

Chapter 4 Let's Hit the Fields...Practice Made Fun

Managers that have consistent success almost always operate with a practice plan. A literal road map that accounts for every minute of your practice. Most practice sessions run approximately 1 to 1½ hours in length. When you budget your time in an organized fashion, you will find that this formula works very well. Plan your work and work your plan.

A practice plan will aide you in communicating how other parents and coaches can assist you during your practice. Lots of parents want to help. They are counting on you to ask for assistance. Making a few extra copies of your plan to pass out will help keep your assisting parents on the same page as you. Jot down a few details about the drills you are using and how they should run. It is impossible to coach every kid, every minute of the practice by yourself. The parents that are willing to help with practice are certainly capable of facilitating a drill. The success rate of that drill will increase when you empower them with an explanation of implementation.

It is a good idea to inform your parents that your kids should arrive to the practice field at least 15 minutes early. Some coaches take advantage of a kid's natural desires to participate in batting practice as leverage to get them to practice early. The child who arrives at practice first is the first player to take the much desired swings in the hitting session. As in all things, you may implement what works for you. You will find the more you manage the easier it becomes to develop methods of motivation. **Of course, positive motivation is the only acceptable means.**

Warm Them Up!

Your practices should start with a warm up. Basic stretches and running are necessary to avoid injuries. When you attend the coach's clinic, you will be given a variety of stretches that are sure to achieve maximum protection.

Warming up their arms is a logical starting point once their bodies are stretched out. As a matter of expectation, you may be surprised at the number of players who need attention with regard to proper throwing technique. In general, the majority of players, especially T-Ball through Minor divisions, need numerous repetitions of basic concepts such as throwing.

In addition, it may relieve you to come to this conclusion. Some of the more notable concerns for new managers are thinking they have to teach multiple advanced strategy concepts and plays. In all actuality, the teams that play with fundamentally sound technique will rise up as the stronger teams in terms of game play. In other words, structure your practices around the development of the basics.

Using Stations To Keep Players Involved

As a parent, you are well versed in the area of a child's attention span. **It's much shorter than you may want it to be.** As much as you will want these kids to be "ball players" they are still kids. Developing a practice structure that keeps as many kids involved at one time is crucial. One way to accomplish this task is to set up stations.

For example: If you have a team of 15 players, you can set up three, five player stations. Station 1 may be fielding grounders. Station 2 may be working on catching fly balls and station 3 may be working on base running. The idea is simple. In a thirty minute period all 15 kids can

get 10 minutes of training in three different aspects of the game. With a group of five players, each kid will get more repetitions in a group of five than he would in a group of 15. While that may seem obvious, a lot of new managers do not implement this.

A Little Fun Competition – Individuals and Team

Another great device to captivate the player's attention is to make your drills a mini competition. For example: Each time a player successfully fields a grounder, they score one point and each time they make a successful throw to first base they score an additional point. Throughout the duration of the drill, have each kid keep track of their own scores. At the end of the session the player with the most points gets to count out ten pushups for the remaining players in their group. Using pushups or other conditioning elements is good for the kids and it will surely motivate intense concentration.

A portion of your practice may include team drills. Having nine players take the field while a coach hits the ball around is a time proven benefit. **Remember, anytime you can involve all of your players in the drills, you will maintain interest and effort from your entire club.** Using the additional players as base runners is an example of how to keep the other kids involved in this particular scenario.

Be sure to develop the depth of your team by rotating between the kids you identify as starters and non-starters. It is inevitable that a starter will miss a game. Don't get caught off guard by avoiding the development of ALL your players.

Batter Up!

Batting practice is the "pac man" of time. It will gobble up minutes very quickly. Time management is crucial in this area. First, there are many ways to structure batting practice. You may choose to have a coach pitch to the kids. You may choose to use a pitching machine. You may choose to have them hit off of a tee. Again, there are numerous ways to accomplish this skill. Regardless of choice, you will need to budget the time of each kid's plate appearance. Some managers predetermine the number of balls each kid will get. Other managers predetermine the amount of time each kid will have. The goal is to get every kid an equal opportunity to work on this skill.

After polling experienced managers, **many of them use a formulated rotation to achieve the maximum involvement during batting practice.** For example: Two players are designated batters, nine players are designated to defensive positions and the remaining players are either base runners, getting a drink or taking warm up swings with another coach. **Again, keeping everyone involved throughout the practice is the objective.**

Another great suggestion is to have a couple of ball buckets. You can find 5 gallon buckets at the local hardware chains or use discarded laundry soap buckets. If you hit grounders to your defense and you have the kids throw to first base, keep an empty bucket by first base. The first baseman can discard the thrown ball into the bucket instead of making another throw home. It might not sound like much, but this technique can save a ton of time and increase the momentum of a practice.

Even though you identify things to work on, you must remain flexible for things like wet practice fields, players not showing up on time or not at all, drills that are not working well or drills that take too long. It is much easier to edit your practice plan in the event you have a personnel issue and/or weather than it is to create a plan on the spot. **An organized manager is a less stressful manager.**

Conditioning For Everyone

Some managers like to save the last 5 minutes of practice for conditioning drills. At the coach's clinic, you will be offered a multitude of conditioning drills that you can alternate from practice to practice that will assist in getting the kids in better physical shape.

Wrapping It Up

Be sure to budget yourself a few extra minutes at the end of your practice to have a wrap up discussion. Any information that you may need to convey to your parents or players needs to be a part of your plan. Another factor of importance with regard to parents is ending your practice on time. Parents appreciate it. You will benefit from this gesture when it comes time to solicit volunteers.

Finally, the conclusion of practice begins a cyclical process of evaluating what works well in your plan and how the players responded. Retool your plan until you settle into a groove. Keep your practice plans and refer to the ones that work best.

If you want honest feedback... ask the kids! What is your favorite drill? What is your least favorite drill? Did you have fun? Did you learn anything?

Kids respond to structure. They light up when you ask them for input. It builds trust. When you ask them for input, it builds trust. **When you earn their trust you will surely earn their parent's trust and that can only improve your overall experience and effectiveness as a manager.**