infielder breaks to third base and the catcher sees daylight, the catcher pops his mitt and the pitcher jump turns and throws to third base. If the runner breaks back with infielder, the catcher drops his mitt and the pitcher steps back.

Other Pickoffs

31 and 32. We use another pickoff when runners are on second and third or first and third. We have our pitcher pitch from the stretch. He brings his leg up. As his leg comes down, his body should start moving toward third base. The pitcher fakes to third and throws to second or first, depending on where the runner is. With a runner at second base, the shortstop and second baseman should move a little farther from the bag to encourage the runner to take a maximum lead. The second baseman covers on this pickoff and breaks as the pitcher starts his kick. We have the ideal defense when the lead runner is sliding on the ground and we are making a play at second base. The pitcher must guard against moving his body to third base before his leg comes completely off the ground. The pitcher must make a good fake at third for two reasons. First, he must convince everyone he's going to third. Second, a good fake facilitates the pivot. During a first-and-third situation with two outs and a full count, this play is automatic. This pickoff with runners at first and third is very effective, especially with an aggressive base runner at first base.

Pickoff Plays off a Bunt Defense

When corners break early with a runner at first base and the bunt in order, we can have the second baseman circle into first base and cover first base, coming squared up to the pitcher for the pick.

The pitcher wants to make sure that he doesn't rush this so that the second baseman has time to get to first base. The pitcher will throw to first once he sees the first baseman pass by him out of the corner of his eye.

This same pickoff can be used at second base in a bunt situation. The corners will break early, and the shortstop will bluff and sprint for third base. If the runner goes with the shortstop, the pitcher will step back off the rubber. If the runner doesn't go with the shortstop, the pitcher will turn his head to home and count one thousand one, one thousand two. He then picks to the second baseman, who is covering second base. The second baseman will take two steps toward first and circle back to cover second base for the pickoff.

In the last pickoff off the bunt defense, the second baseman breaks early toward the hitter at home plate. After the second baseman passes the pitcher, the pitcher picks at first base to the first baseman, who is holding the runner on.
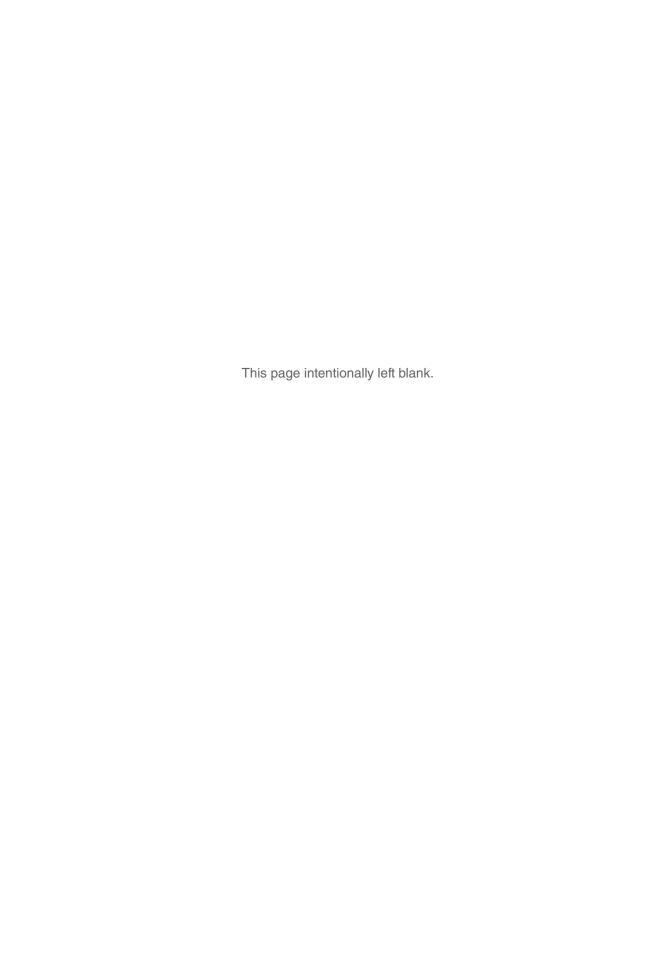
These pickoffs keep base runners from cheating on bunt coverages when the defense is breaking early. The idea is to make an aggressive base-running team more cautious.

Catchers can also put on pickoff plays to particular infielders. When the catcher puts on a pickoff to a particular infielder, he will be throwing to the base on the next swing and miss or bunt and miss. He will not throw unless he has received acknowledgment of the sign from the infielder. The best times to put on these plays are with a base runner who can run, in bunt situations, on 3-2 counts with less than two outs, or with a runner at third base and the infield playing in. You should never try a pickoff at a base with two outs and a weak hitter up behind in the count.

Offense can win you some games. Defense will win you more games. Defense and pitching will win you championships. An aggressive, communicating defense can control the flow of the game. As a coach you want to develop a team that plays consistent defense (making the routine play) and does not beat itself, meets every situation with poise, and is able to make a great play. Great defense can turn the momentum of a game and break the spirit of your opponent. Poor defense can dishearten a team, make it appear poorly coached, and prolong the game. In general, a defense breaks down when players try to do too much. Infielders go so fast that they are out of control, and outfielders try to make impossible throws. Teach players to be under control and make the average play. The defensive team that can make the routine play gives itself an excellent chance to win.

Fine-Tuning Your Strategic Approach

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15

Adjusting for Different Levels of Competition

John Herbold

1. Play catch.
2. Put the ball in play.
3. Throw strikes.
4. Have good team spirit.
5. Run the bases intelligently.
6. Know the rules.

These six axioms describe for players and coaches alike the secret to success at any level of baseball. Coach Wally Kincaid of Cerritos (California) Junior College originally outlined the first four. I added the last two later.

Coach Bill Powell of Long Beach Poly High then suggested a few more: "Try to score in the first inning because it's the most productive of all—and try to keep the other team from scoring in the first inning. And any time you score, it's important that you keep the opposition from scoring right after you do."

Coach Kincaid had some outstanding seasons, once going 39-1 and then 40-0! He did it by playing more games than anybody else and against the best opponents he could find, all the while stressing good fundamentals.

Of course, our next problem—after we know what to do—is deciding how to achieve it. No doubt, other chapters in the book will help you do this. Now let us ponder another statement with which at first reading many coaches, players, and fans may not agree: "Baseball at all levels is more

similar than dissimilar!" A shocking and provoking thought, isn't it? But let's examine the issue. The history of baseball shows that it has been a consistent game. Three strikes and you're out, six outs per inning, no time limits, equal at-bats. Sure, the distances may vary: 40-foot bases or 75 or even 60. Seven innings or nine. Sometimes only five if the high school "mercy rule" creeps in. Certainly, at different levels the fences are not all the same distance. No doubt women's professional baseball failed because the women played in ballparks designed for males. Had the promoters brought in the fences, the game might have survived. Bats in the youth leagues are naturally smaller (and unfortunately usually metal), but players at all levels can surprise with demonstrations of power and arm strength. As Mr. Einstein once proved, it's all relative.

So now what of the game itself? It's not identical for all ages and sexes, but it's close. Players make errors of omission and commission at all levels. One team wins, one loses, and more often than not games are as much lost by the losing team as they are won by the victors.

Errors and umpires everywhere are all part of the winning and losing. As the great New York Giants manager John McGraw said long ago, "You take the errors and the umpires out of baseball, and the game would die in two weeks."

Players in high school often throw to the wrong base, but at a major-league game you may see the same mistake. While watching the St. Louis Cardinals play the Los Angeles Dodgers, I saw a lone Cardinals runner try to advance to third on a ground ball to short with one out! Easy out, dumb play. Later, with one out and Dodgers runners on first and third, the batter hit a fly ball to the Cardinals' center fielder, who then foolishly fired the ball home. Unfortunately, the throw not only cleared the head of the cutoff man but also flew over the catcher and even the pitcher backing him up! By the time the pitcher had retrieved the errant toss, the runner on first had gone all the way to third. A week later Cardinals manager Whitey Herzog resigned. I guess he'd seen enough.

