

Lessons You Can Learn by Watching a Game

Good coaches no matter how old they are will watch a game and come away learning something. Even if they may be watching the game for enjoyment, there is always something they will see that could possibly help them in the future. A great teaching moment is to take your team to a game or watch a game on TV with them. Show your players during that game not only the good things that are happening but also the things that are done that may cost a run and eventually a game.

Coaches can teach their players what to look for during the game like offensive and defensive weaknesses and tendencies. They can teach situations that come up during the game and can teach why something worked or why it didn't work. Pictures are worth a thousand words.

Even watching Major League Baseball games on TV will provide a lot of teachable moments.

Lesson One: When Jason Wurtz hit the winning walk off home run in the ninth inning during game four against the Cardinals, the Nationals went wild. Yes, it was a big game to win but it was not the Championship game. Watching them storm the field and jump up and down with excitement, made me shake my head. I have been on both sides of that scenario and that becomes bulletin board material. The Cardinals came back to win the next game and take the series.

Side note: in case you have never heard that term, bulletin board material means that a player/team said or did something that could make the other team irritated at them to the point that it inspires that

other team to do everything possible to beat the team. Especially if a comment is in print, that article will be posted the next day in the team's locker room and discussed thoroughly.

My first trip to a National Tournament in 1978 when I was just 27 was a lesson learned. Good news is we took second in the tournament and I am very proud of the players for playing that well. Bad news is that Golden West with Hall of Fame coach Judi Garman came out of the losers bracket and beat us twice for the Championship. When we beat Golden West College 3-0 in the final of the winners bracket, we went wild. We didn't think there was any way we would lose two games the next day. The more experienced Golden West coach and team came out the next day very calmly and beat us two straight games. I have also been on the other side of the issue losing that winner's bracket game. If the team that beat us would act like they had just won the tournament, you better believe we used that to get our kids going. And yes, we would win those next games.

- **Lesson learned: Save the cheering and excitement until the tournament is over. Act like you have been there before, shake hands and get off the field. That shows the team that you have just beaten that you are very confident, that winning is nothing new to your team and that your team expects to win.**

Lesson Two: have your players watch the hitter's stance and their approach to the pitch. With some hitters, it is easy to see if they are trying to spray the ball going with the pitch or trying to pull every pitch. If the ball is thrown outside, take that pitch to the opposite field, thrown inside-pull it, thrown down the middle-hit it back up the middle. When players try to pull every pitch including the outside ones, the results are usually a pop up, weak

grounder to the opposite side or a strike out. Some might get lucky and get a hit but it is not a high percentage play.

- **What the pitcher has learned is to set up this hitter so that they go after the outside pitches.**

Lesson Three: have your players watch the infielders and the way they stand in their ready position. If they are on their heels, it will be harder for them to field a bunt or get a ball to their side. See if the corner infielders play up towards home plate or back toward the base, see if they are shifted to one side of the field or the other.

- **Lesson learned is that the hitter can probably bunt successfully when playing this team if the corner infielders are on their heels. You can also bunt/slap the defense by going away from the shift.**

Lesson Four: have your players watch the outfielders approach the ball and the strength and accuracy of their arm. If the outfielders are crouched or have their hands on their knees while the pitch is being delivered, they will be slow to the ball. If they catch the ball on their glove side instead of their throwing hand side, they will be slower getting the ball in from the outfield. If they do not follow through on the throw using their whole body on the throw, the ball will not have much zip on it.

- **Lesson learned is that the runners should take the extra base on all of these outfielders.**

Lesson Five: have your players watch how a team reacts when the other team scores three in the first and three in the second and that team is now up

by six runs after the first two innings. If that happens, it means that leading team still has five innings left in the game. Some teams will think the game is over at that point. I hated when we would score a bunch of runs in the first inning because it is easy to put it on cruise control for the rest of the game. On the other side, if someone scored a few runs in the first inning, I reminded the team that we had at least six more innings to get three runs to tie.

- **Lesson learned is to not to panic. Regroup and pick up run by run. A lot of teams panic and feel they have to get a bunch of runs right away. If the team would score just one an inning and hold them, they win the game at least by the score of 6-3.**

Lesson Six: have your players watch how a team offensively adapts to the defense of the other team. I was watching a Cardinal game (I am a huge Cardinal fan but I still get frustrated with the baseball mentality) and the other team was a couple of runs down in the middle innings. The Cardinals had runners on with good hitters coming up. Each player that came to the plate was swinging for the fence or at least try to pull the ball. The pitcher was throwing everything outside and they went down swinging or hit weak grounders for outs. Almost every inning after that, the same thing happened. I love creating runs. Many infielders stay back especially in baseball or they put the shift on where third base is left wide open. Why not bunt? If the defense is giving the hitter that much room, I do not understand not taking advantage of that. If the bunt is not there, I like to see hitters take the pitch where it is thrown instead of trying to always pull it. A bloop hit over first base that scores a run is marked the same in the scorebook as a screaming line drive—The runner still scores.

Another play I see a lot especially in MLB is a fast runner on third with a player at the plate that is an adequate bunter. Time after time, they do not

squeeze the runner home. The Cardinals last year in the playoffs with the Cubs had the opportunity to score runs on that type of play. They also had the opportunity when the Cubs put the shift on to bunt to third and be safe for a hit. But instead, they would always swing away and produce nothing. Time and time, they did not play small ball to either score a run or get a runner on base when the opportunity was there. But the Cubs did. In Fact, they pulled off two squeeze plays in a row and they won a pivotal game. They then went on to win the Divisional Series and go to the NLCS. A friend texted me and ask if I was coaching third for the Cubs because of the squeezes.

- **Lesson learned is that the Cardinals (unfortunately) will not bunt to take advantage of the shift nor will they use their speed to squeeze someone home. But you also have learned that the Cubs might.**

Lesson Seven: Especially with television coverage, you can really see the eyes of the players. Teach your players to watch the body language and eyes of the opposing players. You can see the fear or the determination in them. You can pick up who is rattled and who is rock steady. The “fear in the eyes” players are the ones you can intimidate during a game. If you see fear in the pitcher’s eyes while batting, stare right at her with a determined—I will not break—look. If your team gets a runner on base against that pitcher, be aggressive with the lead offs so that the catcher will be distracted by those lead offs. If the catcher is distracted, the pitcher will also be distracted.

- **Lesson learned is not to have fear in your eyes. Fear no one but respect everyone. If you see fear in the eyes of the opposition, be more aggressive on offense and defense. The more powerful your team seems, the weaker the other team will feel.**

Teaching your players the strategy of softball while watching games really works. When you break the plays down for them and show them as they watch, they will understand. Learning gives a team that mental power and confidence needed during their own games. It is well worth the time it will take to teach your players these lessons. It will also be a great team bonding activity.