leaguers rarely practice on a mound except when they are warming up immediately before entering a game. The mound puts extra stress on the pitcher's arm, so practice on grass. The mechanics on the mound are no different than on grass. Have a catcher put on full gear and have the pitcher throw to him. Pretend you are an umpire and give them ten pitches. Six need to be strikes to declare the drill a success.

Make sure the pitcher steps toward home. We leave the rope on the ground so we can see if the ball of the front foot lands on (or near) the rope. This is useful feedback for the pitcher.

Many kids will slow down pitches so they are more likely to be strikes. Nip this in the bud. Tell them to THROW THE BALL and BLAST IT in there. After ten pitches, talk to them about what went right or wrong and have them take a break before they do another ten.

You can do two to three sets. On the third set, have a batter put a helmet on and stand there. The batter should not swing; he should just stand at the plate. You will be amazed at how many young pitchers can throw strikes to the catcher with the batter absent, but if a batter is present, they are freaked out and don't even come close. They are afraid that they will hit the batter. They have to learn to focus on the catcher's glove and not fret about hurting the batter.

Diagnostics

Diagnosis: Pitcher is throwing wildly left or right.

Fix: Frequently this is due to the stride leg stepping in the wrong direction. Place a rope from home plate to the center of the pitchers mound and make sure the stride foot lands on the rope.

Diagnosis: Pitcher throws high

Fix: Throwing high means too early a release point. Saying "release it later" does not usually help. Determine why the release point is too early. Often the stride needs to be longer. To fix this, identify the correct stride length and mark the spot where the stride leg should land. Another cause can be that the pitcher is not moving "over the wall" and bending his back as he throws. Drilling the mechanics step-by-step can help with this.

Diagnosis: Pitcher throws low

Fix: Now the release point is too late. An overly long stride or a loss of balance at the balance point can be the cause. Try having the pitcher start in the balance point and then throw to see whether the problem goes away. The timing of the stride leg and the arm into the power position is also crucial. Check to see whether the arm-back point and the stride leg are in sync.

The Importance of Confidence

You have to teach pitchers to work on their body language so they look confident. This will come naturally if they have success, but at the start of the year you don't want them looking like nervous wrecks or as if they are going on a death march as they walk to the mound. Not unlike predatory animals, batters sense fear.

Tell the pitcher to act like he owns the mound and that he's in charge. Tell him to stare at the mitt and, when he strikes a batter out, to calmly request the ball. No celebrating, no nothing: Just ask for the next ball.

In short, tell him to act like success is the expected outcome.

Tell him to do the same thing if the batter hits one five hundred feet into the next county. Just use a cold stare, no reaction, and ask for the ball.

Summary

So in summary, pitching is about confidence, balance, and good smooth mechanics. Pitchers may take a few weeks to start to improve but if they keep throwing every day they will improve. Young pitchers often have trouble staying balanced through the

mechanics and its impossible to throw consistent strikes without balance. As their leg strength improves with practice, they will have more balance.

Do not teach pitching during a game! During combat is no time to be discussing how to shoot. If the infantry guy has not learned how to shoot by the time real bullets are flying – it's too late. You will have to work on it in drills before the next battle. We have said this a few times since we still see some coaches who can't resist the urge to teach how to pitch during a game. We have yet to see that work.

Finally, talk to pitchers if they fall in trouble, calm them down and instill confidence. Especially with pitchers, the psychological aspects of coaching are of paramount importance. A confident pitcher is a winning pitcher.

We'll move on from pitching now. In the next chapter, we'll cover how to teach your catchers how to play their position.

CHAPTER

10

How to Teach Catching



Chapter 10: How to Teach Catching

This chapter focuses on training good catchers. Many Little League coaches themselves have some idea about how to hit, field, throw, and catch, but they often are not experts at the catcher's position. Often coaches simply tell catchers to CATCH THE BALL, whereas they should be teaching catchers good, solid fundamentals. We will show you how to teach catching fundamentals in this chapter.

It is important to stress up front that catching can be far more than just mastering fundamentals. A good catcher may well become another coach on the field and build a rapport with your pitchers. However, that is another subject for another time.

What you will be learning in this chapter is how to teach catching balls, blocking wild pitches, recovering wild pitches, and throwing out runners.

Catching Pitches

During a playoff game, my runner is on third, there are two outs and our number nine hitter is at the plate.

The score is tied in the bottom of the sixth inning. The coach tells the runner, "If anything gets behind the catcher, YOU TAKE OFF!" as he really doesn't want to bank on his #9 hitter to win the game. The ball comes close to the plate, the catcher misses it, and our team wins the championship. What great skill did our team have? None. We just accepted the gift of the catcher missing the pitch.

So, you see, it is not what great things the catcher can do for you, it is often more a matter of what horrific things a catcher can do to you. If your catcher catches balls that come to him and makes simple plays at the plate, good things are likely to happen to your teams.

There are few things more important than catching the pitch. Have your catcher work on setting up correctly. The catcher should squat down into a comfortable position. In the subsequent section we will describe two key positions. One is the no-runners-on-base position that makes it easier to block balls and the other is the runners-on-base position that makes it easier to throw runners out when they try to steal.

Catchers must be extremely comfortable in either stance. Encourage them to watch television in this stance, so that their leg muscles become accustomed to it. The players should extend the glove in front of the body and gently squeeze the ball as it arrives. They must not stab at the ball. Instead, they must wait for it and squeeze it. The catcher's target must be huge. To enlarge this target, the catcher has to open his glove wide. If the catcher stabs at the ball with a closed glove, tell him to wait until the ball lands in his open glove.

Catching Position – No Runners on Base

With no runners on base, the catcher can be fairly low to the ground and his glove should be right at the target. His body should be positioned such that the glove is in the center of the chest. Feet are wide and comfortable and the catcher must be balanced. The catcher's mitt should be facing the pitcher in a backhanded position. He should hide the throwing hand either at his side or behind his back so that it will not be hurt by foul tips. We don't recommend putting the hand behind the back as that forces the throwing shoulder to turn, which potentially exposes more bones to be injured than if the ball were to strike the fleshy part of the chest.

Catching Position – Runners on Base

Here the catcher is in less of a squat. He can start in his primary stance, then raise his butt 4-5 inches as he gets ready for the pitcher to throw. He must be ready to move toward whichever base he throws to, so that he can gun the ball immediately after catching it. In this higher stance, catchers should not be standing too high or they will block the umpire's view of the plate.

Blocking Bad Pitches

Blocking baseballs is an attitude. A player should take pride in the ability to reliably block thrown baseballs.

To block a ball, the catcher moves in front of the ball and drops to his knees by pulling his legs back – as if someone has pulled his legs out from under him. His chin should press against his chest with his eyes focused on the ball.

This is something that all catchers do nicely in practice, but rarely accomplish in a game. Make sure you simulate lots of games and get them to do this all the time. Here is a drill to work on blocking bad pitches.

Make sure the catcher wears a mask for the following drill. Get the catcher into position and then throw the ball so it comes to him on one bounce. As it bounces have him kick out his feet, landing on his knees to block the ball. Also, as the ball is coming he needs to tuck in his head so that he looks at the ground like a turtle. This way, if the ball takes a big hop there is a good chance it will hit the catcher's mask and stay in front of the catcher.

