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Teaching and Shaping Skills

Your primary objective as a youth baseball coach should be to develop well-rounded baseball players. You can accomplish this goal by letting them play many positions; teaching them the fundamental skills, rules, and strategies; and introducing them to values, life lessons, and the importance of leading an active lifestyle. Teaching and coaching are closely related, but they have important differences. In this chapter we focus on principles of teaching, especially teaching baseball skills. But many of the principles we discuss apply to teaching tactics and strategies, fitness concepts, and other important lessons as well. (Most of the other important teaching principles deal with communication, which is covered in chapter 2.) Then, in chapter 10, we discuss the principles of coaching that relate to your leadership activities during contests.

Teaching Baseball Skills

Many people believe that the only qualification needed to teach a skill is to have performed it. It's helpful to have performed it, but successful teaching requires much more than that. And even if you haven't played much baseball or performed some of the skills you must help young players develop, you still can teach the game effectively by employing the Ripken Way of Skill Development:

The Ripken Way of Skill Development

1. *Place your players in small groups to introduce the skill to them.*

   Be sure to use key buzzwords that can help them remember how to perform the skill. Demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill. Don't forget to explain why the skill should be performed that way. Describe and demonstrate the drill that will help them improve the skill you have introduced. Examples of buzzwords are the basic ground ball fielding fundamentals: *Wide base, butt down, hands out in front.* Another example is the phrase we use to describe a proper weight shift when hitting: *You have to go back to go forward.*

2. *Observe your players.*

   Note what they do well and what they might need to improve. Emphasize the correct way to do it as opposed to what they do wrong.

3. *Bring your players together to talk about how they've performed so far.*

   Ask them questions about the proper way to execute the skill and why it should be done that way. Answering basic questions such as "What is the goal of the drill?" and "What are the most important things to remember when executing the drills (buzzwords)?" allows players to understand the correct mechanics. Asking them to explain *why* convinces them that there is an important reason for performing the skill a certain way and helps them remember the proper techniques. If they don't come up with

the answers on their own, guide them toward the correct responses or demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill without speaking.

4. *Ask some or all of the players to demonstrate the proper technique and to repeat the key buzzwords for you.*

   Do this again at the end of the drill and then before you repeat the drill to reinforce the concepts. Review and reinforce.

5. *Add competition.*

   Once the players get the hang of the drill, introduce a point system or some other method for them to perform the drill in a competitive setting.

We prefer to use these steps when teaching the game of baseball. Next we will explain each step in greater detail.

Place Players in Small Groups and Introduce the Skill

Players, especially young and inexperienced ones, need to know what skill they are learning and why they are learning it. When you put players in small groups and rotate them to various stations every 15 or 20 minutes you can keep them moving, maintain their interest, and give them some of the individual feedback they need to improve. Remember to take these steps every time you introduce a skill to your players:

1. Get your players' attention.
2. Name the skill.
3. Demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill.
4. Introduce key buzzwords or phrases to help players remember the skill.
5. Explain why it is important to perform the skill a certain way.

Get Your Players' Attention

Because youngsters are easily distracted, use some method to get their attention. Some coaches use interesting news items or stories. Others use jokes. And still others simply project enthusiasm to get their players to listen. Whatever method you use, speak slightly above the normal volume and look your players in the eye when you speak. Make sure that your players understand that they are not allowed to talk or otherwise distract their teammates when a coach is talking.

Be sure to position players so that they can see and hear you. Arrange the players in two or three evenly spaced rows, facing you. (Make sure they aren't looking into the sun or at some distracting activity.) Then ask whether all of them can see you before you begin.

Name the Skill

Although you might mention other common names for the skill, decide which one you'll use and stick with it. Doing so will help avoid confusion and enhance communication among your players. For example, because several methods exist for fielding a ground ball, make sure to differentiate between the basic, or routine, ground ball and other ways of fielding ground balls such as backhands and forehands.

Demonstrate the Proper Way to Perform the Skill

Most of us are visual learners. We need more than simple instructions or descriptions to master a skill. Being able to demonstrate the skill you are trying to teach is important when attempting to successfully explain a skill. It is usually easier for young players to imitate someone than to absorb a lot of information. Keep in mind that it is easier for young athletes to imitate those who are facing the same direction they are. For example, if you are teaching a group of players how to field a routine ground ball correctly, you shouldn't face them when demonstrating because they are facing the opposite direction. Turn to face the same direction they face so that they can truly imitate you. Break the entire skill into several smaller parts, each with checkpoints so that the players have a frame of reference to make sure they execute the skill properly. (Slow the skill down if necessary to help players understand how to do it properly.) Before you begin drills take a walk around and make sure that everyone is taking the proper approach to learning the skill.

