

# ELEVEN DISCIPLINES OF LACROSSE

Adapted from Drew Bowden

John Wooden, one of the most successful coaches of any sport in any era, stated that a coach's most important responsibility is to teach his players to execute properly and effectively the fundamentals of the game. In his book, Practical Modern Basketball, Wooden wrote:

No system will be successful unless the players are well grounded in the fundamentals and execute them properly and so quickly that they seem to be done instinctively. Almost any system will be successful if it is taught well, stresses positive action with (field) balance and is used by quick, aggressive players who are well grounded in the fundamentals, in excellent condition, possess a good team attitude, and keep their emotions under control.

If you properly train your team in the fundamentals of lacrosse, you will see immediate, rewarding results, and each player will build a strong foundation for the future.

## THE LIST OF DISCIPLINES

In my eighteen year coaching career, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to coach at several levels, including, in order: youth league, high school, Division I college, youth league, Division I college, high school, and youth league. During my last two turns coaching youth league, I noticed that much of what was being taught to the young players was not necessarily preparing them for play at the next levels (high school and college). I therefore attempted to identify a list of the most essential skills that young players should be taught to help them learn and appreciate the game and develop a base on which to build. I tried to keep the list reasonable and to boil down the fundamentals into short rules that can be easily remembered and frequently repeated. I ended up with the following eleven rules. The list is by no means exhaustive, but it covers enough ground to keep you and your players busy for some time:

**Discipline ONE:** *You must learn to run, throw, catch, and shoot both left and right-handed.*

**Discipline TWO:** *Protect the Crosse and keep it "in the box" position.*

**Discipline THREE:** *Move the ball.*

**Discipline FOUR:** *Move the ball off the ground.*

**Discipline FIVE:** *Move without the ball.*

**Discipline SIX:** *Move to the ball.*

**Discipline SEVEN:** *Look at a spot behind the goalie as you shoot.*

**Discipline EIGHT:** *Shoot with a quick release.*

**Discipline NINE:** *Defensemen must have better stickwork than attackmen or midfielders.*

**Discipline TEN:** *Play defense like a boxer boxes.*

**Discipline ELEVEN:** *You don't have to take the ball away to be a good defenseman.*

### **THE RATIONALES FOR THE RULES**

Players respond and play better when they know the reason why they are being told to do something, rather than receiving unexplained orders. It is imperative to continually discuss and reinforce the rationales for the disciplines with the players. Referring again to John Wooden, he stated:

(I)t is unlikely that a teacher of any subject finds it as necessary to follow the laws of learning as closely and specifically as it is for the teacher of the fundamentals of (lacrosse). A fundamental must be explained and demonstrated, the correct demonstration must be imitated by the players, their demonstration must be constructively criticized and corrected, and then the players must repeat and repeat the execution of the proper model until the correct habit has been formed to the point where they will react instinctively in the correct manner.

Here are the rationales for the disciplines:

**Discipline ONE:** *Every player must be able to run, throw, catch, and shoot left-handed and right-handed.*

There is no way around this one. The "one-handed" lacrosse player is dead, and the sooner you insist on competency with both hands, the better it will be for the players. Start with your players on day one. Make them practice with both hands during your practice and *insist that they practice their weak hands on their own.*

On the first point (practicing with both hands every practice), I do not believe or expect that you can train your players to use their weak hands effectively during the limited time available to you; however, no player likes to look incompetent. *If you make all of your players use their weak hands every day at practice, even if only for 5 minutes, they will practice their weak hands on their own, even if it is only to avoid being embarrassed.*

On the second point (insisting that they practice their weak hands on their own), I always *remind my players that they are not going to awaken magically one morning with a left hand.* They must practice, preferably early in their careers. *Learning to play with both hands is like learning a foreign language: the younger they begin, the easier it is.* Once a player goes a few years dependent on only his primary hand, he loses confidence in his weak hand and finds it difficult to practice it, much less use it in a game.

Please note that I have not included scooping or playing defense among the things that a player must be able to do with both hands. I have found that even the best athletes have problems learning to scoop with both hands, and switching hands while playing defense is too complicated to be called fundamental.

**Discipline TWO:** Protect the Crosse and keep it “in the box position.”

*The more time your players play with their sticks perpendicular to the ground, as opposed to parallel to the ground, the better players they will be.* This one sounds simple, but gets complicated quickly. The premise is that if a player keeps his stick perpendicular to the ground, he can protect the full length of his stick with his body. To the contrary, as his stick becomes parallel to the ground, the head and butt are exposed, and he is susceptible to a number of checks. *Teach your players to play with the crosse next to their heads ("in the box position") and the shaft perpendicular to the ground and protected by their bodies at all times.* The second they catch a ball, no matter where it is thrown, they should adjust their sticks so that the crosse is in the box position, and their bodies protect the shaft. The moment they scoop a ground ball, they should return the crosse to the box position. When they throw or shoot the ball, they should do it overhand, from the box position.