Making the Play on a Wild Pitch or Passed Ball

One drill we work on repeatedly with catchers (and pitchers) is the cover-home-on-a-wild-pitch play. Put a pitcher on the mound and a catcher behind the plate in full pads. Have the pitcher go through his full windup without a ball and act like he is throwing the ball. Once he has “released” the ball, roll a ball behind the catcher. The catcher has to jump up, throw off his mask, get the ball, set his feet and toss the ball to the pitcher, who meanwhile has run from the mound to the plate, catching the ball near the plate and applying the tag. The catcher has to lead the pitcher with the ball so that it reaches the pitcher where he will ultimately be at the time of the catch, not where he is at the time of the throw. The pitcher needs to receive the ball a couple of feet up the third base line so he can catch it and apply the tag. If the pitcher catches the ball right at home plate, it is almost guaranteed that the runner will be safe at home because the pitcher will not be able to apply the tag in time.

This play is hard to do, absent the pressure of having a WHOLE RUN depend upon it. On a wild pitch, there is a good chance the runner can score from third. In Little League the wild pitch is even more important because IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME.

When you watch a Major League game on television, sometimes the announcer will say “Great stop!” as the catcher dives to get a wild pitch. There are very few passed balls and wild pitches at that high level of professional ball. However, in Little League, there are many. The batter might swing and distract the catcher. A catcher might miss a pitch that is only slightly outside. A pitch might be right over the middle, but maybe the catcher was not quite ready. We suspect the percentage of wild pitches or passed balls in Little League is on the order of five to ten percent of all pitches. In the lower levels of Little

League, where both pitchers and catchers are learning their trade, it is probably more like 10-15 percent of all pitches, and much higher on certain days.

We keep track of a statistic called “bases surrendered” in each game. A “surrendered base” is one where the runner was able to advance by virtue of a wild pitch, passed ball or stolen base. It is something that we want to minimize through our pitchers and catchers working together. Our goal is to have fewer than six bases surrendered for the entire game for a team of 11-12 year olds (essentially one an inning). In many games, we have met that goal. In others, we have failed. We had one game last season where we surrendered 26 bases! In one game!!! If you consider that four bases equal one run, that means we gave up more than 6 runs just because we could not pitch and catch very well. Needless to say, we lost that game.

So, if it seems like we are obsessing on good work from our catchers, we are. Remember, we are all for collecting outs and getting back to the dugout to hit. Passed balls, wild pitches and stolen bases prolong the inning, demoralize your team and have your pitchers throw many more pitches than they need to.

Because of the importance of good catching, let's go over each of the four steps in this play.

Step 1: Get out of crouch, throw off mask, get ball

To work on this, practice in steps. Simply roll the ball behind the catcher and have the catcher move from the crouch to the point where the ball is picked up. This requires the catcher to get used to throwing off the mask. **Practice this until it is second nature**, as it

is excruciatingly painful to watch a catcher hunt for a ball because his mask is in the way during a game.

Step 2: Set Feet

Another scenario that makes us cringe while watching the play develop involves a catcher who races to the ball, picks it up, and then frantically heaves it fifteen feet to the right of the charging pitcher. The catcher has to stay calm. He must get the ball as quickly as possible, set his feet so that he is balanced, and then throw. Throwing while still moving toward the backstop is a recipe for disaster. The catcher must come to a stop before throwing.

Step 3: Toss

Now we need to toss the ball to the pitcher. If the ball ends up pretty far from home, this has to be an overhand toss, if it's only a few feet from home it's an underhand toss. If the catcher is only two feet from the pitcher, and he drills it overhand, it will fly past the pitcher, and the other team will score a run. In view of the dynamics of the situation, a calm, gentle toss, with feet properly planted, is what we want.

We work a long time with each stage and then we gradually put it together. Step One and then Step Two and stop. Step Two and then Step Three and stop. Repeat Steps One, Two, and Three several times. This play really has to be done with a live backstop so it's very expensive in terms of scarce time to practice with real infield resources, but we can't stress enough how useful it is. We work this play over and over and then when we think we've got it we put a runner on third.

It is good base-running practice for the runner on third to learn how to break when he sees the ball get past the catcher and then execute a good slide into home. Keep working

on it until you nail the base runner coming home a couple of times in a row. Rotate in new catchers, pitchers, and base runners to keep everyone fresh.

If you are able to get a runner out at home in the first inning, sometimes you'll make your opponents so wary of your abilities that **they'll stop running on wild pitches**. Believe me, it is exasperating to be in the dugout watching opponents score several runs a game on this play when it is blown. It creates such a boost in momentum to make the play, while flubbing it casts a depressing pall over the game and the team. That's why we practice it so much.

Another useful point: the pitcher has got to break toward home immediately as the ball gets past the catcher. The pitcher is running forty-six feet to home from the mound, while the runner is running sixty feet. The pitcher should always be there at least a half-second before the runner. This gives the pitcher time to set up to make the catch and then the tag.

Frequently, we will see the pitcher get there at the same time as the runner. This makes it next to impossible to make the play. The cause is usually that the pitcher hesitated before he ran home. In baseball, hesitation is deadly.

The pitcher needs enough repetitions in practice that he instinctively breaks towards home very quickly to take full advantage of his fourteen-foot lead over the runner on third.

Here's one case that we haven't discussed: Sometimes the ball lands so close to home that the catcher merely has to pick it up and tag the runner. You must teach the catcher not to throw to the pitcher when it lands this close. Practice this by repeatedly rolling the ball close to home and having him make the play. As the catcher makes the tag, he should not dive towards home plate; instead, he should dive toward third, putting the glove down to the ground and waiting for the runner to slide into the tag. The essential point here is that **the catcher must hold the ball with two hands**.

Make certain that the runners have sliding pants on (see the equipment section) so that sliding doesn't tear up their legs. Speaking of equipment, a real killer is a catcher who doesn't bring a cup to practice or the game. Catchers (both male and female) must wear a protective cup.

All players should wear a cup as one never knows where a ball will go. If you can get your whole team to wear cups, this is one less thing to worry about. Few things can make coaching a game trickier than a catcher showing up without a cup – you are then unable to play the kid at catcher. It can really mess up a plan for the day.

Throwing Out Runners

In the younger leagues, runners can only steal third. Later, they can steal second as well. It should be next to impossible for a runner to successfully steal a base in Little League. Here's why: The runner has to traverse sixty feet from base to base. The throw from catcher to second base is roughly eighty-five feet. A throw of fifteen miles per hour gets the ball to second in 3.86 seconds and we have already established that most runners move between the bases in around four seconds. So, the throw does not have to be hard.

Suppose you have a catcher with a decent arm and he throws at about thirty miles per hour. The throw reaches second in approximately 1.93 seconds. No runner can travel the sixty feet in 1.93 seconds. To do this, he would be running at forty miles per hour! So time is on the catcher's side if he is ready. If he takes a second to realize that the runner is going and another second to stand up, he has burned two seconds before the throw. Now he has to throw perfectly and hope that no time is required for the tag.

