

Athens Sandlot League



Team Manual For Coaches, Players & Parents



ATHENS SANDLOT BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President	Bill Fournier	590-8659	fournier.bill@gmail.com
Vice-President	Keith McGrath	590-0984	mcgrathkeith@yahoo.com
Secretary	Bob Staron	593-2409	staron@oucom.ohiou.edu
Treasurer	Kevin Schwarzel	591-1630	jkstimeout@aol.com
Legal Counsel	George McCarthy	593-3357	gmccarthy@mgss.com
Player Rep. & Safety	Mike Rider	707-3586	mris@frognet.net

2007 SANDLOT COMMISSIONERS

12U	Bob Staron	593-2409	staron@oucom.ohiou.edu
12U	George McCarthy	593-3357	gmccarthy@mgss.com
12U/10U Softball	Roger Bissell	591-4002	griffey_89@yahoo.com
12U/10U Softball	Paul Carey		paulcarey@intelliwave.com
10U	Tom Vander Ven	707-7312	vandervt@ohio.edu
10U	Trevis Thompson	707-9559	thompst2@ohio.edu
7-8	Kris Kostival	590-2141	kkostival@intelliwave.com
7-8	Chris Stewart	591-4605	diamondD1@columbus.rr.com

Dear Coaches, Players, and Parents:

This **Team Manual** contains instruction and information for how we would like to see each of the Sandlot teams play baseball. "Team" is the best term to use to describe the type of baseball that we want to teach and encourage our young players to execute on the field. Another most important word you will hear often is "HUSTLE". Hustle is the one thing every player can do well, regardless of his/her level of athletic ability.

You might be wondering why we are giving you a team manual for teams ranging in ages from 7 years old to 12 years old. You may wonder, *is this really necessary?* We believe so. First of all, signing up to play on an organized baseball team is quite different from playing a pick-up game in the back yard. The goal of the Sandlot Baseball League is to help kids learn and appreciate the game of baseball while also developing good friendships with others in the community. Playing a competitive team sport will require that every player knows how to perform the basic fundamentals of the game as well as how to work together with the other members of the team.

A second reason for this manual is to give each child, coach, and parent a sense of expectation. We believe that when all people, young and old, know clearly what is expected of them they will be more likely to achieve what is desired. Therefore this manual is an explanation of goals and expectations, which we hope will be constantly reinforced throughout the baseball season.

Finally, there is one particular point we feel we must address, and it is a very important point when it comes to youth baseball. It has to do with coaching your own child and understanding the expectations you have for them verses the expectations they have for the game of baseball. One thing we Dads (and moms) must understand is that most kids under the age of 13 just play baseball because it's fun, and if they think its fun they will play it a lot, and if they play it a lot they will get better. However, over-enthusiastic parents who think their son is going to be the next Derek Jeter begin pushing their expectations for hard work and dedication, and it's like a foreign language to a 7-year old. Playing baseball is not "work" to them. As adults, we understand the need for hard work and dedication in order to improve your skills. But kids do not hold this same worldview. So we must be able to get them to "work" on their skills while keeping the game fun.

That is what this book is about. It offers instruction on the basic fundamentals, and ideas to improve fundamentals through fun drills and creative practice planning. We all desire to see our own children do things right and be fundamentally sound, which there is absolutely nothing wrong with. And, the fact is, the more they improve their skills the more fun they will have playing the game. But we also need to recognize the line between pushing the techniques and mechanics and simply letting them enjoy playing the game. If all coaches and parents understand that very important point, we can then move on to the fundamentals and the instruction that this book has to offer.

In practices and in games we want all Sandlot teams to emphasize the basic fundamentals of baseball. Learning proper technique in every skill is one of the most important aspects of the game for any age player. Even Big Leaguers practice the most basic fundamentals every day, over and over again. Another aspect of the game that we must teach is "situational baseball", learning basic strategy and assignments for offense (batting and base running) and defense (fielding, throwing, cut-offs, etc.).

In this Team Manual the basic fundamentals of baseball for both offense and defense are explained. As a coach or a parent of one of our Sandlot team members, we want to strongly encourage you to help your young players learn the game of baseball. Having every player know what to do and when is the essence of total team baseball, which is what we want to promote.

There is one final word we would like to emphasize. Our primary purpose in providing this material and pressing you to help your players with the fundamentals is not to build a mindset of WIN, WIN, WIN! This is *not* our primary motivation for young players. The game of baseball is meant to be fun. And as we

*The
best
work
is
TEAM
work.*

mentioned above, the players who know how to perform the fundamentals well *have the most fun playing the game*. This age is a critical time for instruction. Let's teach them well so they can have the most fun playing this wonderful game! This does not mean that we are against winning and losing. We do keep score during the games, and there is a winning team and a losing team after each game. But we must never sacrifice the fun and the fundamentals on the altar of winning.

Baseball has always held a special place in the hearts of the authors of this letter, and now that we are older we realize that so much more can occur inside this little game than just throwing, catching, or hitting a ball. Baseball has the potential to create some of the greatest memories in our children's lives. Baseball has the potential to teach us many lessons about life, about working with others, recognizing your role on a team, working through adversity, learning from your failures and your successes, etc. and etc. We guarantee that you will not regret the time you invest in this game and especially in the children.

We look forward to a wonderful season of Sandlot Baseball with you.

Sincerely,

The 2007 Athens Sandlot Commissioners

Written and developed by Chris Stewart

This manual is divided into TEN sections:

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Because this manual is written for the purpose of Sandlot baseball, the primary focus will be on coaching. It is important for every coach, player, and team to have set goals and then work together toward accomplishing those goals. We believe success is the result of having vision and goals, and then doing what it takes to accomplish your goals.

Every team may have several similar goals, but most likely you will need to create goals that are specific to your own players. For instance, on a given 7-8 year olds team, one player's hitting goal may be to make contact at least once in every game, while another player may set a goal to hit the ball into the outfield at least twice every game.

Goals will vary from player to player, coach to coach, and team to team. So as you read this manual, think about your own team and your own players. Use these tools as guidelines. We recognize that in the game of baseball there is not just *one* right way to do everything. What we are giving you in this manual is the Athens Sandlot way, which we believe to be a very positive and beneficial and way of learning and playing the game of baseball.

Consider how you will pass this on to your team. Feel free to duplicate or copy any of the portions of this manual and give them to your players. Our hope is that it can and will be used as a helpful manual for all coaches, players, and parents.

Winning in Life

As coaches, our value as human beings should not be dictated by a win-loss record. Regardless of what age you coach, we hope that you desire to be the kind of coach who is driven to be successful, yet is also determined to do things right and to develop young athletes into good citizens later in life. Rather than having a coaching philosophy that says, "Let's do whatever it takes to win regardless of long-term consequences," we hope you will strive to have a philosophy that says, "Let's be successful; let's develop athletes; let's mold young boys and girls to grow up mature and do things right."

Our idea of a successful baseball season for youth players in the Sandlot league is that every player ends the season with more love for the game of baseball than they had when they began, more knowledge of the game of baseball than they had when they began, and more skill in the game of baseball than they had when they began. They will learn the importance of

friendship, teamwork, discipline, and effort. All of these characteristics are long-term life values that will help them be successful in all of life.

Helping Young Athletes Focus

No matter what our players are doing, we want them to always be focused on what the team is doing at that present time. With the rapid multiplication of options in today's world, focusing on *one* thing for any amount of time can be a challenge for young people. Baseball is a game that can help young people with concentration and focus.

Qualities Every Coach Can Pass On To Players

- **Honesty** – There must be honesty, integrity, and class in everything we do, but there must also be honesty with ourselves in recognizing our own (and our players') strengths and weaknesses.
- **Consistency** – In all areas; during joyful times as well as difficult ones; especially in team decisions and discipline.
- **Aggressiveness** – In addition to being humble, compassionate, sincere and honest; in sports there must be aggressiveness, competitiveness, and the strength to not be intimidated.
- **Inner-confidence** – They will learn more from who we are than from what we teach. Therefore we must be confident in who we are as a coach. People will always follow a "teacher" more closely than they will follow a "teaching."
- **Strong thinking** – Weak thinkers concern themselves with things they cannot control. We want to teach athletes to have the inner-confidence that if they perform to their abilities they will be successful—regardless of any other conditions.

I. Ground Rules

It is important for every coach to develop a set of ground rules for their team. We recommend that these be kept simple and communicated in a positive manner. Also, these particular ground rules are in *addition* to the rules and expectations given by the Sandlot League. These ground rules are how you specifically expect *your team* to conduct itself. Give every player and parent a copy of your ground rules and make sure they all understand exactly what you mean by each one. We recommend something like the following:



- [1] **Excel in effort.** Give your best, 100% effort—always. Effort is the number one rule of our team. We want every player to try their best every time we are on the field.
- [2] **Hustle.** On a baseball field walking is not allowed. We will hustle and run at all times. A team that hustles is a team that has great spirit, and one that plays with discipline and enthusiasm. Hustle does not require awesome talent; it requires simple commitment and desire. When we compete with other teams on the baseball field, this is the part of the game we will always win. Regardless of who we play, we can control this aspect of the game. We will out-hustle every team we play.

