

Planning, Planning, Planning; Success Is Not Just An Accident

First, you have to get their attention, and second you have to earn their respect. How do you do it? Be prepared, be definite, and be one step ahead of them. I watch coaches and their practices and there is a direct correlation between the practices and the way their team plays the game. When I listen to them talk to their players, sometimes I hear a lot of "Okay, do you want to do this or how about doing this?" Never ask them what they want to do! It's your team, tell them what you want them to do. Be direct, be definite, and do not be wishy washy or they will "eat you alive".

Have a plan for the year according to the skill of your team. You may get through the entire plan or you may not. You need to perfect the basics first and then try to teach the more complicated skills as the team progresses. Each player will progress at a different rate so you have to handle that and challenge the players according to the different skill levels. For example, I watched a high school JV coach hitting infield to the young players. He kept hitting the ball at them harder than they could handle and the result was a lot of chasing of the ball and a lot of discouragement on the faces of the players. First, if they are just learning to field, hit with a fence behind them so that time is not lost chasing ball after ball. Second, encourage them and hit the ball to them so they can have success from the start. You can do that without making it too easy on them. When they become a little more comfortable with fielding, you can start hitting the ball harder to them and then progress to side-to-side with them. Progression and encouragement are the keys to success for the younger ones. Challenge the older ones and vary the speed of the ball and direction.

The players want knowledge and you have to provide that knowledge. A lot of knowledge can be gained by you (the coach) going to clinics put on by the top coaches. Listen to coaches who have great teams consistently every year. They must be doing something right. Learn the fundamentals of the game and the strategy of the game. Be a student yourself and never stop learning. Games are won and lost on little things and if you think you know everything, you probably don't.

Players want structure and discipline. They may buck you at first but they are testing you to see how far they can push you. Stay definite to what you want them to do, how you want them to act, how you want them to look and they will follow you. You give in or waiver and they will take advantage of you.

Try Some of These During Practices:

Prepare and plan every practice. Have your plans on a **note card** at every practice and keep it in your pocket. When they see you are organized and serious about practice and the plan for the year, they will respond and be more attentive.

You decide what players are in which group and never say, "Some go over there and some come over here." Have the groups already chosen on your card and send them to their specific station. Never let them choose their own groups. This helps with team unity, minimizes cliques, and teaches the players to respect everyone for who they are and how they play.

Keep players busy. When you have players standing around doing nothing or waiting for their turn, it leads to goofing around and lack of concentration. That leads to low production (learning) for that practice and could lead to unnecessary injuries. Our practices are run very quickly and the players love it because it is not boring for them or for the coach.

Drill

1. Instead of one person hitting a whole bucket of balls in the cage, try putting two players in the cage (make sure there is enough room and a protective area that they can stand without getting hit) and have each rotate after five swings. This makes them focus because they only have five swings and it keeps them fresh. Those two keep rotating until the bucket is empty. Players get bored hitting a whole bucket of balls and just swing to swing instead of attacking and having a purpose.

2. Station work is great for teaching fundamentals. While the infield is doing station work, you are working with the outfield and vice versa. We use every inch of the gym, lobby, and hallway, anywhere we can find a space to practice I would suggest having a list of the stations with a check off area so the players can actually see the stations and check off what they have finished.
 - a. **SAMPLE STATIONS:** (Vary every other day or so.)
 - a. Ball drops
 - b. Quick Hits
 - c. Stick swings
 - d. Short hops
 - e. T work
 - f. Over the shoulder catches
 - g. Bunting
 - h. Step Ups
 - i. Wrist Curls
 - j. Long throws
 - k. Accuracy throws
 - l. Sliding and more...
 - b. At the end of each of the practices for the infield and the outfield, we will add runners to put pressure on the defense and make it more realistic.

Drill

1. While drilling the infield, the outfield runs and vice versa when drilling the outfield. The pitchers and catchers, depending on the day, may run for both sessions. This not only puts game like pressure on the defense but also provides practice for base running. Speed on the bases and knowing how to run the bases is a crucial part of the game.
2. The players love to be aggressive and score runs. So, we practice base running a lot during all of our drills. They run and do headfirst slides on the gym floor just like they were on dirt. Be careful in the gym, we do not let them go feet first with tennis shoes on in the gym.

Drill

1. Use a mat with a sheet or blanket to teach headfirst slides, after a short time they are sliding on the gym

floor with just sweatshirts. Teach avoidance slides to the players. Have them slide away from the base and reach to the 10/11 o'clock position for the base if the ball is coming from the catcher. This gives the fielder only the hand to tag. Also, teach them to slide inside if the ball is coming from the outside.

2. Vary the drills. There are tons of drills to do for each skill and do them quickly with very few people standing around waiting.
3. Just as in elementary school, when you have one or two players performing a skill in front of the rest of the team, some players will thrive on it but most will not. Have five or six groups doing the skills instead of one or two. The younger players will be more relaxed and you will get more out of them. Keep everyone busy so no one has time to watch others.
4. Keep asking them for 200%, keep encouraging everyone during the drills, and stay positive with them.
5. Don't forget agility, fitness and mental training.
6. Practices will change the closer you get to the season. Have a timetable to achieve certain player skills and team progress. Pre-game practices also have to be planned.

a. Examples of pre-game practices:

- a. Jog
 - b. Stretch (depending on your philosophy)
 - c. Quick Hits
 - d. Hitting (I like to use a portable screen about 10 feet in front of the batter and throw live batting practice to them.)
 - e. Short hops
 - f. Throws by coach to players on the run varying the angles and catches
 - g. Infield and outfield practice
 - h. Agility work
 - i. Mental practice-positive imagery and relaxation
 - j. Sprints-progressing to full sprints
- b. Again, make it as clear to the players as possible so that there is no confusion. Have a basic plan and vary it depending on your team and the team that you are playing and the time of the season early, middle, or late.

Look for Cheleste's article next month.

Good Luck!