

OYO Baseball and Softball Training Program

Created for 2006

First and foremost, teach players to love the game !!!

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Philosophy:

Oaklandon Youth Organization's mission is to teach baseball and softball players the fundamental skills and basics of the game in a learning environment. In order to do this, the coaches must understand the skills and be able to teach them during practices and refer back to them during games.

The season is devoted to teaching and learning in a non-competitive environment, that is won and lost records are not kept, so that players may experience different positions and skill requirements before the season ending double elimination competitive tournament.

To promote fairness and parity among teams, players are evaluated before being placed on a team. Teams are formed by placing one player from each ranking, highest to lowest, on each team. Every effort is made to ensure that no team has an obvious advantage.

Equipment (provided by OYO):

- Standard issue equipment bag with bats, helmets, and catcher's gear
- Practice balls
- Access to batting cages, hitting net, and batting tees

Start with Six Basic Skills for All Ages

As a coach, you will need to evaluate the skill level of each player to know how and what to teach them. Their skill levels may vary considerably depending on their age, maturity, playing experience, and previous coaching. Start with the basics and advance from there. Not every one will master all skills, but we still want to teach and practice them to build a consistent foundation for following years. The players will have more fun and play better ball the more their skills improve.

The following basic skills should be taught at each practice in all leagues, so they will be covered first. Sections devoted to advanced skills for older players will be covered in following sections.

Hitting

There are many parts to proper hitting technique. Power comes from weight transfer and hip rotation. You will notice in the following description, the proper bat swing may be different than what you were taught as a child. In today's game, hitting is a very short, compact, yet powerful movement. This hitting technique allows today's batters to make contact and drive even the fastest pitch. The basics are listed below:

Grip – Align the “door knockers” (the middle finger joints) on the bat handle. Without a proper grip, wrist rotation and power will be limited. The wrists must be able to release for good follow through.

Hand position – Approximately armpit high, in front of rear shoulder, with the bat at about a 45° angle to the ground.

Feet – Where they start is not nearly as important as where they finish. A line between the ankles should be parallel to the edge of home plate at contact.

If the stance is open (chest visible to pitcher), the player will pull his head and lead shoulder, and not be able to reach outside pitches. If the stance is closed (back visible to pitcher), hitting power will be limited because the hips cannot fully rotate. Feet should be about a shoulder width apart and the knees slightly flexed.

Weight – The player should have about 70% of his weight on the back foot in the ready position. A good technique is to have the player raise his front heel to keep his weight back. The weight will shift equally to both feet at contact.

Head – The player should be able to see the pitcher and ball with both eyes. The head should remain as still as possible during the swing so that the eyes move as little as possible.

Mechanics of the swing – The swing starts with the lower body. It should be used like a spring to store energy to move the upper body and hit with power. The knee of the rear leg should rotate toward the pitcher while the rear foot rotates on the ball of the foot. Next the hips rotate and weight transfer begins. This transfers energy to move the upper body. The hands should drive the knob of the bat right at the pitcher keeping the wrist cocked. There should be no backwards wind up with the arms. The first motion with the batter's arms should be forward driving the knob toward the pitcher. As the hands start in motion, the upper body rotates, the wrists should not break, keep bat at 90° to the forearm, contact is made with the ball, and then the wrists release for the follow through. Contact is made with the ball in front of the front shoulder, known as "hitting the ball out front". The bottom hand should be palm down and the top hand should be palm up at contact. The player's hands should remain relatively close to the body with the elbows making 90° angles. This is called the "compact swing".

Throwing

Throwing is an important skill, but one that few teams practice enough. Proper technique is needed to play good ball and to advance with confidence to the next level of play. Teams that learn to play catch the best will have the most fun and success.

Like hitting, throwing involves weight transfer and hip rotation. Players should begin with their glove side shoulder pointed at the target and the hands together in front of the chest. The front foot should step toward the target while the hands separate. . The front foot should be the opposite foot from the throwing hand. If the child is throwing with their right arm, they should step forward with their left foot. While stepping forward, the glove hand should raise and point at the target while their throwing hand should pull back about head height with their elbow bent slightly. This position is often called the "K" position. The thumb of the throwing hand should point away from the player, and the glove should stay up during the throwing motion to create balance. The hips rotate and the throwing arm comes forward. The elbow should be higher than the shoulder to avoid strain. The upper body turns and faces the target as the ball is released. The rear foot comes forward as if taking a step to complete the hip rotation and weight transfer while the arm follows through.

Catching a Thrown Ball

One of the most important things to teach about catching is to use two hands. Use the second hand to trap the ball in the glove. While this will result in fewer dropped balls, it also puts the throwing hand in a position to grip the ball quickly to make the throw on the play.

When catching, the palms should always be facing forward. To catch above the waist, put the thumbs together. Below the waist, it's pinkies together. It is very important to stress all balls caught above the waist should be with their fingers up. Most young fielders attempt to catch all balls with their palms up. This is a very dangerous glove position since balls thrown above the waist can easily bounce off the palm of the glove and hit the player in the chest or face.

The player should use his hand to hold his glove open, and squeeze the glove closed when he feels the ball in his glove.

Teach the 6 glove positions and practice throwing to these positions until it becomes a natural motion for the player. Assume all positions below are when the player is a right handed thrower and the glove is on the left hand.

- ❖ Position 1: Ball thrown to the fielder's left above the waist. The glove should be fingers up and positioned to the left of the body. The thumb of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the thumb of the glove hand.
- ❖ Position 2: Ball thrown to the center of the fielder above the waist. The glove should be fingers up and positioned in front of the fielders body. The thumb of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the thumb of the glove hand.
- ❖ Position 3: Ball thrown to the right of the fielder and above the waist. The glove should be fingers up and positioned to the right of the body. The thumb of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the thumb of the glove hand.
- ❖ Position 4: Ball thrown to the fielder's left below the waist. The glove should be fingers down and positioned to the left of the body. The pinky of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the pinky of the glove hand.
- ❖ Position 5: Ball thrown to the center of the fielder below the waist. The glove should be fingers down and positioned in front of the fielders body, between their legs. The pinky of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the pinky of the glove hand.
- ❖ Position 6: Ball thrown to the right of the fielder and below the waist. The glove should be fingers down and positioned to the right of the body. The fielder's wrist will be rotated on this catch with their elbow away from the fielder's body. The thumb of the throwing hand should be positioned next to the thumb of the glove hand. The fielder may naturally want to step with their left foot over their right foot when making this catch. This is a normal and desired motion.

Start out letting the fielder know where you plan to throw the ball or repeatedly throwing the ball to the same position. As the fielder's skills develop, throw the ball to the different positions without telling them and mix it up. Eventually the fielder will position their glove correctly without thinking about it.

Emphasize to your parents and players throwing and catching are the 2 easiest things for them to practice at home. 15 minutes per day of playing pitch and catch

with Mom or Dad working on the above throwing and catching skills will have the child safely catching and throwing accurately by mid season.

Fielding a Ground Ball

The key to fielding a ground ball is body position. The fielder should be in the “ready” position prior to the pitch being made. The feet should be a bit more than shoulder width apart, knees bent, weight on the balls of the feet, with their glove down ready to move to the ball when it is hit.