- [3] **Develop loyalty.** Put the team first. Be a team player. Help your team members achieve team goals.
- [4] **Support your teammates.** Baseball is a team game. Be supportive of your teammates at all times. Encourage and cheer for one another. Mistreating or criticizing another player is not acceptable.
- [5] **Think baseball.** Concentrate. Whether in a game or at practice, keep your mind focused on the team's baseball goals. Help yourself learn how to play baseball by watching it on TV.
- [6] **Master the fundamentals.** The most practiced skills of every major league player are the basic fundamentals. To become a skilled player on game day, it begins by being a good practice player. The old saying is true; you will play the way you practice. Therefore, we will always practice the way we desire to play.
- [7] **Learn from your mistakes.** Mistakes are common in baseball. Errors are part of the game. Every player will make errors. The difference is in our *attitude*. When a mistake is made, forgive yourself, and make a commitment to learn from the experience.
- [8] **Be ready on every pitch.** Players are never spectators—when you are on the field, be prepared to be involved in every play. Know what to do with the ball at all times. Play with confidence.
- [9] **Value sportsmanship.** Be a good sport. This means: show respect for opposing teams, umpires, coaches, and fans. Most of all show your respect for our team and the great sport of baseball at all times while on the field and in the dugout. This is called playing with *class*.
- [10] **Be a good communicator.** There is a time to talk and a time to listen—know the difference. Be attentive and listen well to your coaches. Respond positively to direction.

II. Offense

The following pages contain some basic guidelines to help your players with their hitting. For each point there is an illustration so you can see what the technique should look like. One caution in teaching hitting is to not over-analyze the swing. Becoming too technical or trying to teach several things at once will only confuse kids. We have provided the following details to help you know the basic fundamentals of hitting and how to encourage your players.

HITTING

The strike zone is the hitter's zone. This is the area where the hitter wants the pitcher to throw the ball. When he receives a pitch to hit, the hitter responds by making a good swing of the bat. A good swing is more than proper technique and mechanics. It also requires a proper hitting attitude or focus.

In his career as a major league baseball player, Pete Rose had more base hits than anyone else, 4,256. He had a very simple focus each time he crouched into his stance in the batter's box. He would think to himself, "See the ball, hit the ball." This was his only focus, all other thoughts were excluded. Young Sandlot batters can learn something

*The ball is
the hitter's
only focus.*

very valuable from Pete Rose. The best focus is one that is simple and positive. The ball is a hitter's only focus.

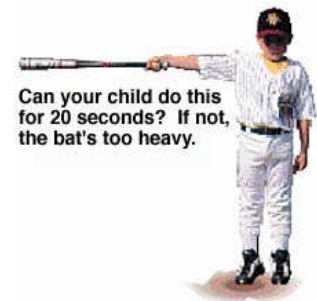
Watch the ball. See it hit the bat.

In our practices we will work on proper hitting technique by using coach-pitch batting practice, soft-toss drills, and hitting off a tee. It is always a good idea to practice hitting on your own by going to a batting cage or having someone pitch to you in an open yard.

Below are brief explanations and some photos of the basics of hitting mechanics. Refer to these in order to help your child at home.

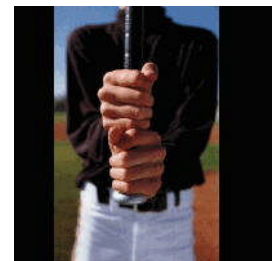
Choosing a Bat

One of the most important aspects of hitting is making sure the player has a bat that is comfortable and one that they can whip, or swing very quickly through the hitting zone. There are various lengths and weights of bats for youth baseball. It is also very difficult to get a good feel for a bat in a store, where you don't have an opportunity to swing it at full speed. The illustration on the right is a little technique you can do with your child in helping him/her choose a bat that is appropriate for his/her strength.



The Grip

A good grip on the bat is one where the handle is held primarily in the fingers of each hand. To do this, lay the handle of the bat across the lower base of the fingers of each hand. Then, simply close your hands around the handle. Never hold the bat back in the palms of the hands. This slows down bat speed because it does not allow the wrists to properly flex during the swing. Also, it can be painful. Finally, don't squeeze the bat too tightly.



The easiest way to ensure that you are keeping the bat up in the fingers is to rotate your hands so that the second row of knuckles (the "door-knocking knuckles") on each hand line up with each other. See the illustration at the right.

The Stance: Vision & Balance

As I have already mentioned, the most important aspect of hitting a baseball is "seeing the ball." A proper stance will help ensure that you are seeing the ball clearly. One thing to look for is, are the eyes parallel to the ground?

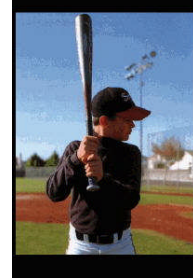
In the stance, your feet should be slightly more than shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent and your weight evenly distributed between both feet. You should feel a little more weight toward the balls of your feet and to the inside of your feet. You should feel springy and ready for action. This is a well balanced, athletic stance that will allow you to hit with power and grace.

One of the best ways to teach young hitters how to get into a well balanced, athletic position is to have them stand still with their feet about shoulder width apart. Now they jump as high as

they can straight up in the air. When they land, they will usually land in a very balanced and athletic position.

The Power Position (Launch Position)

When a hitter is ready to hit the ball, they must come to the power position (or launch position), which is where their hands will explode toward the baseball. As you can see in the illustration at the right, the hitter's hands are shoulder-height and fairly close to the body. This is where the power position begins.



As the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, the hitter will "load up". Loading up is what prepares a hitter to swing the bat. Without loading up the ball simply will not be hit very hard.

The key points to a good load are:

- The weight moves primarily onto the inner portion of the back leg and foot.
- The front shoulder closes slightly, automatically loading the hands and tilting the bat head forward toward the pitcher (knob looks at the catcher).
- The front knee kicks inward (show the pitcher your pocket) this move cocks the hips.
- The player is stacked, meaning from the bottom of the back side to the top everything is aligned. The foot is under the knee, the knee under the hip, shoulder and hands stacked above the hip.

The "Step"

From this position the player is in a well-balanced, loaded position that allows him to attack the incoming pitch. This is where the "step toward the pitcher" phase of hitting comes in. The hitter is not actually taking a long step toward the pitcher with the front foot. He is actually lifting it and lowering it in order to transfer weight into the swing. The step should be no more than 4-6 inches.

Launch the Hips

At this point in the swing the hips rotate forward. To do this the hitter actually fires the rear hip toward the pitcher aggressively. The weight transfer will begin to take place from the back foot to both feet (with the load phase the weight was 80% on the back foot, 20% on the front; now it is moving back to 50/50). The launching of the hips is the foundation of powerful swings in baseball. If a kid can pick up this mechanic early on, he/she will hit for power.

Launch the Hands

The hitter will now PULL the hands through the zone by taking the knob of the bat toward the front foot. The wrists will snap the barrel to the contact point with the ball. This entire time the head remains steady, with eyes focused on the baseball.

Finish the Swing Strong & High

At the follow-through of the swing the hands should roll over and the bat should wrap around the back of the hitter. The hands should finish at the shoulder or just below.

All in all, everything I just described should happen in a matter of about a half-second! I have provided some step-by-step photos of a complete swing below so you can familiarize yourself with what a good swing should look like.

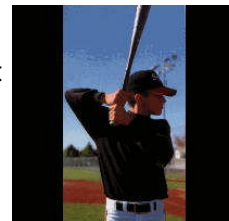


The Myth of the Elbow

Over the years I have often heard fathers and coaches yell out commands to their sons and players. I realize this is done with good intentions, but many times their information is incorrect. One command in particular that stands out (because we have all heard it so much) is telling the hitter to "keep your back elbow up." I'm not sure where this "tip" first came from, but one thing is for certain, it is a "fault" not a "fix."

With the back elbow up in the air it changes the hinging of the wrists during the swing. This, in turn, changes the path of the bat, as well as the leverage which affects the speed of the bat. The proper advice is that the forearms should actually be in a reverse "V" and fairly close to the body. This allows the bat to flow freely to the ball.

So, in the illustrations on the right, the top photo is incorrect and the bottom photo is correct.



BASE RUNNING

There are some basic rules of base running that need to become automatic for every player. Whenever you are running the bases, remember these rules. Make them a regular habit of your base running.

- ▶ Run as hard as you can on every ball that you hit. Pump your arms and run hard, always with the intention of taking extra bases on a hit ball.
- ▶ Get a quick jump out of the batter's box. As soon as you make contact with the ball, turn your eyes toward first base and concentrate on getting down the line at full speed. Watching the ball after you have hit it will usually cost you several steps and possibly extra bases. Don't watch the ball. RUN, and listen to your coach.
- ▶ Run full speed **through** the bag at first on ground balls hit to the infield.
- ▶ Run the fastest and **fewest** steps you can between the bases. To do this, you will need to round bases correctly and touch the inside corner of each base. This is called taking a proper turn or arc and driving through the bag. We will practice this at every team practice.

► Answer these three essential base running questions before each pitch is thrown:

1. How many outs are there?
2. When a ground ball is hit, what do I do?
3. When a fly ball is hit, what do I do?

Also, talk to your base coach. He is there to help you, and to remind you what to do.

