



INTRODUCTION

The Monticello Youth Baseball development program was created with two main objectives in mind. One is to assist coaches in preparing to run effective practices, and is to promote and instill a more consistent coaching methodology throughout all levels. One that we're confident will keep the players engaged and interested in the game of baseball, and one that is designed to develop and enhance the players' skills as they progress through the Monticello Youth Baseball program.

The ultimate goal of Monticello Youth Baseball is to create an enjoyable experience for all coaches, parents and players. Teaching the correct fundamentals throughout the program develops better players which then creates better teams. The more competitive the team, the more enjoyable the experience. Winning isn't everything, but it's a lot more enjoyable than losing.

The best coaches adapt their style to all the different individuals, rather than expecting players to adjust to the coach. The goal doesn't change with what the coach wants to accomplish; what's different is how he handles each player to accomplish that goal. Some players need only guidance and support while others need direction and discipline.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Youth coach? Teacher, mentor, character-builder? What do you want to be? When you take on the position of coaching, whether you realize it or not, whether you want it or not, you will leave an impression on your players. We pose this question because coaching is much more than running the team and its play on the field. It is much more than wins and losses. You will have an opportunity to teach, influence and mentor your players on the diamond, and more importantly, as young men or women. You have a chance, usually reserved for parents, family members and schoolteachers to leave a positive impact on the life of your players. In the big scheme of life, what is important for you to pass along and how would you like to be viewed by your players and their parents? Remember, whether it is a youth coach, high school coach, college coach or professional coach, this game is about the players not the coach.

PRACTICES – Sample plans in the Coaching tab of Monticello Youth Baseball Website

Practice Philosophy

Baseball players are indeed creatures of habit. These habits and routines are shaped at an early age and reinforced by repetition. Through repetition and practice, players are better positioned to execute in game-time situations. Repetition alone, however, does not ensure success. The players must be taught the proper way to execute a drill or play. This is vitally important, especially for younger players or those playing the game for the first time. Recognize too that not all players develop their skills or understanding of the game at the same pace. If you see that a player is not fully grasping the concept of drill or play, take the time to work with the player individually.

Preparation

Take the time to prepare and review your practice plan in advance. If possible, bring copies and review your practice plan with coaches and volunteers. When you have a plan, the players will remain engaged, the parents will appreciate that you are prepared, and you will find that your coaching experience is rewarding.

Coaching Tips

- Prepare for your practice in advance, start on time, and stick to your timeline (refer to sample practice plans).
- Set expectations for the practice and the season – we encourage managers at all levels to conduct a “parents meeting” at the beginning of the season and to set ground rules for the players.
- Ask for help (the more volunteers the better), but don’t be afraid to tell coaches and volunteers how you want drills organized and executed – this is still your practice.
- Keep the kids moving, for example, run stations and limit the amount of time at each. If possible, break the kids up into smaller groups to maintain their attention and increase their repetitions.
- Reinforce routines, for example, start each practice the same way (running and stretching, throwing mechanics, etc), and have a designated place to play catch (e.g., right or left field foul lines).
- Keep it fun by incorporating contests (refer to sample practice plans).
- Focus on the basics and skills development. Baseball is about muscle memory caused by repetition of good mechanics.
- Try to incorporate “situations” at each practice to teach the kids the game.

Baseball Fundamentals will make a difference in Performance.

In essence, proper body positions are proper fundamentals. Getting players into better positions for hitting throwing and fielding gives players a better chance for success. But getting them to do so is not always as easy as it sounds. Once we identify a flaw and decide on how to best communicate our instruction, it is up to the player to make the adjustment.

Coaches cannot control a player’s athletic ability and hand-eye coordination. A player’s aptitude and desire to improve will also enter into the equation, but improving a player’s fundamental position can make a big impact on that player’s potential for success. Let’s use a golf analogy to clarify this point. On the course, a playing partner notices a fundamental flaw in your swing and gives you a tip. The playing partner is trying to correct your body alignment and/or body position before or during your swing. But once you have been given the instruction, it’s up to you to apply the information. It’s up to you, your aptitude and your athletic ability and hand-eye coordination to perform and constantly repeat these positions. A coach can’t control the outcome, but he can certainly help tremendously in the process. This is why it is very important what information we choose to give the player, how we present it, and most important, how we carry it through.