Once the ball is hit, the player should move in front of the ball rather than catching it to the side because this puts the eyes and hands in line with the ball’s path.

As the ball approaches, the fielder’s feet should be more than shoulder width apart – enough to be able to comfortably drop their rear end between their feet. The player must bend his knees and squat down so that he can keep his head up and his eyes looking forward. Bending at the waist won’t get it done.

The hands and glove should be extended out in front of the feet. It is important that the ball be caught in this position so that it can be seen all the way to the glove. Do not let the player put his mitt under his rear end. Coaches must stress that the glove should touch the ground so that the ball will not roll under it. The player should hold the glove open and squeeze the ball when he feels it in the glove. The throwing hand should be positioned above the glove in a position to trap the ball, and to be ready to grip the ball for making the play. Field the ball using both hands. This is sometimes called the “alligator position since the glove hand and throwing hand act like an alligator closing its mouth when the ball arrives.

Once the ball is caught, the player should rise to a throwing position, bringing the hands to the chest, pointing the shoulder and glove side of the body toward the target, and then execute the throw as described above.

Catching a Pop Fly

Fly balls and pop ups should be caught with an open glove in front of the body and slightly overhead. This places the glove in a position to be seen while the player tracks the flight of the ball into the glove. The glove should be tipped back to form a large open target for the ball. Use two hands, trapping the ball in the glove with the second hand. You might want to consider practicing with tennis balls or soft coated balls until the fielder gains confidence in catching a fly ball. A ball of socks works well for very young players or those really afraid of the ball.

Once the ball is caught, the player should move to the throwing position, bringing the hands to the chest, pointing the shoulder and glove side of the body toward the target, and then execute the throw as described above.

Running the Bases

After hitting the ball, players should be taught to drop the bat and begin running immediately. They should run all the way to first without slowing. Players should be taught the difference between running to first and the other bases, namely that it is OK to overrun first without the fear of getting called out as long as they turn to their right and make no effort to run to 2nd base after the over run.

At all levels, coaches should teach the base runners specific signals and /or verbal commands. This would include over running 1st base, advancing to the next base, rounding a base, and other age appropriate signals.

Base running will be discussed further in each age level.

Remember, always explain the “whys”.

Skills by Age

T-ball

(Ages 4 to 6 – Hit from tee and coach pitch)

The top priority for a T-ball coach is to send the kids home tired and have a lot of fun! If they happen to learn some skills, that's great. Don't expect miracles. Some kids won't even know why they are there and won't know how to play organized ball. They'll be just as happy playing in the dirt and picking clover if you don't keep them moving and involved in an activity. Don't tell the kids to play catch if they don't have the skills to do so. They will only find it frustrating. Teach the throwing and catching skills first.

Hitting

Using batting tees, try to teach the beginnings of good swing mechanics. Work on grip, hand position, and hitting the ball out front. Do not place the ball in the middle of the player's body. Introduce coach pitch to start working on the batter's timing after a few practices.

Throwing

Work on getting players to point their glove side toward their target and learn rotational throwing rather than using just their arm and pointing their chest at the target. Have them throw into a net or tall fence.

Catching a Thrown Ball

This has to be the hardest thing to teach due to fear of the ball. Every kid is afraid of the ball. If they're not, they've never been hit by one! So, evaluate the player's skill level. Start out with a ball of socks or tennis balls to ease player's fears. Start with adults gently throwing to the kids so that they have a chance to make a catch. Remember “thumbs together” and “pinkies together”. Reinforce the use of two hands.

Fielding a Ground Ball

Work on the fundamentals at this age: width of stance, rear end down, knees bent, glove open and in front touching the ground, track the ball into the glove, use throwing hand to trap the ball.

Catching a Pop Fly

Again with this skill, players are afraid of being hit by the ball. Begin teaching this skill with a ball of socks or a tennis ball. Teach the proper technique with the glove in front of the body and slightly overhead. Remember, have fun!!

Running the Bases

Try to teach the players to run through first base, and to stop on the other bases. This will greatly help coaches at the next level when outs are made and runs are scored.

Teach the players to be ready to run when the ball is hit or at the base coach's command.

Teaching the Game

Coaches should remember that most of the players may never have played an organized sport before. As such, remember to explain terms that you use so that the players can understand what they're being told and feel good about learning. At T-ball age, most players will not be familiar with these terms since they haven't played before, so you have to teach them. Since people learn best in different ways, try to teach by using *the four 8's*: educate, illustrate, communicate, and participate.

Techniques/terms to teach T-ballers include:

- Infield – Explain what the infield is and what the positions are. Young children will be very literal, so if they are told to “go to second base” on defense, they'll likely go stand on second base! Teach them the positions and where to play them.
- Outfield – Explain to players the different areas of the outfield. Left, center, and right field positions can be very confusing. One of the easiest ways to get players to remember is to have them stand at home plate facing the field, and explain that left field is the part of the outfield on their left, center field straight ahead, and right field to the right.
- Choke up – If a player is having a tough time swinging the bat, the coach will often say “Choke up”. Most players will not know what the coach means. Explain that to choke up means for them to move their hands further up the bat's handle.

Remember, always explain the “whys”.

Rookie Baseball and 8U Softball

(Ages 8 and under – Coach pitch)

At this age, the game becomes a real sport as runs are scored, outs are made, and there is a winner and a loser, however, *our objective is to teach the game and the skills necessary to play it well*. Start with the basics and work on correct form and technique. You will get some new players that have never played before. Many softball players at this age have never played before. Even if they have played, you need to start at beginning and build from there.

Both baseball and softball use reduced injury factor, or RIF, balls at this age. The baseball is standard size and weight. An 11” (circumference) softball is used.

Hitting

Most coaches at this level have a tendency to just teach the batters to swing the bat any way they can so the coach has an opportunity to hit the

bat with the ball. As silly as that may sound, it is very true. Try and resist this temptation and focus on teaching the beginning of good swing mechanics. Work on grip, hand position, hip rotation, timing, and hitting the ball out front. Use the “squish the bug” technique to get the batter to rotate their back foot which leads to rotating their hips. Focus on getting the batter to keep their arms bent and not dropping their bat and not extending their arms during the swing.

Hit off of a tee, and introduce soft toss for batting practice

Throwing

Start at the basics discussed earlier. Continue to work on pointing the glove side toward the target, stepping with the glove side foot, and forming the “K” position, and using rotational throwing. Make sure the players bring the ball back behind their head with their wrist cocked and throw it rather than “pushing” the ball (also known as “pie throwing”). The players should follow through with the arms and their push foot comes up past their stride foot in the follow through.

Have them throw into a net or tall fence if they don’t have the skills to play catch with each other. Build throwing accuracy and distance. Introduce the cross over step for strong throws – an important skill for outfielders.

Catching a Thrown Ball

Players are still afraid of the ball. Use a tennis ball if necessary. Use the 6 position drill until the player automatically positions their glove correctly. Once the player can catch, an accurately thrown ball, begin to teach them to move to the ball so that they catch it in the center of their body. Reinforce the use of two hands.

