

How Do You Approach Scheduling?

While at St. Louis CC/Meramec, we started taking the team to Arizona during our spring break from classes. Going straight from the gym floor to the fields in Arizona for real games is really hard but also very rewarding. Being from the Midwest, we might be able to get outside a couple of days before we would leave the first weekend in March for the Southwest. If we were really lucky, we would get a scrimmage game in, but that was very rare. Usually the players who play the infield do not see the dirt until we get to Arizona. But sometimes we are able to get the team out to work on the outfield and work on balls that go between the infield and outfield, relays, breaking in the new spikes. We would try to work on as much as we could without having the dirt.

I liked going to Arizona for spring training. I found there to be a large concentration of schools in the Phoenix area, with two more very good teams close by in Tucson and Casa Grande. The teams in Arizona are good, very good and excellent. Therefore, every game is a challenge for us since it is our first time out of the gym and those teams have already played at least 30 games. The rest of our conference schools go to Florida where the teams are more spread out. There are some great teams in Florida, but a lot of the years they go to Florida and play each other or play other northern schools. I prefer to play the local teams who had already played a lot of games.

We knew that if we would beat one or even come close to beating an Arizona team, that we were going to be very good. In the 24 years that we went out there, we won conference 23 times and went to 15 National Tournaments. I have to give a lot of credit to those teams in helping to prepare us for the season. Some of the teams in our conference were very frustrated because we always won. But they never realized that our going to Arizona made us a lot tougher. We would come back almost always with a losing record but what we learned on the trip was invaluable.

Because we played the tougher teams, they forced us to make mistakes and showed us where we were weak. They also showed, especially our first-year players, what teams and players were capable of doing. Some of the schools do a lot of the run-and-slap offense. Our players could see what we were trying to show them in practices and the picture became a lot clearer to them. We teach a fast offense and so do the best teams in Arizona, so again they could see it in action. You could see the light bulb clicked on in their heads.

We took a few thrashings while out there, since both the NJCAA Division I and II National Champions are usually from Arizona. When we face them in doubleheaders and also wind up facing them in tournament, it's tough. We spent a lot of time, out there, teaching skills but also talking a lot of keeping this trip in perspective. Again, we knew that if we were close to some of the schools or even won a couple of games, that we were going to be very good. The kids had to keep it in mind that they needed to play as hard as they could every inning of every game and learn from the experience. We constantly told them that if they played scared or gave in to the score, that we would never know exactly how much we had to work on when we got home. So the challenge was to keep the heads of the players in the game at all times—no matter what the score—along with talking them through each game, teaching them the game as we played it.

When we came home, usually we had time to practice on our weaknesses before starting our conference and non-conference games. The weather is usually not good when we first get back and a lot of games are rained out. Good for practicing, not good for rescheduling everything. In my career, we won 25 of 26 conference titles. Remember, we played the tougher schools, and the other teams in our conference either played each other or teams who had not been on dirt either. Our non-conference schedule was against as many National-ranked teams as possible. Every weekend, we either hosted or went to tournaments where we played mostly ranked teams. Being from Missouri, we would play the best teams from Illinois, Iowa and sometimes Kansas. Illinois has a lot of schools, especially junior colleges, which we are also.

I think that the type of schedule that we played during the season definitely made us the team that we were year after year. Nationally ranked from 1978-2004 (except for maybe one year), 25 of 26 conference titles and 16 trips to the National Tournament. I am a believer in that you play the way you practice and that you make yourself better by playing better teams. I do not understand putting in the months of practice and then playing a weak schedule. A team learns nothing from that type of schedule and philosophy. Playing weaker teams never pushes a team to learn to be better. So then, they play a well-seasoned team who has had to play hard to survive the games on their schedule and they wonder why they cannot beat the well-seasoned team. That blows my

mind. It should be obvious.

During the fall scrimmage season, we try to play as many four-year schools as possible. It takes the freshmen and throws them right into the line of fire. But they do survive and are a lot smarter and tougher because of it. Their game is elevated from the very beginning of the school year, the practices are hard and well organized, and spring training is really hard. After that, nothing really shakes them up.

So, my advice is to make practices very organized, very intense, with no time to sit around, but with a little humor in it also. The players will have fun when they are learning and succeeding as a team. Be positive and TEACH the game. Really focus on your schedule, and go to a warm-weather state, if you are from a cold-weather state, for spring training. Schedule teams that have already been playing 20+ games; your team will learn so much.

Then try to balance the rest of your schedule. You need to play some teams that are weaker to not only have some success but also to use your bench more to keep them strong. You will need the bench players somewhere during the season either to rest your starters, replace them while they are injured and/or come in during special situations. Every team has their best nine as their starters but keep the bench players sharp and prepared. We used a lot of players during the season; usually we kept between 18-22. Everyone knew their roles, and roles could change during the season. We used pinch runners, pinch hitters, defensive specialists in later innings with the game on the line, bullpen pitchers, chart keepers, etc. We tried to keep everyone busy, their heads in the game at all times and their self esteem high. In other words, we needed everyone on the team, to win as a team.

Play the Nationally ranked teams in tournaments on the weekends. You get better by playing better teams. Make sure, when scheduling, that you consider rest time for your team. The spring season is hard because of the rainouts and having to reschedule a lot. But when you do, watch to not schedule tough games after a tough weekend, especially when you are coming back from an away tournament. The team needs time to refresh. Of course, the bench can help if you have prepared them to be ready to step in and play effectively.