

# Are Your Teams Relaxed or Stressed Out?

If you look around and watch the coaches, you will see a variety of coaching styles and techniques. Some just stand and watch, letting the kids play offering no suggestions. Some coaches are very encouraging and talk positively to the players a lot. Some coaches are yellers, berating, and embarrassing their players. Whatever kind of coach you are, you can help your team play with more confidence by teaching them how to relax. More games are lost on errors than won on hits. Most errors are caused by nerves than poor skills. Nervous players hesitate and we all know that "He who hesitates is lost." Nervous players do not attack at the plate but tend to watch the pitches go by. Nervous players don't stray from the bases too far. We all know that you can't steal second if your foot is still on first. So, how can we make these players relax and play with confidence?

Teaching the players to relax during the off season will really prepare them for the season. A team that acts confident even before the game has the mental advantage over the other team before even one pitch is thrown. I use to tell my players, "We are in uniform when we get off of the bus." Everything is tucked in and on properly. Walk with confidence, put your bags down in the dugout with confidence, put your shoes on with confidence. When it is time for you to warm up, do it in a professional way, get to business, look tough, act tough and sprint where ever you go - no walking. This intimidates a lot of teams and sometimes your team has gained a huge mental advantage over the other team before the game has even started.

So, what's the first step? I suggest that you start teaching them early during the off-season. Teach them how to relax and go through a series of techniques to be used each time. They should practice these techniques at home every day or night.

1. First, find out if the player has any fears or problems with any part of the game. For example, some could be ball shy and fear playing their position all season. The player could even be thinking about it all night and the day before the game even starts. Solution: work with them a lot. Start out hitting balls softly to them helping them with fundamentals and giving lots of encouragement. As they progress, start hitting it harder and harder. Give lots of encouragement to them during the process. Pretty soon the fear will be gone. I have watched some coaches start out with even younger players and rip the ball at them. Those coaches give no encouragement; they do not correct fundamentals and then wonder why the young players are afraid of the ball.
2. Next, encourage your players to get enough rest. They should get about 7-9 hours of sleep a night.
3. After that, encourage your players to get enough exercise. Low to moderate exercises like running, swimming, or riding a bike relaxes the body. Also, many schools offer tai chi, yoga, or Pilates.
4. Remember to use these techniques at every practice.
  - a. Have the players lie down and close their eyes. Working from the feet up, have them contract their muscles, hold for 5 seconds and relax. Start with the feet, then the lower leg, then the whole leg, and go on up the body. Let your body go limp after each contraction. Take a few deep breaths and release slowly after each contraction.
  - b. Have the players lie down and close their eyes. This time isolate some body parts and contract. Start with the foot by pulling the foot toward the head and then push as far down as possible. Curl the toes on one foot and then the other. Pull the leg straight up as far as possible. Tighten the stomach muscles by doing a stomach curl or crunch. Move the shoulders as far back as possible and forward as far as possible. Stretch the neck by going in all four directions pulling the head toward the body as far as possible. Make sure the neck is not rolled to each position, after each stretch return the head to an upright position.

- c. This is my favorite exercise to have them do not only at home but especially before every game.
  - a. Have them lie down (front or back) with the eyes closed. Have a coach talk them through the entire exercise. Start at the head and then on command take a deep breath and as they release tell them to feel all of the tension going out of their head.
  - b. Take another deep breath and as they release the air, feel all of the tension going out of their head and shoulders.
  - c. Take another deep breath and as they blow out feel the tension going out of your head, shoulders, and chest.
  - d. Repeat above and feel the tension going out of your head, shoulders, chest, and arms through their fingers.
  - e. Repeat the previous exercise emphasizing to feel the tension going out of their upper body through their fingers.
  - f. Then do the same for the thighs, again for the lower leg, and finally to the feet feeling the tension from the lower body going out through the toes.
  - g. Repeat a couple of times telling them to take a deep breath and blow the tension out through their fingers and their toes.

I really saw a difference in the teams over the years that I spent a lot of time with doing relaxation exercises especially before each game. The players need to also do the exercises on their own each day/night. It's the coaches' job to convince the players that this works and should be done regularly.

**Good Luck!**

Look for Celeste's article next month.