One caution: Young players have short attention spans, so a long demonstration or explanation of a skill may bore them. So spend no more than a few minutes altogether on the introduction, demonstration, and explanation phases. Then get the players active in a drill that helps teach them how to perform the skill. The introduction and demonstration should take no more than 10 minutes, followed by drills, which eventually can be turned into games or contests.

Introduce key buzzwords or phrases to help players remember the skill. Young children often use word association to study for tests or absorb educational materials. The same method is effective when teaching proper baseball skills. Use key words or phrases that relate to a specific skill and will help the players remember the proper approach. You should often refer to these buzzwords as a means of reinforcing the current lesson and for review before introducing more complex skills. Buzzwords that we use include the following: *loose hands, quick bat* (goal of Soft Toss Drill); *you have to go back to go forward* (weight shift when hitting); *five links of the chain* (pitching mechanics); *get the ball down, out, and up* (power position); and *wide base, butt down, hands in front* (routine ground ball fielding position).

Explain Why to Perform the Skill a Certain Way

Why? is a young person's favorite question. As a coach, if you are able to explain why a skill should be performed a certain way, you gain instant credibility. If you are able to explain why it is important to perform a skill in a certain way, a young player is much more likely to try it that way than if you just tell them that they should do it because you are their coach and you know best. Also, if a young player understands why a skill is attempted a certain way, even if he or she can't execute the skill right away, at some point a play will happen in a game and he or she will naturally approach it correctly.

Remember that although the importance of a skill may be apparent to you, your players may be less able to see how the skill will help them become better baseball players. Offer them a reason for learning the skill, and describe how the skill relates to more advanced skills. For example, even the youngest players can execute an underhand flip properly. They may not be skilled enough to use it to start a double play, but you can explain to them that some day—when they are bigger and stronger—the underhand flip will help them turn two.

> The most difficult aspect of coaching is this: Coaches must learn to let athletes learn. Sport skills should be taught so they have meaning to the child, not just meaning to the coach.
>
> Rainer Martens,
> *founder of the American Sport Education Program*

Attend to Players Practicing the Skill

If the skill you selected was within your players' capabilities and you have done an effective job of introducing, demonstrating, and explaining it, your players should be ready to attempt the skill. Some players may need to be physically guided through the movements during their first few attempts. Walking unsure athletes through the skill in this way will help them gain confidence to perform the skill on their own.

Your teaching duties don't end when all of your athletes have demonstrated that they understand how to perform the skill. In fact, a significant part of your teaching involves observing them as they improve and helping them stay on task when they don't perform the skill exactly the way you taught them. Later we guide you in shaping players' skills, and then we help you learn how to detect and correct errors using positive feedback. Keep in mind that your feedback will have a great influence on your players' motivation to practice and improve their performances. Don't forget to use the buzzwords and demonstrations to continually review and reinforce the skills you have introduced.

Remember, too, that players sometimes need individual instruction. If possible, try to set aside a time before, during, or after practice to give individual help when it is needed.

Helping Players Improve Skills

After you have successfully taught your players a skill, your focus turns to continually helping them improve that skill. Players learn skills and improve upon them at different rates, so don't get too frustrated. Instead, help them improve by constantly shaping their skills and detecting and correcting errors.

Shaping Players' Skills

One of your principal teaching duties is to reward positive behavior—in terms of successful skill execution—when you see it. A player hits the ball hard in practice, and you immediately say, "That's the way to keep your head in there! Good swing!" This, plus a smile and a thumbs-up gesture, goes a long way toward reinforcing a particular technique with that player.

Sometimes, however, you may have a long dry spell before you have any correct technique to reinforce. It's difficult to reward players when they aren't executing skills correctly. How can you shape their skills in this case?

Shaping skills takes practice on the part of your players and patience on your part. Players at all levels make physical errors. This is expected and accepted as long as the proper approach was taken. Positive reinforcement when a skill is performed correctly doesn't mean that the skill will be executed properly the next time. One of the most frustrating things about being a coach is the inconsistency you see in your players' techniques. It can be even more challenging to stay positive when your athletes repeatedly perform a skill incorrectly or lack enthusiasm for learning. It can certainly be frustrating to see athletes who seemingly don't follow your advice and continue to make the same mistakes. And when the athletes don't seem to care, you may wonder why you should.

Please know that it is normal to get frustrated at times when teaching skills. Nevertheless, part of successful coaching is controlling this frustration. Instead of getting upset, use these six guidelines for shaping skills:

1. *Think small initially.*

   Reward the first signs of behavior that approximate what you are looking for. Then reward closer and closer approximations of the desired behavior. In short, use your reward power to shape the behavior you seek. Celebrate small victories with enthusiasm.

2. *Break skills into small steps.*

   For instance, in learning to field ground balls and then throwing after the catch, one of your players does well as far as getting into the proper fielding position (*wide base, butt down, hands out in front*) and watching the ball into the glove, but doesn't shuffle his or her feet toward the target or follow the throw after releasing it. Reinforce the correct techniques of getting into proper position and watching the ball into the glove, and teach him or her how to shuffle in the proper direction and

prepare to throw. When he or she masters that, focus on getting him or her to complete the skill by following the throw toward the target after releasing it.