The ideal is not often realized, however, because in order to "play perpendicular," a player must first learn to catch, throw and shoot with his wrists, not his arms. Frequently, players cannot do this because they have learned how to catch, throw and shoot with their arms extended rather than relying on their wrists. This problem is often exacerbated by the fact that their pocket is as deep as the rules permit. More often than not, this creates a whip in their stick. It is impossible for players to catch, throw, or shoot with their wrists when their sticks have whips; they must extend their arms. So, if you have a player who just can't get the knack of "playing perpendicular" with his wrists, the first thing to check is the bag in his stick.

As an added problem, every offensive player wants to crank. They want to perfect the side-arm heat that rips twine ... and they spend hour upon hour standing in front of the goal, flat footed, cranking away, developing the worst habits. You should do everything in your power to discourage this (virtually) useless activity. Throughout the entire season, a player may have three or four opportunities to stand and wing the ball sidearm towards the goal or to a teammate. That same player should have scores of opportunities to catch, throw, and shoot in close quarters where he must protect his stick. Thus, just as with playing with both hands, you should insist from day one that your players (on the field and on their own) get used to "*keeping stick at box.*"

**Discipline THREE:** *Move the ball.*

*The less time the ball spends in your players' sticks, the better players they will be.* I insist on this rule early on because it is easier to learn to carry the ball after having learned how to move the ball than the other way around. Few things are more difficult than teaching a player who has learned to "tune out" (i.e. to run down the field with the ball oblivious of his teammates) to move the ball. Moreover, *players who learn to carry the ball too long develop a horrible sense for the game.* I'm not saying that you shouldn't teach your players how to dodge or to run around an opponent. I'm saying that they'll generally be better off if they first learn how to move the ball from the defensive end of the field into the goal in a matter of seconds. *The only way to do that is to force them to move the ball (which can always travel faster than any one player's two feet) all the time.* At St. Simon, we practice the "3 second rule." Once the ball is in the player's stick, he has 3 seconds to "move the ball" to another player.

**Discipline FOUR:** *Move the ball off the ground.*

This is a corollary to Rule 3 and will improve your transition game dramatically if you don't already live by it. *The premise is simple: as teams scramble for loose balls, they get spread out and pulled out of position.* Much like basketball or hockey, if your team picks up a loose ball, it can capitalize on the opponent's misalignment only if it can move the ball before the opponent has time to readjust. *You should therefore teach your players to move every ground ball they pick up as soon as they possibly can.* Teach them to throw every ground ball they scoop to the first open man on your team that they see - whether behind, across, or in front of them. Ideally, the players off the ball are moving themselves to strategic positions and surveying the game situation as their teammate scrambles for the loose ball so they can quickly exploit the opposition's misalignment when they get the ball. The player scrambling for the loose ball cannot do this because his eyes are on the ball on the ground. He has no idea how the opposition is aligned or who on his team is most strategically placed. A good way

to practice this concept is to *have your team make three quick passes after every ground ball they scoop in scrimmage situations.* They (and you) will be amazed at how many scoring opportunities this simple strategy creates.

**Discipline FIVE:** *Move **without** the ball.*

All lacrosse players, fans, and referees have a tendency, if not a habit, of watching the player with the ball. With everyone watching the man with the ball, it's difficult for him to do anything without drawing attention. The players off the ball (or "off ball"), however, are to some extent disregarded. Thus, it's easier for a player to get into shooting, catching, or scooping position when he does not have the ball. (*We call this "finding space."*) Moreover, every player plays without the ball for over 90% of the season. It is imperative that they make the most of this time and "find space." I tell my players to make the most of their time without the ball by moving and thinking - especially immediately after they throw the ball, when everyone turns their heads to see who's going to receive it. I joke with them and tell them, "Don't watch your pretty pass." By learning not to watch their own "pretty passes" to their teammates, players learn to perfect the art of the give and go. (Most of the players are familiar with Reggie Miller and how he played in constant motion looking to get open. Use Reggie's movement as an example of how the players should work to get open.)

In sum, make your players recognize that when they do not have the ball, they should be moving and analyzing so that the second they receive the ball, they can comply with Rule 3: MOVE THE BALL!

**Discipline SIX:** *Move **to** the ball.*

This may be the most important, and least observed, of all the rules. A player who is open and wants a pass should always move **to** the ball (unless he is so close to his teammate that he'll just run into him). This is particularly true when a player is (1) open on the backside, (2) not being watched by a defenseman in front of him and (3) receiving a pass to shoot.