So does strategy vary from level to level? Yes, of course, but not much. First, we need to realize that baseball is really a pyramid—of both success and failure! The bottom tiers of the pyramid are made up of the thousands of youngsters all over the world who begin playing the game at an early age. Johnny and Jenny at age six or seven come home and tell Mom and Pop they want to play T-ball down at the park because "all the kids are." Some of the youngsters then find that they like the game. Some love it, and some leave it.

Down through the ensuing years, our baseball pyramid becomes smaller as players strive to reach the top, our major leagues. We hope all will remember the game fondly through their experiences. As noted baseball expert Don Weiskopf wrote in his book *Baseball Play America*, "Often too much youth baseball is geared more to the adults than to the kids." He adds that

in a rush to find national champions, for many players the summer season is all too abbreviated—finished by mid-July.

Often a good neighborhood playground can help in teaching the nuances of baseball, especially when the people in charge are baseball veterans with years of experience, putting fun into the word *fundamentals.*

Years ago, men such as Benny Lefebvre (Los Angeles Rancho Cienega Playground), Bill Duvernet (Los Angeles Manchester), and George Powles (Bushrod Park in Oakland) were key reasons behind the success of California high school powerhouses Dorsey, Washington, and Fremont in Los Angeles, and Oakland Tech and McClymonds in Oakland. Today Fremont High is tied with Long Beach Poly for producing the most major leaguers with 23 each, and Washington High once had six future AL or NL performers on one team! Powles for McClymonds in Oakland turned out such stars as Frank Robinson, Vada Pinson, basketball legend Bill Russell, and football whiz John Brodie.

As ex-major leaguer Chuck Stevens says of his youth, "On those Long Beach playgrounds, we learned to be 'playmakers,' of which there are very few today even in the big leagues."

I remember a Long Beach Poly High player of mine who, while receiving an intentional walk with the winning run on third, suddenly reached out and poked the third pitch into center field for the game clincher. Nobody *taught* him that! Certainly not I, who was as surprised as everyone else there. Kids learn such tricks at the park playing with and against each other, especially their elders.

Another time one of my players scooted home from third with a big run while the other team was making an appeal on him at second. Nobody taught him that either. But young players should be encouraged to try things on their own. Too much baseball today is robotic. Sadly, in high school ball now there are no more intentional walks and no appeal plays.

Ah, fundamentals. I remember Tommy Lasorda asking me after I had my head down after a losing effort in a close game, "John, did you lose the game because of a breakdown in fundamentals?" "No," I replied. "Then don't feel so bad," he said.

Certainly, the length of practice sessions will vary depending on your age group, but whatever the ages involved, practice should be carefully planned, executed by time blocks, and made competitive, realistic, and enjoyable. Make your practices like games, and then the games will be like practice.

Or, as the motorist asked the traffic cop, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice," was the reply.

By the time youngsters reach high school, the number remaining from those who started out in T-ball drops considerably. That number is cut in half when college rolls around, and it falls even more when the pro draft arrives. A fortunate few get a shot at the minor leagues. It is estimated that

7 percent of those drafted and signed will ever reach the majors, and of those who do, most will average about four years there. Still, hope springs eternal, and it should. Some are going to make it and become Yankees, A's, Astros, or whoever.

Ask, Listen, Observe

So, to help young people become more proficient in baseball or softball, coaches must do a lot of teaching and encouraging. As Ted Williams always said, "Hitting a baseball is the hardest thing to do in all sport."

Along this line, one of my ex-players, who went on to college and pro ball, once commented, "There are a lot more good *players* than there are good *coaches*!" Both should follow Yogi's advice, "You can observe a lot by watching," because baseball, more than any other sport, is a "monkey see, monkey do" game. Baseball is sort of an "individual team" game of chess played on grass and dirt.

For instance, as a beginning coach, I knew a lot about the art of catching because I had been a catcher, but I knew *nothing* about playing first base. So I studied first sackers and then asked questions about playing the bag from ex-major leaguers like Gordon Goldsberry, Chuck Stevens, and Jack Graham. Later, while discussing a flashy major-league first baseman with a pro shortstop, I told him how graceful I thought the first sacker was around the bag. To my dismay, the infielder blurted out, "We hate him! He never gives us a stationary target. He's just a 'hot dog' timing his arrival to catch the ball on the run to make himself look good." Hmmm. I learned something there—get to the bag quickly and stand *still*!

Mets scout Harry Minor once asked me, "When's the easiest time for a runner to get picked off base?" "Don't know. When?" "On a missed bunt," Harry answered.

Next question: "What should a base runner do if he gets picked off first base?" Same answer: "Don't know." "He does *not* try to get back to first or get in a rundown unless there's also a runner on third. Rather, he goes hard for second base and slides late, perhaps even head faking the receiving infielder." At Long Beach Poly High, we once beat a future major-league pitcher 1-0 on this technique, then went on to win the Southern California–CIF high school crown.

Minor's last question: "What does a runner on second do when there are two outs, two strikes on the batter, and the runner *sees* that the next pitch is going to be a strike?" For the third time I said, "Don't know." Minor answered, "He steals third!"

Makes sense doesn't it? Well, we once won our high school league championship on this play because I listened to Harry Minor, and my players listened to me.

On a very shallow pop fly that fell between the outgoing shortstop and the incoming left fielder, our runner barely scored the winning run because he was already racing to third on a pitch headed for the middle of the plate.

"What does the pitcher do on a pop fly between the first baseman and the catcher when both are going for the pop-up? The pitcher calls the name of one player, and then *tackles* the other so that they don't collide and perhaps drop the ball." Thank you, Scout Jackie Warner, many years ago. We've done it a few times.

"What does the second baseman do when he is prepared to cover first base on a sacrifice bunt?" What he does *not* do is sprint immediately in the direction of first base. Rather he cautiously moves straight forward so that he can move in either direction and not commit himself too early should the ball be hit behind him and go out into the outfield. Thank you, former Arizona State coach Bobby Winkles.

So ask, listen, observe. Yogi Berra had some pretty good messages for us, but I'm not so sure about his "When you get to the fork in the road, take it." When it comes to strategy, I don't think that one would be much help.

Six Steps to Success

And now, it's time for us to delve deeper into our half-dozen axioms: (1) play catch, (2) put the ball in play, (3) throw strikes, (4) have good team spirit, (5) run the bases intelligently, and (6) know the rules.

Play Catch

"Anybody can play catch!" you say. Whoa, not so! Branch Rickey once orated, "You don't *play b*aseball, you *work* it." Brooks Robinson, the great Orioles third baseman, told Coach John Scolinos and me, "I often just bounce a baseball 50 times or more up against a cement wall and field the ricochets. Then I'll take 30 ground balls because fielders go into slumps just as hitters do."

All-star infielder Bobby Grich later added that Robinson showed him a good drill that Robinson's high school coach had once shown him. Two infielders stand facing each other, maybe four to five feet apart. One fielder would have his glove on while the tosser bounced difficult short hops to the fielder until he had made 25 in a row without a miscue. Then the pair would trade duties.

An old timer once told me, "Catch the ball as if you were catching a raw egg, and on ground balls think of your glove as a dustpan." Adds Coach Jerry Kindall, the former head man at the University of Arizona, "Fielders should field the *bottom* of a ground ball—glove beneath it."

So in practice we do fielding drills with dustpans as gloves, use square "baseballs" to detail the bottom part, and play catch with an egg, each player taking a step backward after each catch until something breaks. (Supposedly, the record throw and catch is over 300 feet—but not by us!)

