

Baseball



Fundamentals



M.A. Mungaray

BAS EBALL FUNDAMENT ALS

by M.A. Mungaray

Introduction

What has happened to America's favorite pastime? It has gone the way of the NFL. Exorbitant salaries, free agency, specialty players, greedy owners and league operators. Take your pick. They have priced the game out of reach for the average star struck kid looking for a modern day hero. So he gets stuck with video games instead of playing in the fresh air and getting much needed exercise.

There are no more "Babe Ruths", "Lou Gehrigs", or "Mickey Mantles." In my day it was Sandy Kofax, Don Drysdale, John Roseborough, Duke Snider, Gil Hodges, Juan Maricial, and Orlando Cepeda among others. We could discuss these issues all day and it wouldn't bring back the glory days of baseball. That only leaves the actual game we used to play on the old sandlot. Kids teaching kids how to play the game, and picking sides. Everybody plays.

The way I see it, today's game has taken the T-E-A-M out of the sport. It begins when players are judged according to their skill level and divided into positions. The player is then identified as a 1st baseman, 2nd baseman, 3rd baseman, or shortstop and will not prepare to play any other position. Those that don't meet the required skill level for the infield are designated "outfielders". That's how it is done at most community ball parks.

The separation of players is deepened and reinforced when the team is divided into "infield" and "outfield". Those players that did not make an infield position become dejected and suffer feelings of inadequacy. They lose some of their willingness to be a part of the team. They settle for the outfield position just to get a uniform and be part of the team. They do not give their best effort because they are not afforded an opportunity to play at a different position.

There is a separation that takes place among the players giving rise to a "pecking order" again giving place to feelings of rejection. The way I see it

a kid just wants to play ball. He is looking to the coach to teach him how to play the game. Who else is he supposed to ask except the coach? And coaches wonder why it is so hard to get players to play like a team.

There is no such thing as “infield” and “outfield”. There are boundary lines that determine the field of play for both teams. So, if you are playing anywhere inside the boundary lines you are an “infielder”. “Out fielders” are sitting on the bench waiting for their chance to become an “infielder” at any position. They just want to play. The fact that any kid can play any position was made evident on the old sand lot. That fact will become evident again as we begin a few basic (but necessary) elementary drills.

In the following pages we will teach the player team play and the fundamental practice of sportsmanship. The player will also learn some tried and true drills to help improve the players’ game. NO CHARGE.

TEAM PLAY

The best way to learn the game of baseball is to understand the objective. What are we trying to do? Then the player will understand why we need a TEAM. There are two basic objectives:

Score points

Prevent the other team from scoring points

Most teams practice to prevent the other team from scoring. That is why players always hear the coach say, “get one, and get two. Second base, third base, and home.” Unfortunately in most cases, that is the extent of his ability to coach.

Beware of coaches who carry a BAT. They are mostly interested in making contact with the ball. How the player performs is secondary to how the coach looks as he hits the ball. A good coach carries three or four balls. (Not a bat) Using the first coach as a model, his best effort to score points is left to the batting cages. (And they wonder why they lose more games than they win. It is easier to find fault with a player, than to accept blame as the coach)

Throw all that away. We are going to use the two objectives to teach the player the game of baseball. We will train a player to play the game at any and all positions. In this manner the player will always be ready to play no

matter where or when. If a player can catch the ball, and throw the ball he should be able to play at any position.

First: Prevent the other team from scoring. Always watch the ball. 85% to 90% of the game of baseball is played below the waist. Mostly ground balls that have been hit trying to advance a runner, and then “putout” plays on the base paths where runners are trying to advance or score a point. So, when you see a player standing upright it is an indication that he is not paying attention. He will most likely get a late jump on the ball allowing the base runner to advance toward home plate and score a point. (The result of poor coaching) The player always keeps his eye on the ball and is prepared to make a play.

This means he must know what to do if the ball is hit to him. It also means he must know what to do if the ball is NOT hit to him. This is where a coach is important. Every player on the team has a place to go on every ball hit into the field of play. Every player has a possible play to make. It is called “situation baseball”. You are in the field of play, so play. “What do I do?” you ask. Now you are ready to learn.

Second: Scoring points. A home run is not the only way to score points. A team needs base runners. This is where the team concept is most important. If your team has a base runner it then becomes the responsibility of the team to get that base runner home. The most obvious way to accomplish that is to “rattle the pitcher”.

Meaning, make the pitcher so uncomfortable he gets nervous, misses the strike zone, and walks batters. The more batters he walks, the easier it becomes to score points. Another way to rattle a pitcher is to steal bases. This will be discussed in more detail in another pamphlet. Once a pitcher begins to doubt his ability his coach has no choice but to replace him with another pitcher. This builds your team confidence in their ability to get hits and to score points.

