

Keys to Getting the Most Out of Players: Part Four

Create Room for Routines AND Novelty When You Coach

Sometimes we must use an “either/or” approach to coaching. We must select one answer from several choices. Either we pitch our best and most experienced pitcher the first game of the week or the second. If we start player “x” at first, we must find another place for the other possible first basemen or they will be on the bench. If hitter “y” bats third, all our other choices must find another spot in the order. These are just a few examples of making the tough choice’s when there is only one answer available to us. We just can’t play two pitchers, two first basemen, or have two people hit 3rd in our line up. And we only have nine defensive possibilities; some kids must start on the bench. So it goes for coaches.

Sometimes we do not have to use the “either/or” approach. Every chance we can, we are better off if we use the “and” opportunity. It is very possible to have very high standards for improvement AND laugh a lot every time the team gets together. Sometimes, coaches feel like they must either run the “old school coach in charge” with a structured, disciplined approach to the game” or a looser “new school kids in charge fun and games approach.” Can’t we capture the value of both approaches to get the most out of our players?

The Value of Structure and Well-Organized Routines

Structure, predictability, and drilled activities with outcomes that build and support growth will fuel improvement. Structure is the key to managing time well. Coaches are racing against time. If our players do not improve enough and succeed enough to find baseball or softball enjoyable, they will eventually stop playing. Learning is facilitated by predictable routines. Confidence is gained by understanding the structure and flow of a practice or a ballgame. Opening practice with a clearly understandable, thoughtfully developed warm up to prepare for activity is essential. Then, providing activities for defensive and offensive and base running and pitching and catching fundamentals, as well as ways to improve team defense and team offense and situational IQ’s are required elements of effective teaching and practice planning.

Here would be a sample practice plan to clarify. Start practice with 1/4 of your team at each base on the field. Move from base to base with varied dynamic stretch movements: lateral scissor steps, bounding, and lunges forward and backward. Then stop on a base as a group and do forward and backward arm circles, leg over toe touches, and an Achilles stretch. Once fully loose, immediately do some base running reaction drills moving around the bases working on fundamental starts and reactions. Then, get your mitt and immediately begin your throwing routines to not only warm up your arms but to improve upon each player's ability to play catch. Design activities to move from short to medium to long catch, each one with targeted goals. Then move to infield and outfield routines designed to improve how many times in a row players can catch properly ground balls and fly balls and throw accurately to targets. This includes pitchers and catchers getting needed throwing and fundamental work. Have a situational team defensive routine follow your "every day" fundamental work, so double plays and bunt defenses and throwing to bases varying the outs and runners on base, so mental processing gets better and faster. Moving to offensive fundamental time, make sure that batting stations are created so players move in pairs from tee stations to side toss work to machine work to live arm practice all designed with targets and goals to keep track of development. Only a well-organized, structured series of activities clearly understood by all players allows for an active, fast paced workout offering enough repetitions to create player improvement.

The Value of Novelty and Surprise and Playing and Having Fun

The perfect complement to a well-developed practice is surprising kids each time we meet and creating activities that kids find competitive and fun. Even the best routines get old. Players can just start going through the motions. That is why offering points and charting improvement and trying to hit targets set up around the field are more interesting than mindless repetitions. Even then, mix it up! Schedule a game and compete for prizes. Double or nothing is fun! Teams of 4 batting at a time with the bases loaded, and the team that gets the most RBI's win's Tootsie Roll Pops! Setting a defense and seeing how many plays you can make in a row in five minutes is competitive and focused. Play games that put drills together into simulations that prepare for the real thing. Get to know your kids, determine what they enjoy doing, and make up things they will enjoy that incorporate game strategy and skills. Create teams within a team that are evenly matched and have each team come up with a

nickname. Make sure something is surprising/fun every day. Find your funny players. Give them the assignment of “joke of the day”, or “funny story of the day” during a break in activities. Laugh AND work hard!

How important is novelty and fun for our players? The answer is as easy as asking young kids what their favorite class is, or what they remember about their day after school is over. Recess! If not recess, PE! Why? Human beings want and need to play. Work is associated with the subjects that involve worksheets and homework and sitting down and putting your “nose to the grindstone” and accomplishing assigned tasks. Not much changes when we become adults. Work pays the bills and recreation is for enjoyment. Ultimately, what do we want to make baseball for our players—work or enjoyment? If kids do not learn to love the game, if passion does not drive their efforts so that extra work outside practice is something they choose, they will not become excellent players. Period! So let's give kids choices of games to play during practice, let's make parts of practice “recess” and truly fun, so they can begin to see a game played with uniforms in public competitively fun as well.

Conclusion and Reflective Questions

Sometimes we make choices that can be “and” opportunities “either/or” choices. This is always a mistake. Structure is essential. An organized, well-developed practice and pre-game approach will improve players and manage our time more efficiently. This is essential. AND—Novelty and surprise and playing games is essential to teach our kids the joy of play in an age where they often have their heads buried in a screen thinking “fun and games” is on their I-Pad or phone or computer screen. The joy of movement and working with teammates does not come from structure and drill. It comes from play. Let's “play ball”!

The sixth assignment: What were some helpful routines that helped you become a better player when you were younger? How did they help you and your team improve? What were some surprising and fun things from your playing career? What games did you most enjoy at recess? Why were they fun? How can you use your experiences to make your practices and game opportunities more effective AND fun for your players!