One of the best catch-and-throw drills is the popular four-man relay-throwing contest in which the coach spreads out two or more squads of four players. The first man in line for each team has a ball, the coach yells, "Go!" and the race is on. The rules are that the ball must be caught on the fly by player number two, who like number three and number four, is spaced in a line a reasonable distance apart depending on the age level.

Number two then turns to his glove side and gives to number three, and then on to number four, who starts the ball going back in reverse with the ball returning to the first player, providing it hasn't been dropped or overthrown. If the ball ever hits the ground, that team loses right there, but the other squads must still complete their throws all in the air. To be victorious, the winning team must win by a two-game margin.

Put the Ball in Play

As the old saying goes, "Ya can't steal first base!" So there's not much strategy involved if the batter strikes out. And the worst strikeout is the called third strike. I've benched players who took a called third. You may be worried about teaching batters to swing at bad pitches, but I'm not. And I never criticize a player of mine for swinging at a ball over his head or in the dirt. I may not like it, but as a coach I can't have it both ways.

The Cuban players have a saying: "You can't walk off the island." (And don't let anybody tell you that "a walk is as good as a hit" either). Speaking of Cuban players, I once had a great talk with Tony Oliva, three-time AL batting champ and later the hitting coach for his Minnesota Twins. In that beautiful Cuban accent, he lectured, "You got to sweeng de bat. Don't be too peeky. You no know that de boll be outside a leetle beet. You can heet de peech ifn you sweeng at de boll."
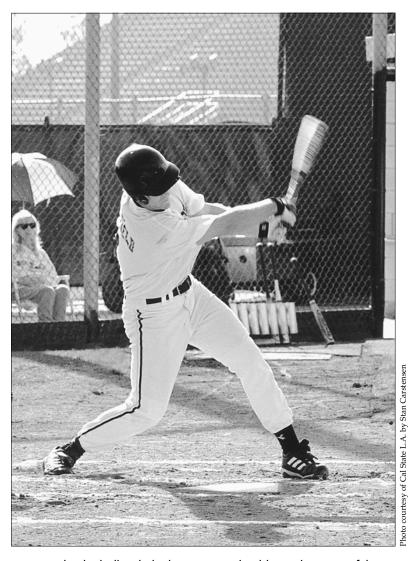
In our Los Angeles State University dugout, we have several signs, one reading, "You can't hit the ball with the bat on your shoulder." Another says, "Close enough to call—close enough to hit."

Our players are also reminded that former player Doug Stodgel had but one strikeout in 229 times at bat one season (and that on a foul tip caught by the catcher on Doug's 123rd at-bat)!

Former La Verne University coach Ben Hines says, "Every pitch is a fastball strike until the batter finds out otherwise" (unless he had decided to look for a certain pitch from an off-speed pitcher with less than two strikes).

As the pitch comes toward the plate, the hitter must say to himself, 'Yes, yes, *yes*!' or 'Yes, yes, *no*!" (if he suddenly decides to lay off that pitch).

Photo courtesy of Cal State L.A. by Stan Carstensen

You can't hit the ball with the bat on your shoulder. To be successful, you must put the ball in play!

Coaches need to sell their players on the value of putting the ball in play. Maybe the following stats will help get the point across:

- Tony Gwynn, the great Padres hitter, swings and misses fewer than 10 times per every 100 swings, and that's against major-league pitching!

- Don Mueller of the New York Giants put the ball in play 93 times out of every 100 plate appearances, walking or striking out only 7 times per hundred.

- Reportedly, National Leaguer Manny Mota took only one called third strike in over 500 pinch-hitting trips while batting nearly .300 in so doing.

- Joe DiMaggio hit 11 home runs without an intervening strikeout, and he struck out only five times in his 56-game hitting streak.

Throw Strikes

"If pitching were easy, they wouldn't pay a man a million dollars a year to do it," once wrote the late Ron Squire, a great pitching guru some years back at Lynwood (California) High School. "And ya can't field a walk!" Jack Salveson, a former major leaguer out of Long Beach Poly High, once added, "Control is a state of mind." (Control is more mental than physical.)

I'm not sure about the secret of control. I once had at Lakewood High a pitcher named Mark Clabough who walked but two batters all season as a starter. In so doing, he threw a no-hitter against the Long Beach Poly High Gwynn brothers—Tony and Chris—using only 61 pitches, of which only 9 were balls!

That year we had three starters who gave up only 10 walks among them! We also had five hurlers who shared the 15 league wins, of which 10 were shutouts in which no walks were issued. (The team went undefeated in league.)

The so-called secret? Probably concentrating and focusing on the next pitch over and over. Or perhaps it was me constantly screaming "Throw strikes!"

If one wants a major-league record to shoot for, how about Red Barrett's 58-pitch, nine-inning shutout over Cincinnati in 1944? It can be done. Control *is* a state of mind, so work on it.

Sparky Anderson rates the 2-1 pitch the most important in baseball because the next pitch is going to be either 3-1 (bad) or 2-2 (good). Dean Stotts, the able pitching coach at Stanford University, advises, "A pitcher's objective is (a) to get at least one of his first two pitches over the plate for a strike, and (b) to get to a two-strike count on the hitter as soon as possible." Defensive strategy isn't a big concern when the other team doesn't have many runners on base. Only in T-Ball are walks not a big factor in the outcome of the game.

Yes, we do keep pitch counts with a clicker held by the pitching coach:

- 120 pitches maximum per week for high school, 80 to 85 per game.
- 135 to 145 per week for college, 90 to 105 per game.
- 70 pitches per game for ages 12 to 14 (don't count innings).
- 60 pitches per game for ages 9 to 11. An excessive number of pitches thrown in one bad inning is more damaging than an excessive number of pitches thrown in the entire game.

Photo courtesy of Cal State L.A. by Stan Carstensen

The key to a successful defense? Throw strikes!

Should the coaches call the pitches for the pitcher and catcher? For us? Not often—maybe 5 or 10 times a game when needed. Coach Gary Adams over at UCLA calls very few pitches, and some years he's had more players on major-league rosters than any other college coach. He lets his players *play* (and develop). He's not interested in playing master puppeteer. I wish my sons could have played for Gary Adams.

I'm not really in favor of young players ages 5 to 11 even facing other youth pitchers. I prefer to use tees for games or else have each coach "pitch" to his own players. More action, fewer walks, and fewer hit batters. Save the curveballs for high school. And nobody—especially players 6 to 12—enjoys getting hit by pitchers.

Have Good Team Spirit

Team spirit is a hard one to explain and equally hard to develop. Winning teams seem to have it, but which came first—the chicken or the egg?

Winning teams *expect* to win. Look at what Tommy Lasorda has accomplished with the Dodgers and the USA Olympians. Consider the Yankees

under Joe Torre, USC under the legendary Rod Dedeaux, or LSU with Coach Skip Bertman.

I once saw a picture of Coach Ron Fraser's University of Miami team running across the outfield after practice, all holding hands together—bonding.

Another squad had its players fall one by one from a 10-foot platform into the arms of their teammates—trust.

Run the Bases Intelligently

Good base running can be taught by making home videos of the team and showing them on rainy days; these can be very instructional. Often, a picture is worth ten thousand words. Say it once, show it twice, and do it a thousand times!

For instance, we show our runners to run *through* the bag when running to first base, all the way to the outfield grass when legging out bunts and other balls hit in the infield. Track runners do not stop, turn off, slow down, or leap in the air when approaching the finish tape, and neither should ballplayers at the bag.

In publications like *Scholastic Coach* magazine and *Collegiate Baseball*, I have outlined our work on not foolishly running to third from second on ground balls to the shortstop when not forced, tagging up at third base properly to avoid being called out for leaving too early on fly balls, reading the ball off the bat and reacting correctly, and taking the proper position as a third-base coach with runners at third or second or both (down the line toward home so that the base runner can easily see him).