Utilizing Drills

Drills are the lifeline of developing baseball fundamentals and are used throughout a player's career. When teaching the drills in this program, the coach should conduct the drill or sell his point with enthusiasm and conviction. The organization and attitude of the coach sets the stage for the instruction. When explaining the drills and instructing your players, show patience. A misunderstood drill is very difficult to perform. Be sure to emphasize the importance and purpose of the drill so players are aware of that purpose. As a coach you must believe in what you are teaching and get your players to believe in it as well. If the drill's explanation is poor or not set up properly, it will add to the confusion, and will become a waste of time. As drills are learned and repeated at practice, the drill should become more efficient and effective.

Teaching Progression

- 1. Explain the Proper Fundamentals of the Area You Are Teaching**
 - a. Don't assume players know the correct way to throw, catch, hit or field. Take some time to explain the key fundamentals.
- 2. Physically Demonstrate the Proper Fundamentals of the Area You Are Teaching.**
 - a. This visual demonstration speaks much louder than words. Now players can physically see the proper position as you explain it.
- 3. Put Players Into Non-Reaction Drills**
 - a. Dry drills allow players to perform fundamentals correctly. The athlete is in a position to get a feeling for the fundamental without the bat or ball.
 - b. Make adjustments as each player demonstrates the position back to you.
- 4. Put Players Into Controlled Reaction Drills**
 - a. This is where coaches should spend the most time. Coaches will end up rolling numerous balls to players and setting up tees and soft-toss for hitting.
 - b. In these drills, players are reacting to the moving ball, but at a distance and speed where they can perform the fundamental correctly. In this environment the game is slowed down just enough for the player to get a feel for what they are doing right or wrong. It is also easier for the coach to see and suggest a correction if needed.
 - c. Remember the old saying: Practice makes perfect. It should be: Perfect practice makes perfect. If players are practicing poor fundamental positions that will be the position they take into the games. They will never develop the correct muscle memory.
- 5. Performing Skills Correctly with Many Repetitions.**
 - a. The more repetitions a player can get, the faster he will develop the muscle memory for that skill. Muscle memory is a result of teaching the muscles how to perform a specific activity and repeating that activity until it can be done freely without methodical thought.
 - b. Remember there are productive repetitions and unproductive repetitions. This is why the quality of the repetitions is of the utmost importance.
- 6. Game-Speed Practice.**
 - a. Even with all the benefits of dry drills and controlled reaction drills, it is still necessary to put players in a game atmosphere. They need to experience the game of baseball at the speed they will be playing.
 - b. Judging the speed and reading the hops on a batted ball, timing a live pitch, recognizing a ball from a strike – players need to be exposed to all these skills
- 7. Be Creative. Make Drills and Practice Enjoyable**
 - a. If a drill is not going the way it is supposed to, find a way to make it a competition between groups of players. When making a drill a competition against groups of players, a player's concentration and motivation increases.
 - b. Some drills will be loads of fun, while some drills have great benefits and should be done regardless of how fun they are.

Proper Warm-up

Establishing a warm-up and stretching routine is important at all levels of the game. Prior to every practice and game, time should be allotted to properly warm up and stretch the body. First, it sets the tone by bringing the team together and preparing as a unit for the given practice or game. It also gives different players a chance to lead the team. Perhaps a player who doesn't get much recognition would be a good choice to lead. Most importantly, it gets each player physically ready to play the game. Refer to the dynamic warm up.

Even before stretching, it is important to warm up. This may be done with a light jog, jumping jacks or some light baserunning drills. Once the body is warm, have the team line up or form a circle and have them stretch. Have between one and three players lead the stretch, or have one player responsible for each stretch and go around the circle with a different leader for each stretch. A stretch should be held for 5 to 10 seconds and should be a steady stretch with no bouncing action. These are a minimum. Feel free to add more stretching to the program. It's also wise to perform a light stretch after a strenuous practice or game to enhance muscle recovery.

GAMES – Skills are developed in practice and displayed in games.

Do Not Over-Coach During Games

The game should be a time when the players' minds are clear to focus on the competition. Don't fill players' heads with too many fundamental positions that will take their concentration from the game. Practice is the time to work on fundamentals. Limit instruction during the game and encourage players and be supportive when things don't work out.

Make notes during the game on the items individuals and the team as a whole need to improve upon. Address these notes at the next practice. In the meantime, allow players a chance to compete confidently during the games. Let players know you believe in them, and be there for them when they fail.

