

## **Between Innings: Lost Opportunities for Team**

### **Preparation and Development**

**By Adam Sarancik**

Many times I think youth coaches copy what other coaches do without thinking why they are doing it. One of those times this is frequently done is between innings of games. During those times, much team preparation and development could be happening, but is not.

Elite team and player development is very difficult and takes a ton of hard work. To accomplish this development, every throw, reception, and swing a player takes needs to be done for a specific purpose and with intent to be better. Typically, the priority today in youth sports is preparing for and playing as many games as possible and not on practicing to improve individual skills. Therefore, coaches teaching their players before, during and after every minute of a game is critical.

The following is a description of what typically happens between innings during a youth game and what I think could be done to better prepare the team and the players when the game begins.

#### Pitchers and Catchers

Here are some of the important factors that need to be accounted for to properly prepare pitchers and catchers for the game:

A knowledgeable coach, not just a teammate, needs to help warm-up the pitcher. The pitcher must warm-up at the same distance as the pitching distance in the game, on a mound with the same slope as the mound in the game, and facing the same direction as the mound in the game. The pitcher must work on all types of pitches from both the stretch and the wind-up ending in whatever delivery he will start the game. They must not throw too many pitches in the bullpen so they leave their best stuff there.

The pitcher must know the “umpire’s zone” not just the strike zone before they take the mound. The pitcher must be prepared mentally to attack the weaknesses of the hitters they will face and to play defense to the offensive tactics of the opposing team. During the between inning warm-up, the catcher must remind the pitcher of these same things.

The catcher must receive every pitch for a purpose based on the pitch type and delivery. The pitcher’s last warm-up pitch before the game begins must be one the catcher can easily handle to make a good throw to second base. Coaches should be prepared to warm-up a pitcher between innings if the catcher needs time to put on their gear.

League or tournament rules typically dictate the maximum number of warm-up pitches a pitcher is allowed to take before the first pitch or between innings. But what occurred prior to the pitcher ever taking the mound may have as much or more of an impact on whether the pitcher performs at their best or not. The weather and the amount of throws the pitcher already threw the bullpen warm-up, in prior innings, before the game in team warm-up drills and in playing other positions during the game may dictate the pitcher may not need that many pitches or may need more pitches to warm-up.

### Infielders

First basemen should be able to throw ground balls at different heights and speeds to the infielders to simulate what they will experience during the game. This is a skill that needs to be trained during practice! The first basemen should deliver those throws from off of the base so they have to move to the base after each throw to execute proper footwork. Every throw from an infielder should be caught. Period. If the throw is not accurate, after catching the ball, the first baseman should be sure to touch the base after every throw. The first baseman should properly stretch for every throw. An extra ball should be placed behind first base so valuable time is not wasted chasing wild throws. A coach should throw two balls to the first baseman at the end of each inning so they have them ready for the start of the next inning.

The other infielders should field every ball from the first baseman with game-like intensity and purpose starting at the maximum distance they could throw in the game. They need to work on all types of fielding e.g., forehands, backhands, etc., all types of footwork that accompany those balls, and all types of plays they might perform in the game, e.g., double plays and force plays. Coaches need to observe and coach not just the result of those throws, but the process and mechanics that lead to the results.

### Outfielders

Outfielders should not just play catch. They should throw each other fly balls *and ground balls* using momentum for each throw to protect the health of their arm. If their skill level does not allow them to do it, coaches should do it. Similar to infielders, every throw and catch should have a purpose. All types of catches, forehand and backhand, lateral, drop step, “wrong way” turns, and balls in sun with all of the accompanying footwork, e.g., inside pivot, reverse pivot, step behind, “do or die”, etc. should be practiced.

### Hitters

All at bats begin in the dugout. Before a player ever reaches the batter’s box, they should know the game situation which may dictate the sign they will receive to do their job, the umpire’s zone, the pitcher’s tells and tendencies, how the pitcher will attack them as a

hitter and base runner, and the pitcher's rhythm so they can work on their timing in the on deck circle.

### Bench Players

All team members are players and are in the game whether they are on the field or not. They are thinking along with and communicating with the players on the field and the coaches in the dugout about what the players who play their position should do, did do or did not do during the game. At the appropriate age, the bench players should help keep all of the game stats not the coaches in the dugout or the parents in the stands.

Most importantly, all players need to hold each other accountable for all of these things including communicating with each other, verbally and non-verbally, about the score, the other team's potential tactics, and what they need to do to counter them so they are mentally prepared to compete at their best when the inning begins or a new hitter is at bat. The accountability and communication must continue forward, backward and side-to-side among all the players on the field for every hitter and after every stolen base during the game.

My experience is youth baseball teams and players rarely do these things between innings of games. As a result, many opportunities for optimum game preparation and player development are lost.

**Adam Sarancik** is the author of four Amazon Top 100 Best Selling books, *Coaching Champions for Life – The Process of Mentoring the Person, Athlete and Player*; *Takeaway Quotes for Coaching Champions for Life*; *A Ground Ball to Shortstop – How and Why Coaches See Their Game Differently Than Anyone Else*; and *Teacher, Role Model, Mentor: Lessons Learned From a Lifetime in Coaching*.