Any time we discuss base running, we must include the area of sliding, something we do extremely well at Los Angeles State because we practice and teach it more than most clubs do. We simply have the players take their shoes off, wet the grass, and then practice five to six different slides. We have two basic rules:

1. If in doubt, always slide.
2. He who changes his mind in the middle of a slide often trades a good leg for a broken one!

Know the Rules

It's never too early to learn the rules, but most players (and coaches and umpires) are pretty vague about them. Remember poor Fred Merkle of the New York Giants in 1908 who went down in baseball history (unjustly perhaps) for supposedly not touching second base on a force play and possibly costing his team the pennant? Only 20 years of age when he made his famous miscue, Merkle to his dying day was labeled a bonehead.

Let us just touch briefly on what all players and coaches should study:

- What is (and what is not) a legal catch? What about the force versus the double-off? Similar, yes. Identical, *no*!

- Why are there two lines three feet apart the last half of the way to first base?

- What's the difference between interference and obstruction?

- When does a catcher have to throw to first base or tag the batter on a missed third strike? When doesn't he?

- What exactly determines when the infield-fly rule is in effect? Where do the runners have to be? Can the ball be purposely dropped? No. Can the infielder allow the ball to hit the ground first and then make a play? Yes. Is a bunt an infield fly? No.

- What about thrown balls that hit an umpire? Batted balls?

- What happens when two players are on the same base at one time?

- What determines whether a batted ball is fair or foul?

- What are the special sliding rules and restrictions for your league?

General Strategy

In the ensuing section, I will be quoting Coach Al Weiner often because he has had 31 years of experience directing Pony and Colt League teams, has coached the Lakewood High (California) frosh-soph clubs for 15 years, and has directed AAU teams. Working out of Lakewood's Heartwell Park, Al has been a major factor in developing players for Lakewood High, which has had more players drafted by professional baseball than any other high school in the nation.

- At any level, I personally do not like to play my infield up, or in, unless it's the last inning of a tie game or unless we want to keep the opposition from tying it. In either case I don't like it, but we may be forced to do it. The drawback is that you make .500 hitters out of .250 hitters when you bring the infielders up.

  Assistant Coach Cliff Brown and I recently had an interesting talk on strategy with Hall-of-Fame manager Sparky Anderson, who said that when his teams were even or ahead in the game, he often would not play his infield at double-play depth. He would prefer to have them at normal position because as former Fresno State coach Bob Bennett notes, "What Anderson wanted were outs (even if only one) so as not to open up too many holes by playing close to the bag and thus getting even further behind in the score."

On the other side of the coin is former Los Angeles State assistant coach Jon Shuler, who just hated to have a single go between the middle infielders in a double-play situation. Thus we have some differences of opinion on strategy.

Speaking of the double play, Coach Bob Bennett relates that sometimes famed Fresno State coach Pete Beiden would play one infielder in and the other back depending on where he figured the batter would hit the ball. So he would play the shortstop back for a right-handed pull hitter but the second baseman in to cover the bag. Interesting.

- I use the intentional walk more than most high school or college coaches do. The free pass sets up more force plays, and it works more often than it fails.

- I like to hit-and-run with runners on first and third with none or one out. The hit-and-run keeps your team out of double plays and often guarantees a run if the batter gets the ball on the ground (or a double or triple play if he doesn't!)

  In defending the hit-and-run, many college-level teams will have the shortstop cover the bag if a right-handed batter is up because on a single through short, the runner from first probably will not advance to third, but on a single through second, he should.

- The four-man outfield works well against a powerful alley hitter in close games. We leave the third baseman in against bunt attempts but move the shortstop to the outfield, closing all the gaps (we hope). This maneuver, learned from a SABR (Society of American Baseball Research) study, also often upsets the hitter psychologically and may make him try to bunt or go the other way to overcome our defense, which can also work to our advantage. We'd rather have him bunt or single to the opposite field than hit for extra bases.

  A similar maneuver used when the game is really on the line is the five-man infield in which the coach brings in one of his outfielders and stations him either inside the second-base area to cut off a single up the middle or somewhere near the pitcher to cut off a possible squeeze bunt.

- Antisqueeze situation? Another technique to stop the squeeze is to have the catcher pitch out at least twice (or more if you dare) with an open base. Walking the runner won't hurt, and you may catch the runner coming home on a missed squeeze bunt.

  Offensively, I'm not much for ordering a squeeze bunt with the bases loaded at any amateur level—it's too easy to force the runner at home. Overall, I'm not much of a squeezer. As Earl Weaver once said, "If you play for one run, that's probably all you're going to get." (Well, maybe to *win* the game. Maybe.)

- On the double steal, catchers should be taught to throw to second base, not to third, because the trail runner has a momentary delay while he waits to see if the lead man is actually stealing. Thus the trailer is likely to lose a step or two and be thrown out. Often, too, he doesn't realize that the catcher is going after him rather than the lead runner.

  Coach Weiner points out, "Most of these plays are for high school varsity players on up as they are pretty advanced. The lower the age group, the more likely the players on defense will make throwing mistakes. Thus in Little League, a simple bunt anywhere in the infield is often mishandled."

- Both of us agree that being aggressive on the bases at any level is usually a positive factor in winning. For instance, with a runner on third and one out, at Los Angeles State we often send our runner home from third on a ground ball hit to third or first.

  With runners on second and third and none out, again we frequently send our third-base runner home on any ground ball, which he has learned to read as it comes downward off the bat. (But players must constantly practice this read.)

  You have runners at first and third, none or one out, and the batter hits a potential double-play ground ball to third. What should you do? Send the runner! He may be out at the plate, but that's better than a double play, especially if the runner stops near home plate and stays in a rundown if he sees that the catcher is going to tag him out. The other runners can then advance.

  Here Coach Weiner suggests that for players age 5 to 15, sending the runner home might not be a good play because the defense doesn't often shoot double plays. Sending those runners home from third on ground balls can get a coach a lot of criticism from the experts in the stands, but it will also bring in a lot of runs when, in his haste to make a play, the infielder kicks the ball for an error, lets it go by for a hit, makes a poor throw home, or hits the runner. In addition, the catcher may drop the ball, or the runner may just plain beat the play. But don't expect much praise when it works. Heck, often the infielder will be so surprised that the runner is going that the infielder will concede the run.

  Runners on second and first, none or one out, potential double-play ball hit? Many coaches will hold the runner coming from second. Me? I send him on home. Surprise!

- Here's a play that succeeds, especially for ages 12 on up. The opposing catcher has a good arm. One out, close game. You have a good runner at third and a leadfoot on first, who takes off on a "steal." The batter turns around as if to squeeze bunt while the third-base runner breaks hard just one or two steps toward home, yells, "Squeeze!" and then rapidly retreats to third. The catcher usually looks to third to stop the

squeeze while the runner on first strolls untouched into second! Famed Coach John Scolinos of Cal Poly Pomona showed me this one.

Steals

Coach Weiner points out that it's difficult to rack up stolen bases at the Little League levels because base runners are not allowed to lead off. Just the opposite is true, however, at Pony League age because the bases are so close (80 feet apart), the pitchers are not too proficient at holding their runners, and young catchers are just learning how to throw well.

"In Pony, the key to winning is the stolen base and the squeeze," says Weiner, "because with the mound so close, the pitchers usually dominate. When the players get older, the distances from the mound to the plate and between the bases becomes greater."

"By the time the players reach Colt League age, they have learned to hit better because now they are a little stronger and have caught up with the pitching, and it's the same for the high school frosh-soph level. So here we bunt a little less and steal a little less, and besides, the catchers now throw better, plus the pitchers finally have learned how to hold their runners on base."