Positive Reinforcement Motivates and Builds Confidence

One of the biggest parts of coaching is correcting faults. Players are constantly hearing what they are doing wrong. Baseball is an interesting sport in that if you fail 7 out of 10 times, you're a success. Instead of constantly pointing out failures, be supportive and positive to all players. Find something they are doing right and point it out. A positive approach will build confidence.

It is nearly impossible to reach your potential unless you are confident in your abilities.

Be Aware of when and how to correct a Player's Mistakes.

A coach almost always has good intentions when critiquing a player about an error or mistake. But choosing a time when the player is more receptive or feeling confident is important to getting the point across. Coaches should consider how players feel immediately after making an error or mistake, then coming into the dugout after the last out. Chances are, they don't feel their best at that moment. It's magnified when the coach decides to critique the player about the error or mistake and singles him out in front of the team. At this point, the player is not in the state of mind to learn what he did wrong.

A better time will present itself when the coach can discuss the error with the player and help with his fielding. Make a mental note of the play, and wait for that better time. Most players will be more receptive and remember the suggestion if it's done after they have done something well. That's when they are feeling better about themselves and are less defensive.

Just as important as when to approach a player is how to approach him. A coach who begins by criticizing, then telling the player what to do differently has little chance of getting through. Be positive. Players already feel insecure about a bad play. Tell them something positive they can feel good about. Once the player is in a more positive frame of mind, then discuss the mistake. A good way to do this is to find out the player's perspective on the play first, and then chime in with the suggestion. Maybe the player already knows what he did wrong and just needs encouragement. End the discussion with a final dose of confidence: Tell the player, "It's OK. It happens; you'll get them next time."

Knowing What to Look For.

Have you ever heard a coach yell out to a pitcher after throwing a ball, "Throw strikes!" Have you ever heard a coach yell to a hitter after a swing and miss, "Hit the ball!". What do these coaches think the player is trying to do? Players are trying to throw strikes and trying to hit the ball. This approach does not help the player perform. Instead, it increases anxiety, adds pressure and can destroy confidence.

The key for the coach is to figure out why the pitcher is throwing balls or why the hitter is swinging and missing. To know why, coaches must see what the player is doing wrong. On the other hand, coaches should not get discouraged if they don't know why. It's not always easy to see. And it's especially difficult to see at game speed. But the longer a coach watches, the easier it is to see why something is going wrong.

While watching players practice and play in games, keep this in mind. If there are improper fundamentals on the pitch or swing, there's a high probability that is the problem or part of it. It may not always be, but often it is.

If a coach sees what the player did wrong, he can help. If a coach doesn't see anything incorrect, do not say anything. Don't guess. Remember to keep encouraging and supporting the player's effort. Do not say anything until figuring out the problem.

For example, if a player swings and misses, pulling his head during the swing, there's a good chance that's the problem. Approach the player and give him a specific tip that will help him avoid swinging and missing for that reason. He might still swing and miss, but the swing fundamentals will be improved.

If you are having a difficult time seeing why a player is not being successful, try focusing on a particular area. For example: If you are watching a player hit, there are different areas you can focus on. You could watch the feet or one particular foot. You could focus on the swing path by watching what is happening with just the arms during the swing. Or you could focus on the head throughout the swing. Sometimes watching the whole picture will work, but often we need to focus on a particular area for a number of swings.

Having said that, watching the feet during throwing, fielding, hitting and pitching is always a good place to start if you cannot recognize a flaw from the whole picture. Balance is a key ingredient in everything we do on a baseball field. The feet and legs are crucial for balance. Feet and legs are the foundation for all our movements on the field. Once the bottom half is working correctly, often it will correct flaws in the upper body.

Always Try to Put Your Players Into a Position to Succeed.

We are often asked if we would allow a player to play first base if the player was not very good. Our first response to that question is, "Is it safe for the player?" We need to think of safety first. Secondly, is it really in that player's best interest to play the position if all they will do is fail and be embarrassed?

Our philosophy on how to handle players is that we want to give players a chance to play and develop. Whenever possible, we attempt to put players into a position to succeed – not fail. To answer the question posed above, we may give the player a chance to play first during practice and continue to help him develop at the position. But we would not play him in a game until we felt it was safe and the situation was right to give the player a chance. The right situation may be when the team is winning by a significant margin and a mistake at first base would not be as detrimental to him and his teammates.