3. *Develop one component of a skill at a time.*

   Don't try to shape two components of a skill at once. For example, when hitting, players must begin with a proper grip, get in a comfortable and appropriate stance, and use proper mechanics to incorporate a weight shift, stride, and swing. Players should focus first on one aspect at a time: grip, then stance, then weight shift, then stride, and then swing. Athletes who have problems mastering a skill often do so because they're trying to improve two or more components at once. Help these athletes to isolate a single component. That is one reason why we advocate using different hitting drills to develop each part of the swing before allowing the player to face live pitching.

4. *As athletes become more proficient at a skill, reinforce them only occasionally and only for the best examples of the skill behavior.*

   When you focus only on the best examples, you will help them continue to improve once they've mastered the basics, and they will begin to understand the difference between doing something satisfactorily and doing it exceptionally.

5. *When athletes are trying to master a new skill, temporarily relax your standards for how you reward them.*

   As they focus on the new skill or attempt to integrate it with other skills, the old well-learned skills may temporarily degenerate. As this happens remind them of the buzzwords and demonstrate all aspects of the new and old skills. Constantly review and reinforce.

6. *If a well-learned skill degenerates for long, try to restore it by going back to the basics.*

   For example, a hitter who makes contact on almost every pitch, suddenly can't hit anything. You might want to go back to soft toss or short toss from the front to help the player regain confidence and then go back to live pitching.

It can be great for camaraderie—as well as a natural display of leadership—when a player realizes that a teammate is struggling with a skill and offers unsolicited positive reinforcement as the teammate executes a skill correctly. You have to be careful, though, because you are the coach and players shouldn't overstep their bounds to the point that they actually teach. This type of interaction can lead to players criticizing each other. It's always important for the players to realize who the coach is and to respect that person's knowledge and authority.

We've looked at how to guide your athletes as they learn skills. Now let's look at another critical teaching principle that you should employ as you're shaping skills: detecting and correcting errors.

Detecting and Correcting Errors

Good coaches recognize that athletes make two types of errors: learning errors and performance errors. Learning errors are ones that occur because athletes don't know how to perform a skill; that is, they have not yet developed the correct motor program in the brain to perform a particular skill. Performance errors are made not because athletes don't know how to do the skill, but because they made a mistake in executing what they do know. There is no easy way to know whether a player is making learning or performance errors. Part of the art of coaching is being able to sort out which type of error each mistake is and how to handle the situation in a manner that is in the player's best interest.

The process of helping your athletes correct errors begins with your observing and evaluating their performances to determine whether the mistakes are learning or performance errors. For performance errors, you need to look for the reasons that your athletes are not performing as well as they should. If the mistakes are learning errors, then you need to help them learn the skill, which is the focus of this section. Keep in mind that players of all ages will make performance errors, which are sometimes called physical errors (as opposed to mental errors). It is important not to get too upset about performance errors as long as the player's approach to the skill was correct and he or she put forth the proper effort.

There is no substitute for understanding skills well when correcting learning errors. The better you understand a skill—not only how it is done correctly but also what causes learning errors—the more helpful you will be in correcting mistakes.

One of the most common coaching mistakes is to provide inaccurate feedback and advice on how to correct errors. Don't rush into error correction; wrong feedback or poor advice hurts the learning process more than no feedback or advice. Observation is a key to successful coaching. You can't watch a kid swing at a couple of pitches or throw a couple of pitches and know what needs to be corrected. Watch your players hit, field, and pitch closely over time before asking them to change anything. Look for results. If a batter seems to have a flaw or two in his or her swing, but is your team's most consistent hitter in practice, you're probably better off leaving that kid alone. Likewise, if a pitcher doesn't follow through in a good fielding position but throws hard and accurately, you should overlook the follow-through. Some of the hardest throwers and most successful pitchers at the big league level (such as Troy Percival and Goose Gossage) don't end up in a good fielding position. Imagine if their youth league coaches had tried to correct them. They might not be where they are today.

As a rule, you should see the error repeated several times before attempting to correct it. If you are uncertain about the cause of the problem or how to correct it, don't try to correct it yet. Continue to observe and analyze until you are sure. Don't be afraid to ask for advice from someone whom you trust

as an expert or to refer to any Ripken instructional products, which can be found in the Products section of www.ripkenbaseball.com.

Correct One Error at a Time

Suppose Megan, one of your outfielders, is having trouble with her fielding. She tends to break in on the ball first, and she often has to reverse direction as the ball flies over her head. When she is in position to catch a ball, she uses only one hand and doesn't catch the ball above the head. What should you do?