- Get a good jump from every base on a batted ball. As each pitch reaches the batter, be ready to run. In our league **you cannot leave the base until the ball is hit**. But always be ready to run hard. Expect every pitch to be hit. Be aggressive on the base paths.
- If you are in doubt about whether to slide or not, go ahead and slide into the base. Even on “sure out” force plays, the slide will break the infielder’s concentration and may cause an error to be made. We will practice the proper way to slide in our team practices

III. Defense

TEAM DEFENSE

Good, solid defense is the most important aspect of the game. We will work very hard in our practices to become fundamentally sound in all of the following ways:

1. On every batted ball, each fielder moves either to **the ball**, to **a base**, or to **a backup position**.
2. Throw every ball with a purpose to a target. See the target with your eyes before you throw.
3. Throw every ball hard and low (on a line drive, not high in the air).
4. From the outfield, always throw the ball one base ahead of the runner. Never throw behind a runner. After fielding a ball that was hit past you, throw the ball to the relay (cut-off) man.
5. An outfielder must make every effort to keep a ball that is hit to him from bouncing past him. Get in front of the ball and use your body to block it from skipping by.
6. On any ball hit between fielders, the fielder in the best position must **call for the ball** by shouting “MINE! MINE! MINE!” Don’t catch it unless you call it, and don’t call unless you catch it. The fielder that is called off the ball moves immediately to a backup position.
7. On every outfield throw to a relay or cutoff man, the throw should be low, hard, and shoulder high on the fielder.
8. On any ball hit to the first base side, the player in the position of pitcher must run toward first and be ready to cover the base.
9. On any throw from the outfield to first base or home base, the player in the position of pitcher must back up the play.

*More
games
are won
with the
glove
than
with the
bat.*

10. After every play, get the ball back to the pitcher as quickly as possible. Call "TIME."

READY POSITION

One of the instructions all fielders constantly hear repeated over and over during baseball games is, "Get Ready!" Players in the field are always being reminded by coaches to assume a proper Ready Position. The reason for this is that the ready position is the most important first step to good defensive play. The quickest way for a player to improve his defensive play is to develop the habit of being in a ready position on every pitch.



"Being ready" is what the fielder does before the ball is hit to him. Before each pitch, the fielder must prepare his mind and his body for the play that will develop. When a fielder is properly prepared, he is ready to make the correct play on any ball that is hit.

SET POSITION

The Set position is the same for infielders and outfielders. Begin by spreading your feet more than shoulder's width apart. By doing so, you will have a balanced and comfortable base of support. Next, turn your toes out slightly, and then drop your throwing-side foot a little further back than your glove-hand foot. Spreading your feet like this will make it easier for you to go right or left, and to break for balls that are hit to your bare-hand side. Bend your knees comfortably. Rest your hands on your knees with your head up and your back straight. Your heels should be lightly on the ground with your weight just a little bit forward on the balls of your feet.

In the set position, look around and notice where the base runners are. How many outs are there? If the ball is hit to you, what are you going to do? Finally, say to yourself: "*Hit the ball to me! I'm ready. Hit it to me!*" Because you are now prepared and know what to do when the ball comes, **you want the batter to hit it to you.**



As the ball is about to be pitched, move your hands from your knees to your waist level or below with glove out in front and open. Keep your butt down, back straight, head up, and shift your weight a little more forward. Your eyes should be focused on the strike zone of the hitter. **Be sure to avoid the mistake of trying to follow the ball from the pitcher's hand to the batter.** Watch the hitter's strike zone only! That is the place where the ball will be struck and hit toward you.

"CREEPING" TO THE BALL

During the pitcher's wind up and just before he releases the ball, **the fielders all have slight movement.** As the pitch goes into the strike zone, the fielders are all ready to react immediately to any contact with the bat on the ball, because they are already moving (just slightly, not with big steps).

This movement used by the fielders is sometimes referred to as the *creep* step. Our fielders are taught to use the creep step because we do not want them to be on their heels when the ball is hit. Think of the creep as *stepping into the play* you are about to make. The creep step helps fielders get ready to react to any hit that is made.

If the ball is hit toward you, **move toward the ball** in order to field it. This is often referred to in this way: “charge the baseball”. Moving toward the ball helps you stay in control of fielding the ball, and it gives you more time to make the out.

IV. Pitching

In the game of baseball, pitching is arguably the most important position on the field. The pitcher literally controls the tempo of the game. Most likely your best overall athletes and most confident players will be your top pitchers. It is important to recognize them early. This section of the manual is intended to give you some tips for what to look for, and how to teach the basic mechanics of pitching.

PROPER PITCHING MECHANICS

We desire for all pitchers to work through the following main levels of pitching. Understanding the basic fundamental mechanics of pitching is essential to the success of our pitchers.

Level 1

- ▶ How to prepare to throw by stretching.
- ▶ Proper set up on rubber, balance, and body alignment. Keeping chin over belt buckle, keeping weight back, keeping head and eyes level... in order to be in the “power position” at landing. This is called the power triangle, made by the two feet and the head.
- ▶ Proper understanding of the mechanics of “pulling off” the rubber, not “pushing off” the rubber. Do not “drop and drive.” Do not “push off” the rubber. Stay high, using a “controlled fall” off the rubber (“tall and fall”), ending low and in the fielding position.
- ▶ Proper understanding of where power begins (the power position). Velocity begins out in front of the rubber, as the front foot lands. The pitcher takes an easy stride with the front foot (not kicking or swinging it out, but simply lifting the knee, then lowering it), lands slightly closed, and then rotates the trunk.
- ▶ Proper grips on the baseball (using both, four-seam and two-seam fast ball grips; change-up grips).
- ▶ Proper hand separation and arm action (down, out, and up—making the circle), keeping the hand on top of the baseball.
- ▶ Proper arm angle and release point. Do not try to throw “over-the-top.” Throwing at too high an arm angle causes the head to go off at an angle, and pushes the weight off to the side, causing you to fall toward first base (if you are right-handed). This could also cause arm and shoulder injuries.
- ▶ Proper follow through and finish. The follow through will pretty much take care of itself if the previous mechanics have been performed correctly. The head will pull down toward the target, the back foot will roll over and hips will rotate as the ball is released, and the body will end in a fielding position.
- ▶ Agility and strength training (running, long toss, etc.)

Level 2

- ▶ Continue adjustments and correction of any Focus 1 problems.
- ▶ Develop smooth rhythm in delivery.
- ▶ Become comfortable working from the stretch as well as the wind-up, using same mechanics as Level 1 describes.
- ▶ Holding runners on base (if age level requires this)
- ▶ Glide/Slide step to the plate.

- ▶ Developing location and control of pitches.
- ▶ Throwing pitches in and out on the corners as so-called “waste pitches”.
- ▶ Change-up grips and delivery mechanics.
- ▶ Learning what is a hitter’s and pitcher’s count, and how to set-up hitters.
- ▶ Agility and strength training.
- ▶ Leg and arm conditioning drills and exercises.
- ▶ Adjusting to different hitters
- ▶ Establishing a strong, mental approach to pitching
- ▶ Developing arm strength
- ▶ Rest and recovery times
- ▶ Mid-week workouts and off-day routines
- ▶ Running and conditioning
- ▶ Pre-game bullpen routines

The following is a very detailed description of each fundamental pitching mechanics, followed by a simpler “1,2,3” description of what to look for in a kid’s pitching mechanics. We have included both for the purpose of providing you with solid pitching material. We encourage you to read the following, but don’t feel you have to memorize it. We would just like you to become familiar with some of the terminology of good pitching.

Why so much focus on pitching mechanics?

Having good mechanics is foundational to pitching. Without solid mechanics pitchers struggle with their control, add additional stress to their arms, and never maximize their velocity. Mechanics is simply about moving the body through space using proper timing in a well-balanced and controlled manner so that the pitcher lands and gets into a consistent throwing position. Getting to the proper throwing position will be the determining factor in how much power you will be able to generate.

This consistent throwing position is what actually controls the release point of the ball. So when you change mechanics you will also change a pitcher's release point. And that's why without good mechanics a pitcher will always struggle with control never quite understanding why no matter how many bullpens he throws he is still unable to hit the glove consistently. Remember, just because a pitcher has good control doesn't mean his mechanics are good. Even with poor mechanics, many pitchers are able to locate the ball. However, they must sacrifice velocity to do so. With good mechanics, pitchers can maximize their velocity and still locate the ball with consistency.

Getting Started

Most right-handers will start on the right side of the rubber and most lefties start on the left side of the rubber. As the mechanically sound pitcher begins his wind-up his focus is on getting to a good balanced position. Most use a short start step so that they don't get out of balance. This start step is what gets them going so they have a rhythm during the wind-up.

Getting To A Good Balanced Position

As their lead leg pivots in front of the rubber, they will lift their leg up to their balance point. Many youth pitchers on the other hand will swing their lift leg up and get out of balance. It is best to keep the lift foot under the knee. At the balance point the weight should be on the ball of the foot and the chin should be slightly forward so the chin is out over the pitcher's belt.

Proper Body Alignment

Once the pitcher reaches his balance point his shoulders should be lined up between home and second base. The upper body should not be over-rotated. In other words a right-hander should not turn his front shoulder over toward third base. If he does, he will have to make an adjustment to get back on line.

Hand Break And Arm Action

As the lift leg starts down out of the balanced position, the hands should break in the middle of the body somewhere between the belly-button and the chest, fairly close but not up against the body. The throwing arm goes down out of the glove with the fingers on top of the ball and the thumb underneath. It should swing down and back but should not go to full extension straight back.

It's About Proper Timing — "Leg Down, Arm Up"

It's important to understand something that can really simplify the delivery and that's the importance of proper timing. So remember this, as the lift leg starts down and out, the throwing arm is going down, back and up. So it's "leg down - arm up." If you work on timing those two things properly, your delivery will happen in the proper sequence.

After going down and back, the arm should stay slightly flexed so that it can immediately go up into the high-cocked or L-position. Many youth pitchers go to full extension when they take the ball out of their glove and because they flex their throwing elbows too late they end up in a bad throwing position at foot plant. So if the elbow is below shoulder height at foot plant, the pitcher will end up throwing the ball high. This also adds stress to the arm.