You never want to put a player in a position to fail. Remember, they are playing with their peers and do not want to be embarrassed. For instance, you would not send your worst hitter up against the other team's best pitcher. You would not ask your weakest pitcher to pitch the final inning of a tie game. You should not bring in your least experienced and least confident pitcher when the other team's best hitters are coming to the plate. You should not ask a player who shows fear when hitting to bat against the opposing team's hardest-throwing and wildest pitcher. You do not want to put a player at 3rd base if they have difficulty throwing across the field to first base.

There are going to be many situations that are out of our control and these unfortunate match-ups are going to occur, usually because we want to give our players a fair shake with playing time. But, having said that, be aware of these situations. Whenever possible, put your players in a situation to succeed so they can build confidence through success and develop self-esteem.

INFORMATION AND DRILLS

HITTING

Everybody's favorite activity in baseball is hitting. Players can't wait to hit in practice. You will hear more than once, "When are we going to hit?" The highlight of the game usually revolves around an at-bat and often players are judged by parents, coaches and themselves based on how they performed at the plate.

Many ingredients go into being a successful hitter. Some players are naturals, but most are a work in progress. Hitting takes dedication, hard work, confidence, proper swing mechanics, rhythm and timing.

Remember, hitting a pitched baseball is one of the hardest single feats to do in sports. It can be a painstaking skill to develop. As stated in the coaching philosophy section, "More success is obtained through praise than by criticism." That really rings true when developing hitters. If you can help the hitter create a good mental picture of themselves at the plate, it will go long way in helping them hit successfully.

Be patient, understanding and instill confidence in each hitter. Be positive with your hitters at all times. Negative thoughts can destroy a player's psyche and confidence. It takes years and years for players to fulfill their talents as hitters.

Proper swing fundamentals are something all hitters constantly strive to perfect. Once a swing can be repeated without much thought, a player can maintain all concentration on the pitched ball. Solid swing mechanics can be developed through a number of drills. Practicing correctly – whether that means dry swings, tee work, short toss or live hitting – is crucial. Quality repetitions are essential because muscle memory is being developed with every swing. In order to help players perform the correct fundamental swing, you should encourage them to hone their swing outside of team practices. Let them know what they need to improve on and give players drills they can work on at home.

Teaching hitting will be easier with a good understanding of swing fundamentals. Good swing fundamentals start and end with balance. Balance is a key to athletics and all skills on the baseball field. A hitter should maintain balance in the swing from start to finish to be most effective.

BATTING ORDER

Knowing the team's make-up is important when making a batting order. Which players can run? Which players hit consistently? Who can handle pressure? Who can cope with failure? Who likes to hit? Who doesn't like to hit? For coaches teaching 6-to-12-year-olds, letting players hit in different spots in the batting order is healthy for team morale. This gives all players a chance to feel good about themselves and understand what it is like to hit in different spots in the order. Also, this is a way to let players know that one player is not bigger than the team.

Characteristics of batting order positions:

- 1. Leadoff hitter:** Fast, good contact hitter, gets on base frequently, runs bases aggressively without hesitation. Will take a walk and is not afraid to steal at any time.
- 2. Second hitter:** Good contact hitter, above-average speed, good hitter, gets on base frequently, can bunt and steal.
- 3. Third hitter:** Best hitter on the team, can hit for average. Clutch hitter who can drive in runs.
- 4. Fourth hitter:** Good hitter who can drive in runs, hit for power and be a run producer.
- 5. Fifth hitter:** Your second-best hitter. Can hit for average. Same characteristics as third hitter but may lack one characteristic. Good RBI man.
- 6. Sixth hitter:** Good hitter, picks up the RBIs that are missed by the heart of the order. Surprise clutch hitter.
- 7. Seventh hitter:** Least efficient hitter, patient hitter who uses whatever skills they have.
- 8. Eighth hitter:** Your second clean-up hitter who can surprise the other team. Not a consistent hitter, but someone who is streaky.
- 9. Ninth hitter:** Second-best leadoff hitter, similar characteristics as the leadoff hitter. Has to be a good hitter who can keep an inning alive. Fast, bunts, aggressive player, a good clutch hitter, two-out hitter.

These are just common characteristics and by no means are an exact science. This is meant for a guide and there are many different strategies when creating a batting order.