First, decide which error to correct first, because athletes learn more effectively when they attempt to correct one error at a time. Determine whether one error is causing the other; if so, have her correct that error first, because it may eliminate the other error. However, in Megan's case, neither error is causing the other. In such cases, athletes should correct the error that will bring the greatest improvement when remedied—for Megan, this would be working on stepping back first on fly balls that she is unsure of, learning how to execute the drop step on balls over her head, and then practicing how to run hard while still being able to catch the ball. If balls are constantly going over her head, she needs to be positioned deeper and understand that the drop step can help her move quickly in the proper direction. If balls only occasionally fly over her head, she needs to break the habit of running toward the infield on every fly ball. Once she improves her ability to judge fly balls and get into proper position, then teach her to catch the ball with two hands above her head (toss them first before hitting or using a machine). Improvement in the first area may even motivate her to correct the other error.

Use Positive Feedback to Correct Errors

The positive approach to correcting errors includes emphasizing what to do instead of what not to do. Use compliments, praise, rewards, and encouragement to correct errors. Acknowledge correct performance as well as efforts to improve. Reward hard work. By using the positive approach, you can help your athletes feel good about themselves and promote a strong desire to achieve.

When you work with one athlete at a time, use these four steps as a positive approach to correcting errors:

1. Praise effort and correct performance.
2. Give simple and precise feedback to correct errors.
3. Make sure the athlete understands your feedback.
4. Provide an environment that motivates the athlete to improve.

Let's take a brief look at each step.

Step 1: Praise Effort and Correct Performance Praise your athlete for trying to perform a skill correctly and for performing any parts of it correctly. Do this immediately after he or she performs the skill, if possible. Keep the praise

simple: "Good try," "Way to hustle," "Good form," or "That's the way to follow through." You can also use nonverbal feedback, such as smiling, clapping your hands, or any facial or body expression that shows approval.

Make sure your praise is sincere. Don't indicate that an athlete's effort was good when it wasn't. Usually an athlete knows when he or she has made a sincere effort to perform the skill correctly and perceives undeserved praise for what it is—untruthful feedback to make him or her feel good. Likewise, don't indicate that a player's performance was correct when it wasn't.

Step 2: Give Simple and Precise Feedback Don't burden a player with a long or detailed explanation of how to correct an error. Give just enough feedback so that the player can correct one error at a time. Before giving feedback, recognize that some athletes will readily accept it immediately after the error and others will respond better if you slightly delay the correction.

For errors that are complicated to explain and difficult to correct, try the following:

- Explain and demonstrate what the athlete should have done. Do not demonstrate what the athlete did wrong.
- Explain the cause or causes of the error if it isn't obvious.
- Explain why you are recommending the correction you have selected if it isn't obvious.

Step 3: Make Sure the Athlete Understands the Feedback If the athlete doesn't understand your feedback, he or she won't be able to correct the error. Ask him or her to repeat the feedback and to explain and demonstrate how it will be used. If the athlete can't do this, be patient and present your feedback again. Then have the athlete repeat the feedback after you're finished. Remember the buzzwords to help with your explanation, and don't forget to explain *why*.

Step 4: Provide an Environment That Motivates the Athlete to Improve Your players won't always be able to correct their errors immediately, even if they do understand your feedback. Encourage them to hang in there and stick with it when corrections are difficult or they seem discouraged. For more difficult corrections, remind them that it will take time, and the improvement will happen only if they work at it. Make a concerted effort to encourage players with low self-confidence. Saying something such as, "You were hitting much better today. With practice, you'll be able to keep your head in and make consistent contact," can motivate a player to continue to refine his or her hitting skills. Reinforce successes by telling the player what he or she did right and how it contributed to the successful performance. This prevents the player from changing or correcting an action that doesn't need fixing.

Some athletes need more outside motivation to improve. Others may be more self-motivated and need little help from you in this area; with them you

can practically ignore step 4 when correcting an error. While motivation often comes from within, try to provide an environment of positive instruction and encouragement to help your athletes improve. Remember that every player is different physically and emotionally and that part of your job is to develop an understanding of what motivational techniques will be most effective with each player.

A final note on correcting errors: Team sports such as baseball provide unique challenges when it comes to troubleshooting. How do you provide individual feedback in a group setting using a positive approach? Instead of yelling across the field to correct an error (and embarrassing the player), substitute for the player who erred (if the error occurred in practice) or wait until a game is between innings, and then make the correction on the sidelines. This type of feedback has three advantages:

1. The player will be more receptive to the one-on-one feedback.
2. The other players are still active, still practicing skills, and unable to hear your discussion, thus limiting the player's embarrassment.
3. Because the rest of the team is still playing, you'll feel compelled to make your comments simple and concise—which, as we've said, is more helpful to the player.

This doesn't mean you can't use the team setting to give specific, positive feedback. You can do so to emphasize correct group and individual performances. Use this team feedback approach only for positive statements, though. Save any negative feedback for individual discussions.