The Importance Of Arm Alignment

Besides good body alignment, the arm should stay aligned with the shoulders so the route getting up into the high cocked position is efficient. Many youth pitchers will try to get velocity at the rubber by raring back and therefore pulling their throwing arms behind them. Or they will break their hands out away from their body. From the catcher's view you will notice, for example, that the right-hander will take the ball down out of the glove and then pull it over toward the second baseman. This slows the arm from getting up since it has to take a longer route. Again the pitcher ends up throwing from a low-cocked position. The effect is less velocity, poor control and more stress to the arm.

Lead Arm Action

What happens with the lead arm or glove arm as the pitcher breaks his hands? Well, the lead arm and the throwing arm should go almost in sync in opposite directions. It's almost as if a pitcher is doing a jumping jack. Hands break with fingers on top and thumbs down. Pitchers will either lead with their glove or their elbow. The important thing is for the pitcher to use his elbow almost as a sight so that when his lead foot lands his elbow and shoulder are lined up with home plate. If the pitcher's shoulder opens up too early, he loses power and puts additional stress on the arm.

Weight Shift, Lead Leg Action And Moving Forward To Landing

When the pitcher begins moving forward out of this balance position, his lead leg starts down and out. As the lead leg starts down, his back leg or posting leg should slightly flex. This flexing of the posting leg allows the pitcher to maintain balance while at the same time keeping his weight back so he can lead with his front hip and lower body. Most youth pitchers don't know when to flex their back leg. Some flex them too much or too soon while others simply stay too tall and never get their weight back.

Why Pitchers Shouldn't Push Off The Rubber

This holding the weight back helps create a source of power when the pitcher's front foot lands. Keeping the weight back is the exact opposite of pushing forward or rushing the motion, which causes a power loss. When pitchers push off the rubber or lead with the upper body they will end up getting the body ahead of their throwing arm. They will then lose power and add stress to the throwing arm.

What about lead leg action? Many youth pitchers don't understand the importance of lead leg action. The lead leg must get down and out so that the pitcher is leading with the side of his shoe. This will help him land in a closed position. Youth pitchers will many times swing their leg out or get too aggressive with it rather than drifting out to a flat footed landing position. This can create many problems.

One Way To Add Velocity

Most youth pitchers rush their motion because they don't know how to keep their weight back. This is one of the biggest sources of power loss. Fixing this can many times add 3-7 mph to a pitcher's fastball at the high school and college levels rather quickly.

Landing Position

If the pitcher comes out of a good balanced position, keeps his weight back, and drifts forward, he should land in a closed position. What that means is the front shoulder will be closed (shoulders lined up between home and second), and the lead foot will land on or slightly across the mid-line 2-3 inches. The mid-line being a line you would draw from the ball of the pitcher's posting foot toward home plate. If a right-hander lands too far to the left of this line, he has opened up too early which is a loss of power and stressful on the arm. On the other hand, if the pitcher lands too far to the right of the mid-line he is throwing across his body. This is very stressful on the shoulder and also causes a power loss since the pitcher isn't able to rotate his hips in time to help his arm.

Set Up A Firm Base To Throw Against

The other important thing that must happen, once the lead foot lands, is that the pitcher must stop his lower body from moving forward before his upper body begins rotating as it squares off going toward release. He does this by firming up his lead knee so he doesn't drift forward. Many youth pitchers let their knee continue to drift forward so the body has nothing to throw against. This causes more loss of power.

The Power Triangle

Besides landing closed, the pitcher's upper body must form a triangle with both of the pitcher's both feet as the base. So from the side view, you will see that the pitcher's nose is in-line with the pitcher's belt buckle. If the head is too far forward or closer to the lead leg, the pitcher has rushed his motion and has lost power.

So again, if the right-handed pitcher has done everything properly before he gets to landing, he will be in a powerful throwing position. Here's what that looks like. The lead or glove arm is up at shoulder height and the shoulder is closed. The lead foot has landed on or slightly across the mid-line, the throwing arm is in the high cocked or L-position with the ball facing back toward the shortstop and the head is level and in the top center of the triangle formed by the two feet. One more thing. In this final landing position the pitcher's back foot has rolled over so his shoe laces are tuned down to the ground and his heel is almost facing back toward second base.

Finally, the pitcher is ready to produce power.

Up to this point we have not begun to produce power. Everything has been about getting to the right landing position. To this point it's all been about set-up - nothing more. So if we don't do everything properly we then can get our landing out of sync and therefore lose velocity and affect control, while putting additional stress on the arm. Most youth pitchers want to throw the ball before they land. So they lose power.

Roll The Ankle

Before we actually get to the explosive position of hip and trunk rotation we should discuss what happens just before the pitcher explodes. At this point the pitcher rolls the ankle over, or as many coaches might describe it - turn the laces down. Now let me explain.

Rolling the ankle happens gradually as the pitcher is still moving out to his landing position. As he gets close to landing you will notice his posting leg ankle turning or rolling over. This rolling over of the ankle is what allows the pitcher to release and then violently explode his hips. If you have watched many youth and high school (some college) pitchers, you will notice that when the ball is released, their back foot is still at the rubber or is dragging. This slows down hip rotation and decreases power and velocity.

Added Power - Drive The Back Knee Forward And Inward

When you video-tape a major league power pitcher, most focus on the entire delivery or on what the arm is doing. But that added power comes from the use of the lower body. If you want to see that extra power, then focus on the back foot. What you will notice is that the ankle rolls over and just before ball release, you will notice that the back foot is pulled away from the rubber by the explosive action of hip and trunk rotation.

What this means is that the power pitcher's back foot is off the rubber before he releases the ball. So the back foot coming off the rubber is not from any pushing off that the pitcher does, rather it's about the pulling action from the hip rotation.

So if the pitcher wants to develop better hip and trunk rotation, he must first get into the proper throwing position. That means that his mechanics up until this point must be balanced and in sync. Once he gets to this proper throwing position, he can accelerate his hip rotation by pulling his glove either to his chest or to his hip and then pulling his back knee forward and then slightly inward toward his front leg. This helps speed up the hips and is a source of additional power. The glove should not go back behind the pitcher's body or he won't be able to protect himself.

Ball Release

Getting to ball release from landing requires that the pitcher squares his trunk to the plate before he flexes forward too quickly. Many youth pitchers will get this part of the delivery out of sequence. You will notice because of poor balance or rushing their motion that they actually flex forward before their trunk squares itself.

Again, they lose power and get the body out ahead of the arm. This is also stressful. Again, with major league power pitchers, notice how their back knee, just before ball release, is pulled forward and slightly inward toward the front leg. You will notice that many youth pitchers (right-handers for example) will swing their back leg out and around toward third base as they are going to finish. This stops hip rotation.

A Strong And Long Finish - Protecting The Shoulder

At ball release, the eyes should be fairly level. Once the pitcher releases the ball, the trunk flexes forward, the pitcher's front leg begins to straighten as his head and front shoulder get up and over the landing knee. The throwing hand will finish between the front ankle and knee while the trunk is flexing forward into a "flat back" position. The pitcher finishes by decelerating his arm so that he shows the back of his shoulder to the hitter. This "flat back" finish helps take the stress from the throwing shoulder and helps protect the arm from injury.

Some important points to consider in order to speed up improvement:

- Educate yourself on what good mechanics are and then go to work fixing your mechanical faults.
- Start with the first fault in your delivery and fix that - then go to #2, etc.
- Don't try to work on too much at one time - fixing one thing can make a difference
- Work hard and have patience – it takes time to build a quality delivery
- Use the mirror to get instant feedback
- Video-tape the pitcher doing the drills, pitching in bullpens, etc. from all angles
- Set goals for developing better mechanics and look for weekly improvements
- Use the off-season to fix mechanics - it's much tougher during the competitive season

One, Two, Three Approach to Coaching Pitching

Okay, now we will try to boil everything you just read down to a simple, 1,2,3 approach to pitching. This is what you should look for:

1. **Head** → Remains over the pivot foot at step back from the rubber
2. **Balance** → As knee lifts, the body is balanced and controlled; as knee lowers, the hands break from glove, throwing hand going down, out, and up (fingers on top of ball)
3. **Stride Closed & Controlled** → Front foot glides down and out toward plate, weight remains back until front foot lands. Front shoulder leads the way to the plate and head remains in center of body.

If you can look for those three things, then you will be an effective pitching coach. Teach the three points to your pitchers. If a kids seems to grasp them exceptionally well, then you can begin to get more detailed with him. But especially for the younger ages it will be important to keep things simple, while instilling good mechanics at the same time.