BUNTING

Bunting is an area that often is overlooked by Youth League coaches because run manufacturing via the bunt doesn't come into play as often until higher levels of competition. However, proper time should be spent on this aspect of the game early in a player's baseball development. Teach all players the proper fundamentals of bunting regardless of where they bat in the batting order.

Teaching the concept of bunting early in a player's development will also help improve hand-eye coordination, demonstrate the concept of tracking the ball and bolster self-confidence.

Bunting forces a player to track the ball all the way to the bat. Simply by concentrating on the incoming ball, the player enhances hand-eye coordination and gains confidence by making contact. For these reasons, in addition to developing bunting skills, a player should bunt the first few pitches of every batting practice before swinging away.

To ensure more success, have the player square around early enough to get into proper bunting position. Whether sacrificing to advance a runner or attempting to bunt for a base hit, it is necessary to have enough time to get into the proper bunting position. This preparation, along with ball placement after contact, are two keys to being a good bunter.

THROWING

Throwing is one of baseball's most important skills. If a player cannot throw the ball effectively, the player's possible positions will be limited as he gets older. Especially at the youth level, many outs are given away by the player's inability to make an accurate throw. Learning to throw correctly should be an important part of any practice routine. It should not just be an activity to get ready for practice.

Proper arm action is extremely important, but do not rely just on the arm when throwing. The arms, legs and body should work together. Being in an athletic position with knees flexed enables players to have balance and leverage. The feet align the body so that the hips can be used most efficiently. After catching a ground ball or fly ball—or when making any routine throw—squaring up to the target, gaining momentum toward the target and keeping the eyes focused on the target are routine fundamentals.

While the legs and body are important, proper arm action is critical for a player to throw the ball with velocity and accuracy. The arm action should be a continuous fluid motion, starting from the break of hands to the finish of the throw. As players advance in age, there are a couple of positions (catcher, some infield) where the arm action is slightly altered. The arc coming out of the glove is usually shorter in length. Do not expect players to alter their arm action at a young age. Teaching players a fundamentally sound arm action will be a challenge in itself. As players mature and advance in age (13 and above) and strength, they will be able to shorten the arc in their arm action for specific positions such as catcher.

A solid overhand throw is the best arm angle to teach. Outfielders utilize this arm angle because that is where the arm is in its strongest position. Outfielders have to make long, accurate throws. Infielders should develop this arm angle for their routine throws, but they will also need to learn how to throw the ball from different angles with accuracy and velocity.

How much and how often players throw should be monitored at least mentally throughout the season. Practice plans should be designed so the drills do not overtax the arm. But a solid throwing routine, including dry drills, proper warm up, long tossing and accuracy games are important issues that should be a regular part of your practices. All players need to work on throwing drills and their mechanics as this can vastly improve a player's strength and accuracy.

You can find detailed throwing fundamentals in the Coaching tab on the Monticello Youth Baseball website.

RECEIVING

Catching the baseball is one of the first skills we learn when beginning to play baseball. Whether it's at practice or in a game of catch with dad in the yard, there are some areas we should be aware of to help our players succeed at catching the ball. Having a glove that is the correct size and properly broken in should be the first order of business. At practice, examine each player's glove to make sure it fits properly and that they can control and squeeze it.

Fear of the ball is common for many younger players (ages 6 through 9). Indications of fear include: backing up as the ball arrives or turning the head and the glove as the ball approaches the glove. Using softer balls and tennis balls is beneficial when players are first learning to catch and are scared of getting hit with a baseball. Players who show fear are better off receiving the ball with a one-handed catch away from their face area. With time and success through repetition, fear can be eliminated and players will eventually be able to utilize the two-handed catch. At the younger ages, the two-handed catch is helpful at times but not as important as it will be as the players get older and the game speeds up. Getting players to just plain catch the ball and enjoy the experience at these younger ages is what is most important.

Proper receiving technique is a skill that should not be overlooked for players who are beyond fear of the ball. Proper fundamentals will not only enhance each player's catching ability but will allow an efficient transition to throwing. We advocate two-handed catching for both younger and older players who can handle it. While players advance in catching skill as they age, the speed of the game also increases, making the two-handed catch much more valuable.

Another area, which will help your players immensely, is training them to be ready to move their feet to catch the baseball. Players receiving a throw should always expect a bad throw and be ready to move their feet to get into a good receiving position. Doing so will allow them to catch the ball and transition into the throw more efficiently. During your throwing routine, and when they play catch on their own, encourage your players to try to receive throws near the center of their body by moving their feet to get in front of the ball. If the throw is too wide and they have to catch it outside their body, the one-handed catch is recommended.

