

Practice Organization

Set Objectives and Have a Practice Plan

Come to every practice with a plan. Well-run softball practices should achieve three objectives:

- Improve players' basic skills in throwing, fielding, hitting, and baserunning;
- Improve players' advanced skills in areas like looking back runners, executing rundowns, hitting the cut-off, turning the double play, etc.;
- Provide opportunities for players to execute the basic and advanced skills in game-like situations.

Players need to learn how to handle the many situations that can come up in a game. Young players' instincts for making the right play are sharpened by giving them the opportunity to make as many different plays as possible in practice. Repetition is the key. Looking back runners and knowing when to take the extra base are just two of many situations that must be practiced over and over before players can execute the plays routinely in a game.

Organize Each Practice to Work on Elements of All Three Objectives

The practice plan should be divided into three components -- basic skills work, advanced skills training, and game situations. Skill-enhancing drills should be conducted with intensity. Players should be split into small groups and rotate through stations that emphasize basic and advanced skills. Besides routine skills like catching fly balls and grounders and teaching fundamental hitting and baserunning techniques, the players should also work on more advanced skills, depending on their age, that involve hitting cut-offs, looking back runners, and taking the extra base on throws from the outfield. The advanced skills must be practiced over and over in an isolated environment to be sure the players know how to execute them routinely.

The third component, practicing under game-like conditions, is an extremely important part of every practice. It can be boring unless the coaches keep it moving properly. Players like to be baserunners, so be sure everyone gets that opportunity. Rotate players in and out of defensive positions so everyone has an opportunity to play positions they may play in a game. Make sure all players are engaged in the learning process. If you are instructing the first baseman, make sure all players who may play first base are listening. Freeze players in place occasionally and discuss where they should be, and why, if they're not in the right position. Two points to keep in mind:

- Every defensive situation has a corresponding offensive situation -- don't forget to instruct on the offensive component when it's appropriate;
- Before practices, reach agreement with your fellow coaches on how you want to handle certain situations to ensure consistency in teaching.

Set up for game situations by having players assume all nine defensive positions and putting helmets on the others. Have one coach hit balls from home plate and call out where the runners are and how many outs there are. Other coaches can roam the field to observe and teach. Runners can be placed on particular bases to teach players how to react to certain situations -- e.g., runner on third, no outs, and a ground ball to an infielder. Or you can begin with no one out and the runners starting at home plate; then let the situations unfold as they would in a game.

Recognize that Practice is Not Enough During Games, Maintain Your Focus

While game situations should be an integral part of every practice, the coach's responsibility doesn't end

there. A coach must know the capabilities of her players. Depending on their age, commitment to the game, and skill level, some players may instinctively know what to do most of the time; others can forget the number of outs and baserunner locations between every pitch. A good coach knows the capabilities of the players and reminds them to think through situations before the batter hits the ball. Players should tell each other how many outs there are and where the runners are. Very young players may need to be reminded on almost every pitch in crucial situations, particularly after the flow of the game has been interrupted by a foul ball or a conference. It's the coach's job to keep them thinking about where to make the next play if the ball is hit to them or to someone else. As the players get older and more experienced, the coach should wean them from using her as a crutch and get them to do more of the thinking for themselves. But this is an evolutionary process and coaches shouldn't expect the average ten year old to instantly grasp all the nuances of the game.

Examples of Game Situations to Cover in Practice

The following are just a few ideas for the game situations part of a practice:

Defense

- Getting the lead runner -- understanding that the play changes depending on how sharply the ball is hit and how cleanly it's fielded; be sure the catcher is communicating to fielders where to make the throw, particularly on bunts and grounders fielded by the third baseman, pitcher, and first baseman.
- Looking runners back on second or third and either going for the out if the runner is too far off the base, or going to first for the out and then throwing to home or third for the double play.
- Relays to home or a base -- is everyone going to their proper position including the pitcher and first baseman on throws to home plate?
- Bunt coverage -- are the second baseman and shortstop playing their positions until they are sure it's a bunt; are all infielders and outfielders rotating properly?

Offense

- Taking the extra base on a throw that misses the cut-off.
- Avoiding a double play by being alert to get back to a base on a line drive or pop up with less than two outs or by not running into the tag between bases.
- Scoring on a grounder to the infield; when does the runner break to home on the hit, when does she try to score on the throw? With the infield pulled in, how does that change the way the runner on third reacts?

Of course, there are many other situations to cover. After every game, coaches should reflect back on what happened to come up with a list of areas to cover in the next practice. Or have an assistant coach or parent make notes of things to cover while the game is in progress. Remember that repetition is the key. As you continue to emphasize game situations in practice, you will see a marked improvement in execution on the field.