The time to catch and release is critical. The catcher has to catch the ball and start moving forward immediately. The release is somewhat different from what we described

for infielders, as the catcher does not have to bring the ball down and back like an infielder. Instead, the catcher can simply bring the ball straight up to his ear.

The throw must be straight but in Little League, where runners cannot take a lead before the pitch, it does not have to be super fast. If the catch and release is done quickly enough, a high-speed throw is never necessary. Remember that a hard throw is more likely to be out of control and not on target. When throwing, the catcher must learn to step over home plate without actually stepping on home plate as it is a slippery surface. The catcher must not take two or three steps before the throw – a simple move from crouch toward the pitcher while throwing is ideal.

The catcher's advantage is even greater on a throw to third. If the catcher throws at just twenty miles per hour, the ball will reach third in two seconds. So again, it is all preparation, catch, and release. The throw to third can be impeded because a right-handed batter might be in the way. However, there is time to step into the throw.

To work on this, throw to the catcher, then have him come up and be ready to release the ball. Work with him to ingrain the habit of doing this smoothly and without delay. Clock the time from catch to release. If you can get this to under two to two-and-a-half seconds, you are in great shape. Once the catcher is comfortable with this motion, set up all four bases and put a runner on first. Set up a shortstop and a second baseman. Stand on the pitcher's mound and throw balls to the catcher.

The runner should break once the ball crosses the plate and the catcher should try to throw him out at second. Keep doing this until the catcher gets three players out in a row. Remind him that the throw does not have to be super-hard, just accurate and straight – it cannot be a high fly ball. Since there is no hit-and-run in Little League, have the shortstop take the throw and have the second baseman be the backup. Make sure the second baseman is back about ten feet from the bag so that if the throw is bad, he has a chance of making the play on the ball and keeping it from squirting into the outfield. To work the

play at third, do the same thing: start a runner on second and set up a third baseman, with the left fielder as backup. The shortstop can be the backup if there is no runner on first; otherwise, he has to move to second in case the throw goes to second. If the offense fakes a bunt, then the third baseman will be charging toward home. In this case, the shortstop has to rotate over and cover the throw to third.

Work these different scenarios in practice and make sure the players know who is covering where on what play. It is extremely frustrating in an actual game when the second baseman and the shortstop both decide to cover second at the same time.

Fielding Bunts

As we have said before, we really don't think youth baseball hitters and fielders need to be worrying about bunts. However, not all coaches share our opinion and they will teach their teams to bunt. Hence, you catchers need to have some idea how to defend them.

On a bunt, the catcher has to come out of his crouch, get the ball and throw it to the correct base. The catcher should do this only if the ball is directly in front of home. We would suggest that you let the pitcher charge to cover balls hit in front of the pitcher or to the first base side of the mound, while having the third baseman charge and field balls to the right of pitcher's mound.

Textbooks recommend that the first baseman charge as well, but in order to execute that play, the second baseman has to cover first. I think that is asking a lot of your second baseman rotate over to first on a bunt, when in most cases, the pitcher can get to the ball and make the play.

In a bunt situation, the catcher's most important job is to shout which base to throw the ball to. With runners on first, the play is usually to first – but the catcher has the best view

of the runner, and if the catcher thinks the force play can be made at second base, he can scream “Second!” or “Two!” at the top of his lungs.

The key is to make it second nature for the catcher to call out which base to throw to. To do this in practice, you need to put runners on bases and roll the ball in front of the plate to simulate a bunt. Perform this drill in the outfield with plastic bases as no backstop is needed. It is good to practice this play frequently, because in Little League there are not only deliberate bunts but also tons and tons of unintentional swinging bunts, where the batter swings, barely nicking the ball, which ends up dribbling a few feet in front of the catcher. Put a runner on first and simulate a bunt five times. Then move the runner to second. Change runners and infielders. Once one catcher gets it, substitute another catcher. Make sure the catcher yells clearly and early.

The bunt play in which the ball goes between the pitcher and first baseman is the most difficult. The catcher should call out who has the best play. He should be taught to err on the side of caution, calling for the pitcher to make the play if at all possible. If the first baseman makes the play, then you have no one to cover first.

Getting the Ball Back to the Pitcher

We have not seen much written in Little League coaching books on this one, so we will be the first to state the obvious in writing:

IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT FOR THE CATCHER TO ACCURATELY AND TIMELY THROW THE BALL BACK TO THE PITCHER.

Consider two scenarios.

Scenario #1, the good one: The pitcher throws a fastball over the middle for a strike. The catcher catches it, smiles, and nods at the pitcher, yelling, “TWO MORE JUST LIKE THAT!” and throws the ball right to the pitcher’s chest.

Now try this one: It is 98 degrees on the field. The pitcher throws a ball outside. The catcher catches it, gets up very slowly, and lobs the ball to the pitcher. The ball soars over the pitcher’s head. The second baseman backs up the throw and tries to toss it back to the pitcher, but he misses and it turns into a Bad News Bears episode.

The catcher has a lot to do with the pace of the pitcher. If the pitcher is throwing a lot of strikes, he is in a groove and needs the ball quickly. We cannot tolerate a catcher who finds a way to distract his own pitcher by taking forever between pitches – or a catcher who makes the pitcher jump for balls, wearing him out on a hot day.

To practice pacing, have the pitcher throw real pitches to the catcher while you count loudly how long it takes to get the ball back to the pitcher—as in, “ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, THROW IT THROW IT THROW IT – PLEASE, PLEASE THROW IT!!!”

It should be quick.

As a final note, we want to mention that a good catcher can sometimes save you a trip to the mound. If the pitcher is struggling, have the catcher walk the ball back part way, utter a few encouraging words, and kill some time to get the pitcher out of the bad groove and into a good groove.

Summary

Catcher is one of the most important defensive positions in the game of baseball. Mastery of fundamental catching skills makes the difference between winning and losing. There are times when we put our best infielder at catcher because catching is such a big deal.

The catcher touches the ball on just about every play and many runs in Little League are scored because of wild pitches and passed balls. Having a catcher who can stop most balls is a great advantage. The catcher controls the infield. On a bunt, he is in charge of where the ball is thrown. Therefore, catchers have to be trained to make lightning-fast decisions. Finally, it is crucial that catchers get the ball back quickly and accurately to pitchers to maintain the pitcher's pace and to avoid the extra physical activity on the pitcher's part chasing bad throws.

Now that most of the fundamentals are covered, it's time to talk about base-running in Chapter 11.

CHAPTER

11

How to Teach Base Running



Chapter 11: How to Teach Base Running

Nearly every game my team has lost includes a play similar to the following:

A batter gets a single. The next batter smashes a line drive to right field. The runner on first could have been running the whole time but he was mentally absent – so he only makes it to second. The third batter hits a long fly ball to left field. The runner on second could have drifted toward third, but he's still distracted by butterflies or airplanes overhead – so he advances only to third after the ball is dropped by the left fielder.

The next pitch is a wild pitch. Being a base coach you say, "RUN!" The runner hesitates; then, he runs. He's out by four feet.

As we have previously mentioned, kids run ten to fifteen feet per second, so a one-second hesitation means an out by four feet, instead of safe by eleven feet.