Fielding a Ground Ball

Continue to work on fundamentals: width of stance, rear end down, knees bent, glove open and in front touching the ground, track the ball into the glove, use throwing hand to trap the ball (use the alligator). Begin to teach the transition from the catching position to the throwing position, and throwing to various bases.

Catching a Pop Fly

Remember, use a ball of socks or a tennis ball if needed. Teach the proper technique with the glove open, in front of the body, slightly overhead, and tipped back for a good target. Use two hands. Begin to teach the transition from the catching position to the throwing position.

Running the Bases

Without the limitations of T-ball, begin teaching real base running skills at this age. You will have to retrain the players to get them to understand that they do not have to stop running after advancing one base.

Techniques to teach include:

- Watching the base coaches. Have clear signals for what you want the runner to do.
- Running through first base
- Rounding first base
- Running from one base to another
- Holding for fly balls and line drives
- Stopping on 2nd or 3rd base and not over running the base to avoid getting tagged out by a defensive player

Really focus on getting the base runner to look at the correct base coach and watch for signals. Teach the batter to look at the 1st base coach as soon as they drop the bat. Teach the base runner approaching second and third to look for instruction from the 3rd base coach. Don't forget to use physical signals and not just verbal signals. You will be amazed how loud it gets at this age level during the game and the typical child will pick up their parents' voices out of the crowd before they hear the coach.

Teaching the runners on base to be in the ready position before the pitch. Since they cannot steal at this level, it is best just to teach the players to leave the base on the hit or at the command of the base coaches.

Baseball: Even though stealing is not allowed at this age, begin teaching the players in baseball style so that they have a natural progression to the next level. A good ready position is simply being in a good athletic stance – chest pointed toward the infield (not the next base), feet a little more than shoulder width apart with knees bent, and weight on the balls of the feet. Introduce the crossover step at the proper technique for taking the first step.

Softball: There are 2 different ideas for what the proper ready position is.

1) The base runner puts their left boot on the edge of the base and their right foot behind the left foot, but off to the side of the base. When the ball is hit the runner steps forward with their right foot and pushes off the base with the left foot. This position is frequently used at the next level, because it allows the girls to rock back before the pitch and time pushing off the base at the pitcher's release.

2) The base runner puts their left foot on the front edge of the base and the right foot out in front of the left foot. When the ball is hit, the base runner pushes off the base with the left foot while striding with their right foot at the same time.

See the 10U section where the advantages and disadvantages of each method are described. The important thing at this level is getting them into a ready position and leaving the base when the ball is hit or at the base coach's command.

Pitching

In both baseball and softball, a team's coach pitches to his own players. Players called "pitcher's helpers" take defensive positions in the pitching area, and the coach is not to interfere with the play.

One difference between baseball and softball at this age is the pitching circle used in softball. When a pitcher's helper has the ball in the circle in 8U, the umpire calls time out. Base runners are sent to the proper base depending on where they were when time was called. If the runner was less than half way to the next base they return to the last base touched. If the runner was more than half way, they continue to the next base.

Catcher Position

At this age, the catcher will just be getting use to the equipment and just trying to stop the ball and throw it back to the coach pitcher. Since there is no stealing, there is no great urgency to fire the ball down to 2nd base. However, there are a couple of other skills you can start teaching the catcher.

Teach the catcher the proper stance. Prior to the pitch, have the catcher get up on the balls of their feet while they are squatting down. Avoid letting the catcher kneel down on 1 knee since this risks getting hit by the ball on the unprotected thigh. Also, have them put their throwing hand behind their rear end. This helps protect their throwing hand from a foul tip.

As your catchers progress, you can start teaching them to flip off the facemask and catch foul balls. The correct method is to have them remove the mask and hold onto it until they have located the foul ball in the air. Have them toss the mask in the opposite direction so that they will not trip over it when going after the ball. At this age, this is one of the easiest outs you can get with a catcher who is trained to look for it. Practice tossing foul balls to teach them the correct technique.

Don't be afraid to rotate all of your players through the catcher position. With all of the equipment and the coach pitching, the catcher will have a hard time getting injured by a thrown ball at this position. This is often a good position for your players who are playing in the dirt, since it keeps them involved in the game.

Teaching the Game

At this age, all regular baseball and softball rules apply except those involving base stealing and pitching/catching. As such, coaches tend to use terms familiar to those that have played the game, such as force out, tag up, take the pitch, etc. Most players will not be familiar with these terms since they haven't played before, so you have to teach them. Since people learn best in different ways, try to teach by using the four 8's: educate, illustrate, communicate, and participate. Studies claim that children at this age must be told something 100 times before they remember it. Don't forget this when giving instructions to your fielders and base runners. Just because you told the short stop where to

throw a ground ball before the last pitch doesn't mean they will remember where to throw it 3 pitches from now.

Techniques/terms to teach include:

- Force out – What it is and isn't. This is important to both the defense and to the base runners. Players need to learn that there may be more than one play, and why one play may be more advantageous than another to keep force outs in place for the next batter. Base runners need to understand when they have to run and when they don't.
- Tag out – Contrast to force out and explain when it is necessary to tag the runner to get the out.
- Tag up - What it is and when it's necessary.
- Backing up the play - Every player moving to a back up position in case something goes wrong with the intended play.

It is also important to teach the concept of stopping the runners. The umpire will not stop play if runners are still advancing. Therefore it is important to stop the lead runner by getting the ball ahead of the runner (baseball) or getting the ball inside the circle (softball).

Fielding strategy will vary with age and requires some coaching analysis to be kept realistic. The correct place to throw the ball for a 12-year-old boy throwing a baseball may not be very practical for the 8-year-old girl throwing a softball. Very few 8 year olds can make the throw from 3rd or even short stop to 1st base. So, develop some strategies and try to stay consistent with them. You may tell your 3rd baseman to throw the ball to the pitchers helper if no one is on base prior to the hit. This stops the batter at 1st base and should be considered a good play by the 3rd baseman. You may tell the 2nd baseman to throw the ball to 1st base when they catch a grounder and there is a runner on 2nd base to get an out. At the same time, if you have a player with an unusually strong arm at 3rd base, you may tell her to go ahead and make the throw to 1st base with no one on base to try and get the out.

New Technique – Sliding

Not recommended for 8U softball. Begin teaching sliding at 10U.

Proper sliding technique can be taught at this age because runners are required to avoid contact with defensive players. This usually means sliding. Players should learn to slide on grass with a loose target such as a glove or throw down base. You can also use a blanket laid down which slides with the base runner. Do not teach sliding by using real bases because ankle, leg, wrist, and arm injuries can occur. Allow players to gain experience judging the sliding distance in the grass. See the Drills section of this document to learn the recommended sliding technique and drills to teach it.

Remember, always explain the “whys”.

Minor Baseball and 10U Softball

(Ages 9 and 10 – Kid pitch)

The game becomes even more fun for the players at this age as they begin pitching. They will face their friends as both hitters and pitchers. Additional rules come into play as steals are now allowed. For baseball, runners may leave the base when the ball reaches the batter. In softball, the runners may leave the base as soon as the pitcher releases the ball. Lead offs are not allowed. Due to steals, the catcher becomes a much more important position. Runners can easily steal if the ball gets past the catcher.

