

Five Tips for Five Phases of Practice to Dramatically Improve the Coaching Methodology of Youth Coaches



By Adam Sarancik

I have spent as much time in my 45 years of coaching watching other coaches coach players at all levels as I have coaching teams myself. What I have observed is coaches with a ton of well-meaning energy and effort underachieving in the development of their teams. This is not completely their fault. In my experience, youth leagues rarely give their coaches enough equipment, resources, and training to enable them to do their jobs well.

Here are some essential factors missing from many coaches' approach and practice plans that will dramatically improve how and why they coach.

Pre-Practice

1. Do your homework – set goals for the team as persons, athletes, and players for the season, each week and each day and consult reputable resources to be sure what you are teaching is fundamentally sound. Do not assume what you were taught as a player was or is correct.

2. Master teaching what you know for the entire ability spectrum before expanding what you know.

3. Prepare physically and mentally to mentor the person, train the athlete, and develop the player. A team member will not fully accept what you have to say unless they can trust that you understand them as a person. The best athletes have the most potential to be the best players.

4. Post a written practice plan with timed segments that the players read before practice that has a logical progression leading to an end of practice game-sim or scrimmage where the coaches do and say nothing to see what the players have learned. Be sure quotes, acronyms or guest speakers for the discussion of life lessons are included in the plan.



5. Coaches should arrive early enough to prepare the field, set up all equipment and stations, and to discuss who, what, and how practice will be done so that the

transitions will be short and, most importantly, so that all coaches, at all times can teach, role model and mentor from the moment the first player arrives until the last player leaves.

Athleticism/Dynamic Movement and Stretching Routine

1. Have one. Running to a tree or a pole and back will not prepare your team mentally or physically to be trained as athletes or developed as players.

2. Be present and physically able to teach it. Do not simply show the players what to do at the beginning of the season and tell them to go do it at the beginning of every practice and game. The word Coach is a verb, an action word. In youth sports, telling is not teaching. A coach must be able to demonstrate and teach it using the appropriate learning modality for each player. Take this part of practice as seriously as you do teaching throwing, fielding or hitting fundamentals and mechanics. In fact, it is the foundation for success or failure for all of those things.



3. All team coaches and the league itself must have a system to assess, teach, program, progress and monitor each player practice-to-practice and season-to-season how to crawl, walk, march, skip, run, bound, sprint, shuffle, backpedal, jump and hop in all planes of

motion optimally in a coordinated and synchronized manner. The training must include mobility, flexibility, stability, balance, breathing, visual acuity, mental mindfulness and focus, speed, agility, quickness, strength and power.

4. Train preparation, anticipation and reaction, as well as, action. Explosive and baseball actions and footwork, e.g., chatter steps, lateral/crossover steps, drop steps, “wrong way” turns, must be taught here first in dry mechanic progressions before you ask the players to do them on the field.

5. Make it fun, rewarding, and motivating by having competitions here too by using speed ladders, shuttle runs, gauntlets, and all types of chase/tag games. Incorporate baseball/softball tosses and receiving often.

Throwing and Receiving Progression

1. Do an arm care routine for *every* player before this part of training at *every* practice and game.

2. The players should never perform just “catch play.” *Every day* coaches must carefully teach the mechanics of receiving, transferring, and throwing a baseball so that at the end of the season *every player* has dramatically improved these skills.

3.. *Every* throw and *every* reception must be done for a specific purpose and with an intent to be accurate and mechanically correct. Use training gloves, striped and flat-sided balls to aid this process.

4. *Every* type of throw, e.g., underhand, backhand, dart, glove flip, relay, long hop, clock throws, right foot, “do or die”, muff and dive that every position player will be asked to make in practice and, eventually, in games must be practiced here *every* day. *Every* situation, e.g., relays, rundowns, tag and force play mechanics that a player will be asked to execute in practice and games must be practiced here first *every* day.

5. This is the most individual part of practice. Not every player should perform the same number of throws from the same distance every day. Their health/fatigue, conditioning and level of development may dictate fewer or shorter throws. The positions they play may eventually dictate at a certain point in the season that some players work more on certain types of throws than other players, but versatility is a key asset for a youth player.



Position and Hitting Fundamentals

1. Follow the six step teaching process. A player fielding a ball hit to him during position fundamentals or hitting a ball in batting practice is step five in the process, not step 1.

2. Use training aids such as speed ladders, discs, cones, hexagons, hurdles, bands, training gloves and weighted balls to teach using all of the learning modalities, not just auditory commands.



3. Teach by doing the skills *with your players*; let parent volunteers or non-coaches roll, feed and hit balls. At the high school level, invite youth coaches from your feeder programs to do these things so they can watch you coach and learn what you teach. High school coaches should only have to refine, not reteach players when they arrive.

4. Multi-task at all times, e.g., 2-in-1 and 3-in-1 drills; priority, shadowing, relays and tags at home plate mechanics with fly balls; baserunning mechanics and game situations with team hitting (shag balls after every round, not during, unless it's necessary for safety).

5. Please do not have players line up. If a coach has more than 2 or 3 players at a station they have design flaws in their practice plan. Have enough coaches, equipment, and stations so that all players are active all of the time. There is no line standing; only mental and physical preparation doing.