Speaking for high school and college squads, my teams have usually led the league in stolen bases (which doesn't mean we always lead the league in the standings!).

What's our steal sign? Usually we don't have any! It's "Go if you think you can make it, but you better make it!" (We do have a "don't go" sign).

Most coaches live in one of two camps: those who play for one run at a time with the small-ball philosophy and the Earl Weaver followers who subscribe to the three-run-homer creed. Me? I think you can often combine the two at all levels, leaning more one way or the other depending on your team composition, the score, and the park in which you are performing.

But #1, remember that if a player steals 40 bases but is picked off or thrown out 35 times, he's really only stolen 5 times!

Remember #2. When the rules permit players to lead off base, it is far better to be picked off first (and then go hard for second) than it is to be thrown out stealing! The catcher practices the throw to second more than the first sacker does.

And #3: a runner stealing third should be safe 19 times out of 20 tries. Being thrown out stealing third is a bad play. Oh, yes, I like to steal home too.

The Slash

The slash (also known as the fake-bunt-and-hit or the butcher boy) is a weapon I love at all levels of baseball. I've even seen pitchers like Orel Hershiser do it successfully in big-league ball.

The slash is a fun play, but few players know when and how to perform it because few coaches really know how to teach it. The maneuver takes place in a sacrifice-bunt situation, with a right-handed bunter (er . . . hitter) up against a pitcher with good control.

The slasher should usually take one strike because he may end up walking anyway. Many pitchers find it hard to pitch to a batter partially squared around as if to bunt.

We use the Branch Rickey bunt position. Rather than squaring around with both feet facing the pitcher, the bunter's feet remain in the hitting position, while only the upper body squares around. The slash batter goes into this position early. His not committing until the pitcher has thrown one strike plants a great deal of doubt in the minds of the defense about exactly what the offense is going to do next.

If the pitcher does get a pitch over, the bunter-slasher can choose to either bunt or slash the next strike.

The best time to bunt is with runners at first and second if the third baseman makes the mistake of backing up too soon to cover third on a force play. In that situation a well-placed bunt toward third will end up with everybody safe and the bases loaded!

But if the third-baseman charges, the batter should slash down on the ball, hoping to drive it by the oncoming third sacker. This is a good hit-and-run play too.

Even with two strikes, you may want to have the batter go ahead and bunt because of the surprise element. In this case the bunt doesn't have to be perfect—just so it's not foul for strike three.

The mistake made by most slashers is that they hold the bat down too close to the knob end and thus do not choke up enough to have good bat control. In addition, many wait too long to get the bat in proper position to slash. Just as the pitcher makes his very first move upward from the stretch, the slasher must cock his bat up to his ear, take a first step with his right foot toward the pitcher, and then take a step with his left foot—a sort of short, balanced one-two step forward. Then he swings downward, hits the top of the ball, and drives it hard at the feet of the oncoming infielder.

The best way to defend against the slash, by the way, is to move the right fielder in toward home about 30 feet because it's almost impossible for a slasher hitting right-handed to hit the ball over the right fielder's head. Further, the defense is already set up for a bunt, so have the pitcher throw a curveball, which is easier to bunt than to hit from the slash position.

Sacrifice Bunt

Some baseball people do not really like the sacrifice bunt, and I'm one of them, especially if we must use metal bats. The ball comes off metal too hard, and because the bat surface is also slippery, the bunter is more likely

to pop up. Besides, using metal, game scores are usually so high that playing for one run can be a big mistake.

Some statisticians have even shown that a team is better off with a runner at first and none out than with a runner at second and one out. The same goes for a runner at second with none out as opposed to one at third with one down.

So 95 percent of the time in a sacrifice situation, we will either hit away, push bunt, slash bunt, slash hit-and-run, or just plain hit-and-run.

Hit-and-Run and Run-and-Hit

If I were coaching again in high school, I would do two things more often—base-hit bunt and hit-and-run (or better yet, run-and-hit).

We do it now a lot at Los Angeles State because the hit-and-run can

- help move a slow runner from first to third,

- move a faster runner perhaps from first all the way home (as in the winning play in the famed 1946 World Series), and

- keep the offensive team out of a double play.

Sometimes you may want to put the hit-and-run on for a timid hitter because it forces him to swing the bat—and it places the responsibility for failure on the coach!

If you played for Wally Kincaid and hit a ball out of the park for a home run when Wally had the hit-and-run on, you'd probably be benched because he demanded that the batter put the ball on the ground. But he had junior-college-age players and more hours of practice time than coaches at many other schools did.

In the hit-and-run situation the runners must never be picked off base. They should make sure that the pitch is actually on its way plateward. So the hit-and-run is not a steal situation, but one in which the runners have faith that the batter will hit the ball even if it's a pitchout (which is another situation which must be practiced).

Lately we have been leaning more to the run-and-hit, a play that does not force the batter to swing at the pitch. With power hitters at bat and fast runners on the bases, this is more of a steal situation in which the batter doesn't have to swing at the pitch and the runner must make second on his own if the batter decides not to offer at the pitch.

We agree with Coach Weiner that the slash, hit-and-run, or run-and-hit should be reserved only for high school varsity players on up.

We encourage our batters to swing at the 0-0 pitch because, contrary to the opinion of some, the stats at every level of baseball show that the 0-0 offering results in a batting average of over .300. And we often let hitters
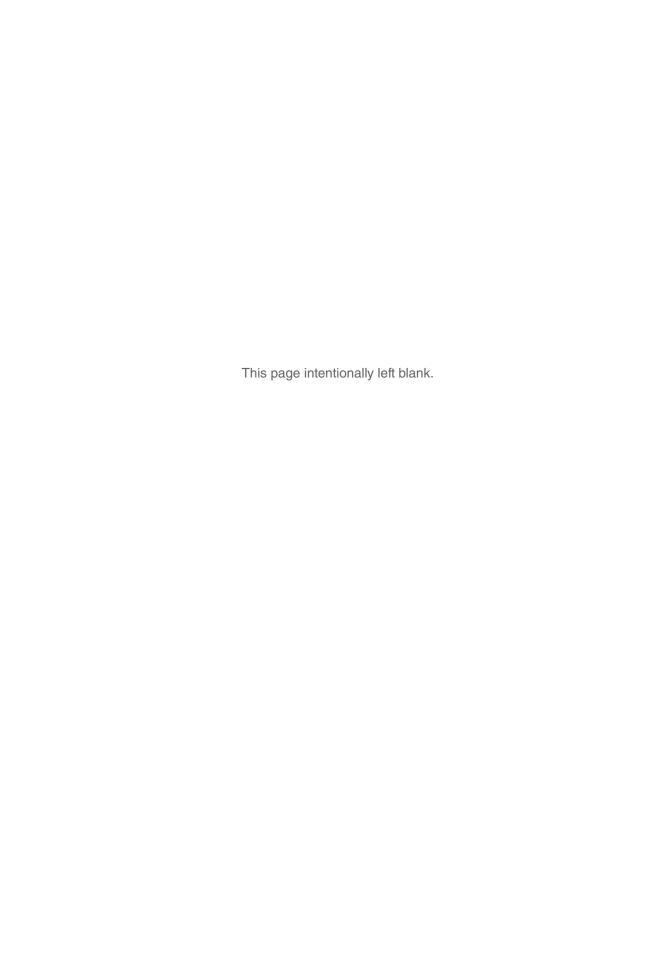
swing at the 3-0 pitch (here the stats are not so good), especially with runners on base and a batter up who has trouble hitting the curveball.

Well, so much for strategy at various age levels of baseball. If something works, the coach is a genius. If it doesn't, he's a goat. The same thing happens when the coach lets his cleanup hitter swing at the 3-0 pitch. Applause for the coach if the batter homers—boos if he pops out. Such is the nature of our national pastime.

