

## Coaching Youth Baseball

While my previous articles have focused primarily on coaching the high school and college athlete, this article is geared towards those who coach the younger players. The “Little League years” from ages 8-12 are so important, as they provide the foundation for players who will develop and continue to play at the higher levels.

When I finished my playing career, I spend my first few years coaching all my kids in their youth sports. I coached two baseball teams each spring along with middle school girl’s basketball. I did have personal motives for coaching these teams. First and foremost I couldn’t wait to coach my kids, to spend more time around them, and teach in a different setting than home. But secondly, I loved being around their energy and enthusiasm, and I loved developing relationships with all the players.

In terms of coaching on the field, I had two main goals as a youth baseball coach. The first was to ensure the kids enjoyed playing enough that they would want to continue to play the following year. Baseball is a game of incremental improvement; players get better a little bit at a time. It pains me to see coaches with the younger kids constantly berating them for what they did wrong, or running practices that are dry and boring. The younger kids need to be engaged and look forward to coming to the field each day.

As coaches the most important thing we need to keep in mind is the game of baseball is hard! Just watch Sports Center each night and you’ll see mistake after mistake from the best players in the world. The game is difficult to master, so make sure your comments are positive and building the player. This was a conversation I had on day one with the parents as well. I used this example as a way to explain what the kids are trying to learn: I ask all the adults to think about playing baseball with their opposite hand. If they were right-handed then I wanted them to imagine playing left-handed, and if they were left-handed, imagine playing right-handed. How hard would it be to play with the undeveloped hand! That’s exactly how it is for an 8-year-old child trying to develop hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. It is not easy. So I tell the parents I only want to hear positive support at the games.

I watched a family friend's 9-year-old team play a while back and a ball was hit sharply to their 3<sup>rd</sup> basemen. The ball took a bad bounce and hit the kid high on the chest, and all the coach yelled was "grab the ball, go get the ball!" That was a tough statement for me to listen to. The 9-year-old just did everything right! He moved his feet, got in front of the ball, and knocked it down. And all the coach could say was pick it up? I watched that game and wondered what the chances were that those kids would be excited about their games and want to keep coming to the field every day. Keep it positive. Teach and correct, but focus on the things they are doing right as well.

My second main goal with my youth teams was to teach the basic fundamentals. Make teaching a priority over winning. Try to avoid spending all your time teaching kids gimmick plays to score runs and focus more on developing fundamentals that will provide the foundation for the kids for years to come. And don't assume anything. Don't assume kids already know the basics. I still deal with that at the college level. I learned long ago not to make assumptions about what they've been taught. Start at square one; teach the basic fundamentals and work from there.

Years ago I learned this lesson while coaching an 8-year-old coach pitch team. We had a number of first time players, but one in particular was just really struggling with every aspect of playing catch. He caught the ball awkwardly and threw with terrible mechanics no matter how much we tried to teach him. On our third day of practice we were watching him again and talking about what to do, when my assistant coach had a thought. He went up to the player and asked if he was left handed or right handed. When he said he was right-handed the mystery was solved. His mom had purchased him a glove to go on his right hand thinking that's what a righty should wear! He didn't know any better, it was his first glove, so he just went out and tried to play with it. When he changed gloves he was a completely different player! Don't assume anything!

I believe part of teaching basic fundamentals is teaching kids to play all positions on the field. In all our practices and games we had our players change positions every inning. We need to make developing our players our top priority. To make a decision on a player's permanent position at ages 8-12 is doing that child a huge disservice. Kids

change, they grow and develop, and they all need to have an awareness and ability to play all positions on the field as they get older. The only exceptions I made to those rules were for lefties and pitchers. Most kids want to be a pitcher, but we made them pass certain tests in practice before they could pitch in a game. Everyone who wanted got the opportunity to pitch in practice, but the players who were able to throw a certain number of strikes in practice threw in the game. Even with this rule we typically had 6-8 pitchers on a 12-man team each year. I also kept lefties at the positions they would realistically play when they were older. They played 1<sup>st</sup>, the outfield and pitched. Again, our goal should be the long-term development of our players.

I feel it's very important over the course of the season to be creative and blend fundamentals with fun activities or drills. Baseball can get dry and boring for young kids if they do a lot of standing around. Do practice drills in 15-minute increments to keep them focused. Kids love to compete, so challenge them with games that also promote good fundamentals a part of your practice. An example would be "catch relay". Make teams of 4 or 5 and spread them out in a long line. See which team can get the ball to the end and back the quickest. This teaches the kids to catch with 2 hands and throw with accuracy to be quicker. There are tons of ways to do this so kids have fun and learn along the way.

In the heat of the summer we had "sliding practice" at the end of the day. We would bring plastic and make "slip and slides" for the players but teach them how to slide properly as well. We would have "water balloon" practice where the kids would play catch games with the balloons and take water balloon BP. Kids you can't get to swing at a baseball would just attack the water balloons with the bat! Easy things like this help kids develop and trust their hand eye coordination.

Before you agree to coach a youth team, check your motive for doing so. Keep the big picture in mind and remember why you're coaching. As coaches we need to realize this is not about us! Our playing days are over and we will not be defined by how many games our 12-year-old team wins. Make the game fun for the kids and teach them basic fundamentals. Keep practices fresh; introduce new competitions and games throughout

the year. Stay positive with the kids. Our goal is not to make them big league players. Our goal is for them to enjoy playing enough that they would want to play again the next year. If we can develop a love and passion for the game within the kids, they will work hard and develop to the best of their ability because they will want to be on the field. And most of all enjoy the kids! Make it about them and you'll be amazed at how much fun you have as well.