THE GLOVE

Glove Size

The glove should be small enough for the player to control and pliable enough for the player to squeeze. Try to avoid purchasing a glove that is too big for the player believing they will grow into it. It is likely a player will go through 3 to 4 gloves throughout their Youth League days.

Infielders Gloves vs. Outfielders Gloves

Infielder gloves are generally smaller in size, with a shallower pocket for an easier glove-to-hand transfer. Outfielder gloves can be longer in length for added reach, with a deeper pocket that allows the ball to stick into the glove easier. First basemen and catchers have mitts that are specific to their position.

Breaking in and Maintaining a Glove

After purchasing a new glove, start the breaking-in process immediately. Put a ball in the pocket, tie the glove closed with string or twine and place it under a mattress for a night or two. This will start to fold and shape the glove.

Next, the critical process begins – oiling the glove. It's important to use the right kind of oil. Liquid oils will moisturize the glove, but they soak into the leather and gradually increase the weight. This makes the glove more difficult to move and control. Mink oil in grease form will not increase the glove's weight, and it is an excellent moisturizer for the glove's leather.

Oil the glove in key areas to shape the glove correctly. When applying oil, concentrate on lubricating the pocket and the hinged areas that need to bend when squeezing the glove shut. It is not necessary to oil the whole glove routinely. Apply oil to other areas of the glove when the leather appears dry.

Moisturizing the pocket and hinged areas will make the glove more pliable, but that alone will not break it in. The glove will still need repetitive pounding in the pocket and flexing of the gloves hinged portions. This repetitive pounding can be done most effectively with your fist or a bat. Playing catch also helps break in the glove, but will take longer to get the glove game ready. Younger players (ages 6 through 10) especially need help getting the glove ready, mainly because they do not throw hard enough to make a good impact on the leather.

When the glove is pliable enough to squeeze easily, it is ready.

INFIELD

The infield positions are very active and critical to the success of your team's defense. This chapter will go over the keys to becoming a successful infielder.

A good infielder plays with confidence, wants the ball to be hit to him and anticipates that happening before every pitch. This confident attitude can be obtained through preparation, hard work and correct repetition of fundamental skills. An alert infielder is trained to be thinking about where to go and what to do with the ball prior to every pitch. No matter what physical skills the player has, it is the coaches' job to get the most out of that individual's ability. How you prepare, train and instill confidence in your players will go a long way in maximizing their talents.

Teaching an infielder how to track a pitch into the hitting zone and how to get the best jump possible on batted balls should be a staple of your development plan. A quick first step on a hit ball can be improved by utilizing proper pre-pitch movement. No one can get their best jump on a hit ball from a dead-stopped position.

Once you establish a balanced ready position through pre-pitch preparation the proper movement to different balls is important. For greater range the fielder should think lateral movement first then forward movement to the ball. When approaching a ground ball, when possible, the infielder should have an angle to the ball that creates a line toward the target to first base. On hard hit balls and some slow rollers this will not be possible. Whether it's a ball hit directly at you, to the glove side, or back hand, reading the hops and using proper footwork is crucial to an infielder's success. An aggressive attitude of attacking the ball while under control and balanced is the correct mindset. Moving the feet to get a good hop means the infielder is playing the ball instead of letting the ball play him. Active feet using shorter choppy steps will help in accelerating or decelerating and will help allow the body and hands to get into a good fielding position. Maintaining balance allows for better control throughout the fielding process and into the throwing motion.

At your levels of competition, getting the infielders into a sound fielding position is going to be a big plus. Common flaws with youth-league players include:

- Not getting the feet wide enough.
- Bending over at the waist instead of the knees to field the ball.
- Not getting the hands out in front.
- Fielding high-to-low instead of low-to-high.

The good news is that you can develop a sound fielding position. As always, focus on developing proper fielding technique through dry drills and controlled reaction drills to start. That way a player can understand and feel the proper fielding position. Once this is taking shape, then you can progress to work on different plays and skills your infielders are going to need throughout their baseball careers.