Remember: "Every time you make three left turns, you go home!" And as that noted baseball sage Casey Stengel once quipped, "Ya touch that five-sided thing, and it adds up."

Good strategy and some luck will help you do just that. After all, it doesn't make any difference who wins as long as we do!

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16

Adapting the Game Plan for Different Situations

Dick Birmingham

As coaches, we have all been in less-than-ideal game situations. As the visiting ballclub, your team may have played on a surface that was less than adequate. Surely your team occasionally plays on a surface that they have never seen before. How do you and your players respond to inclement weather? Do your players complain about playing in the rain? What happens to your team, both physically and mentally, when you lose your star player for the season because of injury? Do your players, and you, make excuses for lack of success? How would your team react to playing in front of a capacity crowd for the first time? Would the cheers and jeers of the spectators distract them?

   The previous examples are a few of the situations that players and coaches might have to respond to during a season. How does a coach help his team cope with these types of conditions and overcome them to be successful? The answer is simple. Successful coaches and teams have a strong yet adaptable game plan designed to conquer any obstacle they may encounter during the season. A solid game plan that is flexible will seldom land a coach or team in trouble when adversity strikes.

Developing a Successful Game Plan

A coach's overall game plan should be to have a well-disciplined and fundamentally sound ballclub. The goal is to have players so well trained that they meet any game situation or other circumstance that arises during the season with confidence and determination.

The key to having a successful game plan is to run highly structured practices that emphasize specifics and focus on player development. This approach will produce results. Just hitting groundballs doesn't deal with specifics.

No organization, whether it be in business, education, religion, or baseball, has any success without discipline. I do not mean military discipline, but subtle control through effective structure and organization. The entire operation, including all practices and drills, must form a structure based on team pride.

Team pride develops from what you are selling to your players—your program or your school. The players need to understand and buy into the idea that there is a wrong way to do things, a right way to do things, and *our* way to do things. Each individual team member harbors team pride in the form of individual discipline. He displays it in the way he carries himself, in his work habits, and in how he participates and executes in practice and games.

The structure of the game plan is founded in rigid practice organization. Two primary policies encompass all practice organization within the game plan:

1. *No-talk policy.* Idle chitchat should not occur during practice. This activity distracts players and gets them off task. If the talking is constructive and improvement related, then it is acceptable and tolerated. Otherwise, no talking is permitted. This approach allows players to concentrate on improvement, and it promotes intense and focused practices. Time is not wasted waiting for players to pay attention or answering questions that have already been answered. The no-talk policy focuses attention and effort.

2. *Sprint policy.* The sprint policy simply means that players run everywhere on the ballfield and to and from the dugout. The sprint policy set our program on a level above that of the opposition because nobody else ran as much as we did. Running kept us alert and involved in the game, and it was a great conditioner, especially for the outfielders.

Years ago, I saw a sign in an accounting office that said, "Good enough is never good enough." We all have a tendency to say, "That's good enough." You must train your players to avoid this attitude at all costs.

The game plan should center on hard work, discipline, and doing things correctly every time. If you do a drill several times poorly, you're better off not doing it at all. Every player must try to do drills better each time. Coaches and players must always remind themselves that they will play as they practice.

When the ball is hit, the only thing that players have to fall back on is their fundamentals. And the fundamentals may be good or bad.

When training the team, emphasize simple execution. Making the routine play should be valued and rewarded. Players should always be in the right position to make the play.

In developing the game plan, the coach must always keep in mind the four major skill areas in baseball:

1. running,

2. throwing,

3. fielding, and

4. hitting.

Every practice should center on these four major skill areas because most of the mistakes will come in these parts of the game. Players should strive relentlessly to improve daily in these areas. A day should not pass where they are not working on the four skill areas.
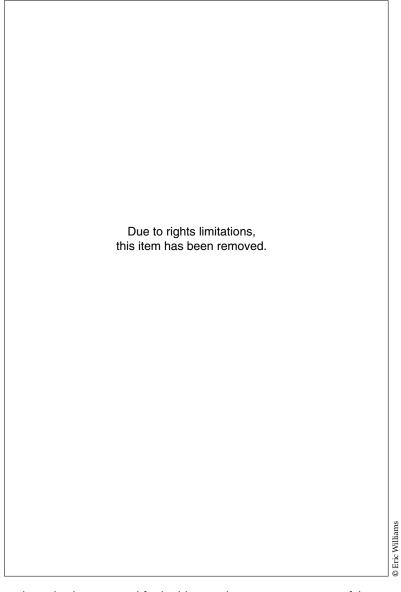
Focusing on Player Development

Building a successful program with a winning tradition begins with finding the right personnel for your team. The foundation of any team is pitching, both quality and quantity. A coach must try to develop at least two pitchers from every class. If he can do this, the team will always have eight pitchers, four of whom will be upperclassmen. In determining who the potential pitchers are, a coach should look for two things: general arm strength and the ability to throw in a pattern.

Although it helps, pitchers do not need to be the most physically gifted athletes on the team. But they do need to be able to develop a basic understanding of pitching mechanics and pitching strategy.

Every other year the coach should plan to develop a catcher, a middle infielder, and a center fielder. By doing that he will always have senior-sophomore or junior-freshman combinations at these positions. This plan does not always work, however, and a coach may need to be flexible in developing and assigning personnel. He may need to persuade some players to change positions for the good of the program. Most players will agree to a position change if it means more playing time.

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this item has been removed.

Pitching depth is essential for building and maintaining a successful program.

The corner-position players (first base and third base) need not be quite as skilled as the players at the middle-infield positions, but the coach should try to find a hard-nosed kid to fill each of these spots.

As mentioned previously, one of the keys to developing a successful game plan is to focus on player development. This is an everyday job for the coach of a successful program.

Getting to the Next Level

In helping his team and players reach the next level, a coach should understand how the following concepts interact with team and player development:

- *Talent.* Nobody moves to the next level without talent. Every coach is looking to add talented players to his squad.

- *Good fundamentals.* A fundamentally sound player is reliable and dependable on the field.

- *Strong work ethic.* Hustle can make up where talent is short. One of the roles of the coach in building the game plan for the ballclub is to inspire players to motivate themselves. We used three sayings, or slogans, in the game plan as part of our program:

  1. The five Ps was the first motto: Prior preparation prevents poor performance. We always tried to outwork our opponents. We focused on preparing for anything that might happen in a ballgame.

  2. The shortest route to success is *smart* hard work. We didn't just do drill after drill. Our game plan was to do the best and most effective drills until we mastered them.

  3. Success amounts to getting up one more time than you've been knocked down. No matter what the situation, teams must learn to overcome, and even thrive on, adversity if they are to be successful.

I have had former players write me letters years after having played in the program to say that these slogans were an integral part of their success in life, not just in baseball.

A coach usually has little say about what type of athlete shows up to tryouts or what type of talent is in the student body. In general, talent comes to a player through the genes he inherits from his parents.

But a coach can develop two other aspects—good fundamentals and a strong work ethic—so he must focus the majority of the game plan around them. Appropriate training can develop those attributes.

For example, most coaches spend most of their instructional time working with the most talented players on the team. These players are usually the easiest to work with because they are generally well skilled and can make the adjustments that the coach asks them to make. But to have a successful program, a coach must learn how to make his marginal players better. When the marginal players—the supporting cast—improve, the *team* improves. The best players will always perform at a high level because of their superior athletic talent. If a coach can get the marginal players to raise their level to average, the team stands a chance.

Educating Players by Position

A coach establishes a successful game plan through individual and team drills. Teams and players develop through drills. All drills should be a part of the game taken aside until players can perform it readily. The idea is to isolate parts of the game and teach players the correct reactions. You train them so their bodies are working for them, not against them. For example, you work on cutoffs and relays, slow rollers, double-play feeds and pivots, and so forth separately, away from game situations until players can demonstrate mastery. You can then incorporate the skills of the drill into more complex gamelike drills.