There is no more egregious sinner in lacrosse than the player who is open backside and stands with his stick in the air. That player should move to, and call for the ball (yelling "*Here's your help.*") Similarly, a player who is not being watched by the defenseman between him and the ball should move to the ball because he can run right past the defenseman and get open. A player receiving a pass to shoot must always move to the ball lest he catch it, turn and get run down by a

sliding defenseman or goalie. This is an especially tough concept to instill in young attackmen. They always think that if they are open, they should not move because they will only run into a defenseman and coverage. Just the opposite is true. If a player is open close to the goal, *someone is coming to get him*. If he stands still, the defenseman or a goalie sliding to him will crunch him, frequently before he has time to catch or shoot the ball. (A better way to think of this is have the player move **through** the ball and protect his stick (see Rule 2, play perpendicular), however, he is very difficult to stop and frequently avoids getting hit. If players move to the ball, they sometimes stop. They should move through the ball maintaining distance from the defender until the shot or pass is made.)

These are only a few of the good reasons to make your players move to and through the ball. Suffice it to say that teaching your players - especially attackmen - to move to and through the ball is one of the greatest services you can perform. It is also important to remember this rule when you arrive at practice to find your players standing flat-footed, cranking at the goal sidearm. *Give them grief, and tell them to practice moving to the ball when they shoot.*

**Discipline SEVEN:** *Look at a spot behind the goalie as they shoot.*

Shooting is the most underrated aspect of the game of lacrosse at every level. Few teams or players practice it on a regular basis. Worse yet, some teams permit their players to shoot consistently without any rhyme or reason, or without looking at the goal. A lacrosse player who shoots without thinking or looking at the goal is like a basketball player who dribbles staring at the floor and shoots in the general direction of the basket with his head down. He will score randomly, not consistently. A player must have a shooting theory, and he must look at the goal as he shoots.

Unfortunately, the most commonly taught shooting theory is: "Look at the goal before you shoot, and pick a spot." This is impossible. If a player is in possession of the ball in shooting position, he is usually being pressured, if not run down. He simply does not have time to adequately evaluate the goalie's positioning and make an accurate shot. *You should therefore teach a shooting theory where your players automatically look first to the highest percentage spot to shoot.* This is a spot "behind the goalie." A spot "behind the goalie" is a spot out of the goalie's momentum. That is, if a player is carrying the ball or is moving to the ball as he receives a pass in shooting position (see Rule 6, move to the ball), the goalie is moving with him (either to his right or to his left). I tell my players to look first at a spot in the opposite direction that the goalie is moving (i.e. behind the goalie). If the goalie

is moving to his right, a shot to his right is in his flow. *A shot to his left, however, forces him to change his momentum and go the other way.* This is a difficult task for the best goalie.

If a player looks first to his highest percentage shot and finds that the goalie is taking it away (or simply out of position), he can adjust and direct his shot to another spot as he is shooting. In sum, do not teach your players to look at the goal and pick a spot. Teach them to look first at the best spot to shoot and adjust accordingly. As an aside, one of the best ways to teach this, or any other, shooting theory is to train your players to watch their shots until they hit the net. It helps a player stay focused on the goal, the goalie, and his shot.

**Discipline EIGHT:** *Shoot with a quick release.*

Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest player in any team sport, is widely praised for the quick release of his shot. This same ability is a great asset in lacrosse. The reason for this follows logically from indisputable facts that have already been discussed: (1) if a player is in possession of the ball in shooting position, he is, or shortly will be, receiving defensive pressure, and (2) goalies move.

*Too many players develop the habit of twirling their sticks, taking two steps, or winding up before they shoot.* This means that they are usually shooting under defensive pressure and the goalie has had time to set and get a fix on the ball. This is especially true when a player has just received a feed.

If that same player, however, *develops the skill of releasing his shot at the same moment he receives a feed,* he will be able to shoot with less pressure than will bear upon him in a moment, and the goalie (who has just turned around, or moved across the front of the goal) will not be able to pick up the ball as easily.

Teaching this skill is difficult. You do not want a team full of “quick stickers.” The proper method of developing a quick release is to give with a feed as it is received and *actually catch it in shooting position, instead of catching the ball and then winding up to shoot.* The best analogy is the centerfielder in baseball who must catch a fly ball with a man tagging at third. That centerfielder does not catch the ball over his head, take three steps and throw to home. Rather, he sets up behind where the ball will land, approaches the ball as it descends, gives with his glove as he is making the catch so that he catches the ball behind him and at shoulder height (not in front of him and over his head), and quickly releases the ball toward home in the same motion. The act of catching the ball is actually the wind-up for the throwing motion.