Common problems in pitching mechanics

1. Poor balance
2. Body gets way ahead of the arm
3. Poor arm action – too short or too long
4. Hands out away from body during windup (flailing)
5. Lands too far to the left or right of the midline
6. Stride is too short
7. Doesn't develop good rotational forces
8. Landing leg does not brace up
9. Opens hips and trunk too early
10. Poor finish

ADDITIONAL PITCHING GOALS TO TEACH YOUR PITCHERS

1. Possess the pitcher's three C's on the mound: Concentration, Confidence, Courage.
2. The pitcher's goal is to make the batter swing the bat. Strikeouts may seem cool, but striking out each hitter is never a priority. Throwing pitches to induce the batter to swing the bat is the main mission for a pitcher.
3. Be a mitt hitter! Pitch the ball down the funnel into the catcher's mitt. Thinking about the hitter instead of the catcher's mitt will create a distraction.
4. Throw the first pitch for a strike! Be fearless and get ahead in the count.
5. Throw the second pitch for a strike! Pitch to the catcher's target. Hit the mitt and keep the hitter on the defensive. Pitch aggressively in the strike zone.
6. Throw the fastball with maximum exertion. A high-speed fastball begins with an attitude.
7. It's harder for the hitter to hit than for the pitcher to pitch!
8. Throw strikes, change speeds, work as fast as you comfortably can.
9. Breathe!!! Proper breathing aids relaxation, concentration, strength, and control.
10. Be in command on the mound. Stay focused and control the emotions. Pitch with a purpose.
11. Control is developed by frequent and deliberate practice. To become a control pitcher, a pitcher must pitch regularly in bullpens and game situations.
12. Develop one pitch that can be consistently thrown for a strike.
13. Develop a second pitch that can be thrown to upset hitter's timing.
14. Develop a third pitch that has movement (horizontal or downward) as it approaches the plate (for upper age-levels).

PRIORITIES FOR ALL PITCHERS

1. **Health of arm.** This is without a doubt the number one, top priority for every pitcher. Without a healthy arm, all else is meaningless. Overworking the arm is the biggest cause of long-term arm injury. It is better to pitch too little than too much. Once we have taken every step to prevent injury to the arm, then we can consider other priorities.
2. **Mental Strength**
3. **Proper throwing technique**
4. **Proper pitching mechanics**
5. **Command of fastball**
6. **Development of change of pace**

7. **Command of off-speed pitch**
8. **Pitching strategy (knowing your goals for every game)**
9. **Evaluation of success**

V. Catching

The catcher plays in a special position on the field. He is the only player who faces the pitcher and every other fielder. All the action on the field takes place directly in front of him. With the pitcher to serve and home plate to guard, the game is played through the catcher with every pitch. The manner in which the catcher plays his position directly affects the play of every other teammate.

Because of this, the catcher has unique responsibilities. A catcher who performs these responsibilities well is recognized as a team leader and will contribute greatly to his team's success. A catcher who ignores these responsibilities will produce a leadership void and disrupt his team's defensive rhythm and play. What are these responsibilities? To play the position properly, a catcher must learn to:

- **Serve the pitcher at all times.** The catcher's primary task is to help the pitcher to be effective. His job is to help the pitcher to maintain control and to maximize his energy.
- **Peak his teammate's concentration.** The catcher moves efficiently to keep the game proceeding at a quick and steady pace. Doing so, he helps the pitcher and fielders to maximize their concentration.
- **Be a communications leader.** With every pitch, the catcher communicates to his teammates. He works closely with the pitcher and signals the best pitch to attack the hitter's weaknesses. He plays with enthusiasm and confidence behind the plate in order to provide his teammates with a positive example of heads-up play on every pitch.
- **Develop an alert style of play.** The catcher anticipates the offensive team's strategies and directs his teammates to make proper adjustments to counter-attack offensive plays. He also observes the other team's hitters and base runners to detect weaknesses in their play. He seeks to gain every fair advantage possible in order to take an out away from the opposing team.
- **Guard home plate with tenacity and skill.** Although the catcher is courageous and fearless in his play, he is committed to playing with respect for the rules and his opponent's safety. A catcher who plays with great skill is also capable of playing fairly and safely.

A beginning catcher must aspire to grow in his motivation and ability to execute these responsibilities. An experienced catcher challenges himself to improve his play by focusing on these responsibilities as a priority to help his team. He recognizes that to be a successful leader

at his position, he must never sway from his commitment to serve the team. A catcher whose every action is intended to help his pitcher, plays with hustle and alertness and exerts his best effort at all times, is a player who will energize his teammates and earn their respect.

TRAINING TIPS FOR CATCHERS

Receiving the ball

- Set up in the catcher's stance so that the pitcher is able to throw the shortest distance to each hitter.
- Adjust to each hitter's location in the batter's box. The distance between the catcher and hitter should be no more than one glove width from the hitter's back leg to the catcher's outstretched arm.
- Move feet shoulder width apart to provide maximum stability and balance for the stance.
- Keep the back straight
- Receive every pitch with the shoulders square (90 degrees) to the ball. Turning the shoulders will make catching the pitch more difficult and increase the risk of injury.
- Catch the pitch with the arm slightly bent. Use the elbow and wrist joints as shock absorbers to provide a soft catching hand.
- Relax glove-hand/wrist before catching the pitch. A stiff hand or locked wrist will cause the ball to bounce off the glove.
- Avoid catching the ball with the arm locked and fully extended, or with the mitt up against the chest protector. Catch the ball in the bent-arm plane away from the body.
- Catch pitches in or near the strike zone with the chest centered on the ball. This alignment with the chest centered on the glove will result in more strikes being called by the umpire.
- Frame the low pitch with the thumb pointed down rather than scooping or basket-catching the ball.

Blocking the ball in the dirt

- Catch the pitch or block it. Commit to do one or the other, but never try to do both at the same time. Pitches in the dirt are to be blocked not caught.
- Use the chest protector to catch the ball, not the glove.
- Get into blocking position by following these four steps.
 1. Glove to the ground
 2. Knees to the glove
 3. Shoulders over the knees
 4. Head down and back lowered to form a correct blocking angle
- Keep the back straight.
- Collapse the leg opposite the ball to block pitches away from the plate. Use the leg to forcefully drive the body out from the plate into the blocking zone.
- Steer the ball toward the front of the plate by keeping the shoulders square to the ball in the blocking position.

Bunts

Toward Third Base

- Stay low to the ground while pursuing the ball.
- Run one-half step beyond the ball and turn toward the base line.
- Field the ball with both feet pointing toward the third base line.
- Keep butt below the ball.
- Bend down (bend with the knees) with head directly over the ball and scoop the ball into the mitt.
- Scoop the ball with both hands, do not attempt a barehanded pickup.
- Stay low and aggressively turn toward first base. Front shoulder and hip are pointed toward first base.
- Shift feet quickly to close the front-side on the base target. Front shoulder and hip should be pointing directly at the base.

- Step and make a strong accurate throw.

Toward First Base

- Start low, stay low to the ground.
- Run out from the plate, and then up the first base line.
- Center or straddle the ball with the feet pointing toward the base line.
- Bend down (bend with the knees) with the head directly over the ball and scoop the ball into the mitt.
- Scoop the ball with both hands, do not attempt a barehanded pickup.
- Take a big jump-step backwards away from the base line. This step provides the catcher with a clear throwing lane to first base.
- Step and throw

Fielded by Another Player

- Quarterback the play and shout out to the fielder the number of the base where the throw should go.

Tags at the plate

The proper position to receive the throw is in front of the plate. When awaiting the throw, the catcher does not set up to the side of the plate, nor does he straddle the plate. It is illegal for the catcher to block the plate before he has the baseball in his possession.

To position himself for a normal tag play, the catcher should execute the following steps.

1. Always leave the mask on. The mask stays on for safety, and because the catcher will consistently keep your head down on the throw and look the ball into your glove. With the mask off, catchers are prone to flinch and pull their head off the ball. Catchers react with more confidence with the mask in place.
2. On any fair hit ball, move to the front of the plate and anticipate a throw. Like any other baseman, the catcher's job is to guard his base. He cannot protect his base by standing behind it. The catcher needs to be in a good defensive position before any play at the plate begins to develop.
3. The catcher can be as much as one foot length in front of the plate and still be in excellent position to block the plate once the throw is received.
4. The direction of the throw will dictate the catcher's initial set up position. Use the front corners of the plate as guide points. Set up with left foot off the left front corner on throws from left field and center. On throws from right-center to right field, the catcher sets his right foot adjacent to the right front corner.
5. Stay low and relaxed. Knees are bent and butt is down in a good athletic position.
6. Give the runner the back half of the plate. The idea is to let the runner have a clear shot at the plate, at least the catcher wants the runner to think he has a clear shot. What the catcher gives as he prepares to receive the throw, he quickly takes away after he catches the ball. With correct footwork, this is easy to do. Remember, the catcher's first priority is to catch the ball.
7. After the ball is caught, the catcher grasps it with his throwing hand. With the ball gripped tightly in his throwing hand, he places his hand inside the mitt. Contact with the runner is made with the back of the mitt.
8. Once the throw is caught, with his left foot the catcher takes a quick step onto the third base line. Both his toe and his knee are pointed directly down the third base line at third base. In this position, he has the entire plate blocked. This is also the safest stance for the catcher to assume prior to the tag. With his knee facing the runner, the risk of injury is greatly reduced. Any contact that is made will not buckle the knee from the side.
9. The catcher stays low and maintains good leverage. He tags the runner, and then spins around to face the infield, ready to throw to another base.
10. The sweep tag is a secondary tag. It is used when the throw is late or off line and the catcher has no time to move his feet into the normal plate blocking position.

This sequence of movements is the same for catchers who are 8 or 22 years of age. It is both effective and safe. Catchers are able to concentrate on receiving throws from any part of the diamond, and then quickly react to thwart a runner's advance to home base.

VI. Team Policy

Below is a recommended list of expectations for each team. We encourage all coaches to adapt this or create something similar for your own team. This team policy is in *addition* to the policy and expectations provided by the Sandlot League.

The "Team Policy" you see below is an actual list used by one of our Sandlot teams.