Running a Fun and Efficient Practice

We've all seen it: We drive by a local baseball field during a youth practice. It doesn't look like much fun. An adult is pitching, one player is batting, another player is on deck, and the rest of the team is in the field. It's hot, and the only person who looks interested is the batter. It even appears as though it's an effort for the coach to be out there. A ball is hit, and one of the fielders halfheartedly chases the ball and throws it back into the infield. Balls are scattered everywhere. Every so often a player sits down or wanders into the bench area to get a drink. This goes on for a little more than an hour, and then everyone goes home. That's practice.

Unfortunately, this scenario plays out more often than not on baseball fields across America. It's easy to see why over the last 10 to 15 years many kids have gotten bored with baseball and looked toward sports they think are more exciting. The rise of the extreme sports has given kids more opportunities to pursue recreational activities on their own. Home video games give kids the feeling that they are really playing sports in professional stadiums and arenas. It's easy to get four or six guys together, find a basketball, and get

a pick-up game started. Soccer and hockey have developed programs to train and certify coaches, and parents seem to prefer the idea of sending their kids to an environment that they know will be organized and structured.

The previous batting practice scenario is not the only reason that baseball has struggled to hold on to its participants. In fact, that scenario is more common as kids get a little bit older and their parents become less interested in volunteering. At the youngest ages of 4 to 6, when most kids play T-ball or coach pitch, parents are more eager to get out on the field and help to make sure that their kids are having a good time. Everyone wants to have video footage of their 5-year-old's first T-ball game. As the years pass, it brings us great joy to look back on our children's formative years with fondness. We love to rerun old videos of our kids having fun—even if they don't always appreciate it!

One of the big problems with baseball right now is that the game, as currently structured, is not very fun for even the youngest players. We think that there are just as many (if not more) 4- and 5-year-olds who are as intrigued now as there have ever been when they see a baseball and a bat. They still want to throw or hit the ball. It's a natural curiosity. Kids want to learn to play baseball. So, what happens between the time of that first spark of interest and the age of 13, when kids seem to be dropping baseball for other recreational activities? We think that the experience is not enjoyable for the majority of kids from the earliest stages of their athletic development. We also think that this situation can be fixed.

Once again, we don't blame the volunteer coaches for the decline in baseball participation or for the lack of excitement that kids seem to find in the game. Baseball as a sport has not given much attention to the needs of its coaches. Most times, coaches are not armed with the materials and knowledge they need about the game itself, motor development, and child psychology. They volunteer their time by checking a box on their child's registration form and are called and told when and where to pick up the equipment, team jerseys, and so on. From that point on it's up to them. Sometimes one designated practice time and one game time a week are assigned to each team. Other times there might be two games a week and no practices. At the youngest ages the games often evolve into free-for-alls in which most of the defensive players jump on the batted ball while baserunners advance one base at a time. Very little learning occurs other than the players gaining an understanding that if they field a batted ball they should try to throw it to first base before the runner gets there.

Games don't offer many learning opportunities, so it stands to reason that even at the youngest ages practices are extremely important. Practices, if handled correctly, provide the opportunity to interact with players individually or in small groups, to develop individual motor skills, to teach the basic rules of the game, and to understand what it means to be part of a team. As we stated earlier, practices can be as much fun as or even more fun than games.

Kids will always look forward to games. Even the youngest players look forward to their games, although many of the contests are not particularly well organized. At that level it's the parents who seem to lose their patience faster when games are not particularly exciting or enjoyable. Competition drives all of us, no matter what age we are. As kids get older the games become more fun and exciting for them and their parents. If we can make sure that baseball practices are organized, enjoyable, and effective (so that players look forward to the idea of just being on the field at any time), we will make tremendous progress toward our goal of growing the game of baseball and returning it to its former status among the other participatory sports. We hope that this course serves as a valuable resource for youth baseball coaches everywhere. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to the basic concepts that can help coaches of all ages run effective baseball practices.

As always, common sense must prevail. For ages 4 to 6, a practice should not last much longer than an hour. You should shorten times accordingly if the kids are struggling and don't seem to want to be there that day. You can extend practice at this age group, but only if the players ask to stay longer. Players ages 7 to 9 should be able to handle an hour just about any day and may even be able to maintain interest and concentration for as long as an hour and a half (try to keep practice to about an hour and 15 minutes for this age group). Players aged 10 to 12 can probably handle an hour and a half with regularity. Use this framework as a guideline, and customize practices to fit

Sample Practice Plan for Ages 12 and Under

10 minutes	**Baserunning**
	Big league baserunning or dynamic warm-up
20 minutes	**Stretch and throw**
	Stretch around mound or in center field
	Go over practice plan in detail
	Stress proper throwing mechanics and proper catching fundamentals
45 minutes	**Stations—small groups, 15 minutes per station and rotate**
	Live batting practice
	Tee work/soft toss—use fences/backstops if necessary
	Fielding/throwing station—while live batting practice is going on
	Fly ball/throwing station—while live batting practice is going on
10 minutes	**Baserunning**