At this point it is important to talk about the team and what it means to be a team. Most teams are defined by their ability to play defense on the field. “That’s a great play.” Most kids want to be able to make a “great play”. But, if you can’t follow a “great play” with a “great hit” then you leave yourself open to ridicule.

Good teams will not ridicule each other. It will affect everyone’s play on

the field. It will show to the other team and to the fans in the bleachers. A real team will make “great plays” into “routine plays”. This means players practice making “great plays” until they become routine.

Everyone practices the same drills to sharpen their skills and be able to assume any position on the field. It is true that some can perform the skills better than others, but it does not mean the player cannot perform the skill. It doesn't mean he does not know what to do. It means he just has to work a little harder. Nothing more. The player is on the team and is ready to fill in wherever needed.

Let's begin the drills with the warm up.

The warm up is a missed opportunity to get some fundamental skills honed to a fine point. Mainly, throwing and catching the ball. Most teams will practice for two hours and not get everything done due to poor throws by the players. So, they wind up practicing every day after school to get everything done before the next game. That is why the warm up is a valuable missed opportunity.

Most coaches carry a bucket filled with old balls that are used for warm up. The team divides into pairs and they begin to play “catch” with nobody supervising the players. So the players are left to their own devices and wind up “goofing off”. After about fifteen minutes the coach assigns positions and starts practice. How sad. Practice should unify a team not separate the players; practice also includes the warm up.

The Circle Drill:

This drill is fun and gets everyone involved from the very beginning. The team circles the infield from home plate, down to the grass line and around to home again at least 5 to 7 running paces apart. The coach is in the center with four balls and a whistle. He tells the players which direction to throw the ball. On the first whistle the coach throws the 1st ball to the catcher who begins by throwing the ball in the direction given by the coach. The ball travels around the circle from glove to glove.

When the ball has returned to the catcher, the coach blows the whistle twice. This means he has introduced a second ball into the circle, and the players are to be aware for the second ball. When both balls have completed the circle the coach will blow the whistle three times indicating a third ball

has entered the circle.

Players are turning one direction to catch the ball, and then pivoting into position to make the throw. If the coach sees no problems with the players making the catch, pivoting, and throwing the ball he will introduce the fourth ball. The circle will be moving rather quickly at this point. When the fourth ball has completed the circuit, the coach will then stop the circle and begin again with one ball in the opposite direction. If the players are having trouble throwing and catching the ball, the circle can be made smaller by taking 1 or 2 steps into the infield.

The team will work the circle drill for fifteen minutes. The goal is to have the entire team complete four circuits with four balls in each direction within the allotted 15 minutes. Doing the circle drill will show the coach who will need one on one attention. Notice the team is acting as a single unit and the coach is in control of the activity. And that is just the warm up.

The Fly Ball Drill:

The coach will demonstrate for the team how to make a proper crossover step so the player can run and not turn his back on the ball causing him to take his eye off of the ball. Mastery of the crossover step is essential for catching fly balls, and changing direction on the run.

The coach has 2 or 3 balls and takes position with the catcher at the grass line between 1st base and 2nd base. In this drill the coach splits the team into three units. A line at 1st base and a line at 2nd base, as well as three active fielders. As noted in the beginning of this pamphlet 85% to 90% of the game is played below the waist. Mostly using the feet to run, fielding ground balls, and the putout at the bases. This drill is probably 50/50.

This drill is designed to develop hand, eye, and foot coordination. It begins with the 1st active fielder taking position directly in front of the coach. The coach then holds the ball in the air and the active fielder starts to back pedal. The coach then points the ball toward center field. The fielder then does a left crossover step while keeping his eye on the ball.

The coach will then point the ball to the right foul line. The fielder then does a right crossover step while keeping his eye on the ball. Coach then throws the ball in any direction and the fielder takes whatever step is necessary to catch or field the ball. The fielder throws to 2nd base and runs

to the end of the line at 2nd base. 2nd base throws the ball to 1st base and runs to the end of the line at 1st base. 1st base throws the ball to the catcher and takes his place at the end of the line of active fielders. The drill continues until each player has had his turn as active fielder. (20 to 30 minutes)

The Put Out Drill:

Coach observes this drill from the base path between 1st and 2nd base. This is a fast moving drill and requires only one ball. Catcher is up the line 2 to 3 steps from home plate toward 3rd base. 4 players line up facing 2nd base from left field. The remainder of the team lines up on the left field foul line facing 3rd base.