Kids love running bases but they must be taught how. Many coaches say that by far the least practiced skill that affects the most games is base-running. We have resolved to find time in every practice to work on base-running. We haven't always done so in the past, but we are confident that it needs to happen.

So please, work on it every practice – if only a fifteen-minute drill at the end of practice. If nothing else, future coaches will thank you.

Base running is the perfect gathering drill. As your players begin to trickle in for practice, have them run the bases. It can be as simple as running from home to first; or first to third; or second to home. Someone needs to be watching the runners to make sure they are

doing things correctly, but you can literally do these drills with only one player, if necessary.

Running to First Base

When we see a batter watching a grounder he just hit as he runs to first base, we want to go ballistic. Watching the ball is almost excusable if he hits it 700 feet and he's watching it sail out of the park – but on a ground ball, please don't look, just run! The player's head needs to be facing first base and not the field. Why? Because if a player runs while he is looking somewhere else, he runs slower. On a ground ball, fractions of a second decide the play. If we agree the runner is running at ten to fifteen feet per second and most plays are within five to ten feet – then it is not a big leap to suggest that watching the ball may well cost the runner the necessary five to ten feet.

We suggest lining up the players. Roll a ball towards the mound and say RUN. They will naturally watch the ball. Time them and see how fast they run to first. Then repeat the drill and have them run while focusing only on first base. Time them once again and compare times.

In youth baseball, when running to first, a lot of players feel that they must stop right on the bag. This isn't the case. In fact a player goes faster if he runs past or "through the bag." This way he can keep the velocity high the entire trip to first instead of starting to hit the brakes.

The first base coach tells the player if he needs to round the base and prepare to head to second. Otherwise, he runs straight through along the foul line. Teach players they can freely overrun the bag as long as they do not make a clear move as if they are running to second. You can do this drill by doing the batting yourself while setting up a runner next to

you. The runner can pretend that he hit the ball. Hit it short and have him run through the bag.

Position another coach at first to yell, “Run through the bag!” If he slows down even a hair, tell him to try again. Interestingly, we have found that some kids truly are in the habit of slowing down when the throw comes toward first. This stems from their desire to avoid getting hit by the ball. (Yes, here it is; another “fear of the ball” effect.)

Think of this as breaking a bad habit like chewing nails. Have players do this a few times without slowing down. Eventually, the players will catch on. Then, reinforce it at later practices.

The instruction: **don’t slow down** is easy to understand. It is much easier to teach than the umpteen steps involved in hitting.

Running to Second Base

Most youth baseball leagues do not allow a runner to lead off from first base. Thus, the runner needs to start in a position on the bag that enables him to run quickly from first to second. He should start with feet parallel and about shoulder width apart.

The player could stand like a track runner with his rear foot just touching the bag, but this position limits the player’s view of the ball. If he starts off facing home, he can see the ball as it is hit. Once he sees where it is going, he can take one step, crossing the left foot in front of the right, and head toward second base.

As the player moves from first to second, he should check to see if the ball has been hit to the outfield. If so, the player should look to the third base coach for guidance on whether to continue running past second and on to third base. If so, the player needs to round second (not run just straight to it) and head to third.

Rounding the bag is done by drifting a few feet toward right field, then touching the inside corner of the bag with the player's foot, as he runs to third. This way, he doesn't slow down by going straight to second, then slamming on the brakes, turning, and heading to third. Remind players that each second is ten to fifteen feet – and outs involve just a few feet.

Base running has to be perfect. You don't want players to miss the bag.

Running to Third Base

Starting on second base, a player should stand with his feet parallel, about shoulder width apart, facing the batter. When he sees a ball hit to the outfield, he should think about scoring and watch his third base coach. If the third base coach sends the player home, he needs to round third (using the same technique as with rounding second), then head for home plate

Running to Home

Starting on third base, a player needs to stand with one foot on the base, and the other in foul territory. This way, if a runner is hit by a batted ball in foul territory, he won't be out. When the ball is hit and the runner needs to come home, he heads directly home hell bent for leather and slides if the play looks to be close.

An important tip concerning the batter – teach him to get out of the way on wild pitches. A common occurrence in Little League is for the batter to stand and watch a pitch over his head. Then the catcher chases it. The runner on third decides to score. Suddenly it seems like a TON of players are standing around home – the batter, the pitcher, the catcher, and the runner. The batter needs to get out of the way quickly after a wild pitch.

Legally, the umpire can declare the batter as being a player interfering with the play to get the runner at third and the runner can be declared out.

For any kind of close play, the runner on third must slide into home. In Little League it is against the rules to try to run into the catcher with the intent of dislodging the ball.

Running on a Ground Ball

There are two cases: forced and unforced runs. It turns out that a lot of Little League players need some work on what is a force and what isn't. For readers not versed in baseball, a quick recap: The runner is forced to run to the next base on a ground ball if runners occupy all bases preceding his base. So a runner on second is forced to run to third if there is a runner on first (the batter at home can be thought of as a runner running from home to first). If no runner was on first, then there is no force in effect for the runner on second and he can run to third at his own risk.

When a force is in place, the runner does not have to be tagged out. The fielder simply has to touch the base, usually with his foot, while holding the ball prior to the runner arriving at the base. This is a **force out** or a **force play**.

So let's say the runner is forced to run. There are runners on first and second. Each runner must run on a ground ball. While coaching bases, remind the runners of this fact. When the ball is hit on the ground, the runners should execute their crossover step and take off for the next base. They should look to the base coaches to see if they should keep running or simply slide into the base to which they are running. It's crucial that they NOT SLOW down as they get to the base.

To teach this, put runners on base and hit ground balls. Don't tell the runners what to do and see if they can remember. If they slow down as they approach the base, stop the

play and start it over again. For many runners, it's a habit to slow down as they approach a base.

If there is no force, the runner should take a couple of steps toward the next base (depending upon where the ball is) and be ready to run to the next base the moment the ball leaves the fielder's hand. So let's say the runner is on second with first unoccupied. A ground ball is hit to third. In this situation, the runner has to learn to take a couple of steps as the third baseman fields it. If he takes too many steps, the third baseman will get him in a rundown between second and third. The technique is to take steps that are somewhat non-threatening – small enough that the third baseman isn't sure he can get the runner in a rundown and opts for the easy play to first. If the runner on second does manage to make some reasonable progress toward third, then the moment the ball is released he can take off for third at high speed. It takes a great defense to throw the ball across the infield twice, from third to first to get the batter and then back to third and make the tag on your runner. If you work on this play in practice, you can often get the base on a ground ball. Be prepared to have a runner out a few times, but the players love it and it can be a lot of fun.

In practice, it teaches runners to be aware of the play while imparting some of the finer points of the game.

Running on a Fly ball

On a fly ball, a Little League runner must stay on his base until the moment that the ball is caught. This is called **tagging up** at the base. There is nothing worse than watching a guy forget this rule. He takes off on a fly ball, it's caught, and the defense gets an easy double play by throwing to the base before the runner can get back.

Note that the runner is forced to return to the base so he does not have to be tagged for the double play.