Sample Practice Plan for Ages 13 and up

20 minutes	**Stretch, run, throw**
20 minutes	**Ground balls and fly balls—use buckets and systems to minimize throws and maximize repetitions**
	Not taking infield
	Two infield fungo stations
	One outfield fungo station
20 minutes	**Team fundamentals**
	Bunt defenses
	First and third defenses
	Cutoffs and relays
	Pickoffs and rundowns
	Team baserunning
60 minutes	**Team batting practice—four stations, 15 minutes each (or four stations, 10 minutes each if you want to do another team fundamental)**
	Stations can be rotated daily; always include free hitting

your needs. You will find more information about the types of drills that can be integrated into these formats later in the course.

Once the season begins, you should prioritize which issues need to be addressed during team fundamental sessions. You can add another team fundamental session and reduce batting practice by 20 minutes. Please note that the infield fungo station does not mean taking a full infield. Batting practice provides opportunities for pitchers to throw on the side and do their running.

Use Small Groups and Stations

It's twice as easy and productive to be able to work with a group of 6 or 7 as opposed to an entire team of 12 or 15. Likewise, it's easier and more productive to work with a group of three versus a group of six. We have been running camps with up to 250 kids attending at one time since 1999. One thing we have learned through this experience is that to teach baseball effectively you must make the practices as interactive as possible by using a variety of drills or stations and breaking the kids down into small groups.

The key is to develop stations that cover the age-appropriate instructional goals discussed in chapter 4. It is important to understand that at each age level attention spans vary, so the length of each station should be set with an eye toward how long you will be able hold the kids' attention. After a few productive minutes the groups should rotate to a new drill or station. It also is important to keep the drills and stations creative. By simply turning a basic drill into a game or contest you can maintain a child's attention for a much longer period. Be careful about having a winner and loser, though. It can lead to hurt feelings and disappointment. It's always good to make all the kids feel like winners if possible, even if that means giving everyone some type of reward at the end of a drill or practice.

Because creating two or three small groups is an important aspect of running an effective, enjoyable practice, it stands to reason that communicating effectively with parents is imperative when attempting to follow this model. Earlier we discussed the importance of having someone available to supervise each group. That's one reason the preseason meeting with parents is essential. If you can get a rotation set up so that one or two parents attend each practice, it becomes much easier to run a well-organized, effective, and fun practice.

Let Players Determine Practice Length

Most youth leagues seem to schedule practices in 1-hour time blocks. This may turn out to be way too long for the T-ballers or a little too short for the 12-year-olds. Regardless, you will be able to tell by the kids' body language and ability to pay attention when a practice has run its course.

We feel very strongly that practices for youth players ages 10 and younger should last not much longer than an hour. For the youngest players the limit may be 30 or 45 minutes. If practices are more fun and interactive with a variety of activities, it will be easier to maintain the team's attention for a full hour. In fact, sometimes the kids will be excited and will want to stay longer. That is fine, too, as long as the players dictate. Other times you may find that after 45 minutes a practice has become unproductive. Coaches need to be able to sense when a practice should end and be willing to cut it short. Always keep the big picture in mind. At the end of the season we want the kids' memories of the entire season to be positive. We don't want them to look back and remember that practices were long, tedious, or boring.

As players get older their passion for the game and attention spans are likely to increase. It is okay to adjust practice times accordingly. Again, the key is to be able to read the players and understand when enough is enough. Practices for younger players should accentuate fun; use shorter stations (they love baserunning) and incorporate more games and contests.

Players in the 7-to-9 age group will begin to learn team concepts, which can be more time consuming. However, the amount of time spent on these concepts should be limited. If they don't understand it after a certain amount of time, they probably aren't going to get it that day. Move on to something

else. Practices for players in this age group still should be kept to approximately 1 hour, although some teams will be able to handle more. Again, let the kids dictate.

As players continue to get older, team fundamentals and drills become more important. However, remember that throwing, catching, and hitting are the basic building blocks of the game and should be practiced every day. So, practices will inherently be longer. Still, you should monitor your players to make sure that you don't lose their attention by practicing too much. Limiting practices to 1-1/2 hours is a good starting point for teams in the 11-to-12 age group.

Even as players progress up the ranks into high school, you need to monitor practice length. We believe that practices for teams of any level should not last much beyond 2 hours. Coaches of older and more advanced players will spend more time on team fundamentals such as bunt defenses, cutoffs, and relays, first-and-third defenses, communication, and so on. Still, if you spend too much time on these, it can become counter-productive. If your players haven't caught on after about 20 minutes, they probably won't get it that day.