Working with your pitchers and practicing pitching are important. During practice and as the season progresses you should develop several pitchers because you will use three pitchers in a six inning game – even more pitching if one of them struggles.

As the players mature and become stronger, continue to emphasize the six basic skills. Get as many repetitions as possible. Use short sets of the drills to warm up before a game.

You will still get players who are playing for the first time. Make sure to work on the basics with these players. Don't be afraid to group your players into skill levels and teach different degrees of difficulty.

Hitting

Continue to build confidence and improve technique including timing, power, seeing the ball, and hitting the ball out front. Because this is kid pitch, the pitching will vary considerably between pitchers. While it's important to recognize balls and strikes, teach a wide strike zone. We want to encourage players to swing the bat and we don't want to discourage the pitchers. Don't encourage taking a walk. Have the players pick a pitch they can hit. See the ball well and hit it! We highly recommend you do not use a "take" sign at this level. We want the kids swinging the bat anytime they get a pitch that is hittable. Never discourage swinging the bat. At this level most kids are going to the plate worried about getting hit by the ball more than they are worried about whether the pitch is a ball or a strike. There is plenty of time to teach pitch selection at future levels. At this age group, it is all about swinging at the ball.

Throwing

Continue to assess the skills of the players. Have them throw and play catch with an adult if needed to build confidence. Continue to work on throwing accuracy and increasing throwing distance. Proper technique and using the cross over step will really help. Begin to introduce catching the ball in a position to make a throw and a play, throwing in relay lines, and underhand tosses and accurate darts for short throws.

Catching a Thrown Ball

Continue to work with players to build confidence. Work to make them competent at catching as this is a necessity to play any position. As players advance work on moving to the ball and catching in the center of the body using two hands and moving to a position to make the next play.

Players are still afraid of the ball. Use a tennis ball if necessary. Once the player can catch an accurately thrown ball, begin to teach them to move to the ball so that they catch it in the center of their body. Reinforce the use of two hands.

Fielding a Ground Ball

Continue to work on fundamentals: move to the ball, width of stance, rear end down, knees bent, glove open and in front touching the ground, track the ball into the glove, use throwing hand to trap the ball. Work on the transition from the catching position to the throwing position. Work on throwing to all the bases from each infield position.

When the ball is hit too far to the side for a player to move in front of it, he must learn the backhand technique. Begin working on the backhand using the techniques in the drills section.

Catching a Pop Fly

Remember, use a tennis ball if needed. Teach the proper technique with the glove open, in front of the body, slightly overhead, and tipped back for a good target. Use two hands. Work on the transition from the catching position to the throwing position. This is important to all players, but especially to outfielders.

Running the Bases

Players should be familiar with the basics of running the bases. Work on sliding, watching the base coaches, when to run through and when to round first, holding for line drives and fly balls, and being more aggressive. Base runners should learn to watch the pitch and anticipate if it will be in the dirt so they can steal. Introduce banana cuts for taking more than one base.

Baseball: As mentioned earlier, teach the cross over step. They should begin learning this method since it is needed when leadoffs are allowed in the older leagues.

Softball: For softball, we mentioned 2 different techniques for the base runners being in the proper ready position before the pitch:

The base runner puts their left boot on the edge of the base and their right foot behind the left foot, but off to the side of the base. When the pitcher starts her motion, the base runner rocks their body weight back, and then times her right foot striding forward with the release of the pitch, and pushes off the base with their left foot. The benefit of this method is the base runner already has their momentum going forward on the release of the pitch. The draw back to this method is that sometimes the umpire sees the movement out of the corner of their eye and they think the runner left the base early when they actually have not.

The other method is the base runner puts their left foot on the front edge of the base and the right foot out in front of the left foot. When the pitcher releases the ball, the base runner pushes off the base with the left foot while striding with their right foot at the same time. The benefit of this

method is that there is no confusion caused by the rocking motion before the pitch as in the other method. The drawback is the base runner waits for the release of the pitch to start their forward motion.

Teach the runners to leave the base aggressively on the pitcher's release and get off the base 5-6 steps on every pitch. Then watch for the ball. Once the catcher throws the ball back to the pitcher, have the base runner get back to the base quickly.

Continue to work on the base runners watching the base coaches. Use stealing signs, but keep them simple. Make sure you use some sort of signal along with your verbal commands for the base runners at every base.

Pitching

At this age, players begin pitching and the complexion of the game changes dramatically. Players have more responsibility and the decisions we make as coaches relative to pitching can easily affect the outcome of the game. Pitching can be very difficult. Even the best players have off days and struggle to get a pitch across. Be conscious of your pitchers' well being and encourage and support them no matter what happens.

Baseball: At this age and slightly older, we recommend pitching from the stretch at all times. Pitching from the windup can add unnecessary steps and mechanical errors to a complicated process. In general terms, the same steps used to teach proper throwing technique are the ones needed to pitch well. When executing these steps, the pitcher should concentrate on maintaining all motion along a line between the mound and the plate. If the pitcher's body falls off to the side, the arms and legs must compensate for this motion that is directed away from the plate. Inconsistencies in this motion result in inconsistent pitches. We will go over the method and steps in pitching mechanics in the "Pitching Skills Checklist" provided later.

NOTE – For the young baseball players in our youth leagues, we must take care to avoid arm injuries. Both parents and coaches should be educated about limiting the number of pitches that a player should throw on a given day and how much rest and recovery time is needed before pitching again. Many organizations have rules that limit innings pitched but not the number of pitches thrown. OYO limits a pitcher to 2 innings/game, however, if a pitcher is really struggling and the outs just don't come, the coach should be conscious of the pitch count. For 9 and 10 year olds, 50-60 pitches should be the maximum. For 11 and 12 year olds, 60-70 pitches should be the maximum.

Medical professionals also recommend that only fastballs and changeups be thrown by players under 14.

Consult the American Sports Medicine Institute website for more information.

Softball: In softball the “windmill” pitching motion is a very different motion than the girls have ever used before. Encourage your girls to try pitching. It doesn’t come natural for anyone and anyone who practices can become a good pitcher, especially at younger ages. We require the girls use a full windmill rather than a modified or a half windmill. We really want to start developing the pitching at 10U. If you are lucky enough to have a good pitcher at this level, you may have a desire to pitch her frequently. Using 1 pitcher too frequently slows the development of the other pitchers on your team. Try to resist this temptation and allow your developing pitchers to get game experience, no matter how painful it is. We also recommend mixing your 9 year olds and 10 years olds in the pitching rotation. This way the 9 year olds gain experience to be the good pitchers next year and the league is not depleted of all of their pitchers when the 10 year olds move up. We will go over the method to teach pitching in the “Pitching Skills Checklist” provided later.

The pitching distance is 35’ and an 11” ball is used.