1. Practices

- a. Before scheduled season games begin we will practice at least twice a week. After games begin we will practice at least once a week, but possibly more.
- b. It is very important for all players to attend all practices and all games.
- c. If you are unable to attend practice, please phone a coach to notify the team of the reason for your absence.
- d. Always wear long pants to practice (preferably sweat pants). You never know when you will need to slide.

2. Uniforms

- a. No jewelry (rings, necklaces, bracelets, watches, earrings) or headbands can be worn. Please leave these items at home.
- b. On cool days dress warmly. Even at a young age, players can develop sore arms because of dressing improperly in cool or windy weather.
- c. Uniforms must be worn properly. Jerseys are tucked inside the pants at all times. Hats will be worn frontward at all times.

3. Field Conduct

- a. Never throw, kick or slam your bat, your helmet, your glove, or the dugout fence.
- b. Hustle! Run on and off the field.

4. Dugout Behavior

- a. Stay alert and involved in the game at all times. Being in the dugout is still game time, not break time. Keep your focus on the field and the game that we are playing.
- b. Only water, Gatorade or PowerAde beverages are allowed in our dugout.

5. Playing Time

- a. Every player will receive fair playing time (notice that I did not say an “equal” share of playing time). Playing time is a privilege, not a right. Which means it is fair to reward more playing time to those who uphold the team policy.
 - b. Playing time will be determined by each player’s effort, attitude, and attendance (if you must miss a practice or a game, please call).
- 6. Post Game or Practice**
- a. Every player helps pick up equipment and clean out the dugout before anyone leaves.
 - b. We will have a brief post-game meeting at the end of every game to talk about what we learned, and to make plans for the next game or practice.
- 7. In Case of Rain**
- a. The game is still on unless you receive a phone call from a coach. Come to the field. Never assume the game is cancelled.
 - b. If a game is cancelled you will receive a call from a coach.
- 8. HAVE FUN!!!**

We encourage all coaches to use the following “contract” of expectations for coaches, parents, and players. It will be important to hold an introductory meeting with your players and parents, in which you can go over all of the material in your team manual and then have each player, parent, and coach sign their name to the expectations below.

(Your Team’s) Expectations of Coaches

As a coach I will make every effort to...

- Create a safe and caring place for players to learn, practice, and play baseball
- Be sure all of the players are instructed on the fundamentals
- Be kind, approachable, and make every player feel like an important part of the team
- Set clear and reachable expectations
- Be polite, positive and fair to all of the players
- Warm up the players before every practice and game
- Make every practice and game active and fun
- Model good sportsmanship
- Be patient, and remember that players improve at different rates
- Remember that the game is for the players

(Your Team’s) Expectations of Parents

As a parent I will make every effort to...

- Attend my child’s games
- Be a supportive parent for the coach and team
- Cheer for all of the players on the team
- Be a positive role model and demonstrate good sportsmanship
- Be supportive when my child is successful and also when my child is struggling for success
- Respect and support volunteers and umpires
- Regularly play baseball with my child practicing the skills of the game
- Be positive and supportive whether the team wins or loses
- Remember that the game is for the players

(Your Team’s) Expectations of Players

As a player I will make every effort to...

- Be a kind person
- Listen to my coach and parents
- Do my best
- Hustle
- Be a good helper
- Have fun
- Be a good friend to my teammates
- Be a good sport
- Cheer for my teammates
- Follow the rules of the team

Signed: _____ Date: _____

VII. Practice Planning

For every coach practice time is the most vital time of your season. It has been said, “Practices are where coaches shine; games are where players shine.” Unfortunately, however, the trend for many coaches of youth baseball teams is to try to do more coaching in games than in practice. This is usually because we fail to run effective practices that provide our players with all the tools they need to be successful in a game.

If a coach is good at running his practices, then he can usually relax and enjoy the game, as his players simply carry out what they have learned and practiced over and over. But if a coach is lax in his practice planning, then he will usually compensate for his negligence during a game. By then it is usually too late. Kids are already nervous, and in the heat of the moment is not the time to be teaching them. We must *teach* them during practice. And then let them play the game.

This is not to say that there is no coaching needed during the game. Of course there is. But we want to emphasize the importance of every coach running an efficient and effective practice.

If we were to ask you to think of a typical youth baseball practice, what would you see in your mind? Most likely you would see 12 kids scattered around the infield and outfield, one coach on the pitcher’s mound, and a hitter in the batter’s box. In the typical youth baseball practice, each kid gets 6-10 swings of batting practice while everyone else shags the balls, and by the time everyone has had a chance to hit, practice is over. If there are a few minutes left, you may see a round of infield and outfield fungo before the team dismisses.

We want to strongly discourage our Sandlot coaches from conducting this kind of practice. In this section of the manual we will offer some practical suggestions for practice planning, and in the following section we offer some drills and resources for you to use in your practices.

The key is to keep the kids engaged in baseball the entire time of practice. We don’t want any kid to be standing around or doing the same task for more than 10 minutes at a time. Yes, you will need to have some players shagging balls during live batting practice, but not ALL players at

the same time. If you put them in groups of 3 or 4, and have different stations of tasks for them to perform, then they are always moving, always doing something new, and never getting bored.

Parent Volunteers

As you can probably see, it will be important to utilize parent volunteers for your practices. Meet with all your coaches and volunteers for the first 10 minutes of practice, go over your plan, and assign tasks to each one. Explain to them what you want them to do, then do your best to stick to the schedule. We recommend writing out a practice schedule for each practice. See the sample on the next page. On page 25 there is a blank copy of the practice schedule. Feel free make copies of it and use it.

The key to having a good practice is to include many fun and creative ways for the players to work on baseball skills. We obviously cannot tell you *everything* to do. We hope you will develop your own new, fun ideas and incorporate those into your practices, keeping in mind the basic fundamentals of baseball we have already discussed in this book. Just make sure that any drill you create reinforces the fundamentals. Remember, practice time is when players improve.

Practice Plan

The following is a sample organized practice plan for a 10U team.

TIME (minutes)	ACTIVITY	GROUPS/COACHES	EMPHASIS
5:00 (5)	Dynamic Warm-up (no gloves, no balls) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking high knees, walking lunge, walking straight leg kicks, walking side lunge, running butt kicks, running high knees, carioca, running back pedal, arm swings, side bends 	All together Coaches lead until players learn the forms	Warm-up
5:05 (10)	Base Running <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow the leader (Home to 1B; Home to 2B; Home to 3B; HR) 	Coaches at 1B & 3B	Making proper turns at bases
5:15 (10)	Throwing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stretch arms One-knee drill (2 minutes) Power Position drill (2 minutes) Playing catch (5 minutes) 	Throw with coaches at first, then with each other	Proper arm action and body alignment
5:25 (40)	Stations (3 groups, 15 minutes each station) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hitting (tee, soft toss, & live pitching) Infield & Throwing (rolled ground balls, throwing after catch drill, underhand flip drill, DP & outs at 2nd base drill) Outfield & Catching (thrown fly balls; throw after catch; over the shoulder drill) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hitting: 2 coaches Infield: 1 coach Outfield: 1 coach 	Basic baseball fundamentals and skills (throwing, fielding, hitting)
6:05 (10)	Rules Session or Fun Drill <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run downs, cut-offs, backing up throws 	Coaches teach, then walk through with players, then players do	Developing good mental focus and confidence

6:15 (10)	Infield & Outfield Fungo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Mix it up by using base runners & situations ▶ Have pitchers come to mound and make pitch to catcher 	Coach controlled hit from home plate (not the live pitch) Second coach watching pitcher	Position practice Pitchers practice
6:25 (5)	Base Running <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Base Running relay drill 	Coach at Home plate, coach behind second base	Fun, speed, and proper turns at bases
6:30	Team Meeting & Dismiss <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Go over what you learned, give positive reinforcement ▶ Give details for next practice or game 	Head Coach speaks to team	Good communication

Practice Plan

TEAM _____

DATE _____

TIME (minutes)	ACTIVITY	GROUPS/COACHES	EMPHASIS

VIII. Drills & Practice Tools

Below are several drills for the basic fundamental skills of baseball. Drills are meant to help make the practice fun and enjoyable for the kids, while also developing the skills they need to play the game. This is not an exhaustive list by any means. Use what is here, but also feel free to create and implement your own drills.

BASE RUNNING

RELAY RACE... Split the team in half, with one group of kids behind home plate and other half behind second base. Give the first kid of each group a ball (this will be the "baton" for the relay race). At "GO!" the first kid from each team begins running the bases, ball in hand. After making a complete lap around the bases (back to each kid's starting point), that kid hands the ball off to the next kid in line, who continues the relay race. First group of kids to finish the race wins.

Kids will often beg for rematches and will VOLUNTARILY run the race ALL OUT at least three or four times!

RUNNING THROUGH THE 1st BASE BAG... In coaching very young players you may notice that many of them slow down before they get to first base instead of running through the bag. In this drill, have the kids run to a base you place about 15 feet past first. This way they keep up their speed through the first. You can also use a cone or the grass at the edge of the infield. Tell them not to stop running at full speed until they get to the second mark.

AGGRESSIVE BASE RUNNING... Runners start at home plate. Swing and round first properly taking a wide, aggressive, turn and then slides back into the bag. Runner gets up quickly, stands on the bag ready to go to second (or, for older ages, takes an aggressive lead-off), takes off to 2nd as fast as he can, sliding into the bag. Runner then gets up repeats the same action to third base, sliding into the bag. He then gets up and sprints home (no slide at plate). The next runner takes off from home when the previous runner completes his dive into first and touches the bag.

