

A-Ball recommendations- Mandatory viewing- YouTube search “TCU Baseball- The Journey”

Overall Coaching Philosophy – “If you build it (a great learning culture)- They will come (back next year)”

Kids are smarter and more talented than we give them credit for. For example you may notice that most kids seem to have a flawed but natural “uppercut” swing. That is not natural, and not flawed at all. That was learned when somebody in their lives first taught them how to hit by lobbing a ball from a short distance with a significant arc. The uppercut is the most effective swing path to hit that pitch, and most kids naturally figure that out by developing that type of swing.

A coach’s job is to create an environment for players to learn and develop. Winning and Fun are not goals! They are a byproduct of kids who are learning and developing in a safe, healthy and team building environment. Create a culture that has structure and clear expectations, with rewards and accountability, but that is also positive and full of energy.

Average coaches make the mistake of trying to help their players avoid failure so they will be happier and have fun. This is a CRITICAL error in baseball coaching (and doesn’t work). Failure is something that is normal, natural, and will teach us to become better. Great coaches create an environment where process is celebrated, not results. So when it comes to batting, don’t celebrate a great hit (they will feel good enough about that and don’t need reinforcement in that moment). Celebrate the great aggressive swing, or an adjustment in the player’s stance, or getting a good “stride-load” for the first time. Make process the focus and the hits will come!

Practice Philosophy- High energy, high activity, fast paced.

Pre-practice- Players who arrive early should NOT grab a ball and start playing catch on their own. Use that time to talk with kids about their life, or let them have that the time to talk with each other about whatever they want. If they need to move, let them run bases, but make sure that the team starts practice together with the warm up routine you have selected.

Warm ups- Create a consistent routine for warm ups. We always warm up our bodies to throw. We never throw to warm up. Warm ups are very important habits and routines can be learned by even the youngest players. This is also a great time to teach fundamentals of baserunning (or at the end as conditioning).

Stations- Most baseball practices are like a zoo, where there is some action taking place with one or two kids at a time, and everybody else standing around and watching. This is why kids get so bored with baseball. Instead, make your practice look like a circus, high energy with action going on everywhere and activities changing quickly. Stations are critical, and they should rotate quickly. Give just enough time for about 1 minute of instruction, and 1-2 minutes for each kid to execute that station, then rotate. After about a minute, the effectiveness diminishes, boredom sets in and bad habits begin to form.

Group Time- Once offensive and defensive stations are completed, the last 25% of your practice should be for team activities.

Hold out the last 10-15 minutes as optional time with potential for a reward activity like playing a game. This reward could be a fun game like “over the line”, or “quick scrimmage” if they earn it by focusing and working hard during the first parts of practice. If we don’t earn it that day, maybe we continue with group drills or do conditioning. Put the control in their hands, but coaches are the judge if we earned the reward with a good practice.

Sample practice plan

1 hour 30 minute max.

Warm up routine, 15-20 min.

Run (organized), stretch (basic, 6 exercises), organized throwing routine- emphasize good throwing posture to teammate. Parents and coaches can back up with ball in hand. Throwing by cadence is always fun.

Stations 40-50 min.

Batting: Stance, hands, bat path, finish *Hitting off tee, hitting soft toss, hitting overhand pitches, Use multiple drills and vary.*

Fielding: Approach, footwork, throwing mechanics by position *Catching balls thrown, catching balls hit, catching pop-ups, throwing balls to force outs (use runners). Fore hand and back hand drills. Parents and coaches can run these stations.*

Game activity- 15 min.

Scrimmage with parents, over the line, force out game, throwing targets.

**Conditioning is optional at the end of practice but try to embed base running, stamina, or strength aspects to their level of baseball.*

Game management-

Pregame- have the line up created before you get to the park. At this stage, all kids should be playing infield and outfield positions and rotating frequently (2 innings max). HOWEVER, do not put kids at first base or catcher who are scared of the ball. Let them participate in a way they are comfortable and will not feel unneeded pressure and anxiety.

Game Management philosophy-

Batting-

- a. Take the focus off “hitting” and put the focus on taking great, aggressive swings, and demonstrating the fundamentals they are learning. The standard pitch for this level of machine or coach pitch should be to have the ball pitched from machine or coach about 35-40 feet away so that a pitch with enough velocity to have a reasonably flat plane. Verbally encourage and reward great swings with the same intensity whether they hit the ball or not.
- b. Keep things moving quickly. Reinforce that we want to swing at good pitches and “call” a strike if a player doesn’t swing at a good pitch. Nothing takes the energy out of a game and embarrasses a player more than having a coach throw 10+ pitches to a player who won’t swing the bat or moving closer to the plate in an effort to “help” a player be more likely to hit the ball. It’s normal for most of the players strike out in the beginning of the season. They will each get it

at different stages, but only if you are consistent with pitching from the same place and velocity in games, and continue working solid fundamentals in different stations in practice.