Catcher Position

With the introduction of stealing, the catcher position becomes much more important, which requires us to teach new skills. Start by teaching the correct position. If there is no one on base, you can use the same technique as taught at the Rookie and 8U level. When you get a runner on base, just before the pitch is released, the pitcher should spread their feet a little further apart and straighten their knees just a little bit so they are no longer resting on their calves. This gets the catcher in a position to be ready to move to the ball to the throwing position and to make a strong throw.

When making a throw to the base, catch the ball, stand up quickly, and throw the ball on a straight line. Reinforce the ball does not have to be delivered in the air. A ball that bounces a couple times gets there quicker than a ball that arches way up in the air. As some of the catchers develop, you can start to teach them to bring the ball up to their ear and release the ball with a snap of the wrist. This is faster than winding up and throwing the ball.

Work on blocking the ball. Throw balls in the dirt in front of the catcher so they have to use their bodies to block the ball and keep it in front of them. Use tennis balls or the RIF balls used in league play if the player is afraid of the ball. Reinforce that the equipment will protect them.

When picking up a past ball or a ball in front of the plate, teach the catcher to approach the ball with their body in the throwing position. They should approach the ball with their throwing shoulder toward the back stop and the glove shoulder towards the infield like the normal throwing position. Scoop the ball up with their throwing hand and glove and bring it up to their chest. Make the throw to the base.

Continue to work on flipping off the facemask and going after foul balls.

Softball: In 10U softball, the base runners can only steal 1 base per pitch and cannot steal home. Use this as an opportunity to have your

catcher throw the ball to the base. If a base runner attempts a steal and there is no way the ball will make it in time to throw the base runner out, have the catcher hustle to the ball, pick it up, and make the throw. This will give your catchers and infielders 50-70 throws per game. Since the runner cannot advance on an overthrow, you are taking no risk when making this throw.

Fielder Responsibilities during base stealing

Since stealing is being introduced at this age, we need to teach the defensive players what to do when a steal is attempted. The defense should be instructed to yell "steal" when they see the base runner going. Have the short stop cover 2nd base on the steal and make sure the 2nd baseman is either backing up the throw or not in the way of the throw. The 3rd baseman should cover 3rd on the throw. Work with the infielders so they get to the base, but do not leave their position too early in case the ball is hit to them. Teach the outfielders to back up the throws on stolen bases. One of the center fielders should be backing up the throws to 2nd base, the right fielder backing up throws to 1st, and the left fielder backing up throws to 3rd. Teach the fielder to straddle the base while waiting on the throw. Once the ball arrives, keep it in their glove and tag the runner down low on the ground.

Teaching the Game

Teach the cross over step. This is a vital skill for outfielders to get a jump on a sharply hit ball, and for baseball players to use in stealing and running the bases.

With the introduction of player pitching, it is important to teach players how to spin out of the batters box to avoid being hit by a pitch. Teach them to get the bat down to keep it from errantly being hit by the ball, and to spin toward the catcher.

Work on developing proper understanding of cutoff execution for balls hit deeply to the outfield. At this age, the short stop is the cutoff for a ball hit to the left side, and the second baseman is the cutoff for a ball hit to the right side. The cutoff needs to be aware of the game situation and be prepared to make a throw after catching the throw from the outfield.

With base stealing and more aggressive base running, you will want to teach your defense how to execute run downs. There are different techniques for executing run downs. Regardless of the method, common key points are to close the distance to the runner, use only one or two throws, and keep the runner from advancing even if you don't get the out.

At this age players begin to get a better understanding of the flow of the game. Teach them where to move depending on the game situation (number of outs, number and position of base runners, what the batter has done before, etc.). Every player should move on every play, either to field the ball, to cover a base, or to a backup position. Players may begin recognizing the next play and calling for the ball.

You may want to introduce some simple signs for a steal, bunt, or to take a pitch.

Techniques/terms to teach include:

- Take the pitch – Intentionally letting a pitch go by without swinging. This is often done if a pitcher is struggling and the batter is way ahead in the count.
- Infield in

Continue to work on understanding terms, sliding, and proper ball positioning to keep runners from advancing.

New Technique - Bunting

Along with kid pitch, bunting is allowed. When properly taught and executed, a bunt can be a good idea for a fast runner or a player who is struggling at the plate. There are two bunting techniques: squaring up and pivoting. Either technique should emphasize the proper bat grip to protect the fingers, bat out in front of the batter so that they can track the ball to the bat with minimal head movement, starting with the bat at the top of the strike zone with the bat head elevated, flex at the knees to get the bat down to a lower pitch, and bunting the ball down a baseline not back to the pitcher. Only bunt strikes. Pull the bat back if the pitch is a ball.

Remember, always explain the “whys”.

Super Major Baseball and 12U Softball

(Ages 11 and 12)

At this age, the dropped third strike rule is in effect so you'll have to teach your players to run of a dropped third strike. It seems very difficult for players to remember this change, so talk about it and practice it. Even struggling hitters can reach base if they remember this rule.

Continue to work on basic skills and improve form, power, and accuracy. The skills should be more comfortable and natural at this age.

Continue to work with your pitchers and catchers. Develop as much pitching as practical. Develop catchers as well. Work on blocking bad pitches, execution of throws to first on dropped third strikes, and footwork and throws on steals.

Hitting

Continue to build confidence and improve technique including timing, power, seeing the ball, and hitting the ball out front. Teach bunting - it's and underutilized skill. Remember to use tee work to isolate and improve specific parts of the swing. Teach a more accurate strike zone. Players should try to better distinguish ball and strikes, and recognize different pitches. Watch out for that change up!

Teach batters to think about the count and the game situation. Think about whether the count is in his favor or in the pitcher's favor, and how that may determine what pitch may be thrown. When does the pitcher

really need to throw a strike? Look for it! When the pitcher has a pitch to waste, don't be over aggressive. The batter should expand his pitch selection with two strikes. Teach the batter to make the decision with two strikes. Don't leave strike three up to the umpire!

Throwing

Continue to work on throwing accuracy, increasing throwing distance, and catching the ball in a position to make a throw and a play, throwing in relay lines, and underhand tosses. Work especially hard on pointing the lead shoulder at the target and using the entire body to throw with power.

Catching a Thrown Ball

Continue to work on technique such as moving to the ball, catching in the center of the body using two hands, and moving to a position to make the next play.

Fielding Ground Balls

Continue to work on fundamentals. Teach a quick hop turn to get into throwing position after fielding the ball. Teach the players to think ahead to what play needs to be made from their position and how they must move to make that play.

Catching a Pop Fly

Teach the proper technique with the glove open, in front of the body, slightly overhead, and tipped back for a good target. Use two hands. Work on the transition from the catching position to the throwing position. This is important to all players, but especially to outfielders. Teach the crow hop step to build forward momentum for greater throwing speed and distance. Use a tennis ball if necessary to build confidence without fear of getting hurt.

Running the Bases

Continue to work on technique, looking for the base coaches, and holding on fly balls and line drives.