OUTFIELD

Outfielders should anticipate every pitch being hit to them and think about where they should throw the ball before it is hit. All outfielders should be in the ready position, utilizing pre-pitch movement as the ball approaches the hitting zone. Pre-pitch movement will help players focus on the hitter, the game and improve their jump on the ball. Players can relax between pitches, but should return to the ready position as the pitcher is ready to deliver the ball.

Encourage communication among outfielders. They should remind each other of the number of outs after each play to keep them alert. Runs can be saved by teaching outfielders how to back up bases and their teammates correctly. Charging ground balls, fielding them properly and getting them back to the infield quickly are valuable skills that also save runs.

The most obvious aspect of playing the outfield is catching fly balls. Sometimes outfielders have a difficult time, because their judgment skills are not fully developed. Judgment can be developed through practice—repetition of thrown or batted balls. Take time to teach the fundamentals below to enhance your team's outfield play.

CUT-OFFS AND RELAYS

Cut-offs and relays are the most important fundamentals your team will perform. They are utilized every game and can almost always affect the outcome. Their purpose is to keep the double play in order and to stop runners from advancing an extra base. When multiple runners are on base, always make sure the lead runner is stopped before trying for a trail runner.

TEACHING CUT-OFFS AND RELAYS

Proper positioning on all the different scenarios takes time to develop and can be overwhelming for younger players. But players need to have an understanding of where to be on the field in order to play the game correctly. Regularly expose your players to different situations that arise. Don't overload players with too much information at one time. Teach them where to go and how to communicate so they are prepared as a group when a play develops.

- Be patient and do it dry first. Explain the situation and walk the players through their positioning of that play.
- Then introduce a ball and cover the same situation without runners and watch for proper alignments and spacing of players.
- Lastly, add a base runner or two and play it live.
- Remember to have a runner start at home plate when doing live cut-off situations. This is the batter/runner that is often forgotten by the defense in a multiple-runner scenario.
- Over a few practices, slowly build on the different cut-offs and relay situations.
- Review the old situation briefly and then add a new one.
- The more players are exposed to these situations, the better they will become in handling them.

In any given play, every player has a place to be. Remind players never to get caught spectating and to cover their responsibility when a ball is hit. Make sure all bases are covered and all potential plays are being backed up. Watch for proper spacing between the outfielder, relay man and the player who represents the cut-off man.

Important Points for Outfielders

- The outfielders need to communicate with each other where the ball should be thrown.
- The throws should be good, low hard throws so they can be handled by the relay men or cut-off men.
- Outfielders should throw to hit the lead relay man, not the trailer. The throw should be chest high.

POP FLY RESPONSIBILITY

POSITION PRIORITIES

1. Outfielders have priority over the infielders.
2. The center fielder has priority over the left and right fielders.
3. Infielders have priority over the catcher and the pitcher.
4. Second baseman has priority over the first baseman.
5. Shortstop has priority over the third baseman and second baseman.
6. Second baseman can be given priority over the short stop if he is better at taking charge and catching pop-ups.

FUNDAMENTALS AND PRINCIPLES

1. When a pop fly goes up in the infield, all infielders should expect to make the catch until one player takes charge by calling for the ball loudly three times: "Mine, Mine, Mine!" Or: "Ball, Ball, Ball" can also be used for the younger players.
2. An infielder should take charge when the ball is in his area and not look for someone else to make the catch. Want the ball.
3. If the pop-up is really high on a windy day, the infielder should not call for the ball too soon. Wait until the ball starts to descend before calling for the ball.
4. If the sun is in line with the pop-up, use the glove to shade the sun.
5. Once a player with priority calls for the ball, the other players should give way to him.
6. When an infielder determines he will not catch a pop-up, he should retreat to cover his base.
7. Catchers should go for all pop-ups in their area until called off.
8. The shortstop and second baseman should take charge on popups that are behind third base and first base, respectively.
9. On short pop-ups near the mound area which no other player can get to, the pitcher should call for and catch the ball.
10. On pop-ups near the mound area where two players can reach the ball, designate the best fielder to have priority on that play. For example, the shortstop has priority on balls over the mound.
11. On pop-ups between the outfielders and infielders, the infielders should not drift with the ball. They should attempt to get behind the pop-up as quickly as possible so they will not have to backpedal to make the catch. If an outfielder can make the catch easily, he should always call off the infielder if he is backpedaling.
12. All players should stay in a good athletic position and be ready to move their feet when camped underneath a pop-up.

