

# The Importance of Practice and Practice Planning



**B**aseball games are fun. No matter our age, we enjoy testing our skills against others. Even the youngest baseball players want to see how they compare to other players or teams their age. If you are a parent, you have probably tried to make your child move a little faster toward a destination by saying, "Hey, let's race; I bet you can't beat me!" Even 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds want to compete and win. Learning to compete to the best of our ability at whatever we pursue and how to win and lose with grace and dignity are important life lessons that should be introduced at a young age. But to maximize a young player's enjoyment of the game and to provide players with the best opportunity to improve, organized, and enjoyable practices are a must.

## **Make It Fun**

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One of our basic philosophies of teaching baseball is to make it fun. On the surface that means that we should let the kids play games, which is important from both an enjoyment and a developmental standpoint. Still, when it comes to developing young baseball players—from T-ball right up through high school—the importance of practice, even during the season, cannot be underestimated.

Because games provide kids with the most joy, we have to provide young players with an opportunity to play in plenty of games. Games give the kids something to look forward to each week, which helps maintain their interest. How many games a team should play during a given week and a season really depends on the age, interest level, and skill level of the players. Try not to overdo it at the youngest ages. However, even though baseball games lend themselves to a certain amount of standing around and downtime (between pitches, between innings, when your team is hitting, and so on), games do not usually offer an atmosphere that is conducive to teaching. A lot of excitement, energy, tension, interference, and distractions surround games, making it extremely difficult to communicate any type of teachings or lessons to a player.

## **The Right Time to Correct Mistakes**

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During games at our camps we make a point not to stop play to bring attention to a mistake or situation that could have been handled differently. We do not want to single out a kid to tell him or her that something could have been done differently or better. Doing so can lead to embarrassment, which could turn a young player off to the sport. We prefer to do our teaching between innings in the quiet of the dugout or bench area. Still, at that moment, the player most likely is focusing on something else instead of giving you full attention. The player might be looking at his or her parents, thinking about the next at-bat, or looking for a friend in the crowd. At some of our camps we have developed

a list of the most common mistakes or areas that need improvement for all of the campers. Those issues have been addressed in special instructional sessions for all campers or through additional team instructional sessions before the next afternoon's games. This method avoids embarrassing any one player and provides an atmosphere that is more conducive to communicating and learning. You may want to refrain from talking to your son or daughter about situations that occurred in the game during the car ride home. At that point kids have had their fill of baseball for the day and probably are thinking about how hungry they are or which video game they will play when they get to the house.

You can follow the same line of thinking when correcting mistakes made during your games. Instead of singling out a player or situation and trying to correct a mistake right after it happens on the field in full view of everyone, wait until the inning is over and pull as many players aside as possible to discuss what happened and how it can be corrected the next time. Remember that a lot of distractions occur during games, so maintaining your team's attention can be challenging. When teaching a lesson or correcting a mistake, do so in a spot that is relatively removed from parents and other spectators. Chances are that the excitement will take away from the kids' ability to absorb all of the information.

Although it's good to go over these situations after they happen, remember that the best time to teach is during practice. Kids seem to have the ability to let go of the moment and not dwell on what has just taken place. They are pretty good about looking ahead to their next activity. If you rehash every detail of the game during the contest or as soon as it is over, you run the risk of overloading your players with information and zapping the enjoyment from the game experience. Maintain a journal or notebook with a detailed list of situations and mistakes to address at the next practice. Keep that list to yourself until practice time and then run through everything that you want to cover when you have everyone's full attention. Try your best to re-create the situations and present them as areas that the team needs to improve on rather than point out the mistakes made by one or two individuals.

## **Use Practices for Learning**

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As we mentioned previously, practice clearly is the best time to address situations that occur in games and to perfect areas of play that need work. Leagues that only play games can really hurt the development of their young players. I think that even the more advanced travel teams, which play 50 or 60 games (or more) during the spring and summer (and sometimes into the fall and winter), may be hurting their players' development at times because they play too many games and don't have enough time to address skill development and team fundamentals in a practice setting. Big league players go through six weeks of spring training for good reasons: The players must get their

repetitions in, refine their fundamental skills, and develop their team strategies and philosophies over a long period of time, because once the season begins they play almost every day. For kids, however, six weeks of practice without playing usually is not practical. Field availability, inclement weather, and team members' involvement in other sports can limit the amount of preseason practice time a team gets.