The next step in player development is making sure that players obtain and develop the particular skills and responsibilities that correspond with the position or positions they play. Players must understand the role and requirements for their positions and work on the requirements on a regular basis. The coach should emphasize the top three requirements of each position through drill work.

The coach must give daily attention to the three main areas of responsibility for each player according to the position requirements (table 16.1). Doing this will ensure that players can handle any situation they encounter during a game.

Developing the Defensive Side

We've all heard the cliche, "We beat ourselves." If this is true, then ballgames are lost, not won. A team must be able to stay in a game long enough to give the other team time to beat themselves. The great Bear Bryant said it best: "All championship teams begin on defense."

Players have to be trained to play good, basic defense. They must learn how to handle the ball and how to stay away from the big inning.

On defense, how does a team keep away from the big inning? Simple—they keep the double play in order. Every player has to be accountable for knowing his role in keeping the double play in order at all times.

For example, on a ground-ball single to the right side with less than two outs and a runner on first base, the right fielder must understand his role in keeping the double play in order. He must charge the ball hard and throw a strike to his cutoff man. If he does this, he prevents the runner at first base from going to third base. But more important, he keeps the batter-runner at first base and keeps the double play in order.

Two drills I have used with great success are the Starts Drill and the 21 Outs Drill. Both are essential to building a solid game plan as part of a successful program.

TABLE 16.1 Baseball Position Requirements

	PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES	SECONDARY RESPONSIBILITIES
Pitcher	1. Throw to spots (control) 2. Change speeds (change-up, breaking ball, fastball) 3. Get the ball to move (breaking ball, fastball, change-up)	1. Field position • Bunts (zones) • Pop-ups (zones) • Backup responsibilities 2. Hold runners close
Catcher	1. Handle the low ball and the pitch in the dirt (blocking) 2. Control runners (throwing) • Accuracy • Quickness • Strength 3. Handle pitchers • Soft hands • Framing • Psychological (control the pitchers, throw strikes, know pitching)	1. Bunts (zones) 2. Pop fouls (zones) 3. Run the club, be the field general
First base	1. Handle the slow roller 2. Guard the line 3. Move to the right	1. Bunts (zones) 2. Pop-ups • Communication with catcher • Sprint to barrier and work back 3. Cutoffs and relays 4. Hold and tag runners
Second base	1. Quick to the glove, side to the left 2. Make pivot on double play 3. Handle slow roller	1. Cover bag and tags 2. Cutoffs and relays 3. Pop-ups (zones)
Shortshop	1. Make play in the hole 2. Excellent in double-play situations (lead throw and pivot) 3. Handle slow roller	1. Cover bag and tags 2. Cutoffs and relays 3. Pop-ups (zones)
Third base	1. Handle slow roller 2. Range to the left 3. Guard the line	1. Bunts (zones) 2. Cutoffs and relays 3. Pop-ups (zones) • Communication with catcher • Sprint to barrier and work back

(continued)

TABLE 16.1 *(continued)*		
	PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES	SECONDARY RESPONSIBILITIES
Left field	1. Go back on the ball 2. Quick to the line 3. Hit cutoff man	1. Execute deep angle into power alley 2. Backup responsibilities 3. Movement with the count and situation
Center field	1. Go back on the ball 2. Have excellent range to power alleys 3. Hit cutoff man	1. Backup responsibilities 2. Movement with the count and situation
Right field	1. Quick to the line 2. Hit cutoff man 3. Change the ball hard, under control, and make a quality throw to cutoff man to keep runner from going from first to third.	1. Backup responsibilities 2. Movement with the count and situation

Starts Drill

Tom Greenwade, the great New York Yankees scout who signed Mickey Mantle, said, "Offensively and defensively, the first two steps a player takes are the most important. And they must be explosive and correct." This was the basis for developing and using the Starts Drill. Defensively, baseball players must assume a good ready position and be prepared to go to left, right, forward, or backward. To do this effectively, players must execute the proper footwork and take the proper angle. A good start may make the difference in getting to the ball. This drill helps players establish angles that they will use in a game, and it trains them to do it explosively and correctly.

Here is how to set up the drill:

1. Put two players at each position. Catchers should be in full gear. Players will alternate.

2. The coach should kneel down on the grass behind the pitcher's mound, facing second base.

3. When the coach raises his arm, each player at each position assumes a ready position.

4. When the coach points to his right, the players break to their left and go hard for about seven yards; the catchers block to their right. When the coach points to his left, the players break to their right and the catchers block to their left. When the coach points to the fence, the players drop step, cross over, and sprint straight back about seven yards. The catchers break out in front of the plate to cover bunts. When the coach puts his hand on top of his hat, the players break in about seven yards. The catchers sprint to the backstop to cover a deep pop foul.

The coach should allow the first group of players to return to their backup positions from their start before he starts the second group.

The infielders and outfielders should work on different angles and techniques each turn.

21 Outs Drill

I developed this effective defensive drill in the 1960s. Players learn that they have to handle the ball to get outs.

Drill Rules

The drill does not include

bases on balls,
strikeouts,
curveballs (pitchers work on fastballs down the pipe),
bunting,
stealing (runners may advance on passed balls and wild pitches), or
sliding.

Purpose of the Drill

To make your defense handle the ball to get outs
To convince the pitching staff that a fastball thrown for a strike will be hit at someone most of the time

Advantage of the Drill

Gives the coach a drill for coaching team defense
Serves as batting practice for nonstarters
Conditions pitchers
Develops pride on defense

The coach and players must treat this drill with gamelike intensity.

A baseball coach's number-one job in relation to the defensive side of the game plan is to develop his pitchers. If he feels that he does not have the background in pitching to handle this responsibility, he must add a strong pitching coach to his coaching staff. This concept cannot be understated or ignored. If pitching is 70 to 90 percent of the game, as most experienced baseball people contend, then a coach must make sure that his pitchers are getting the attention and instruction they need.

The pitcher is the most important player on the field; he gets the win or the loss. The pitcher also must be the best-conditioned athlete on the team because he handles the ball on every play.

To be successful at any level of the game, a pitcher must be able to do the three primary responsibilities listed in the pitcher's position requirements. All activities set up to help develop the pitching staff should emphasize the following three things:

1. Control—Pitchers must learn to throw to spots with command and control. A well-located fastball is the best pitch in a pitcher's repertoire.

2. Movement for fastballs (particularly the two-seam fastball) and breaking balls—With the fastball, one inch of movement is worth three miles per hour. Develop spin drills for the breaking ball.

3. Change-up—If hitting is timing, then pitching is disrupting the hitter's timing. The change-up is the best pitch for destroying a hitter's timing and balance, especially when the pitcher can throw it in fastball counts.

Pitchers who can hold runners, know their backup responsibilities, cover unoccupied bases, and field their positions will win 25 percent more games than those who can't.

How do pitchers improve these skills? They do quality drill work—basic pitcher's fielding practice (PFP) drills—on a regular basis. The coach cannot train pitchers in these important parts of the game just during the preseason and expect them to be executing flawlessly in the last week of the season. Pitchers must practice and drill regularly to maintain their skills.

The coach must constantly build the mental attitude of the pitcher. He must foster confidence and competitive spirit in each pitcher. If the coach wants the pitching staff to have a bulldog mentality, then everything about practice and preparation should focus on developing this attitude.

The coach's role is to develop pitchers both physically and psychologically. He must remember to develop the whole pitcher, not just the guy who throws the ball.