The focus of this drill is to make our runners very aggressive and not be afraid to get dirty! It also gets players practice in sliding properly, which will hopefully keep us from injuries and out of court. It also tends to develop players who want to work hard and get dirty.

INFIELD

HUSTLE & MOMENTUM DRILL... This is a drill that can be used inside or outside to give fielders a lot of grounders in a short period of time. Line ½ of your players up at 3B and the other ½ behind 1B. Have a coach at home with a couple baseballs. Have 1 player move to SS and another cover 1B. The coach hits a ball to SS. They field the ball and throw to 1B. The SS rotates to the end of the line behind 1B and the player who caught the ball at 1B runs to the coach, tosses him the ball, then continues behind him and to the end of the line at 3B. The coach should keep 2 balls in play at a time. While the player from 1B is running the ball to him, he should be hitting another to SS. Allow NO walking on the field!

BOX DRILL... All you need for the box drill is five players and a baseball. Four players line up and create a box, with each player 10-12 feet from the two players closest to him. One player has the ball. The fifth person lines up behind the player who has the ball. One of the great things about this drill is that you can have two people lined up at each corner of the box, which involves eight players. So, if as a coach you don't have much volunteer help, you can get your entire team involved easily at one time and still be able to monitor their progress by setting up two box drills with eight players participating in each.

The "Box Drill" is executed without using gloves. The player with the ball begins the drill by turning to his right to face one of the players next to him in the box. Since this variation of the drill simulates the feed from short to second, the player with the ball will shuffle to his left and execute the underhand flip to the player he is moving toward. The receiver gives the feeder a two-handed target at face or chest level. From a standstill, the player with the ball bends his knees to get into a low, athletic position. The player shuffles to the left and executes the underhand flip: staying low, keeping the wrist firm, flipping the ball "uphill" or low to high, leaving the hand high and following the flip. The receiver must remain still and catch the ball first before shuffling to the left and executing the next flip. After the ball is flipped the feeder jogs to the next corner, turns and awaits the feed from the person at the corner to his right.

To simulate the second to short feed, the drill is run in the opposite direction. The player with the ball faces the player on the corner of the box to his left and shuffles to his right to execute the feed. Again, the player with the ball bends his knees to get into an athletic position and then gets his throwing hand out in front of his body. He shuffles or crosses over, moving to his right, staying low, keeping the wrist firm and making sure the throwing hand stays inside the right leg (in front of the body). The flip is executed, the hand remains high and the player follows the flip, jogging to the next corner of the box. Because of the angle in which this drill is performed, the second baseman will not be able to open or square himself to his target. He must keep his hand in front of his body where the ball was caught.

OUTFIELD

THROWING GAME: "21"... One way to increase your players' focus and make throwing time more fun is to play a game we call "21." This game can be played at any distance. It actually becomes more fun when players are farther apart, because it is more challenging. To play this game, the player receiving the throw holds his or her glove at chest level, giving the thrower a good stationary target. The player throwing the ball is trying to hit the glove at chest level or make a throw at the receiver's head level. A throw that hits the glove is awarded one point and one that arrives at face level gets two points. The first player to 21 wins.

For teams that are struggling with throwing and catching, coaches may want to turn this drill into a mini-tournament, where the winners keep advancing and the losers play against each other. In this case, you may want to shorten each game to 11 or 12 points. Remember, "The team that plays catch best usually wins."

POP-FLY DRILL... Position fielders in pairs 50-75 feet apart. Each fielding pair is in tandem:

- Infielder with an outfielder
- Third with Left
- Short with Center,

- Second with an extra outfielder
- First base with Right Field.

Each team might have their own tosser—a coach or another player, who then rotates.

Calling for the ball: Before beginning, coaches should make one thing clear—what to call. Recommended call these days is not "got it" which might mean "you got it" or "I got it" or "who's got it?" Instead, many coaches ask their players to call "Mine! Mine! mine!" It's more obvious and more confident.

Each tosser under-hands the ball up so it will come down midway between the two fielders—one charging in, one turning and sprinting out. The judgment to call it out must be made with confidence and certainty, at which point the other fielder **MUST** tail away into a back-up position—eyes no longer on the ball, concentrating instead on staying about 15' feet from the caller, waiting for the clean catch or dropped ball.

If appropriate for your team, rotate the three players in a group so each gets turns tossing, charging, sprinting back.

HITTING

VISION DRILL WITH COLORED BASEBALLS... Use 2-3 colored baseballs: Red = Take, White = Hit Away, Green = Bunt. The batter must react to the color of the ball as soon as he/she recognizes the color. The drill can be used with live pitching or soft toss. If you do not have colored balls, you can simply put colored dots on regular baseballs. This will force even greater vision and concentration.

WEIGHT BACK... The batter stands about 20 feet away from the pitcher. The pitcher takes a tennis ball and bounces the ball so that the ball ends up in the strike zone. With bouncing the balls the hitter will tend to jump out on his or her front foot. This drill will allow he or she to stay back in the load and keep his or her weight back so that they can explode on the ball. This drill really works because not only will it keep their weight back, it allows them to see it come out of the pitchers hand just like they were pitching an off speed pitch.

FENCE DRILL... Here is a drill that will help hitters get the right feel for the proper path of the bat to the hitting zone. Remember, all of the essential fundamentals discussed earlier must be adhered to; grip, stance, pre-swing, rhythm, etc., during these drills. Stand facing a fence, holding his back arm straight out so that the tip of the fingers just touch the fence. Now, with bat in hand and utilizing the proper fundamentals, swing the bat through the hitting zone, concentrating on taking the hands "to the ball".

The tip of the bat should not hit the fence. If it does, he will get immediate negative feedback. Hitting the fence is a result of "casting" or "sweeping" the hands through the hitting zone. Take the hands directly at the ball (an inside path), then be sure to "squash the bug," hit against a stiff front side, and bring the wrist action into the swing. Finish high and over the front shoulder, your belly button facing the imaginary pitcher.

Additional Resources for Practice Drills

<http://eteamz.active.com/baseball/instruction/tips/index.cfm?m=1,2,3,4,5>

<http://www.baseballdrills.com>

<http://www.baseball-excellence.com>

<http://www.webball.com/cms/page1151.cfm>

<http://www.thecoachingcorner.com/baseball/skillsdrills.php>

<http://www.qcbaseball.com/drills/drills1.aspx>

<http://www.baseballtips.com/books/coachingbaseball.html>

<http://www.baseball-articles.com/drills/>

<http://www.baseballcorner.com/battingtips.asp>

<http://www.baseballcorner.com/fieldingtips.asp>

IX. Coaching, Communication, and Constructive Criticism

We want to conclude with some important reminders about the importance of knowing how to positively communicate with your team. Positive communication is consistent, clear, concise, and has the best interest of the hearer in mind. What is the best way to communicate with your team, your parents, your individual players, and your fellow coaches? Since baseball, like many sports, relies on mental toughness, it is important that we as coaches and parents know how to strengthen the kids' mentality rather than weaken it. We would be amazed at how vital this aspect of the game is. Yogi Berra said, "90% of the game is half mental."

Good Communication

While some adults view coaching as a volunteer and charitable act (most coaches devote at least eight to ten hours per week of unpaid time), the opportunity to impact the impressionable young athletes mandates considerable knowledge of the game and the communication skills necessary to teach. To this point in the manual we have given you all of the basic fundamental knowledge you will need to instruct kids successfully. But this is perhaps the most important aspect of the manual. You can have all of the knowledge in the world, but if you lack the ability to pass it on to others, what good is it?

Building Credibility

Remember, you must build some credibility with your players, and that is usually not done quickly. Credibility is built one brick at a time. As a coach, avoid the temptation of trying to impress your players in the first few practices. While you are leading fundamental drills in the areas of fielding, hitting, and throwing, do not try to show off your personal talent. Respect and credibility come as you and the players get to know each other, not how far you can hit a lobbed ball during batting practice. And few, if any, players improve their skills by watching adults perform the skills in front of them.

Communication at Practice

As you have read in this manual, practice is the most appropriate arena for skill development. Not only must coaches be prepared for every practice, but we must prepare for how we will communicate the skills we desire to teach. Understanding the technical aspects of baseball is vital because the athletes will be forming their initial understanding of the game and the fundamentals. The coach's ability to convey his knowledge, however, will determine his effectiveness.

A strong coach not only teaches the fundamentals and technique, but has an idea of *how* young athletes learn. When explaining a skill or a technique, coaches need to remember that the technique may seem fundamental to them, but the youth is hearing this usually for the first time. Therefore, when you provide

instruction, always try to explain the *why* behind the teaching instead of just telling them to do it a certain way.

Game Communication

Undoubtedly you have heard parents, coaches, and other players yelling advice to the kids on the field during games. Does this communication really help? Some players may know exactly what the adjustment is, but in-game instruction mostly confuses and adds to the anxiety. Some players get embarrassed. Instruction should be saved for practice when you have more time to explain and without as many spectators.

Likewise, if you do have instruction to give a player during a game, *do not* shout it across the diamond. Hold your tongue and wait until you can communicate with the player individually. No need to embarrass him or point out an obvious error that he already knows he committed anyway.

Communication with Parents

As coaches, it is very important to establish clear guidelines for parents so they know how to help the team and what expectations you have for them. A pre-season parent meeting, newsletter, and/or email before your first practice are all appropriate. The message should include the goals, expectations, and guidelines as described in this manual.