Right up through high school, to college, and even at the professional level, the process of learning on the baseball field is a continual one. During practices you cannot simulate everything that potentially can happen in a game. Baseball is a crazy game. Every year during the Major League season we see plays that we never have seen before. Big league players are the best in the world at what they do, and because they play so many games, they often have to learn on the fly. At the lower levels of baseball we have the luxury of re-creating any new or unusual situations that arise in a practice setting to make sure that all of the tangible lessons can be absorbed. Adults have had much more practice at taking an experience and adapting a response the next time that situation arises without having to re-create the original circumstances. For kids, having the opportunity to break the situation down into understandable parts and to explain why each player involved in the play should react in a certain way is an invaluable learning opportunity. If you have your team do nothing but play games, it becomes very difficult for you to do any teaching, because you always react to events that occur in the heat of battle.

Practice gets a bad rap, especially in baseball, for being boring and tedious. So many fine motor skills must be mastered to play the sport—throwing, catching, hitting, and so on—that fundamental skill development is a must. Remember, baseball is a very simple game. Whether you are a budding youth player or Alex Rodriguez, you have to be able to throw the ball, catch the ball, and hit the ball to be successful. And, whether you are a novice or Alex, to be successful you should follow the exact same fundamental approaches. When a ground ball is hit to a young player, if the player has been schooled correctly, he or she fields it with the feet spread apart to create a wide base, the butt down, and the hands out in front. The same goes for Alex. Once Alex fields the ground ball, he should shuffle his feet toward the first baseman, step directly toward that target, and then follow the throw in that same direction. The young player should do it the same way. When we instruct young players, we have them work on these simple fundamentals over and over. You know why? Because those are the same fundamentals that Alex has worked on from the time he was playing recreational ball right up to this very day. Baseball's fundamental skills are very simple; the complexities of the game come with the various strategies and team fundamentals that are incorporated as we get older and the game becomes more serious. However, players cannot incorporate those complexities until they have mastered the basics.

Games provide kids with a fun, competitive atmosphere that is necessary to maintain their interest and attention. However, kids just don't get enough

repetitions in games to develop the fundamental skills necessary to improve. You can introduce and practice the basic fundamentals during practice in a lot of fun ways. There is no question that fundamental drills can become tedious. Kids are not wired to be able to perform the same simple tasks over and over again without shifting their focus or attention. By breaking the kids into small groups and rotating them to different stations every 15 or 20 minutes, you can break up the monotony of practice. You can hold their attention in other ways as well. Later on in this course we show you ways in which you can turn the same simple drills into games or contests to help maintain a high level of interest and concentration. The same drills that seemed boring before suddenly become a lot more exciting when the element of competition is introduced. Often you will have to ask the kids to leave the field or stop doing a drill, even one that you thought was losing their attention, once you have added a point system or some other means of determining a winner. Not only does this method allow the players to receive a lot more repetitions, but also it puts them in more of a competitive, gamelike situation. Keep pushing your way through this course to learn more about how to make fundamental drills more creative and exciting.

## **Remain Goal Oriented**

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Always design practices while keeping in mind the age-specific goals set forth earlier in this course. When developing a series of practices or a season plan, it is important to understand our philosophy about skill development, which includes introducing and demonstrating a skill, using buzzwords and catch phrases to help kids remember, explaining why the skill or drill is important, letting the kids attempt the skill, correcting mistakes through conversation and demonstration, and reviewing and refining until the skill is mastered.

Be careful not to incorporate more advanced skills, drills, or concepts into your practice until you have achieved the age-specific goal in a particular category. For example, if you are working with a group of 4- to 6-year-olds, don't move into generating momentum toward the target when throwing—a fundamental that should be introduced to older players—until your team has mastered the proper basic throwing mechanics. If you move too quickly for the players in your age group, you are setting both your players and yourself up for a great deal of frustration.