The same is true in lacrosse. A player should give with a feed and turn his body as he catches it, so that he is prepared to shoot at the moment he catches the ball. The player can then utilize Rule 7 and zero in on the highest percentage shot as he is shooting.

**Discipline NINE:** *Defensemen must have better stickwork than attackmen and midfielders.*

In today's game (where clearing time is limited), defensemen have to be able to clear the ball or their team is in big trouble. *It is not in a player's or your team's best interest to take an inexperienced player and stick him on defense because his stick skills are not great.* Nor is it helpful to have defensemen practice their stick skills by throwing crossfield passes while standing still. This will not improve their stick skills. It will only instill bad habits. Make your defensemen do every cutting, shooting, and stickwork drill (with their long stick) that your midfielders and attackmen do. Rotate your defensemen and let them play offense (with their long stick) in live drills, like fastbreaks. I have found this to be the fastest, funnest way to improve defensemen's skills.

**Discipline TEN:** *Defensemen should play defense like a boxer boxes.*

Too many players stop moving their feet when they make a check, or make a check and leave their sticks in a place where it does them no good. The best way to keep them from developing these bad habits and develop good habits is to teach them to play defense like a boxer boxes.

A boxer does not box with his hands by his waist. He keeps them up, ready to punch. A defenseman should not play defense with his stick on the ground. His stick should always be up, in a position to check. A boxer does not punch and stand. He punches and moves. A defenseman should not check and stop. He's got to keep moving. A boxer does not throw a punch and leave his arm extended on his opponent's nose. A defenseman should not check his opponent and leave his stick on his opponent's hip. He must check and return his stick to checking position so that he can check again. In short, *a defenseman must learn to move, check, and reload.*

This rule makes especially good sense for me because I do not emphasize traditional "poke" checks (where a player slides his stick across his opponent's body) with younger players. I always found they had a tendency to lunge, not poke. I like to teach young players to keep their sticks up, ready to check their opponent when he puts two hands on his stick. Depending on how you coach, you may need to modify this rule.

**Discipline ELEVEN:** *Defensemen do not have to take the ball away to be good defensemen.*

John Wooden taught that a defense's goals are: (1) to prevent the other team from getting a high percentage shot (especially one where a player receives the ball to shoot moving towards the basket, rather than away from the basket), (2) gain possession of loose balls, and (3) begin the transition game. The exact same goals are applicable to lacrosse, yet too many players measure their worth by their ability to strip an opponent of the ball. While this is a valuable skill, it is by no means required.

You should *teach a young defenseman that his job is to be in position when the player he is guarding puts two hands on his stick so that he can check that player's hands.* A defenseman need never strip an opponent of the ball to be great. It is far better to teach your defensemen that the most important skills are footwork, anticipation, and hustle.

## **DRILLS**

The drills I use are designed to teach and reinforce the fundamental rules. You should vigilantly oversee your drills. Too many coaches talk to each other or watch the goalie warm up while their players go through their drills. Indeed, too many coaches refer to their drills as “warm-ups.” Drills are not “warm-ups” and calling them so minimizes their importance. I look at the drills done in the first 15 minutes of practice as the best time to set the tone. Stand in the middle of your players' drills. Consistently insist that they try to perfect the fundamentals. If you are inconsistent in the way you supervise these drills, your team will play inconsistently. If you allow your team to drill sloppily, they will play sloppily.

The following are some “do’s” and “don’ts” if you intend to use drill time to teach the fundamentals:

- Make your players use their right hand and left hand in every drill every day (even if you only spend one minute on the predominantly weak hand).
- Make your players catch and throw from the box position. Don’t let them throw sidearm.
- Make your player’s pass crisply into their teammate’s stick. Youth players have a tendency to be content with chucking the ball in the general direction of their teammate.
- Never let your players take more than two steps with the ball in their sticks during any drill. Tighten up lines so that a player can make a ten to fifteen yard pass to a teammate immediately after receiving the ball. Don’t make players run the width of the field during drills.
- Never let your players twirl their sticks during drills. Ball in. Ball out. MOVE THE BALL!
- Make your players return their sticks to the box position immediately after they scoop a ground ball. This forces them to raise their eyes, which helps them to find an open teammate, which helps them to MOVE THE BALL OFF THE GROUND!
- Never let a player carry the ball for more than two steps after he scoops a loose ball. Get the ball up. Get the ball out.
- Always make players move to the ball as they receive it.

REFERENCE (Note: these are all .org’s)

[www.USLacrosse.org](http://www.USLacrosse.org) National governing body of men’s & women’s lacrosse

[www.IndianaLacrosse.org](http://www.IndianaLacrosse.org) Indiana High School Lacrosse Association

[www.IndianaYouthLacrosse.org](http://www.IndianaYouthLacrosse.org) Indiana Youth Lacrosse Association