Fielder at 3rd base fields the ground ball from the catcher, makes the tag on the ground, and throws to 2nd base. Footwork is important to move the play along quickly. (Catch, tag, pivot and throw) He then runs to the end of the line at 2nd base. 2nd base catches the ball makes the tag on the ground and throws to the catcher. (Catch, tag, pivot, and throw) He then runs to the end of the line at 3rd base. The catcher makes the tag on the ground and throws the ball to 3rd base. Tagging the ground creates dust in the air. It may influence the umpire to make a call in your favor. (Get that glove dirty)

Making the Tag:

This skill should be observed and practiced at every practice session. Tagging a base runner requires protecting the ball from being knocked from the fielder's hand (glove). You only need to touch the base runner with the ball. It becomes a little more difficult when the base runner is sliding into the base feet first. A sweeping motion with the ball tucked in the glove and the glove held closed with the free hand accomplishes two things. The fielder can make a good solid tag on the base runner, and his free hand has quick access to the ball in order to make a throw to another base if necessary. A variation of the tag and throw is discussed more in depth later when we discuss the catching position. (The sliding tag)

A variation of the "put out" drill will have the 3rd baseman dash for home plate before running to line up at 2nd base. This will require the catcher to make a good tag before throwing the ball to 3rd base. Again, footwork is important to make a good throw with the ball. There is a lot of running in this drill and it will serve to increase player stamina.

This variation should not be attempted until the coach is satisfied everyone can make a good and accurate throw. It is extremely important to make good and accurate throws to home plate. Otherwise, you will leave the catcher open to injury. And so the cycle continues until everyone has made a play at 3rd base and at 2nd base. (Catcher excluded, 20-40 minutes)

****Notice** that every player has drilled doing exactly the same thing. (Exceptions are the catchers) Also the coach is in control and no player is left out, or left feeling inadequate. It bolsters team morale and everyone feels like they are contributing to the team. NEXT....

The Rundown Play, or, “The Pickle” Play:

When base runners get excited they neglect looking to the base coach who will signal “stay” or “go”. The base runner rounds the base headed for the next base then stops to look. Sometimes he stops too far down the line. This is where a good defensive team can catch the base runner in a “rundown” or “pickle”.

Situation: Batter hits the ball past 3rd base. The extended fielder got a good jump on the ball and comes up firing the ball to the shortstop who turns and runs directly at the base runner rounding 1st headed for 2nd. The base runner stops to see what the shortstop is going to do with the ball. If he remains stopped too long the shortstop closes the gap and will attempt to make a tag. This forces the base runner to decide “advance” or “retreat”?

The base runner retreats two steps forcing the shortstop to throw the ball to 1st base. The runner now has a little more than half the distance to run in order to get to 2nd base. The 1st baseman makes the base runner commit to 2nd base by running directly at the base runner. He then stops and throws a strike to 2nd base for the “putout”.

If the base runner turns again to retreat, then the 2nd baseman runs him down more than half way and throws the ball to the pitcher who moved to cover 1st base. Now the pitcher runs him down and makes the tag on the base runner. Practicing this skill will also teach the players to be smart base runners who look to their base coaches while running the bases. “Why did the base runner get caught? He ignored the 1st base coach giving him the signal to stay.”

Hitting The Ball Drill:

This is where the coach uses the most balls. (5) This drill will teach the player to concentrate on the ball and will improve reflex reaction time, as well as hand and eye coordination. Instead of having players chase balls in all directions, the coach creates a 3 tier defense line facing the backstop. The 3 tier defense will retrieve the hit ball easier and will serve to move the drill along quickly.

The batter is facing the backstop. The coach positions the batter so he can see his back foot at the corners of the plate before the plate angles to a point. The batter now faces the back stop waiting to see the ball and react. The coach lofts a ball from behind the batter toward the backstop. The ball must fall to the ground just beyond the plate. While facing the backstop the batter must see the ball and swing in approximately one second. This is equivalent to a good hard fastball from a good pitcher.

The batters mind is being trained to see the ball and react with motor skills in an instant of time. This means the batter's mechanics will adjust for the needed reaction time. If not, the coach can give the batter some pointers. (Choke up on the bat, bend the knees and get lower, etc.) The bat swing will become compact and will explode with power as the hips turn and the bat extends.

It is difficult at first to become accustomed to the new moves. The more he practices the better hitter the batter can become. The coach will continue until all players have had 5 swings at the ball. This usually ends the practice for the two hour period. The coach will determine when to turn the team around to face live pitching from the pitcher's mound.

The team will go home spent but feeling good about themselves. Other two hour periods can be spent covering base running, pitching, and catching skills, or going over drills the coach deems necessary to sharpen skills. Again, everything starts from the warm up, and everyone will practice the same drills. Each practice session should end with Hitting The Ball Drill.

There is no magic wand, spell, or potion that will replace dedicated effort. The player is the magic. He just has to work at it. It's called "Practice".