Warming Up

Many times a coach shows up and immediately tells the team to run around the bases. As players get older they begin to understand that this activity is a warm-up. They know what it means to jog and get loose. Younger players usually do not grasp this concept. They view it as a race and run as hard as they can in an effort to finish first. Some players are not able to complete the run at this pace and get tired quickly. Others push themselves to the very end and exhaust their energy. Either way, you are going to have a bunch of tired kids. It might take them 10 minutes or longer to recover, which is not a good situation to be in when only 1 hour is allotted for practice.

A better idea for the younger ages is to open practice with baserunning. Kids love to run bases. In fact, they love it so much you can begin and end practice with base running. We like to use a drill that we call Big League Baserunning. The players run from home to first as if they were trying to beat out an infield hit. The concepts of touching the front of the bag and running through the base are stressed. Next, the players run from first to third. After that they walk home and then run a double. Then they simulate scoring on a hit from second base. At that point, if the players are not too tired, they can run out a triple or a home run. Each time specific baserunning skills that will be discussed later in this book are stressed. You can even start out with a slow jog—playing follow the leader with a coach—all the way around the bases before moving into Big League Baserunning or a similar activity.

As players get older (over 13) you can introduce and explain the concept of a dynamic warm-up, including jogging, running, bounding, skipping, high knees, and so on. (Younger-aged players can perform the same warm-up, but it

isn't as important to tell the players why they are doing it at that point). Older players should be able to arrive at practice and start this type of warm-up as a team on their own before beginning a daily stretching routine.

Cold muscles should never be stretched, but it is important to introduce a stretching routine to any age group. Generating a flow of blood to the muscles *before* stretching is essential to prevent injury. Get their heart rates up and have them start sweating a little bit. After the baserunning or dynamic warm-up, players can sit in a circle and begin their stretching routine. Younger players will not have a real physical need to stretch. They roll out of bed loose and ready to go. They are not in much danger of straining muscles. However, understanding the importance of stretching and developing a routine can help them form good habits throughout their athletic careers. So, the earlier the concept of proper stretching is introduced the better. Team stretching also provides coaches with an opportunity to go over the practice plan that has been developed for that day, thus eliminating wasted time once the practice begins.

Having a Plan

As we stated in chapter 1, it is important for a coach to spend some time in advance putting the day's practice on paper. It is even better to e-mail this plan to all of the players and parents the night before practice. If you come to practice with a plan and can communicate and organize the plan effectively while the team stretches, the confidence level of the players and parents will increase, and the practice will run much more efficiently. They will understand that you take your responsibilities seriously and that you are trying to make the experience as rewarding as possible for all involved. Players are more likely to give maximum effort and attention to a coach who is organized, and parents are less likely to question an organized, dedicated coach. If you are disorganized, the players will quickly think that you don't really care, which will make it difficult for you to run an effective practice and may have a negative impact on the entire season.

Adjusting to Limited Field Space

It can be very easy for us to tell coaches not to fall into the trap of running a practice where one kid is hitting and everyone else is standing around in the field. After all, we have access to a one-of-a-kind youth baseball academy that we have built in Aberdeen, MD, that has eight youth fields, a synthetic turf practice infield, and multiple batting cages. Most coaches come to practice and have use of one field for an hour. Some coaches don't even get to use a field with a backstop. Those circumstances make it harder to plan an effective practice. Harder, but not impossible. You just have to get a little creative!

You can set up batting practice so that several stations are going on at the same time. Let's say you have a team with 15 players. You might break your team into three groups of five. One group goes to the outfield, where a coach or volunteer hits or throws fly balls and ground balls to the players between pitches. Another group goes to the infield, where a coach or volunteer hits or rolls ground balls to the players between pitches. The third group is a hitting and baserunning group. One player goes to first base and simulates situational baserunning (seeing a bunt hit the ground before breaking, hit and run, advancing on a hit, reading a fly ball, and so on). Another player is hitting at home plate (two bunts, two hit and runs, 10 swings). The other three players are hitting plastic, rubber, or foam balls off of a tee or doing a soft toss into the backstop or a fence. (Don't hit hard baseballs into a fence!)

In this scenario players are working on hitting, throwing, and catching. If you spend 15 minutes on the warm-up, throwing, and catching before starting batting practice, you then can let the groups hit for 10 to 15 minutes each and still accomplish quite a bit. There might even be more time left over at the end to go over a team fundamental for older groups or to do more baserunning or have skills contests for younger teams.

This is just one example of how to make efficient use of limited field space to run an effective practice. Another way is to purchase some portable pop-up nets. These screens are light and fold up into a bag. You can take them anywhere and set them up in a matter of minutes, allowing you to create your own hitting stations under virtually any conditions. The Jugs Company produces foam rubber Lite Flite balls with raised seams that can be used to take safe batting practice almost anywhere. We have developed a product, called Ripken Quickball, which uses durable small and regulation-sized plastic balls with holes and raised seams that are perfect for hitting drills and hold up even when struck with aluminum bats.

