

Who Teaches Them to Be Coordinated?

We just finished a softball camp with about 70 players ages 8-16 years old. We did a session on agility with the expected results: a very small percentage could do the drills with a few problems and looked very coordinated, even some at a young age. However, most of them, even the older ones, were very predictable. About half of them could do some of the simple agility skills like using the ladder, putting one foot in the center of each rung and the other foot outside the ladder. That same half could also do the drill where they weave around a series of cones going in a forward direction. Even in these simple drills, the other half could not control their body enough during the ladder drill to stay basically straight up with balance. They could put one foot in the rung and one foot outside the ladder for about 5-10 rungs. However, since they lack body control, they would skip a rung because their BALANCE point was too far forward. Remember the word BALANCE. As they continued down the ladder, they would be hit or miss with the foot that was supposed to go inside the rungs.

They also didn't know how to run on the balls of their feet with a light touch nor quickly pick their feet straight up. They always allowed their body to travel forward, thus making it impossible to hit every rung. That's [lack of] body control. The same happened on weaving in and out of the cones with the body facing forward. The player needs to use short side-to-side steps in order to sail through the cones, keeping her body in control. Anyone can go through the cones slowly with large lumbering steps, allowing their body to go side to side. However, there is no BALANCE with that technique, and they are a lot slower. The player using the smaller sliding steps glides through with very little body movement which means her body is in control and BALANCED. When you have balance, you can make quick adjustments with your body-and isn't that what's needed in any sport? The reason players in any sport cannot reach or make the play, in a lot of cases, is that they cannot move their bodies quickly enough. In the case of softball, most of those are considered hits when in reality the player was too slow to get to the ball.

This was another alarming moment. I am not a huge fan of stretching a lot before a game. I believe that the body takes a bit to recoup from the stretching and that will happen then throughout the game. So instead, we do a short jog to work up a little sweat and then do agility drills. We were doing karaoke, hip kicks, high skips, fast skips, side slides, etc. and during the skips, we noticed how many kids could not skip. I am not talking about only the younger ones, I am talking about kids who are 12 and 13 years old.

These kids are in seventh or eighth grade and they could not skip. Now, I know I wrote an earlier a previous article on early and late maturers, but skipping is a fundamental locomotor skill that should be achieved by the time they are six, at least. Physical Education, Art and Music are being cut in a lot of schools-or they are limited to once a week or so. So many schools also give the child a choice of those classes or a study hall/easier class. Obesity is a major problem with our youth; and not having these programs just compounds the problem. So who is teaching coordination if the schools are not?

Obviously, no one is teaching them. So, do we just cut the player because they are not coordinated? Do we accept it and allow the hits to happen even though they shouldn't be hits? I really hope not. Agility drills can go from easy to difficult, and I really hope that you incorporate these into your daily practice plans and pre-game warm-up plans.

Invest in a ladder or make one with the type of rope used in boating, that is waterproof, and use small pvc pipes for the rungs. Get some cones that match the size of your players. You cannot expect the younger players to jump a 12" cone, so get smaller ones. The bigger kids need to be challenged, so use larger ones.

BASIC DRILLS FOR THE LADDER AND CONES

- One foot in, one foot out of the ladder
- Two feet in each rung area of the ladder going forward
- Two feet in each rung area of the ladder going sideways
- Two feet in each rung area of the ladder using a crossover step (Instead of starting with the foot closest to the ladder, use the foot farther away, cross over the other foot going into the rung area.)
- Weave in and out of the cones going forward
- Weave in and out of the cones going sideways
- Weave in and out of the cones going backwards

PRE-GAME WARM-UPS SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

Karaoke: One foot in front, one foot behind on the next step going sideways.

Hip kicks: Keeping the body straight up, have them kick their posterior as fast as possible

High skips-emphasis is on high and hanging in the air. Knee should go as high as the chest area, the arms should be used to gain height. Speed is not the objective, height is the goal.

Fast skips-short, extremely fast skips over a short area. The feet do not go very high off of the ground.

Side lunges and front lunges to stretch out the muscles of the legs. Watch that they do not go below the 90-degree angle at the knee and that the knee stays over the ankle.

These are basic, and there are many books that will take you through a progression of drills. Please incorporate agility into your plans. It will really pay off by helping your players become a more BALANCED player.

Look for Celeste's article next month.