

Favorite Drills for Preseason Practices

In many cases, your practice time is very short because of your association's rules, so you have to train the kids, immediately, to realize that practices are not social hours and that you don't want any players standing around during your practices, at all. Standing around is really boring for the players and usually leads to a lack of concentration—which inhibits learning. You play like you practice, so it is important, to the success of the season, for them to learn as much as possible in practice.

When you are working with the outfield, you can have the infield either working as runners for the outfielders, working on skills for their positions elsewhere or hitting for you. If you are the only coach at practice, you can get a lot more balls hit to the fielders by using the outfield to hit to the infield. If the infielders cannot place the ball in the outfield the way you want it, you can do the hitting to them and have the infielders cover all of the bases, and have a couple of catchers positioned by you. Continuously hit to the outfielders—left, then center, then right—and give the outfielders a designated place to throw the ball, which goes to the bases and then in to the catchers. The catchers either toss a ball to you to keep hitting, or if that is too slow, you can grab a ball out of a tall basket of balls.

I believe in hitting hundreds of balls to each player per practice and working on their fundamental skills a lot. It is possible, in hitting so many balls per day, that the arms will get tired. You can still hit them the balls but, sometimes, have a bucket close by where they can field the ball and put it in the bucket. Better than that is to work on the short throws, backhand throws, throws directly from the glove and underhand throws. A player needs to learn different types of throws for different situations, anyway, so this is a good chance to do it.

Here are some drills that I really like. After all of these drills, my players would work on situations for the infielders, with the outfielders working on their baserunning, which would put pressure on the infielders. Then we would work the outfielders, with the infielders working on their baserunning, again putting pressure on the outfielders. In the winter, we did this inside, in the gym, but we also did it whenever we could get outside. In the gym, the runners put on sweats and worked not only on their baserunning skills but also their sliding skills. The runners loved putting the pressure on the defensive players and, as a result, we were a very aggressive team on the bases. Some drills that I really like for preseason practices are the following.

1. You have two sets of outfielders. One set is on the first baseline and one set is on the third baseline. One outfielder hits and the other outfielder catches for her. The two on the third baseline alternate hits to 1B and 2B. The two on the first baseline alternate grounders to SS and to 3B. There should be lots of repetition. The hitters should have three balls in play and alternate to each fielder quickly. Be careful not to hit a short one, since this would make the fielder go into the path of the other hitter's ball. The balls are actually crossing each other since there is a hitter on the first baseline and one on the third baseline. Occasionally, the balls will hit in the middle of the field. This drill is usually used as a warm-up drill.
2. My favorite is probably this one: I do the hitting with two outfielders as catchers—one on each side of me. I hit to 3B, who throws to 1B. 1B then throws to the catcher on the right side of me. I immediately hit to the SS, who throws to 2B—who then throws to the catcher on the left side of me. I don't wait to hit to the other while they throw, I hit to the other right away. I keep alternating until either I get tired or I see them getting fatigued. At that point, I start hitting to 2B, who throws to SS, who throws to the catcher on the right of me—and to 1B, who throws to 3B, who then throws to the catcher on the left of me, until fatigued. Back to hit to 3B, who now goes to 2B—and SS, who now goes to 1B—then to 2B, who goes to 3B—and 1B, who goes to SS. It goes very quickly, I have a basket of balls by me in case the catchers are late in giving me a ball. Fielders get a ton of balls, as do the players covering the bases. I have control over what type of ball is hit and where. Other outfielders are backing up the throws or doing quick hits. Everybody is busy, and no one is standing around.
3. Especially as a warm-up activity, we use our football drill. Each player lines up by me; they each hand me their ball and, one at a time, immediately they take off, cut left and receive a throw from me. Then the next player, then the next, etc. On the second round, they cut right; on the third round, they run straight out for an over-the-shoulder catch and immediately run back toward me for a short

one, with a headfirst dive. In doing the over-the-shoulder catch, I want the *inside* of the glove facing their faces—not the *side* of the glove. This drill really teaches them to be able to catch the ball at different angles.

4. Bunting and slapping: Everyone on the team learns to bunt (sac bunt for a base hit down the first and down third baselines, slapbunt and fake slapbunt). When executing the bunts for a base hit down the line, we would practice it with four players at a time and the pitching machine. Cones are placed a foot off of each baseline as targets—for the players to get the ball in between the cone and the baseline. The player at the pitching machine keeps throwing at a steady pace, and the four players have to alternate after every pitch. Once they understand, the four players definitely learn how to bunt the ball on the run and be in motion while in the box; and they also learn to put the ball down the lines. Putting the balls down the line makes it harder for the defense to field the ball and throw the runner out.

In executing the slap bunt and fake slap bunt, the infield defense is set and the hitter tries to disguise which one she is doing. The player at the pitching machine does not keep a steady pace in pitching the ball. She throws only when the defense is set. The defense has to be ready for whatever the hitter does. Here again, make sure the slap bunt is done correctly. I like the hitter to pivot forward with the bat chin-high, with hands split. The bottom-hand wrist is pointed down below the bat and is very important—if it is above, it leads to a pop-up. The top hand is securely *behind* the bat—not *under* the bat. As the hitter pulls the bat back, her weight shifts from the front foot to the back foot, but the bat stays on the same plane. A major mistake in doing a slap bunt is that the hitter brings the bat into a hitting position, and this will also lead to a pop-up or weak grounder. Make sure that the hitter keeps the bat flat on the back swing and then goes straight forward to attack the ball. When the hitter swings, the weight again transfers to the front foot, forcefully. The hitter needs to transfer her weight forward instead of hitting off the back foot. Hitting off the back foot on a slap bunt usually causes the hitter to be late and pop the ball up. The idea of a slap bunt is to attack the ball so that it shoots out of the infield too fast for the infielders to react to it. Once the defense fears the slap bunt, it is time to call for a fake slap. The hitter does the exact same thing as a slap but, at the last second, drops a bunt. The defense in most cases will be on their heels for the slap bunt and caught off-guard by the fake. The coach can keep the defense guessing the entire game if the coach learns to read the defense and then calls the appropriate action to combat the defense.

5. An outfield favorite in winter practices in the gym, is the bucket drill. While I work with the infielders, the outfielders put a bucket on top of another bucket, and one player rolls a ball to another player and they would come up throwing at the buckets. It was probably a favorite drill because of the instant reward of hearing the buckets go flying.

Try these in your preseason workouts—they are fun for the players and the players need the repetition to perfect the skills needed for the games. Don't forget that putting the team in every possible situation that could occur during a game is very important. Putting the pressure of adding the baserunners is also very important in being able to handle confidently every situation that arises during a game.