So the key is to teach the runner to move toward the next base on a fly ball, but not to go so far that if the ball is caught, the defense can easily get him out. To work on this, put runners on base and start hitting fly balls to outfielders. It often works to use assistant coaches as outfielders so they can control more easily when they catch a ball and when they don't.

Have another coach hit a fly ball to left with a runner on first. Now, run side-by-side with the runner toward second. Show the runner how to take a few steps toward second. On a fly ball to left, it's a much longer throw back to first, so the runner can go as far as halfway to second. The runner needs to go as far as he can toward second and still be able to get back to first if the ball is caught. If he goes too far, and the ball is caught, the player is finished and it's a double play. If the runner plays too conservatively and takes only a step or two toward second, it's not good either. In this case a dropped ball in the outfield means the defense still is capable of forcing the runner at second. (The moment the ball is dropped all the rules discussed in the ground ball commentary apply.)

Consider a fly ball hit to right field. Now, the runner can go a third of the way toward second base, because the right fielder is a lot closer to first base than the left fielder.

All of the math changes if the runner is on second. Now, a fly ball to center means the runner can't go very far toward third since the center fielder is relatively close to second. A fly ball to right field, however, will generally give the runner time to move several steps toward third. This is a big deal, because the further the runner gets toward third, the greater the chance that he or she can score if the ball is dropped. The difference of a step or two here can easily mean the difference between being safe or out at home. Again, hit the fly balls and run side-by-side with the runners so they start to get a feel for how many steps they can take.

There is no hard and fast formula concerning the number of steps, because this depends on both the speed of the runner and the throwing arm of the outfielder. If the runner knows that the outfielder doesn't throw so well, he can take a couple more steps to the next base.

Here is where different levels of Little League make a big difference. In T-Ball, you might see the runner glued to the base on a fly ball. In the 12 year-old league, you might see the runners playing the fly ball perfectly. The key is to do this fly ball drill in practice a few times and gradually teach the runners how to judge how far they should go. As a base coach, we are usually reminding players by yelling things like, "Remember, HALFWAY on a FLY BALL." "HALFWAY" may be too far depending upon where the ball is hit, but this is intended to remind the players that they need to not just stand on the bag while the ball is in the air.

Running after a Wild Pitch

In Little League this is a big one. We would estimate that about fifteen percent of our games were won or lost on wild pitches, passed balls or stolen bases.

Lots of wild pitches are thrown and whether you should send the runner depends on all sorts of factors. That's your call. You can judge the other catcher, the score, the weather, your horoscope – anything.

The reality is that even a good catcher has a hard time blocking the ball, getting to their feet and throwing out a runner in Little League.

But the key is to work on this with the runners. We suggest having them take a couple of steps toward the next base after the pitch crosses home plate. That way if it gets past the catcher they are leaning in the right direction.

The key play is that a runner on third base must be ready to run the moment you say, “GO!” Sometimes, in a game, we will just tell them to run if they think they can make it, but that’s asking a lot of a young player. So usually, we just tell them to go.

Problems arise if there is ANY delay between when you say, “GO” and when they start running. We become very annoyed when watching a play where we could have had the run easily if the runner had only run, but instead winds up out at the plate.

Also, there is a natural tendency for the player to see how the pitcher is doing covering home. None of this matters. The runner needs to keep his eyes on home plate and run hard. Finally, he should slide into home.

Stealing Bases

Since there are so many wild pitches in Little League, it is rarely worth it to try a straight steal of a base. In lower levels, a steal of second is forbidden and a pure steal of third can be considered in bad taste. It makes you look like a very bloodthirsty coach, particularly when you will likely get third base free on a wild pitch.

However, in higher levels, a steal of second is allowed and the number of wild pitches drops, so it is a viable play. The key here is to get the runner to check for the steal sign and be prepared to run. On several occasions, we have been left standing at the third base coach’s box fuming when the runner stays on first after seeing the steal sign.

During practice give a steal sign, have the players see the sign, and immediately run.

Getting out of Rundowns

Another thing to work on is how to get out of a rundown. The key is to draw as many throws as possible. Staying away from the ball sounds easy, but with practice this can be learned. The game of pickle as discussed in Chapter 4 is extremely relevant to base running. Put two bases at legal base width (60 feet) apart. Put a helmeted base runner on one base. With the fielders throwing the ball back and forth to each other, the base runner gets a point for each base he can advance without being tagged out. So when the fielder throws from the far base to the base-runner's present base, the runner can take off toward the next base. To get out of the rundown the runner's job is to draw throws. So let's say the runner is at first base and the fielder has the ball at second base. The runner takes a lead. The fielder comes in and throws to the fielder at first base. The runner breaks for second base. The fielder at first base catches it and fires to second base. Now, the runner could just run into the tag, but if the runner is only about half way to second, he needs to take a few steps back toward first. Now, the fielder at second has the ball and is forced to fire to first. Just when he releases the ball, the runner takes off again towards second. So the fielders have to close the box and the runner has to expand the box. With practice the runner can get good at taking what looks like a couple of real steps towards second, slamming on the brakes and heading back to first. If the first baseman goes for this and throws to second, the runner can go safely back to first.

Another thing the runner can do is start to swerve a little into the throwing lane. The runner can't run more than three feet out of the baseline, but a little swerve is less than three feet. If the runner is hit by a ball, the ball remains in play but it'll probably bounce somewhere and the runner will end up safe.

To practice this, play a lot of pickle at the end of practice, ensuring that runners aren't just running into tags. Get the players to draw out more and more throws. The more throws, the greater chance there will be for a mistake.

Watching Base Coaches

We talked briefly about missing the steal sign, but a far worse fate befalls you if you give a runner a green light and he slows down instead of running to the next base.

My favorite drill for this is to put a ton of parents on the field and have only kids run. Put a first base coach on first and a third base coach on third. Have the kids running from first to second pick up the third base coach about halfway to second, and do whatever the third base coach says. Make sure the batter/runner watches the first base coach, who will signal whether he should head to second or run past first. The reason this drill is great is that it turns parents into ball players. They'll soon learn that it's not as easy as it looks. We remember one practice at which we were hitting grounders to parents. A lot of parents made horrific errors. It increased their appreciation of the difficulty of the game.

Summary

Base running is unquestionably the easiest taught baseball skill but unfortunately, it is a skill that few Little League coaches choose to teach. Your team will derive great benefit by working on base-running. Think about how much you work on batting, fielding, and pitching, and then think about how quickly poor base-running can take you out of games. In tournaments, we find that the teams with expert base-running are the teams that win. They pressure defenses by forcing throws to the next bag. Conversely, when runners slow down between bases, they make things easy for the defense. If runners continue at full speed, they force the defense to find a way to make a play in a few seconds.

We haven't yet found the secret sauce for avoiding base-running mistakes; however, we think you should plan for at least one good team drill at the end of each practice. Since kids love base running, it's a nice way to end practice and clearly, it will pay dividends in game situations.

With throwing, hitting, fielding, pitching, catching and base running behind us, we will spend a little time in the next (and final) chapter on certain aspects of game management.

CHAPTER

12

Game Management



Chapter 12: Game Management

Our discussion thus far has centered on teaching player skills and general coaching concepts. This chapter focuses on the particulars of managing an actual game.