Baseball: At this age, leadoffs are allowed and runners may steal at any time. Runners must be taught to watch the pitcher's feet and understand whether the pitcher is going to the plate or possibly attempting a pickoff. Watch both feet. If the back foot is lifted, the pitcher is stepping off to force the runner back or to make a throw to a base. A left handed pitcher may lift his front foot and throw to 1st, as well as a right handed pitcher lifting his front foot and throwing to 3rd. Pitchers may lift their front foot and spin and throw to 2nd. Each player has to develop a feel for how far they can lead off the base and safely get back in a pickoff attempt.

Baseball players need to learn how to properly lead off each base. The techniques are similar but not the same at all bases. For a steal attempt, the runner should leadoff "corner to corner" from the back corner of one base to the back corner of the next. Get as big of a lead as you can.

Watch both of the pitcher's feet. Use the cross over step and run hard as soon as you know the pitcher is going to the plate.

To leadoff to score, take a lead but drop back off the baseline about three feet. This makes rounding the next base easier since you can run to it at an angle.

NOTE – Remember to be conscious of pitch count to avoid arm injuries. See the information in the Baseball Pitching Skills Checklist.

Softball: Runners may leave the base when the pitcher releases the ball. Runners should work on an aggressive first step and breaking a few steps off base with each pitch. Continue to work on one of the two techniques outlined in the 8U section.

Pitching

Baseball: Since leadoffs are allowed in Super Major, pitchers must learn how to handle base runners and the proper techniques for doing so. Balks are called at this age, so pitchers must be taught when and how to step on the rubber, when movement is allowed, how to come set and what the restrictions are after doing so, how to move their feet to avoid a balk, how to step off the rubber to hold runners close to the base, pickoff moves, and after all of that how to throw a good pitch! See the "Pitching Skills Checklist" in a later section.

Softball: From 10U to 12U, the pitching mechanics are the same. For softball the changes are in the field and the ball. The pitching distance increases from 35' to 40', and the larger 12" ball is used. Everything else stays the same.

Catcher Position

The basics of the catcher position were cover in the Minor Baseball and 10U Softball section. There is a lot to learn at this position, so continue to work on all skills, especially blocking pitches in the dirt, throwing out runners attempting to steal, and remembering that the dropped third strike rule applies at this age.

Teaching the Game

With the players now older, stronger, and more experienced, work on defensive situations becomes more important and more fun. Situational defense can more easily be practiced and learned. Double plays should be practiced since they can now be made more easily. Outfielders become more important as there are more long hits.

Players should be taught how to move to fly balls hit both in front of and behind them. When a ball is hit in front of and to the side, the defender should use the crossover step to get to the ball as quickly as possible. The drop step and crossover should be used on balls hit over their head. These should be practiced to become automatic during the game.

Outfielders need to learn to how to work with each other and to call out if they will get the ball. The center fielder is charge. If they call for the ball,

the left and right fielders should move to a backup position behind the center fielder in case the ball goes through. When a ball is hit to left or right field, the center fielder should take the backup position behind the other fielder.

Coaches that haven't already done so will want to have signs for stealing, bunting, and other situations at this age. Reinforce all the defensive skills: concept of a force out versus a tag out, tagging runners low, player movement in various defense situations, backing up plays, cutoffs, calling for the ball, and learning the responsibilities of other players' positions.

Remember, always explain the "whys".

Baseball Pitching Skills Checklist

NOTE – For the young baseball players in our youth leagues, we must take care to avoid arm injuries. Both parents and coaches should be educated about limiting the number of pitches that a player should throw on a given day and how much rest and recovery time is needed before pitching again. Many organizations have rules that limit innings pitched but not the number of pitches thrown. OYO limits a pitcher to 2 innings/game, however, if a pitcher is really struggling and the outs just don't come, the coach should be conscious of the pitch count. For 9 and 10 year olds, 50-60 pitches should be the maximum. For 11 and 12 year olds, 60-70 pitches should be the maximum.

Medical professionals also recommend that only fastballs and changeups be thrown by players under 14.

Consult the American Sports Medicine Institute website for more information.

We recommend pitching from the stretch at all times. Pitching from the windup can add unnecessary steps and mechanical errors to a complicated process. In general terms, the same steps used to teach proper throwing technique are the ones needed to pitch well. When executing these steps, the pitcher should concentrate on maintaining all motion along a line between the mound and the plate. If the pitcher's body falls off to the side, the arms and legs must compensate for this motion that is directed away from the plate. Inconsistencies in this motion result in inconsistent pitches.

Grip:

1. Grip for maximum control and leverage
2. Use a firm but relaxed grip
3. Pads of index and middle fingers and thumb grip the ball with a comfortable spread. The thumb should be in the center of the ball.
4. Leave a gap between the ball and the palm

Stance:

1. Straddle the rubber with the glove side of the body toward the plate, front foot 18-24" in front of the rubber, rear foot just behind the rubber
2. Shoulders pointing along a line from the rubber to the plate
3. Head in the same neutral position as if batting, bent neither too far up or down, for balance
4. Knees slightly bent
5. Hands should be separated with the ball in the throwing hand

Set Position:

1. Move the rear foot in front of the rubber with the outside of the foot against the front of the rubber.
2. Bring the hands together in front of and close to the chest while moving the front foot back and next to the rear foot on the rubber. The ball of the front foot should align with the toes of the rear foot to give the hip a very slight closed position.
3. The pitcher is not in the set position. Once set, the pitcher must step off the rubber to move their shoulders or a balk will be called.
4. From the set position, a pitcher's head may turn to look at any runners, but the shoulders may not turn.

Balance Position:

1. The front knee is raised forming an approximate 90° angle
2. The hip remains slightly closed to prevent opening too soon
3. The pitcher's weight shifts entirely to the rear foot.
4. The pitcher should be able to balance in this position
5. The pitcher should not lean too far back or cross the rear foot with the front foot

Power Position (a.k.a. the "K" position):

1. The front shoulder and arm should be aimed at the target
2. The hands separate and the ball is removed from the glove at a slight downward angle. Think of touching the top of the back thigh with the ball.
3. The front foot strides forward and should land on the line to the target with the toes pointed toward the target
4. While the stride is occurring, the throwing arm continues back and up
5. While the stride is occurring, the glove arm is pointed at the target at shoulder level. The arm muscles should be slightly tense so that the arm and hand can be manipulated for proper balance.
6. The power position is properly obtained with the majority of body weight on the backside, the stride foot just touching the ground, the glove arm pointing at the target with good muscle control, the throwing arm back and raised, and the thumb of the throwing hand pointing away from the target (i.e. the hand is above the ball).

Rotation:

1. The throwing arm and body start to come forward
2. As the throwing arm comes forward, the front arm is retracting which creates torque, momentum, and helps create balance and consistency. The glove should end up tucked against the pitcher's chest.
3. The hips rotate in sync with the upper body
4. The front foot is pointing toward the target. If the foot is not rotated it will lock out the hips.
5. The ball should be released a split second before the back foot comes forward. This allows the pitcher to work downhill, meaning that the ball is on more of a downward path that makes it more difficult to hit.

