

Don't Forget To Coach The Elements

A coach needs to prepare the team for every possible situation that may occur on the field including the weather conditions. It would be nice to play in the same conditions every game but the reality is that the weather will differ day to day and site to site. Your players need to be taught the different types of weather conditions they may face and how to play in them. Being in the Midwest, we normally do not get outside until we go to Arizona where the weather is normally very sunny and between 70-90 degrees. Seventy is ok for us to handle but 90 is really hot when you are coming from 8-35 degrees. You cannot practice that but you can take precautions. Start telling them to drink 48-64 ounces of water a day in the fall preferably, but for sure by January. While out there, we always have water available and it is the only time that I recommend a sports drink. Sports drinks are normally very high in calories and are not needed as much as they are consumed. But when we are in Arizona and it is really hot, I keep it and lots of water available during the games.

Playing the sun

*The sky in Arizona is a very "high" one, bright and cloudless most of the time and one that is really different than the Midwest. As soon as we arrive in Arizona, we practiced pop ups and fly balls. At home during the fall season, we work a lot with the outfielders hitting hundreds of high fly balls to them. When we are in the gym, I could hit liners to the outfielders but the ceiling was too low for flys. We also work a lot on high pop ups for the infielders. If you physically cannot hit the high flys, find someone who can hit the ball very high up into the sunny sky if you need to prepare for that type of situation.

*Have the players get good athletic sunglasses that cut the glare. The fashion sunglasses just do not cut it in a bright sun, make it mandatory to have the good sunglasses. Also, provide everyone with a visor and make them wear it. A visor really cuts down on the glare and the heat in those conditions. Don't make these things an option, too many coaches these days ask the players to do things instead of telling them to do it. The coach is the leader, so lead. Make them wear them and if they complain about it, just tell them to get over it and let's play.

*Eye black will also help with cutting down the glare.

*Teach your players to use their glove to shield the sun. Tell them to test gloves with different kinds webs in them. Some of the webs the players can see through and some they cannot. See which kind they prefer to use and you choose which one you prefer and that I would probably go with the one that you, the coach, likes. In playing the ball in the sun, the player should put the glove up to cover the sun. In playing where the sun is right in their eyes teach them to leave the glove covering the sun, even if they lose track of the ball. Chances are the ball will either come out of the sun, they will then pick it up and adjust to catch it. If not, the ball that they were tracking before they lost it in the sun will still be on track and just might fall into the glove. If they do not see the ball coming out of the sun, it has to be right there and come down to them. The worst thing they could do is to pull the glove down and turn away. Just leave the glove up and it just may fall into it. They also can turn part way so that they are seeing the ball on the side versus straight on toward the sun.

*Teach the players to help each other. If the sun is directly in the eyes of the right fielder for example, the centerfielder has to know that the right fielder cannot see the ball and communicate that she will get the ball if at all possible. The same with the second baseman working with the right fielder or the center fielder or the shortstop on the left side of the field. The second baseman will catch the ball going away from the sun, the centerfielder would be catching the ball in right/left field with the sun at her side. These are definitely situations that can be worked in practices. The players love doing these things and you will be amazed the confidence it will give them in tracking the balls. These are very catchable balls if the players are taught to do these things.

Playing the wind

This season I saw way too many balls that should have been caught but were not because the players did not play/consider the wind. Before the game starts, determine if there is wind and what direction it is blowing.

Another thing to realize is that if the field is lined with trees or is below its surrounding area and there is a fly ball

above that tree line, it wind will blow the ball. My home field was a little lower than the area outside the fences and there were also trees on both sides. We always flew a flag not only for our country and the country of my international players but also for the players to watch and determine how much the wind was blowing and which way. I am always amazed when players do not know how to do this and I just shake my head when I watch them camp under the ball with no back up players around, just to have it blow in another direction. If there are no flags on the field, a player can grab some dirt or grass and toss it up into the air. That will tell them how the wind is blowing also.

*Practice in the wind any chance you get. They need to not only practice catching the ball in the wind but also learn how to throw against the wind and not have the ball come back at them. Obviously, you have to watch how many throws they take in practice to ensure their arms will not become sore. They can make a ton of catches without even making a throw. Just have a bucket for them to toss the ball into after the catch.

*Work with your other players, who are not making the catch, on getting close to the player catching it in case the ball drifts on them. They don't want to be right beside them but close enough to take over the catch if they have to do that. These players need to be on their toes and be awake for any possible movement on the ball.

*Make the players aware of foul balls that may be blown back into play by the wind. Never give up on any ball until it is definitely uncatchable.

*Infielders and outfielders need to talk constantly and watch each others positioning on every batter so that they automatically know if they need to get the ball. Wind blowing to left and the left fielder playing by the fence, the SS has to know that a shallow fly is probably theirs to catch.

Playing in the rain, snow showers or mud

These conditions are common in the Midwest for a large part of the season so how to play in this type of weather has to be addressed during preseason practices.

*I use to love playing on muddy fields since we were known to bunt a lot. By putting the ball on ground that is muddy, it makes the defense move on unsteady ground, pick up a ball that could be wet or muddy and keep their feet under them while they try to throw the ball accurately. The batter only has to run to the next base. Granted if the baselines are muddy, it makes it harder. But usually the first things that the grounds crew fixes are the mound, the bases and the basepaths. Usually the area where the ball may be bunted will not be one of those areas. So, my advice is to bunt, switch off to hitting or slapping and then bunt some more. Keep the defense moving in the mud and guessing what you are going to do.

*Many games are played in the mist or light rain so the defense has to be aware of how the ball will probably react. Again, practice outside a time or two in those conditions so that the players have experienced it. It won't take them long to adapt to it in a real game if they have practiced it before. Vissors are a must in the rain to keep as much of it out of their eyes as possible. It would be nice if they had rain repellent jackets. Every team, whether purchased by the school or player, has a team uniform and jacket. Prepare when ordering team jackets for the type of weather you will be playing in the most. The following are items we provided or the players had in the dugout during our season in the Midwest not including our basic uniform:

- visors-windproof/water repellent jackets
- dugout heater-hand/toe warmers for each player
- spandex under uniform-winter gloves or batting gloves
- lots of towels to dry things-knit hats that cover the ears
- tool to clean mud from spikes-tarp to block wind coming in dugout

*The ball skips a lot when the grass is wet and the outfielders need to know how fast it may come off the grass and the normal angle the ball might take off the grass. Again, take them out after a rain and hit tons of balls to them.

Take the time to practice in these elements, it will definitely pay off in your favor if your players have experienced it and know how to react during these conditions. Most teams do not do this so the advantage goes to those who do.