CATCHING

Make the catching position a priority on your team. The catcher and pitcher will influence the pace and quality of the game more than any other players on the field. Not all players are cut out to be a catcher. If you are not sure who should catch, ask your players who would like to be a catcher. Give them a shot at it and then determine if this is a position they can handle safely. This position can be difficult for young players for several reasons. Lack of strength is just one. The catcher should have leadership qualities, be able to communicate with players on the field and should not be afraid to get dirty behind the plate. Look for a fearless blocker who possesses a strong arm to stop would be base stealers. A catcher should possess quick feet to come out of his crouch position to throw to bases. Look to develop a minimum of two capable catchers.

The catching position can easily be and is often overlooked during practice. As a coach, you should take the time to train your catchers at the numerous skills needed to have success at this position. We recommend getting your players into their catching gear more often. A great way to do this is to allow your catchers to catch coaches batting practice, whether it's on the field or in the cage. If you cannot create individual time for these two or three players during the regular practice, set aside 15 minutes with your catchers before or after practice. Take them through a routine of drills that will help them develop the skills needed at the position.

BASERUNNING

Baserunning skills should not be overlooked. Youth players love to run and will enjoy baserunning drills whenever you plug them into your practice. A good baserunner can be developed with a little guidance from their coach. Teach your players to be alert and to know the situation before every pitch. They should survey the defensive positioning of each player, know the number of outs and try to follow the ball at all times. If the ball is hit behind the baserunner, he should look to the third-base coach for assistance. The base coaches are there to assist the runners, not to control every move they make. The baserunner should never assume anything and run hard on all hit balls until the umpire makes a call. Runners should always think aggressively, trying to turn a single into a double or a double into a triple. By running hard, extra bases can be taken if the defense makes a mistake. Another rule to remember is to look to tag up on all foul balls with less than two outs.

Practicing baserunning techniques is important, but simulating game situations in practice is imperative to baserunning success. In setting up drills that re-create game situations, players learn what to look for and develop better instincts. Experience in a given situation can definitely help to alleviate the hesitation that keeps a runner from being aggressive.

Speed doesn't necessarily make a good baserunner. Being prepared before every pitch and good judgment on when to be aggressive will lead to good baserunning skills. Getting a good jump on batted balls can be learned and developed through practice.

As a coach, give players the freedom to succeed on the bases by giving them the freedom to fail. If runners are ridiculed for baserunning mistakes, they will run the bases with a safety-first attitude, never reaching their potential. Take pressure off baserunners by allowing them to be aggressive and understanding their decision-making abilities.

SLIDING

Sliding is nothing more than controlled falling. Though it sounds easy, teaching sliding correctly can be difficult. Learning to slide properly will not only reduce the risk of injury but will cut down on skin abrasions. Headfirst slides are dangerous and can damage fingers and shoulders. Do not encourage head-first slides and never slide head first into home plate. Head-first slides should only be used when a baserunner is avoiding a tag running to first base or when retreating back to a base. Take at least one day prior to your first game to practicing sliding for 10 to 15 minutes. Most players enjoy sliding, but you will have one or two that have fear that needs to be eased with sliding practice.

COACHING THE BASES

The job of a base coach is to assist the baserunners and not to control every move they make. The players need to be aware of what's going on with the ball, unless it's hit behind them. The coach's job is to get into a position where the player can see the coach easily, and where the coach has more time to make a decision. When a runner is going from first to third, the third-base coach should be more toward left field so the player can see them easier. When a player is going from second to third, the coach should be down the line toward home plate to give him more time to read the play. It all happens very fast and the more time you have to read the play the better decision you can make.

GIVING SIGNS

When establishing signs for the coach to give to the players, there are a few points to keep in mind. First of all, keep them simple. Even at the professional level this holds true. It can be as simple as just touching a body part with two hands. Hat is hit-and-run, belt is bunt and shirt is steal. You may have noticed the signal touched started with the same letter as the task we want the player to perform. For example, belt is to bunt.

Another way to give a signal is to have one body part hot, called an indicator. Once the coach touches a body part, the next touch is the live sign. You would have to establish what the live signs are for your team—possibly the hat, shirt or belt. In this system the player always watches for the hot sign. If touched, they know the next sign touched is the action the player needs to perform. Also establish a wipe-off sign in case you give the wrong sign and want to erase your last sign.

When giving signs, give them slowly and deliberately so the players can follow. Go over them frequently in practice and review them before games often.