

Teaching Younger Players to be Coordinated

There is a lot of background work that needs to be covered by coaches in practices before the skill work begins. One of them is working on the coordination of the players. Younger players especially come into the sport not being very coordinated. This is just the time that especially 6U, 8U, 10U and 12U players are growing into their bodies and feet. Even some older players in high school are still growing and not as coordinated as they need so they are successful in the sport.

There are drills that can help speed up the process of coordination.

Also, very few coaches teach one simple move that can make a huge difference in the playing ability of their team. If the toes of the players are turned in slightly while doing all activities and softball skill work, they will be quicker running the bases and getting to the ball defensively.

Turning the toes in slightly will put the player's weight forward onto their toes and ball of the foot instead of the heels. Players on their heels are slower running or getting to a ball. It is a perfect time to bunt if the defensive player's weight, at first or at third bases, is on their heels.

Most players of all ages especially if they have not been trained, will have slow feet that will effect their coordination and balance. Some coaches and parents just think that the player isn't as good as others when actually their feet are hurting their ability. The player may quit simply out of frustration or get cut because they cannot make the plays. In reality it could be because the toes are not turned in and coordination activities are not practiced.

Being on the balls of their feet instead of being flatfooted helps tremendously with their balance and their body control making them a better player. When a player is balanced, they can make quicker adjustments with their body and that is needed in any sport. In softball, there are many base hits that should be outs but the reality is the player is slow getting to the ball because of the positioning of the feet and their lack of coordination to move quickly.

Coordination skills

A lot of younger players need to work on their locomotor, non-locomotor and balance skills to teach them to be coordinated. Coaches should practice these skills at the beginning of each practice.

Agility incorporates the locomotor skills that younger players need to become more coordinated. The following equipment would be the bare minimum for any team to have at their practices.

- *agility ladders
- *cones
- *round discs
- *jump ropes

If on a tight budget, some of these can be made or the coach can improvise by using other items.

*make an agility ladder by using small diameter pvc pipes cut in 12-14" sections, drill a hole on each side of the pipe and connect them with a rope. Each pipe should be around 10-12" apart when attached by the rope that has a knot on each side of every rung. The ladder can be as long as the coach wants but having

at least 12-15 rungs will last longer as the players get older and have more stamina.

*Cones and round discs can be substituted by almost anything like cans, balls, gloves or anything the players can shuffle around. Note: do not use the player's gloves in the dirt but they can be used on the grass but never the dirt.

*Old sections of hose can replace jump ropes

All of these can be used for agility drills to help with their coordination. Work every practice on the following movements. It would also help if the parents were taught these drills so the players could practice them on days when there is no practice.

Locomotor movements are any movement that takes a person from one place to another. Such as:

- *skipping
- *hopping
- *high knee marching working into high knee jogging
- *grapevine step
- *sliding
- *galloping
- *leaping
- *walking
- *running
- *jumping

Non-locomotor movements are movements where a person stays in one place. Such as:

- *bending
- *rocking
- *swaying
- *twisting
- *stretching
- *fleeing
- *chasing
- *tagging

These skills if worked on consistently will help the players learn proper and efficient movement.

Basic Drills for the ladder, cones

Ladder Drills-each drill progresses through the ladder rung by rung.

1-run through the ladder one foot in each rung

2-run through with one foot inside a rung and one foot outside the rope

3-run through with two feet in each rung area of the ladder going forward

4-run through with two feet in each rung area of the ladder going sideways

On all of these, the tendency will be that the players will look at their feet while going through the ladder.

They need to look ahead and stand up straight. Looking at their feet will cause them to fall forwards as they are going through the ladder.

Cones Drills

- 1-Weave in and out of the cones using a slide step, keep the body facing forward.
- 2-Weave in and out of the cones sideways with a slide step, keep the body facing to the right of the cones
- 3-Weave in and out of the cones sideways with a slide step, keep the body facing to the left of the cones
- 4-Weave in and out of the cones, going backwards

A slide step is leading with one foot and bringing the other foot to meet it, same as a basketball slide step.

Basic drills for balance and coordination

Younger players:

- 1-Hopping on both feet, switching to right, switching to left. Keep alternating 10 at a time.
- 2-Galloping-can gallop forward for 20-30' and back or let them do a random pattern for a minute at a time
- 3-Sliding-same as galloping but be sure to teach them switch lead legs on the way back to the start. If using the random pattern, yell switch after each minute

Younger and Older players:

- 4-Skipping-put the emphasis on the knees reaching as high as the chest area and also on using the arms to thrust the body upward for more lift. Make sure the players are using opposite arm with opposite knee.
- 5-hip kicks-keeping their body straight up, have them kick their posteriors as fast as possible.

Older players:

- 6-grapevine step-moving sideways step with forward foot and cross over the front of that foot, next step forward, cross behind that foot and repeat to a given line.
- 7-fast skips-short, fast skips over a short area of ground. Feet stay low to the ground and knees bend slightly.

As the player gets older, there are a lot more difficult drills that can be used to enhance their agility and balance skills. Teaching the players coordination skills will definitely enhance the player's skill level.

It would be nice to think that coordination activities are being taught in schools. Some may still teach it but the reality is that Physical Education has been deemphasized in many schools. Another reality is that kids are not playing outside as much as years past. Computers and video games are on the rise and playing outside on the decline. Which one of those helps a child to be coordinated?