SITUATION BASEBALL

Instructing players in situation baseball will make them observant, and will help keep their heads in the game. When someone comes late to a game and

asks you “what’s the score”, he is not expecting only numbers. When someone asks, “what’s the score”, you should be able to tell them the inning being played (top or bottom), number of outs, the count on the batter and where the runners are. You need to know who is up, who is pitching, and who is catching; and finally what the point score is.

Seems like a lot. Having this information helps to anticipate where the next play will take place, or in what part of the lineup you can expect some fireworks. And so we teach the players situation baseball.

“It is 0 to 0, top of the second inning 1 out nobody on, the number six batter is up with a count of 1 and 2. Gracie is on the mound and Philips is behind the plate.”

At this point you can add any relevant information such as: “Rollins replaced Sanchez in right field. Sanchez made a great diving catch of a foul ball in the first inning and hurt himself sliding into the foul pole. But he hung on to the ball.”

This information tells the new comer some very important facts. 1st) One team is a little weaker in right field. The pitcher will probably compensate by pitching from the inside to the middle of the plate. Pitches from the middle to the outside of the plate will be few. That gives the other team a green light to swing away.

2nd) Replacing Sanchez with Rollins has likely weakened the hitting lineup. This means the opposing pitcher can afford to be more aggressive when it comes to that part of the lineup.

So how does this help kids play the game? If you’ve ever been to a game and paid attention to the whole field the entire game; you may have noticed that when a ball is put into play, every player has a place to go. Not so in most kids ball games. You can usually find one or two kids standing around watching the other kids play. (That is the coach’s fault.)

If the ball is hit to the right side of the field the players on the left side of the field are moving into backup positions. The same is true if the ball is hit into the left side of the field the players on the right side of the field move into backup positions. And just like the other drills, this skill needs to be practiced at least once per week. Backup throws have accounted for 3 to 5 per cent of put outs on the base paths. In a kids game backup throws can account for an even higher number. (10% to 15%)

The coach is at home plate. The coach places players in every position beginning with the catcher. The remainder of the team is running the bases. (With helmets) Again the coach has no bat in his hand. Instead he throws the ball at bases he selects, or throws it through the infield to see how the extended fielders play the ball. The coach controls the speed of the ball. As the team becomes more proficient he can add speed to the ball as if it were a lined drive.

The coach calls out the situation. "1 to nothing your favor, Top of the 3rd, one out, runners on 1st and 2nd and the #8 batter is at the plate. Runners break on the hit." The coach throws a bounding ball wide to the left of 2nd base. The standard play is get the force out at 2nd and 1st base. (Double play: side out) What usually goes unnoticed is the runner at 2nd base.

The runner at 2nd base is free to run all the way to home plate in the event the double play is missed. The ideal play would be get the force at 2nd base and throw a strike to home where the catcher makes the putout at home plate. (Double play, side out, one runner left at 1st.) This is the 'Put Out Drill' we discussed earlier. (A great play or a routine play?)

The coach will determine the team rotation and continue until everyone has had an opportunity to play at least three positions. A good coach will note who has played at which position and begin the next situation practice with players in different positions. Everyone should have an opportunity to play at every position. It can only benefit the team in the long run.

This is just an example of a situation baseball drill. The coach has the option to practice situations where he believes his team is weak, or, if the team is solid, simply practice before a game. Remember, keeping your eye on the ball and being aware of the score will tell the player what play to make.

This is not a comprehensive training manual for kids who want to play baseball or for coaches who need help. If you will take note, all of the examples were presented employing "one" coach. This is only intended to be a starter formula to get coaches and players thinking and playing as a team. Not as individual stars. When you do this the game will be a lot more fun and richly rewarding. There's just one more thing to mention.

Sportsmanship:

Remember, it is not how good the players look when they “get one” or “get two”. (Making a great play into a routine play.) So what is it about? It is about being a part of a team. Sportsmanship begins on your team with your players. It is about having good teammates and showing it to other teams. Good sportsmanship will be noticed by the fans in the bleachers, and will follow a player to every other team he joins. It will amaze the players to find how popular they have become with their peers. Finally, I would like to leave everyone with one last important piece of good sportsmanship advice.

“If you are good you don’t have to brag; others will brag about you.”

Look for the Baseball Fundamentals II pamphlet. It will cover pitching, catching, and base running.

Contents

Introduction3

TEAM PLAY5

Let’s begin the drills with the warm up. 6

The Circle Drill: 7

The Fly Ball Drill: 7

The Put Out Drill: 8

Making the Tag: 8

The Rundown Play, or, “The Pickle” Play: 9

Hitting The Ball Drill: 9

SITUATION BASEBALL11

Sportsmanship:13