As a new coach you are going to be thrown into the fire quickly. You'll get a few practices to learn some skills and then BOOM you'll be on the sidelines at a game.

If everyone could focus on the game and tune out distractions, the game management task would be easier. However, in the real world it is not so simple. The kids misbehave on the bench. They all decide to fight over who is eating whose hot dog. They play with a caterpillar. They get bored. You get bored. A parent comes up and decides you really aren't doing much and wants to chat. Our wives, family and friends know— NEVER TALK TO US DURING A GAME (or right after a game). They know we are thinking about 50 things and that we just won't be able to focus.

In this chapter we will discuss how to effectively manage games from the bench. We will cover not only what you do during a game, but also pre-game preparation and post-game activities. Of prime importance is that you have a plan going into each game, which will enable you to quickly react to game situations and avoid unpleasant surprises.

So the key is to prepare. First, know who your players will be. Make a lineup the night before. Get RSVP's from all the players. Or, just e-mail all the players and have them tell you if they are going to come or not. Numerous web sites exist for tracking RSVP's to an event. Find your favorite and put it to good use. When one of us first started coaching, he wrote a program just to track RSVP's because he realized it was so important. If you don't know who will be at the game, it's pretty hard to make a lineup.

Making a Lineup

Make a lineup FOR EACH inning. Plan on using one pitcher for the first two innings, a second pitcher for the third and fourth innings, and a third pitcher for the fifth and sixth innings. If you have only two pitchers who can throw strikes, don't feel bad, just pitch two pitchers. Use one pitcher for innings one through three, and the other for four through six. This may sound evil, but it's better to use fewer pitchers who throw strikes than ten pitchers who can't.

All kids will want to pitch. Tell them, "Throw strikes in practice, and you get to pitch in a game." Don't just turn the game into a big pitching experiment. If they can't throw strikes in a practice, they won't in a game.

When you make your lineup, try to switch kids among a few different positions.

Here's a sample lineup from a game this year:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	OF	Bench
Roger M.	3	3	x	2	2	2	0	1
Mickey M.	8	x	3	3	x	9	2	2
Rashid W.	2	2	2	x	3	3	0	1
Nomar G.	5	5	x	1	1	1	0	1
Don D.	6	1	1	x	7	6	1	1
Sandy K.	x	7	5	5	9	x	2	2
Dawn J.	7	x	6	8	6	7	3	1
Pedro R.	x	9	7	x	5	5	2	2
Barry B.	9	4	x	9	4	x	2	2
Rocky N.	x	8	4	4	8	x	2	2
Hiroshi Y.	1	6	8	6	x	8	2	1
Isaac G.	4	x	9	7	x	4	2	2
							0	0
Total	45	45	45	45	45	45		
Bench	3	3	3	3	3	3		

The columns are innings. The cells represent positions using standard baseball scoring numbering. 1 = pitcher, 2 = catcher, 3 = first base, 4 = second base, 5 = third base, 6 = short stop, 7 = left field, 8 = center field, and 9 = right field. 'X' in a cell means that the player is on the bench that inning.

Notice that the columns all total 45 and the "bench" row at the bottom indicates the number of players on the bench for each inning, so we can quickly determine whether we have a valid lineup.

The rows show where a player will play for each inning. The OF column indicates the number of innings to be played in the outfield and the Bench column indicates the number of innings spent on the bench. This allows me to quickly view the lineup and spot any problem areas. So if we see a kid with more than 2 innings in the outfield, we can fix it

by moving him to the infield for a couple of innings. Similarly, if a player has more than 2 innings on the bench we fix it by sending someone else to the bench.

Thinking back to our youth, we both have many sad memories of spending numerous innings on the bench – so we just can't live with ourselves if we put a kid on the bench for more than a couple of innings. In fact, when we call it out we never say, "You are on the bench." We soften the blow by saying, "You are the designated hitter (DH) this inning."

To us, a core goal of youth baseball is to play kids a LOT so they learn. Sure, we could win more games if the stars never sat on the bench, and the kids who were further behind lived on the bench, but to me that's not the point. The same thing goes for the outfield. A kid who lives in the outfield probably won't play next year. Put him in the infield and sometimes you'll see serious improvement when he realizes that his play really affects the team. He'll make a few errors early on, but our biggest success stories come from throwing kids into the fire and showing them we believe they can take the heat.

And—by the way—those success stories lead to players coming back next season. If they player feels like he/she is making a contribution and learning to get better, they will come back. **And that is your goal!**

We have sometimes had kids who are poor players plead, "Please put me in the outfield." We usually deny their request because we want them in the game and we know what they are doing—they don't want to hurt the team.

In addition to the detailed inning-by-inning position lineup, you should make a batting lineup for the scorekeeper, and another copy to give to the opposing team.

So make the lineup the day before, but don't divulge it to the players, because it can change. Print a copy for yourself and one for your assistant. Also print copies of the batting lineup for the other team's scorekeeper, for your scorekeeper, and for my bench

coach to post in the dugout so the players know when they are batting. So print two copies of what we call the GRID (the inning by inning plan) and three copies of the batting lineup.

When we arrive at the playing field, we look for the other coach and try to give him the lineup for his scorekeeper as soon as possible. When the scorekeeper shows up, we give him the lineup. The assistant coach who is coaching first base gets the other grid, and the remaining grid should go in your pocket. Always bring an extra pen or pencil to put in the other pocket so you can mark on the grid all of my in-game changes.

Sometimes kids don't show up so you have to make a lot of last minute changes. Sometimes things just don't go as planned. You schedule a pitcher for two innings but he gets shelled in the first and you feel like other pitchers could do better. You don't have to stick to your plan. Look the kids in the eye, and see if they are tired during the game. If a kid is beat, take him out before he faints. If it's hot and you booked a guy to catch three innings but he looks like he's exhausted after two, find another catcher for the third. Talk to the players during the game. Ask them how they feel. If a kid scrapes his leg sliding into a base, maybe he shouldn't play shortstop the next inning. There are no hard-and-fast rules. Just use your best judgment.

Stuff to Bring to a Game

We bring a big container of water to games (and to practices, for that matter). We bring extra gloves for kids who forget to bring their gloves. We bring extra bats for kids who forget bats. We bring extra hats, extra shirts, extra pants. If it can be forgotten, it will be forgotten.

We also bring the list of the players' parents names and their emergency contact numbers and keep that in the dugout. We bring all the catchers' gear and we set it all up in the dugout before the game. We also bring the first-aid kit that the league supplies.

After a while this will become a ritual, but it takes time. We each have a checklist before we leave the house that looks something like this:

LINEUPS (2 Grid, 3 Lineups) and pencil – these go in pants pockets

CATCHERS' GEAR – in separate bag

TEAM BATS, TEAM HELMETS – in separate bag

EXTRA GLOVES – in milk crate A

EXTRA UNIFORMS – in milk crate B

FIRST AID KIT – in one of the existing milk cartons

SCOREBOOK with PENCIL – in front seat of car and gets carried to field on first trip to the field and put on the bench

WATER AND CUPS

NOTEBOOK with TEAM ROSTER and EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

CELL PHONE – in pants pocket

CAR KEYS – in drawer in kitchen (look for two hours and then take other car)

So it's two big bags and two milk crates and some odds and ends. It is best to pack the car the night before. The cell phone comes in handy for calling parents to pick up kids and would serve for an emergency call if need be. Also helpful is a bag of crushed ice, for in case of injury during the game.