Most importantly, you need to the parents to buy into your system and support their children. This seems like a given, but many parents put harmful mental stress on their children, and set them up for failure. Encourage them to stay positive and be their support whether they succeed or struggle. Having this conversation is most effective before the season and when you given to all of the parents as a group. If you wait until an individual situation arises, the discussion becomes more threatening to the parent and the message more difficult to receive.

Expectations

Another thing we must realize is that our expectations as adults will most likely be different from those of our kids. We have to remember what it was like to be a young kid playing baseball. When you do, most likely you will remember how baseball instilled in you a number of values that most likely helped you in school, in life, and in all athletics. Dedication; hard work; perseverance; were just a few of the important things that we have all learned while playing baseball. These are the life skills that we all hope our kids will also learn as they grow, and we believe athletics provide a great opportunity to learn. The key word there is *"will."*

For many coaches of youth baseball, we become so involved in trying to help him our kids be successful—and we forget they are only 8, 9, or 10 years old. When we all look back at ourselves at those ages, most likely "hard work" wasn't in our vocabulary. We played baseball for the pure joy of it. We didn't *"work"* on anything. Surely we did work, but we didn't know it was work. We played and improved because we played a lot and had a good time.

As you watch your kids play you will most likely notice that they are not concerned about their swing or their throwing mechanics. They play hard, and they are mainly concerned about having a good time and playing with their buddies. To them, baseball is exactly what it is supposed to be for 8, 9, and 10 year olds. Remember what the umpire shouts at the beginning of the game. It's "PLAY Ball!" not "Work Ball!"

Constructive Criticism

Kids can be very critical of themselves when they make mistakes. In addition to that if they are also criticized by a parent or coach, it can lead to a player losing confidence in his ability and playing tentative for fear of making another mistake. As a coach or parent you can help build the confidence of players by handling mistakes in a positive manner. John Wooden, the great UCLA basketball coach, understood the importance of positive reinforcement. It didn't mean he wasn't critical of his players, but he would provide feedback in a way that was beneficial. *Constructive criticism is the process of providing both positive and negative comments in a friendly helpful manner, instead of a negative manner.*

Fear of Failure

Watch any game from youth through the professional level and you'll see plays not being made because the player was more afraid of failure than anything else. Fear of failure is a more important factor in a player not being able to perform during a critical situation than any other factor. Sure, it's true that a player may be over matched in a given situation, but even then the fear of failure will often take the small opportunity for success and reduce it even further.

Young players are **motivated by achievements** and most do not respond well to criticism. They want to get better and they will try hard when they feel good about what they are doing. If a player is practicing ground balls and his coach is yelling, "Stay in front of the ball", "Keep your glove down", "Use both hands", and the player is struggling, he may want to give up. His confidence is being reduced by each instruction being yelled in his direction.

As you read this, you might think, "So, how else is he going to learn if I don't tell him what he's doing wrong?" This is a very natural way of providing feedback for most people. We compliment the good plays and criticize the bad plays. We label the criticism as "constructive criticism" which makes us feel like it's not a negative thing. But here's the key question: *How do the kids feel about this "constructive criticism"?* It, like many things, depends on the individual, but if they are not feeling good about their play or their ability, then this criticism isn't going to help improve their performance. If it's not going to help them then we can't label it "constructive criticism". In a game we want our players to have very short memories. We want them to forget about a bad play and focus on the rest of the game. Does criticism of a bad play, no matter what the intention, help the player do that? In this author's experience, the answer is no. It will not help lift them up and get them prepared for the next opportunity, it just gives them reinforcement that they did something wrong.

Giving Positive Instruction and Communication

So the question remains: How do we provide feedback to our players during a game that will help prevent the same mistake from happening again, while allowing them to move on and focus on the rest of the game?

Consider the following method by Dr. Frank Smoll, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington. In a seminar on coaching he discussed strategies for dealing with mistakes. The following is an interpretation of that strategy:

1. **Not every mistake requires that you give instruction.** If a player knows what he did wrong and knows how to correct it, there's no need for you to tell him. Simply encourage the player with a positive statement.
2. If you feel the player needs some instruction or reminder to keep from making the mistake again, **"sandwich" the instruction inside of supportive statements.** Here is an example:

Player picks his glove up on a ground ball and it gets by him letting a run score. He comes to the dugout after the inning. He's upset and knows he cost his team a run.

Coach: "Billy, you did an excellent job of getting in front of that ground ball, your footwork was perfect." **(positive supportive statement about what he did right)**

Coach: "Remember to keep your glove on the ground and then move it up if needed." **(instruction)**

Coach: "In practice we worked on that and you were fielding really well. Now on the next ground ball that is hit to you, field it just the way you have been in practice and make a strong throw." **(supportive statements that reflect on a positive experience along with the potential positive outcome of the next ground ball.)**

3. Finally, teach your players to think about what they **do want to do rather than what they don't want to do.** Research suggests that the brain may not even process the word "don't"—but

instead we more likely picture the words that follow. Good coaches use words to generate the vivid visions of what to do and what can be done. This means that when we approach a kid with advice by saying, "Don't pull your head." All his brain focuses on are the words "Pull your head." So instead we speak with positive language by telling him what to do, "Keep your eyes on the ball," or as Pete Rose said, "See the ball, hit the ball."

By using this approach to give instruction, the player will see that we are confident in his ability to make the play and won't dwell as long on the mistake. The timing of our words is also important. Some kids need a couple of minutes to deal with the mistake before we talk with them, others will look for that support right away.

It takes practice to make this type of feedback a habit, especially during a game, when you have so much going on. We hope you find these words to be a helpful in dealing with your players.

* Adapted from "Coaching & Communication" (pp. 26-27) *Junior Baseball*, March/April 2007 & "Coaching Philosophy" (qcbaseball.com)

X. The Official Sandlot Philosophy

The Athens Sandlot League believes that there is no better experience that a kid can have than playing baseball. We have three fundamental principles that guide our mission:

1. Playing Baseball Should Be Fun for Everyone Involved.
2. The children should be given all of the tools they need to be the best players that they can be.
3. Sportsmanship and developing baseball skills take precedent over "winning at all cost".

In meeting those goals, the following rules and guidelines are in effect:

We do not turn away any children. We do not exclude any child that wants to play, regardless of ability or lack of money. Our rules mandate that all children must play in every game and get at least one at bat.

All teams are evenly matched. Before the season starts, all players must go through an evaluation process. At this evaluation, the players are graded based on their ability. All teams are then made by dividing all of the players up as evenly as possible based on their evaluation results. The results of the evaluation process are not publicized.

Our goal is to have the talent divided up so that the games will be close and that no one team has an unfair advantage. It is no fun to be on either side of a game where one team destroys the other. At the end of each year, all teams are redrafted

Baseball Skills are Stressed. All of our coaches must go through a clinic to train them on what baseball skills should be taught at their age level and tools that they can use to teach them. We will help the coaches make practices fun learning experiences for their players. All coaches will practice at least two nights per week before the season starts and one night a week during the regular season. Players will also be given drills that they can work on at home, both by themselves and with family members, to further their development.

While we will keep score during the games and maintain standings, the development of the players is the main goal. Every participant will be expected to play hard and to try to win, but success will not be whether their team wins or loses.

We also believe that children that develop baseball skills will actually have more fun while playing the game. It is much more fun to step up to the plate if you feel that you have a chance of success.

We will have clinics before the year starts to help get the players and coaches off on the right foot. In addition, we have put on skill clinics and scrimmages in the fall for players that want extra training in the off-season.

All Parents, Players and Coaches Must Agree to a Code of Conduct. Probably the greatest positive impact that youth sports can have is teaching life lessons to its participants. Through sports, kids can learn both how to succeed with class and to handle losing and personal setbacks with dignity.

They will learn from the examples set from the adults (parents, fans and coaches) during competition. A code of conduct must be signed by all players, coaches and parents before the start of the year. No unsportsmanlike behavior will be tolerated by anyone associated with the league.

This should be Fun! Our league has opening day celebrations that include carnival type attractions, color guards presenting flags, singing of the national anthem, radio coverage of announcement of the players and skills contests.

We will also work with the local media to make sure that our players get recognized for their accomplishments on the field by publishing game summaries and standings. We are in the process of upgrading the facilities to eventually have permanent dugouts, outfield home run fences, lights and scoreboards. We are also re-opening the concession facilities to provide snacks to the players and fans.

Our goal is to make the ballpark a place that is a nice place to spend an afternoon or evening. We want to make our facilities a place that is not only nice for our participants, but also attractive to out of town teams to come to tournaments that we host.

There should be Opportunities for More Competitive Children. Some youth leagues lose players to "Travel Teams". These teams are hand picked teams that travel to out of town tournaments to play against the best competition at their age group.

Our league schedule ends right before the time that most out of town tournaments begin. Our league will invite selected players to participate on teams that will travel to out of town tournaments representing the most competitive players in our league. We will strive to play in multiple tournaments against strong competition.

For those players that want to continue to play baseball after our season concludes, they have two options. One, if they are selected to play on our travel team, they will play with them in the out of town tournaments. Two, if they are not selected to the travel team, or elect not to participate on it, they can play in the Athens City Recreation league. This league also includes all that wish to participate.

Conclusion:

Statistically, only a small percentage of the kids that will play in our league will play baseball at the high school level or beyond. Recognizing that, we want to develop children that love and appreciate the game of baseball and have fond memories of when they were competing as kids.

They should be able to play catch with their child someday, or watch a major league baseball game and appreciate some of the subtleties of the game.