- c. Kids will remember where they finished the season, not where they started. Believe in process and believe in the kid's ability to grow and adjust. Empower them instead of trying to enable or appease them.

Fielding-

- a. Align your fielders in realistic positions (even with bases). Even if a player is unlikely to hit a ball that far, it will teach players to "attack" the baseball. Don't put all of your kids in the infield and have your "infielders" start closer than the pitcher's mound.
- b. Make each of your players "step, step, tap" (ie creep) on each pitch. Practice this and hold players accountable (3 "strike" policy). When a player "forgets" (strike 1), give them a gentle reminder from the bench. If a player forgets again, (strike 2) another friendly reminder and get a player on the bench ready with his glove. A third "strike" means the substitute player hustles in off the bench and player comes off for at least one batter. Have a talk with the player about why they got subbed for and ask if they are ready to go back in and do it. Send the player back in as soon as possible in between at bats. Discuss this policy with Parents and explain that it is valuable for both their development as a player and for their safety.
- c. Teach players to always make a throw after fielding (unless hit to the base). Should not be rewarding bases for overthrows at this level. Also recommend that unless hit to the players base, they must throw the ball to the base to get an out. (don't let pitcher field a ball and run to tag base or the batter). Coaches that teach players to hold the ball or get it back immediately to the pitcher for competitive advantage are doing the players a tremendous disservice. Learning to field and throw is a critical area of development.

CORE FUNDAMENTALS that players should finish the season with

Offense

Batting – Grip: Knuckles together in same place on bat every time. Stance: start with feet in straight line facing the pitcher (don't let back foot creep away from plate). Wide Stance, good knee bend. Learn "stride/load" position as pitcher begins to release the ball. Hands should start near the ears and go directly to the ball. BE AGGRESSIVE.

Baserunning - kids should learn what each of the bases mean and should focus on running as fast as they can to each base. As the year goes on, they can learn to run more than one base at a time.

Defense

Throwing - Throwing (2/3 fingers on C part of horseshoe on baseball), one foot in front of the other, stepping straight at the target, and using glove to point at their target.

Fielding – "step, step tap" with open glove. Keep the "eye" of the glove on the ball at all times. Use LA Drill but make sure every child learns the basic athletic stance with their feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent and glove out in front. Once the ball is secured, move feet to correct position to throw to specific base.

Catching – Hands together at all times. Thumbs touch above waist and flip to pinkies below the waist. Circle drill can be a great part of the warm up routine before we play catch. (see Len Clarke manual)

Common Coaching Errors

1. Not setting clear expectations for parents and players and finding reasonable ways to hold players accountable for meeting those expectations
2. Poor practice planning and execution - running a zoo instead of a circus (from Len Clark manual)
3. Setting FUN and WINNING as the primary objectives vs. team and individual development. Winning and fun are results that happen when things are done the right way.
4. Allowing cliques or classes within a team. Not attempting to make each player feel like an equal stakeholder in team successes.
5. Trying to bring the level of the game down to each player's current level of ability (helping players avoid failure rather than making it an acceptable part of the game and coaching them to grow to achieve goals)
6. Failing to establish healthy warmup routines
7. Failing to make running and conditioning a part of each practice (if done right this can be a really fun part of practice)
8. Spending way too little time on basic fundamentals of catching, throwing and Teaching outdated fundamentals.
9. Spending way too much time doing the same thing (spending an hour of practice time pitching a full bucket to each player while the other 11 kids shag)
10. Teaching advanced fundamentals to players who lack the more rudimentary fundamentals (need to be able to add and subtract before you can learn algebra)
11. Under coaching during practice/ Over coaching during games
12. Failing to bring an appropriate amount of intensity to practices and games
13. Discerning the appropriate balancing of playing time and position rotations for the level of play
14. Managing arm health at practices and games (11 yrs old and up)
15. Teaching kids to be too selective on swinging the bat at young levels. Young players need to learn to hit pitches that are not in the strike zone.
16. Allowing the dugout to become a zoo and failing to teach players that what happens in the dugout is an important part becoming a good player and a good team.