

Planning for Effective Practices

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Many coaches accept a coaching position and have never been trained as a teacher. As a result, they fly by the seat of their pants trying to create a “lesson plan” for practice. When that is the case, we fall back upon our experience as a player and imitate the practices from our past. If these workouts were created by a poorly organized coach, our players are now stuck in a “blind leading the blind” cycle of learning. Good coaching is good teaching. Fortunately, my occupation was teaching. I was trained at a school that specialized in educating educators! My high school coaches were very good teachers. This article’s intention is to help you develop good lesson plans and, as a result, help develop the ability to make players better as a result of good instruction.

Let’s Start With the Essential Questions

How many times will you practice, and how committed are you to putting in the time? Where do you practice, both under cover and outside? How long is an average practice; how long can kids focus? How many segments will you have each practice, and how long is each segment? What things do you need to do every practice? What things need to be done a few times over the course of a season? What practice format to you develop and implement to “cover” all the areas you need to work on while improving player performance?

First, how many practices and how committed are you to practicing? This is where coaching and teaching begin. We have been assigned to teach baseball to a group of students/players. What is our schedule? The more hours we instruct, the more our players can learn and develop skill. As a varsity coach, we met six days a week. Rain or shine. Youth coaches must determine if you practice once or twice or ??? each week besides scheduled games. You must decide if you cancel practice for rain or not. You must decide if you cancel all baseball if it rains a game out or if you work out when a game is canceled. Determine all these things in advance so you know how much instruction you need to plan.

Second, where are you going to practice. Teaching requires a classroom! What field or outdoor area are you able to schedule? When I coached my son’s eight year old team we were assigned a specific time we could use the infield once a week. Often the dirt was muck. So we moved to the outfield or a grassy spot nearby and I put pie pans down as bases. I now had an outdoor space. If it rained, nearby was a covered playground that provided space for practice activities during rain. With high school kids, we would move into gyms during assigned times during bad weather. Please consider the importance of having regular workouts rain or shine so players can learn and improve. Then, plan what you can do when it rains and when it is nice weather and plan accordingly.

Third, how long will practice be? What is appropriate for the age group you coach? I found one hour of instruction was max for 8 year olds.... then we played some baseball games to get them competing in some way to simulate game conditions. So practice lasted about one hour and 20

minutes total. Having a pre-established amount of time helps parents schedule drop off and pick up for their kids. Goldilocks principles are important here. Too short a practice leaves out necessary work. Too long creates boredom and kids dreading practice. "Just right" keeps kids active and productive and allows them to leave with a feeling of accomplishment and enjoyment.

Fourth, how often will you break up your practice into smaller chunks? Baseball requires many skills and much time on situations to develop baseball understanding/IQ. So how long does it take to teach and practice a skill regularly? For example, I switched what we were doing every 10 minutes for 8 year olds. We had 6 segments for each hour. Then a double segment, 20 minutes, for a simulation game. At the varsity level, we switched every 15 minutes and had 8 segments over a two hour practice. If the weather was good and we were on a field, we always added a double segment for simulation games on the field for a practice of two and a half hours. That was as long as we ever went at the varsity level. Moving from once activity to another in regular intervals increases learning and interest. Standing around shagging with one person hitting at a time is a recipe to quit baseball and play more video games.

Fifth, what are the things you do every day and the things you do on a rotating basis? For example, catch and throw and fielding and hitting/little ball and base running seem to need constant attention. They must be scheduled every practice. Fielding can include not only grounders for infielders but another segment more specifically working on double plays and catchers framing and blocking and pitchers working on mechanics and first baseman working on force plays and footwork with third baseman all while outfielders are working on moving sideways and backwards and footwork needed to hit a cut off man after a catch. Such a segment works with advanced or all star teams and requires integrating multiple coaches into your practice in a very organized manner. When I coached eight year olds, I had one assistant. So we could be doing two things at once! Max! On a rotating basis, once a week we could work on outfield cut offs and relays and bunt reactions and our "game situation of the day"..... "what do I do when the ball is hit to me?" For example, we would put a runner on first one day and vary the outs and play for 20 minutes. The next practice, we would put runners on 1st and 3rd and vary the outs and play. Every practice was a new situation that, over time, helped players understand how the game changes with outs and runners on base and the score of the game. Without working on this, kids play an entire season and never improve their baseball IQ!

Finally, what is the practice "template" that you can drop learning activities into easily and flexibly? Here is a sample. Remember, it is a good idea to simulate game situations or play baseball related games at the end of practice to "put your skills into a game like situation". So you can combine two segments to get a longer chunk of time. This template includes my ideas for an eight year old team working out twice a week and then either playing a game or working out when rained out twice a week.

Practice Plan Template

Practice (80) minutes—(8) Segments of (10) minutes each

Segment One: (Base Running)

Explain here what you will do: (All players divide into four groups and run at every base.)

Segment Two: (Catch and Throw)

Explain here what you will do: (All players work on pitching and catching.)

Segment Three: (Ground Balls)

Explain here what you will do: (All players work on fielding ground balls.)

Segment Four: (Fly Balls)

Explain here what you will do: (All players work on catching fly balls.)

Segment Five: (Double Plays)

Explain here what you will do: (All players rotate from SS to 2nd to 1B.)

Segment Six: (Hitting)

Explain here what you will do: (All players do the hitting activity of the day/small groups.)

Segment Seven: (Game of the day!)

Explain here what you will do: (Break the team into 3 groups, 2 on defense 1 on offense.)

Segment Eight: (Game of the day!)

Explain here what you will do: (Create a situation and switch groups every 6 minutes.)

Conclusion

Good practices are not accidents! They are the result of thoughtful planning. Player improvement is assured when you do the right things regularly in an organized manner. Good planning allows parents to understand a well organized approach to teaching and adapt to a regular schedule. One thing I know from teaching and coaching for over forty years: the better you teach the less your students and parents complain.