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

We've all heard the saying, *Practice makes perfect*. Well, that's not really true. If you practice a skill over and over again, but you are practicing it the wrong way, you will do it wrong during a game. Our dad, Cal Ripken, Sr., who played, coached, and managed in the Baltimore Orioles' organization for nearly 40 years, was famous for saying, "Perfect Practice Makes Perfect." He also used to say, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." Both of these sayings reflect the idea that we tend to play the way we practice. Throughout the rest of this course are drills and ideas that provide you with fun, creative ways to make sure that your players are able to properly practice all of the fundamentals they need to be successful on the baseball field.

You will be armed with a plan and a knowledge base in the fundamentals that will allow you to make the baseball experience positive for your entire team. By understanding and applying the concept of small groups and stations,

your players will get more reps in a shorter time, increasing the efficiency of your practices. The players will stay active throughout the practice and not get bored. They will begin to understand the importance of completing tasks the right way every time so that they carry good habits into game situations.

We want players to be disciplined and practice the right way every time so that their reaction to situations during games will be natural. Although we want them to understand discipline and the importance of approaching practice a certain way, we still want them to have fun. So, be creative. Introduce new twists to our drills. Turn our drills into contests. Give out prizes to players who practice well. Never lose sight of the fact that baseball is a game. It should be fun for the players and the coaches. If it ceases to be fun, take a step back and reevaluate your approach.

Dealing With Misbehavior

Athletes will misbehave at times; it's only natural. Following are two ways you can respond to misbehavior: through extinction or discipline.

Extinction

Ignoring a misbehavior—neither rewarding nor disciplining it—is called extinction. This technique can be effective under certain circumstances. In some situations, disciplining young people's misbehavior only encourages them to act up further because of the recognition they get. Ignoring misbehavior teaches youngsters that it is not worth your attention.

Sometimes, though, you cannot wait for a behavior to fizzle out. When players cause danger to themselves or others or they disrupt the activities of others, you need to take immediate action. Tell the offending player that the behavior must stop and that discipline will follow if it doesn't. If the athlete doesn't stop misbehaving after the warning, discipline him or her.

Extinction also doesn't work well when a misbehavior is self-rewarding. For example, you may be able to keep from grimacing if a youngster kicks you in the shin, but he or she still knows you were hurt. Therein lies the reward. In these circumstances, it is also necessary to discipline the player for the undesirable behavior.

Extinction works best in situations in which players seek recognition through mischievous behaviors, clowning, or grandstanding. Usually, if you are patient, their failure to get your attention will cause the behavior to disappear.

Be alert, however, that you don't extinguish desirable behavior. When youngsters do something well, they expect to be positively reinforced. Not rewarding them may cause them to discontinue the desired behavior.

Discipline

Some educators say we should never discipline young people, but should only reinforce their positive behaviors. They argue that discipline does not work, that it creates hostility, and that it sometimes develops avoidance behaviors that may be more unwholesome than the original problem behavior. It is true that discipline does not always work and that it can create problems when used ineffectively. But when used appropriately, discipline is effective in eliminating undesirable behaviors without creating other undesirable consequences. You must use discipline effectively, because it is impossible to guide athletes through positive reinforcement and extinction alone. An example of acceptable discipline would be making a player sit out part of a game or an entire game for repeatedly breaking important team rules, such as throwing equipment, arguing with umpires, or making derogatory comments to opposing team members. Discipline is part of the positive approach when these guidelines are followed:

- Discipline in a corrective way to help athletes improve now and in the future. Don't discipline to retaliate and make yourself feel better.
- Impose discipline in an impersonal way when athletes break team rules or otherwise misbehave. Shouting at or scolding athletes indicates that your attitude is one of revenge.
- Once a good rule has been agreed on, ensure that athletes who violate it experience the unpleasant consequences of their misbehavior. Don't wave discipline threateningly over their heads; just do it. It is okay to warn an athlete once before disciplining.
- Be consistent in administering discipline.
- Don't discipline using consequences that may cause you guilt. If you can't think of an appropriate consequence right away, tell the player you will talk with him or her after you think about it. You might consider involving the player in designing a consequence.
- Once the discipline is completed, don't make athletes feel they are in the doghouse. Make them feel that they're valued members of the team again.
- Make sure that what you think is discipline isn't perceived by the athlete as a positive reinforcement—for instance, keeping a player out of a certain drill or portion of the practice may be just what the athlete desired.
- Never discipline athletes for making physical errors when they play.
- Never use physical activity—running laps or doing push-ups—as discipline. To do so only causes athletes to resent physical activity, something we want them to learn to enjoy throughout their lives.
- Discipline sparingly. Constant discipline and criticism cause athletes to turn their interests elsewhere and to resent you as well.