Part of the development of the game-plan pitching philosophy should include the development of three-run pitchers, pitchers who give up no more than three runs in a ballgame. Pitchers should go into a game with the

intention of throwing a shutout. If the opponent scores, however, not all is lost, and he tightens the reins a little. If a second run scores, the game is still in his control and he bears down. If a third run scores, the pitcher tells himself, "That's it, no more runs."

Pitchers must be able to read hitters and hitting flaws. A well-schooled or intuitive pitcher who can see hitters' weaknesses has the upper hand. A good coach teaches pitchers about hitting. Pitchers should remember that most amateur hitters hit off the last pitch they saw. This point emphasizes how important it is to throw set-up pitches and get ahead in the count.

Developing the Offensive Side

In developing the offensive side of the game plan, the coach must decide how to set the lineup. In general, a successful game plan includes the following ideas, although game situations or personnel issues may dictate deviations:

- *Leadoff hitter*—has a good eye, swings at few bad pitches, makes good contact, has good foot speed

- *Second hitter*—usually an excellent bunter, can put the ball in play, hits behind the runner, can run a little

- *Third hitter*—can put the ball in the air (even warning-track power) because runners will be in scoring position, generally the best hitter

- *Fourth and fifth hitters*—power guys, players with pop in their swings

- *Seven, eight, and nine*—the best of what's left, whatever you can get

The successful game plan requires that the entire lineup be trained to be good bunters. The coach never knows who will come up in a bunt situation with the game on the line; it may be the cleanup hitter.

Each player in the lineup must be able to move a man into better scoring position with a sacrifice bunt when the game is on the line. There are more ways to score from third than from second, and more ways to score from second than from first. Do not underestimate the importance of executing a sacrifice bunt.

Hitting

The hitting part of the offensive side of the game plan is divided into two halves, the physical and the mental.

Physical side (the mechanics of the swing). For the game plan to be successful in this area, the coach must emphasize, through practice and drill work, the following points of the swing.

- Setup, hitting position, stance. Call it what you will, each player must have a solid foundation to hit from. Everything starts from this position. Relaxation is the key.

- Stride. The stride has two purposes. First, it is a timing device that allows the hitter to recognize the pitch. Second, it puts the hitter in a position of attack. A good stride should take the hitter down, not forward, and it helps the hitter stay back. The hitter must remember that the swing is not part of the stride.

- Contact-point position. The hitter should be in a squared-up position with the belly button facing the pitcher. The front leg should be firm, and the back leg should look like the letter L with the toes pointed down. The top-hand palm should be facing up, and the bottom-hand should be knuckles down. The chin should be over the back shoulder, helping the hitter keep his eyes on the ball through contact.

- Extension and follow-through. The bat head should follow the ball as long as possible. Follow-through is the release to the front shoulder.

Mental side. The mental side of hitting includes two aspects—the intangibles and plate discipline.

- Intangibles. The intangibles include courage, concentration, confidence, and aggressiveness. A hitter who possesses all four will be a successful offensive player. The coach can have some say in the development of the intangibles. In the same way that the coach can develop the mental attitude of the pitching staff, he can develop the attitude of the hitters. The coach should always be trying to instill the four intangibles into hitters by putting them in practice situations where they can be successful.

- Plate discipline. Hitters must learn to distinguish between pitches they can drive and attack and pitches they must hold up on (balls in the dirt, high, or inside). Plate discipline is best developed in batting practice. The coach stands behind the batting-practice cage and gives the player reinforcement when he swings at a good pitch and corrective feedback when he chases a bad one.

The entire offensive side—the hitting program and drills—of the game plan should be built around developing the proper swing, instilling the intangibles, and acquiring plate discipline.

Different Game Situations

Keeping in mind that the goal throughout the season is to win ballgames, here are some points to consider when adapting your game plan to the situation.

Early, Mid-, and Late Season

Early in the year, practice work should focus on mastery of the fundamentals. Do not wear your pitchers down! Focus more on conditioning their arms, and ease them into their workloads. You should help protect pitchers' arms from injury by strictly monitoring throwing loads, including pitch counts, and emphasizing conditioning so that players will be strong for the late season and postseason.

Early in the season, the emphasis must be placed on setting both the defensive and offensive lineups. This is the time to establish who will be strongest where. Who are the leadoff guys, the power guys, etc.? The answers may not be immediately obvious; it takes time. You can start to answer these questions by playing a lot of games early in the season. Early season non-conference games give you the opportunity to experiment more with players to see if they can develop into being part of your overall scheme. This is especially true for the pitchers.

Like a scientist, you must do some experimenting to come up with the most productive lineup. This definitely requires playing different people in different places. Pay attention to the catching situation so you have at least two guys who will have some game experience. Later in the season it will be critical that you have two experienced catchers who can go out and perform at a high level.

Always remember, you should be trying to put the best team on the field, not just the best players. Every team is unique and will establish its own identity. Therefore, you must be concerned with figuring out how to utilize your personnel in the right way.

This being said, the key is to establish your pitching staff in the early part of the season. Figure out who the "stoppers" are, because they are the ones who will step up the last half of the season and carry the team into tournament time. You should know who the team's best two, three, or four starters are. You also need to know who you can count on to throw an inning or two and who will be the closer-type guy of the pitching staff.

On a daily and weekly basis during the midseason you can add increasingly more difficult or complex techniques and strategies to the offense and defense as part of the game plan. You should be refining and perfecting your bunt defense, cutoffs and relays, and defensive plays including first-and-third situations and pickoff plays.

During the mid- to second-half of the season and heading toward tournament play, you should be able to see a set lineup emerge and be able to fine-tune for particular needs (foot speed, offensive power, etc.) with substitutions when needed.

Rest is the most important factor during the latter part of the season. Workouts should taper down in terms of the physical demands required. Also, nutrition becomes a factor. Emphasize to your players the importance of watching what they eat and getting enough rest. The team is now in the

"daily grind" part of the season, and every effort should be made to try and keep things fresh and exciting. You must keep the interest of the players. Daily quotes, stories, or words of inspiration either before or after practice can help keep players stimulated.

There is a lot to be said about having a team peak at the right time. This has to do with your coaching philosophy, how your practices are organized, how you approach games, and the discipline you have been establishing as you've gone along.

You're building toward what I call "team perfection." You are always trying to get your players to play better, whether it is early or late. They must keep improving each game as opposed to peaking too early and going downhill. The worst is to have a team that peaks too early. You have wasted all of your ammo before the real battle (postseason) begins.

In preparing for tournaments, you have to use all kinds of psychological weapons to motivate players. They must realize the importance of what they are doing and take pride in how they play individually as well as how they play as a team. There are many resources on the market today to help coaches motivate their players. The smart coach takes advantage of every opportunity to improve his team.

Keep driving home the importance of preparation. Stress how important tournament time is and what a great accomplishment it will be to advance deep into the postseason. Don't be afraid to use long-standing tradition to inspire your players to press on. Stressing the accomplishments of past teams can sometimes motivate players toward future achievements.

The mark of a good coach is one whose team improves every week. I've seen teams that played well early, but as the season rolled along they started to go backward. I've coached against some teams with serious "senioritis." Those teams were tough opponents in April, but as the middle of May rolled around, they got worse. The better the weather, the worse they played. They would just lose their focus. They were no longer thinking about baseball and about winning. They were thinking about the weather, girls, and summer vacation.

Getting ready for tournaments is actually a season-long event. It is not a situation where you say, "we've got a tournament next week and we're playing for the state championship so we better start getting ready." You build up to that point throughout the season. This is done by continuing to develop the pride, work ethic, team discipline, and all the other elements that go into pulling a team together. The goal is to play as a unit and have your players focused with the same goal in mind, while working toward that goal.

We all hope that our teams have performed well enough over the regular season to qualify for postseason or tournament play. During this time you must do your homework on your competition. You need to set your pitching according to the teams in the tournament. You should treat every