Follow-Through:

1. The throwing arm crosses the body and continues its motion as if trying to slap the opposite knee
2. The back foot breaks contact with the ground and comes forward as if taking a step
3. Pitchers should protect themselves from hit balls by moving to a defensive position that is a natural result of their particular pitching motion

Softball Pitching Skills Checklist

Pitching the “windmill” method is a very new movement for the girls and takes a lot of repetition to learn. Coaches have a variety of techniques to teach pitching mechanics. You seldom can get 2 professional pitching coaches to agree on all of the mechanics of the pitch. However, they will all agree, the young pitcher will have to practice a lot and throw a lot of pitching. Some girls have the drive to practice enough to become good pitchers and some do not. At 10U, encourage the girls to experiment with pitching. Make sure to practice pitching in your weekly practices. Consider having the girls who want to pitch stay for the last 30 minutes of each practice just to practice pitching. Make a deal with them that everyone can pitch in a game, but when you walk 4 or 5 batters in an inning, then you will put someone else in the for them. This way you take the emotion out of the decision of pulling your pitcher. Always talk positively and remind them that they need to practice more and they may get a chance in another game. At 12U and 14U the girls start realizing if they have the drive to practice enough to become a pitcher. Therefore you will have fewer pitchers to practice with at these levels.

Grip:

1. Grip for maximum control and leverage. This is the same grip used when throwing a softball overhand.
2. Use a firm but relaxed grip.
3. Pads of (3) middle fingers and thumb over ball seams with a comfortable spread.
4. For a small hand, try horse shoe pointing down, for a large hand, try horse shoe pointing sideways.
5. Leave a gap between the ball and the palm.

Wrist Snap & Finger Push:

1. The snap and push should be as forceful as possible.
2. Wrist should be naturally cocked coming into the release point.
3. The finger pads push through the ball as the ball is released (ball doesn't roll off like shooting a basketball).
4. Wrist and fingers finish in a natural curl.

Arm Circle:

1. Make the circle as large and long as possible (start by pushing out and up, no locked elbow).
2. Arm speed should be as fast as possible (this takes time to develop).
3. Pitch with relaxed arm; i.e. shoulder, elbow, wrist, fingers.
4. Keep the arm swing on the power line with minimal wobble.
5. Finish long and high (don't force a finish).
6. Maximize a natural shoulder roll.

Hips and Chest:

1. The hips, chest, and shoulders act like a door which opens and then slams shut.
2. The chest remains mostly upright (do not allow any serious bend at the waist).
3. Hip action; close at start, open, then close with the thrust toward the catcher.
4. At the release point, the hand and ball lead the hip slightly.

Stance and rules:

1. Both feet must be in contact with the pitching rubber and be completely inside the 24" width of the rubber to start the pitch.
2. The pitcher must pause (typically at least 1 second) and look to the catcher prior to starting her movement.
3. Typically the pitcher's foot on the throwing arm side of her body is a little forward of the opposite foot when standing on the pitching rubber.
4. When the pitching motion starts, the pitcher's back foot cannot step backwards off the pitching rubber, it must stay in contact with the pitching rubber until it is moved forward toward the batter.
5. As the pitcher strides forward with her front foot, the rear foot must stay in contact with ground and be drag forward.
6. The pitcher's feet must stay within the 24 inch width of the pitching rubber at all times until the release of the ball.
7. Once the pitcher separates the ball from the glove to start the pitching motion, they cannot bring their hands back together until after the pitch is released.
8. The pitcher's hand must be closer to her body than her elbow during the delivery of the ball.

Feet and Legs:

1. Use the legs to push the stride and to start the hips closing, push with the toes and instep.
2. The stride should be aggressive, not small.
3. The stride foot lands just to the glove side of the power line and pointed at about a 45° angle to the power line.
4. Do not pitch with knees locked; the knees must have some flexibility.
5. At the finish, the back foot should drag forward with the hip closing, or the power delivered.

Head:

1. Always see the target with two eyes during the entire pitching motion.
2. The head should not move much during the entire pitching motion.

Sample Drills

These are examples of basic drills. There are many, many drills available in books, videos, and on the Internet. Talk to other coaches and board members to exchange favorite drills. Keep the players busy and change the drills so they don't get bored.

Throwing Drills

Wrist Snap - With players kneeling on one knee (right handers kneel on right knee), hold arm out in front at 90 degree angle with hand pointing up. Toss the ball to partner (who is also kneeling) by only snapping the wrist. Players should be 8-10' apart.

One Knee Drill (Kneeling Throw) - With players on one knee (right handers on right knee), turn body sideways, point glove to partner, hold ball back and at ear level with thumb point back. Throw the ball to partner and follow through by rolling shoulders and touching elbow to knee.

Ready, Throw Drill (Standing Throw) - Same as Kneeling Throw but with the players standing. Make sure players are standing in a sideways position with the front shoulder pointed at the target. Follow through by bending at the waist.

Accuracy Drill - put several targets on the backstop. Have the players form several lines. Each player gets 5 throws to hit the target. Rotate through several times. Reward the most accurate throwers with a prize (gum, M&M's, etc). You will be surprised how hard they will try to win. As the season progresses, move further from the target. Make sure the players are using proper form.

Zigzag Drill - Make two lines with the players facing each other. Starting with one of the players at the end, have them throw across to the other line. Have the players call out the name of the person they are throwing to. Zigzag down the line and then come back. Time the players to see how fast they can finish without dropping or miss-throwing the ball. Reward them when they succeed. As the season progresses, start additional balls so you have 2 or 3 balls going at once.

Relay Race - Form two lines of players. Space them 20 to 30 feet apart. Practice relay throws by having a relay race. Each line needs to throw it person to person all the way up the line and then back. First team to finish wins. Make the players square up to catch the ball, then spin and turn in the direction of the glove hand to throw to the player behind them. Make sure they are turning the correct direction.

Catching Drills

Glove Position Drill - Define 6 positions for the glove. Position 1 is shoulder high out to the left. Position 2 is chest high in front of the chest. Position 3 is shoulder high across the chest out to the right. Position 4 is at knee level out to the left. Position 5 is in front of the knees (fingers down), Position 6 is across the body at knee level out to the left (thumb down). Line up the players and go down the line tossing a ball to a position you call out.

Start with all position #1.s. Then go to position # 2. Repeat until you are through the cycle. Then repeat the drill but don't tell the players which position you will throw it to. This drill works on glove position and coordination. Make sure the players are not catching balls directly in front of them above the chest with the fingers pointing down. The ball will most likely hit the mitt's pocket, roll out and hit them in the face. Make sure their fingers are pointing up for balls in this zone.

Pop Up Drill - Place the glove overhead, just slightly in front of the head, not over the top of the head. Open the mitt fully and tip it back slightly to form a nice bushel basket. Toss the players pop ups. Make sure they use two hands to catch the ball. Make them move right and left one or two steps to work on their footwork.

Fielding Drills

Two Knee Grounders - Have the players kneel on both knees, facing across each other in two lines. Roll ground balls and work on having them open the mitt, catch the ball with both hands, quickly bring it in to the stomach area to prepare to throw. Make sure their mitts are positioned slightly in front of their bodies (fingers downward) so they can see the ball go into the glove. Position the free hand above the open mitt to prevent the ball from popping up and hitting them in the face. Use the alligator snap and pull the ball and hands into their stomachs.

