

The Art of Making a Lineup

Dave Gasser

Determining who plays and where they play with a substitution pattern and a batting order is something all coaches are required to do. Rarely is any instruction offered to develop this important skill. All of a sudden it is game day and we grab a line up card and wing it as an inexperienced coach. Often subs are sort of inserted or not inserted, and after the fact our moves are not very thoughtful and are easily second guessed! Many problems can be avoided by having a thoughtful, intentional approach to making up a line up. Here are some very important questions that can help do this with some thought behind the process.

Who starts and where?

As you evaluate the talent and skill of your players, you must begin selecting those players located in the middle of the field. These include catcher, pitcher, shortstop, second baseman and center fielder. The foundation of a defensive team is found in a strong core of players in these positions. Baseball is the only game where the defense controls the ball; and the player with the ball in his hand at the beginning of every play is the pitcher. Find the players who can throw the ball with consistent accuracy. Locating pitches is more important than throwing hard. Walks make youth baseball endless affairs. Throwing strikes and changing speeds makes the offense perform and lets the defense make plays. Now find a the players who catch the ball without dropping it consistently. Of these guys, who wants to put on the gear and be involved in every play and is not afraid to be behind a batter. Catching is both skill and desire to be there. If you have a skilled pitcher and a good catcher, over 50% of your defensive issues have been addressed. Now find the players that best field ground balls. Which has the best and most accurate arm to go with fielding skill? Put that player at shortstop. Who is the next best player that can get rid of the ball quickly and throw accurately? They do not have to have a strong arm. Put that player at second base. Now who is the fastest guy you have that has a strong arm who can catch a fly ball? Put that player in center field. You have now filled the middle of your defense with players whose skill level match the job description of the position they play in the best possible manner for your team!

Now for the corners. Who was the best catching prospect that is not catching? Put him at first. Sometimes we place a good hitter at first base to get his bat in the lineup. That is a mistake. This player will touch the ball more than any other player other than the pitcher and catcher. They need to make sure that decently thrown balls are caught for outs! Who is the best infielder left that has a decent throwing arm? Put that player at third. Right field requires a strong throwing arm since the throw from right to third is longer than any throw the left fielder has to make! A good center fielder who covers a lot of ground allows a fairly limited defensive player to play left field. Here is a place you can put a player who is one of your better hitters. You now have a rationale as to who plays each position on the field!

How will subs be inserted into the game?

The best thing to do at the youth level is pre determine how you will substitute during games before it begins. In the heat of competition, it is difficult to think about the game and the score and substitutions and timing. The pressure will always keep non starting players on the bench when games are close because of the natural competitive desire to win a game. So before the game begins, make a few important decisions. What is the importance of getting all players experience for their development as

opposed to the importance of winning a youth baseball game? Once you have determined how much every player should play each game, let them know when they are going in and for at least how long. Kids can be inserted in the middle of a game and then starters can re-enter if the game is close and they never get “left out”! If a player is better offensively they can come in when a batter is needed and then play their innings. If a player is better defensively they can replace a good offensive player after they hit and help the team with defense and get an at bat before a starter returns. If the game is one sided either way, why not let the subs play more and get more experience? If the game is going to truly develop character in a positive way, your best kids should get the opportunity at times to positively encourage your subs and work on being a good team mate. When this happens the subs are much more inclined to support your better starters and you are creating a positive team experience for all who play.

How do I determine a batting order?

For the youngest teams, winning should not be the main focus. So it is perfectly fine to develop a system where all players have a chance to hit in the first five and all players hit in the bottom of the order. If that is not competitive enough for you, have your obviously best hitters hit 1-4 and be random with 5-9 so your little ones do not see themselves constantly as the ninth hitter or forever the bench warmer. That sort of negative thinking will have them quit before they physically develop and we will lose some very good future players too early!

For more competitive older youth teams, here are considerations for your establishing a competitive batting order. Your lead off hitter can be one of two types of players. If you have a very fast kid with a good eye who gets on base constantly via walk and base hits, get his speed on base! Or, if you clearly have a best hitter who is fast, consider him leading off. If the pitcher is “afraid of this guy” and is prone to walk him, great! You have a fast lead off hitter up. Also, if the bottom of the lineup gets a few runners on with two outs, your best hitter gets to drive them home later in the game. The second hitter should handle the bat! They need to be able to bunt and slap bunt and hit the ball to all fields to move that lead off guy into scoring position. The third hitter is generally the player on your team who hits the ball hard most consistently. Your fourth hitter is the next best guy to drive the ball with pop after you’ve selected your first three. Your fifth hitter is the next best guy! The number six hitter is second lead off. This player can be fast with a decent on base percentage so he can run to help create a run. Number seven is the best guy you have to bunt and drag bunt and move a guy up. Number eight is the best hitter available to drive in a runner in scoring position. Number nine should be able to run as well as possible in case they get on with two outs and your lead off hitter comes up.

What roles can non-starters play during a game?

Finally, your line up can include roles for all players. Bench players can be assigned tasks that keep them mentally involved in the game. A pitcher on the bench can chart pitches and show that chart to the pitcher in the game between innings how often they are getting ahead or behind hitters and where hitters are hitting the ball off them and what pitch they are hitting. On defense one of your players can remind the team of how many outs and where the hitter went their previous at bats! One of your players is your bull pen catcher ready to warm up the pitcher whenever needed on the field between innings or in the bull pen. An offensive chart can show what your hitters did the previous at

bats and the offensive charter can show this information when batters are “in the hole” to help prepare them for their at bat. These are just a few examples. You can develop roles for your team that are positive and helpful and get your bench engaged in the game!

Conclusion

The best time to make up a line up is the night before. You can sit down and be thoughtful about who will start, where they will play and when they will bat. At the same time you can determine our substitution pattern. This process can be explained to parents before games begin so they know what you as the coach have determined that clarifies not just what you are doing but why. (For example, all players are going to play so this is when I sub and how players will go in and out of the game.) This is the best a coach can offer players and parents! If you come with a large white board, all starters and bench roles and when bench players will enter the game and switch roles with your starters can be clearly written. Here would be an example.

Hitting:	Position:	Inning Replaced/Player Entering:
1. Bill Jones	SS	
2. Fred Smith	P	4th/Jim Ferd
3. Bilbo Baggins	3B	
4. Arnold Palmer	1B	
5. Dirk Pitt	2B	4th/Clem Johnson
6. Milo Meskill	CF	
7. Harpo Marx	RF	4th/Elmo Sesame
8. Matt Swann	Catcher	
9. Ben Gazarra	LF	4th/Chris Peterson

Roles:

Jim Ferd: Pitching Chart

Clem Johnson: Defensive Chart

Elmo Sesame: Hitting Chart

Chris Peterson: Bull Pen Catcher