Basically, the big difference between practice and game-day equipment is that for a game you need to make sure to bring your scorebooks and lineups and extra uniforms.

Pre-game Warm-up

When kids show up, tell them to get a ball and start throwing. Have them make two lines about fifteen to twenty feet apart and throw. Have a coach watch them. If you get a chance for batting practice, have kids start batting but leave most of your team in the outfield just throwing and catching. If you get through everyone batting, hit some ground balls to the infield, and if you still have time hit a few fly balls to the outfield. Practice your pre-game warm-up at every practice.

Many leagues have different rules about how much time you have to warm-up – so find out and plan your pre-game practice. Also, be aware of what your opponent is doing. Many times you can learn a lot about another team by watching their warm-up. If all is chaos during warm-up, you know their coach is new.

Pre-game Speech

Meet with the opposing coach at home plate and discuss ground rules, such as field boundaries and other field-specific rules. Then, talk to the players on your team. We like to get them on one knee and then we get on one knee and look them in the eye, one by one. We usually talk about concentrating while in the field. If there have been specific problems in the previous game, we talk about things we want to work on in this game. For example, if we haven't been doing well on ground balls, we will say, "let's really be ready for the ground balls."

We **never** say anything bad about the other team. We usually talk about looking for good pitches to hit and about running hard to first after hitting the ball. We remind the team that

in the field they really need to focus on each pitch. We don't talk much about winning and losing. We just want them to use the game as the opportunity to show off their skills and we usually point out that teams that handle the fundamentals well tend to be very good.

You don't need to rev the kids up. They will be excited anyway. In fact, the calmer you are, the better. If you look nervous and excited, it'll rub off on them. At one playoff game, a player looked at me and said, "Wow, coach is sweating, the other team must be really good." The other team was good, but we let it get to us and the kids saw it. We lost by a run, and we got to wonder the whole off-season whether things would have been different had we remained calm.

Finally, review signals. You may need a steal sign if the rules allow you to steal second. Some teams have bunt signs, some have fake bunt, and some have take. We are horrified by these. Our teams don't bunt. We want them to HIT THE BALL. Most of my problems are that the kids are afraid of the ball, so bunting is not teaching them to conquer that fear. My teams don't fake bunt. We figure the other pitcher has enough troubles without a fake bunt. We don't have a take sign. We want kids to swing at the ball. They get enough walks without me helping along the process. So for us, it's just a steal sign. Sometimes, we will say something like everyone steals until we get an out. Then, here's the sign. The kids love that.

Kids love the signs themselves, too. We guess it triggers some big James Bond thing in them. You'll get kids the first practice saying, "Coach, what's the steal sign?"

For a steal sign, try to use something that isn't too blatant. If it's just "touch your hat" the whole other team will start screaming, "Steal" the moment they figure it out. If it's too complicated your guys will miss the sign. Try different things. So far we haven't found the perfect Little League signs. Ours usually either get stolen or are too complicated, but feel free to e-mail us favorites that work. Just remember that anything fancy is likely to be missed and anything simple is likely to be stolen.

Bench Management

Make certain that the on-deck batter is wearing a helmet and is ready to bat. Be certain that the players know which bat they are going to use. Tell your bench coach to familiarize himself with players and their bats. Guard against a player who suddenly identifies his pal's bat as LUCKY and then uses it – even though it is 80 ounces heavier than what he normally swings.

If a new pitcher is going in the next inning, try to get him to warm up. When you are batting, get your next catcher ready if at all possible. If the catcher is batting with two outs, identify another catcher who will go out and warm up the pitcher.

Practice this. Have a practice where you give a bench coach a lineup and you throw one pitch to each player. Have them rotate through the lineup several times.

Keep the players focused on the game. They'll play with bugs. They'll play with sunflower seeds. You name it. Have your bench coach stay on them and keep them cheering for the team.

Coaching Bases

We suggest that you, as head coach, coach third. We have seen other coaches let someone else coach third, but too many games come down to coaching third and if you come out on the wrong end, you don't want to have to tell some other coach, "That's OK, no big deal." You want it to be your fault.

Be clear with the kids when they are on base and constantly remind them what to do on a ground ball, a fly ball, etc. Give the signs well in advance as they are approaching the

base and yell at them loudly. If you want them to run say, “Go, go, go,” as loud as you can. If you hesitate, they’ll slow down and you’ll pay dearly.

Make your decisions and live with them. If you never send anyone around third you’ll lose a lot of games and if you send everyone you’ll lose a lot of games. You have to know how fast your runners are, how good the fielders are, how many outs there are, and who is on deck. With your last batter on deck, with two outs, maybe you send more runners home on a single than you would with your cleanup hitter. Who is pitching? If runs are hard to come by maybe you get more aggressive to try to do something. If you have a big lead, be careful. Running too much can inflame the other coach.

Sportsmanship & Respect for the Game

You want to teach your kids sportsmanship and sportsmanship begins at home. If the kids see you in any way denigrating or mocking the other team, they’ll do it too.

Lots of parents will yell things like, “You can get this kid out. He can’t hit at all!” Tell those parents to knock it off and stick to saying positive things about your guys. You can give all the speeches you want on sportsmanship, but you need to exhibit it at all times.

One of our teams was down 15-4 in our second game as a head coach. It was so sad. We wondered if we’d last the season or if the parents would mutiny and insist on a new coach. Then we saw our kids goofing off in the field and acting like they had already lost. Between innings we called the kids over. We heard one say to another, “He really looks mad.” We asked them if they thought we could come back. They said, “No.” We told them that it was unlikely we would come back as the other team had an excellent pitcher and was really finishing us off. We told them we didn’t care nearly as much about that as we did for proper respect for the game.

Respect for the game means you do your absolute best regardless of the score. You don't just "mail it in." You go 100 percent when you are down by one and you go 100 percent when you are down by 10.

We told them that we were going to finish this game and that we were going to finish it the right way. They lost that game, but they went on to win the league championship.

Maybe it helped that team to get a firm respect-for-the-game lecture early in the season. Just don't let disrespect for the game fester. If a kid gets on another player for making a mistake, nip it in the bud. Remind him that everyone is trying to do his best and that he makes plenty of mistakes himself.

To me, respect for the game carries over to the bench. If kids are goofing off on the bench, and not even watching, they really aren't showing respect. We want them watching and learning. This is especially hard for them when it's hot, but it must be done.

Eating During the Game

Oh, if there was ever one topic that has caused more consternation between parents and us, it is food during the game. Now that we are parents, we get it. Parents want their kids to eat. We were so confused when we started coaching (before we had kids). Parents would be feeding kids between innings. We went nuts. We said, "How on Earth can they focus on the game when they are eating a hot dog?" We banned all food in the dugout. Parents got mad and said, "Other teams can have sunflower seeds."