Triangle Drill - Have the players draw a triangle in the sand. Place a foot on each corner and place the mitt out in front on the remaining corner. Have the players squatting with their rear ends low to the ground. When they catch a rolling ground ball, have them bring it into their stomach area. Pretend they are alligators, eating the ball with both hands. Have the players move one step left and one step right to work on their foot movement.

Ground Ball Line - If possible, have 2 or 3 lines with help from the parents so the players get more practice and aren't standing around. Hit each player 2 ground balls, then go to the back of the next line. Continue hitting balls until each player has rotated through each line 5 or 6 times. Give them grounders to their right, center, and left. Make sure they are using the two handed alligator snap. If they bobble the ball, teach them to stay with it. Occasionally hit them soft line drives and soft pop ups. Warn them ahead of time if needed.

Stuffed animal drill - Set a large stuffed animal (Barney is a great one if you can find one) on 1st base or on a chair at 1st base. Have the players form 2 lines spread 10-15' apart between 1st and second base. Bring 1 player from each line up at a time. Hit a ground ball between the players and have them field the ground ball properly and throw to 1st base trying to hit the stuffed animal. You can use this drill to help teach aggressiveness by telling the fielders, "Whoever gets the ball gets to try and hit the stuffed animal." You can also use this drill to teach infielder communications and backing each other up by telling them you want one of them to call out the grounder and the other one to get to a good backup position.

Team Defense Drills

Work a variety of different game situations to teach players the rules and what to do during a game. Give them the situation and quiz them on what they would do. Then do it. Have some players run the bases while others play the field. Rotate the players to all positions. Don't forget to work the outfield positions. Try to keep the players' attention. This is difficult to do in team defense drills.

Position Coverage Drills - begin teaching the players where they need to move during different situations. Everyone should be moving as soon as the ball is hit. Call out a situation and then tell them where the ball was hit. Make sure they are all covering their areas.

Hitting Drills

Focus on specific hitting positions at each practice. Learning to hit with correct form takes a lot of practice and repetitions. Use the batting cage. Have parents help with tee drills, soft toss drills, etc while you are using the cage. Don't let the players stand around.

Hitting Circle Drill - Each player in this drill must wear a helmet. The coach may want to wear one also! Put 5 to 7 players in a large circle, evenly spaced. With a bucket of whiffle balls, have the coach stand in the center of the circle. Quickly pitch a ball to each player, one at a time, and go around the circle. Challenge the players to try to hit the coach with a line drive. They will enjoy this! Make sure they are swinging with the correct form. Have the players collect the balls and go several more times.

Base Running Drills

Run to 1st Drill - Practice having the players run to first base and watch the coach's signal. Make sure the players run through the base if they are to stay on first. Don't let them stop on the bag. Use simple signals to instruct the players what to do. Verbal commands don't work well due to crowd noise. The following work well and are recommended:

Run through – No physical signal indicates that the player should run through the base due a possible play

Round the base – Point toward 2nd base indicating that the player should round first and take aggressive steps toward 2nd while the play continues elsewhere. This allows the runner to get to 2nd quickly if the defense bobbles the ball or makes a bad play.

Go to 2nd – Move one arm in a windmill action signifying not to stop or slow down at 1st base. Proceed to 2nd without hesitation.

Run from 1st to 3rd Drill - practice having the players run to second and watch for the coach's signal as they approach 2nd base. Alternate between stopping them and having them go on to third.

Sliding - Most players are afraid to slide. Virtually every player who learns to slide has fun after their initial fear is over. Remember, the faster they run, the easier it is to slide. Sliding is a very important skill. Many players wear sliding shorts to protect their skin. In softball, players usually wear sliding leg pad. When learning to slide, players should not wear cleats! Have them wear tennis shoes or no shoes at all. When learning, use a movable target such as a throw down base, a glove, or rag as the base. This will keep players from injuring themselves while leaning to judge the sliding distance.

The correct sliding position is with one leg extended, toe pointing up, with the opposite leg bent underneath the extended leg. This is often called the "figure 4" technique. It is not critical which leg is extended and which is bent. Some coaches recommend extending the right leg and bending the left leg since this naturally turns the base runner toward the infield where they are most likely to see the ball coming to the base.

Line up your players in a single line, spaced an arms length apart. Talk to them about the cadence of the slide. Left, right, left sit. Then have the player's start walking left leg first, right leg, left leg and then have them fall to their butts with the right leg extended and the left leg folded underneath to make a figure 4. Once the players get better, have them to begin running slowly. Run left, right, left, and sit.

The base runner should have their waist bent slightly as if just starting to sit in a chair. The straighter the body, the faster the slide. Begin the slide low to avoid a big impact on the ground. It is very important to teach the base runner to keep their arms up and not plant them on the ground. Their natural reaction is to soften the fall by putting their hand down on the ground. This can cause them to jam or fracture their wrist. When practicing, players may hold a bat over their head with both hands. During a game, they can carry their batting gloves to help resist the temptation to put their hands down.

One technique to make learning to slide easier is to have the player slide on top of a blanket laid out on the ground. Players can also learn to slide on wet grass.

Training Material References:

Check Half.com and local Half Price Books stores

- Baseball the Ripken Way (available at Dick's, paperback ~\$15, hardback ~\$25). I bought my hardback copy on Half.com for \$2.75 + \$3.75 shipping!
- Baseball the Ripken Way DVD video series, featuring separate DVDs on the fundamentals of hitting, defense, and pitching.
- Ripken Baseball Coach's Clipboard E-newsletter
Sign up for automatic delivery at www.ripkenbaseball.com
- Teaching the Mechanics of the Major League Swing II DVD by Baseball World
- Defensive Drills DVD by Baseball World
- Books authored by Bob Cluck
- Drills included on "The Rookie" DVD
- Baseball Skills & Drills video series with Bragg Stockton
- Websites
 - www.ripkenbaseball.com
 - www.Eteamz.com
 - www.baseballworld.com
 - www.baseballtips.com

Glossary of Terms

Take the pitch – Intentionally letting a pitch go by without swinging. This is often done if a pitcher is struggling and the batter is way ahead in the count. Please don't do this at younger ages. We want to develop hitters as well as pitchers!

Infield in – Having the infielders play closer to the batter when it is absolutely necessary to stop a runner from scoring such as late in a tied game.

Tag up – After breaking from the base when the ball is hit in the air, the runner returns to the base and waits until the instant the ball is caught, then immediately runs to the next base. The player should not watch the ball. The player should listen for instruction from the base coach telling them to run.

Force out – A force out occurs when a defensive player has the ball and touches the base before the runner. This can only occur when the runner is forced to run. For example, after the batter hits the ball they are forced to run to first. A defensive player makes a force out by touching first base before the runner. Stress to the players that if there is an open base behind a runner, you cannot get a force out on that runner. Such runners must be tagged with the ball or with a glove containing the ball to be out.

Choke up – A batter moved his hands up on the bat (i.e. away from the knob), effectively making the bat shorter but lighter and easier to swing.