We relented. Our latest attempt on a policy on food is as follows:

"Players should eat before the game if possible. If they haven't been fed and they must be fed, please skip the pre-game warm-ups and feed them. No food is allowed in the dugout so eat during the pre-game warm-up. Sunflower seeds and chewing gum are allowed in

the dugout, but if kids throw seeds at each other or start playing with gum, both seeds and gum will be banned for the rest of the game and we will try again the next game. All players must help clean the dugout after a game – that means picking up the gum wrappers, sunflower seed wrappers, etc.”

Personally, we want to focus on baseball, but food has been a big issue over the years. Sometimes, we long for a big league coaching job where someone else would deal with food issues.

Postgame

Have the players help clean up and then they can have a post-game snack. We always have a snack coordinator who rotates snack jobs to parents. We usually talk to the players after the game on my own away from the parents and then let them go clean the dugout and have a snack. First, we shake hands with the other team and then we talk.

We have found that asking players to talk about what went right is a great thing to do. They'll talk for a while about all the good things that happened. Then we will point out things we need to improve and then we'll go get a snack. If the game has been pretty boring, we suggest you have them run the bases after your talk. They'll love it and it'll make it so they leave in a good frame of mind.

A variation of running the bases is to have the players run to an object in the outfield (like a coach) and run back. This may actually be easier to do after a game because the infield may be getting prepared for another game.



Just like all of the other competitions you can stage, the kids will love it and it will take their minds off the game just played, win or lose.

Another post-game ritual that works is to ask the players, “How many of you can play better than you did today?” Almost immediately, all will raise their hands. We have found this approach to be especially useful when dealing with a team coming off a big win and feeling pretty cocky about themselves. Putting a question to them like “can you get better” gets them focused on improvement.

Summary

Enjoy the games. Sometimes the weather is great and you can just enjoy the thrill of seeing how the game will turn out. Go chat with the parents between innings if you get a minute. If you appear relaxed, it can calm down the parents – and sometimes parents can make you feel a lot better. After one big loss we went over to the parents and asked how they were doing and they all looked at me and said, “We’re not worried about us, we’re worried about you.” We laughed and it helped us get through the rest of the game. If their kids do something great, point it out.

Talk to your players and try to stay positive. If they drop a ball yell, “Good try.” As long as they hustle and respect the game, stay positive. If they start mailing it in, that’s the time to go nuts. Call the team together and talk about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Keep the bench reasonably orderly. They are kids so they are not going to behave perfectly, but it shouldn’t be chaos. Encourage them to cheer for the team – constantly – and have fun.

And they—and you—will come back for another season!

And that’s what it’s all about!

ADDENDUM

References



ADDENDUM: References

The following are good books on coaching little league baseball along with some thoughts on each.

Pitching

[Pitch Like a Pro: A guide for Young Pitchers and their Coaches, Little League through High School](#) by Jim Rosenthal (Author), Leo Mazzone (Author), and Henry Aaron (Foreword)

Great book by the guy who had the famous Braves rotation of Smoltz, Maddux, Glavine and Avery. Talks a lot about balance and using your whole body when you pitch.

[The Act of Pitching: A Tutorial for All Levels by a Master Technician-Detailing Every Aspect of Pitching](#) by Dr. John Bagonzi

Really breaks down pitching with some great drills. He's a big fan of weighted balls and I've always been a little afraid of hurting kids with them, but it has always struck me as an idea that is probably not bad and may have huge benefits for some kids. In general I'm a fan of improving the conditioning of all players, not just pitchers.

[The Pitching Edge](#) by Tom House

Amazing book on the mechanics learned from frame-by-frame video. Talks quite a bit about how most coaching advice is wrong because it's based on what the eye can see and that is typically very different from reality.

[Coaching Pitchers - 3rd Edition](#) by Joe McFarland

Really thorough book recommended to me by some college coaches. Very detailed. He is head coach at James Madison University.

[Randy Johnson's Power Pitching: The Big Unit's Secrets to Domination, Intimidation, and Winning](#) by Randy Johnson and Jim Rosenthal

Fun book to read. I enjoyed how he talked about how no one coached him at all until he was in the pro's because he was so dominant.

[The Art of Pitching](#) by Tom Seaver

The only book I have seen to take you through each pitch of a game. The book ends with a pitch by pitch breakdown of one of Seaver's no hitters. What he thought about every batter and every situation. Very interesting stuff.

[Coaching the Little League Pitcher : Teaching Young Players to Pitch With Skill and Confidence](#) by Randy Voorhees

I didn't get as much out of this one but it's in every library so I may as well mention it. It's not bad.

Hitting

[The Art of Hitting](#) by Tony Gwynn

Great book by one of my favorite hitters. Used to love seeing him hit everything as a perfect line drive to all fields. Was on the edge of my seat for any advice at all. The cover has a great shot of his head on the ball.

[The Science of Hitting](#) by Ted Williams and John Underwood

Truly useless as the author is someone who is a true freak of nature and has no idea how he hits anything. His advice, “See the ball hit the bat.” “Smell the burn of the wood meeting ball”. Well sure, that’s great, if you are superhuman. It’s a great example of a good thing to show parents so that when they say “Well, so and so did that on television which is different than what you teach.”

[You Can Teach Hitting: A Systematic Approach for Parents, Coaches, and Players](#) by Dusty Baker (Author), Jeff Mercer (Author), Marv Bittinger (Author), and Billy Williams (Foreword)

I have read this book several times. One of the co-authors is a physics professor. Beautifully written, lots of drills, lots of diagnostic grids for different problems. A truly great read.

He has several follow-on books, but the essence is all here.

[Coaching the Little League® Hitter](#) by John Monteleone

Good book, but a little thin on the details.

Coaching in General

[Jeff Burroughs' Little League Instructional Guide](#) by Jeff Burroughs

First book I read when I was a new coach. Nice overview, written by a champion of the little league world series. I liked the section on teaching bunting before hitting. Thought that made a lot of sense.

[The Baseball Drill Book \(The Drill Book Series\)](#) by American Baseball Coaches Association
Good drills, well described.

[Coaching Youth Baseball the Ripken Way](#) by Cal Ripken Jr. and Bill Ripken
Nice book, good illustrations. I find a lot of what Cal has to say as really good stuff, but tends to work more on more advanced players. Not sure his advice is so great for a true beginner. Fun side note is that I saw him play in one of his first professional games as a Bluefield Oriole when I used to go to games in Johnson City, Tennessee. Recognized his name as his dad coached the Asheville Orioles. I even went up and asked him if his dad was the coach of the Orioles and he said. "YEP, he is." Got his autograph. Of course I lost that autograph. So sad.

[Baseball: How To Play The Game: The Official Playing and Coaching Manual of Major League Baseball](#) by Pete Williams
Really like this one as it has some big pictures of MLB players in different phases of the game. Great to show kids to make a point.

[The Mental Game of Baseball: A Guide to Peak Performance](#) by H.A. Dorfman
Lot of good stuff on visualization, excellent read. Most of kid's problems are in their heads.

[The Complete Book of Baseball Signs and Plays](#) by Stu Southworth

Fun book with some good signs to use.