

Indoor Practice The Ripken Way

By CAL RIPKEN, JR.

For many high school baseball teams not located in warm-weather climates, March 1 marks the official start of practice. Depending on the local or league rules, some teams may get the opportunity to practice a week or two prior to that. Youth baseball teams with fewer restrictions may already have held their tryouts and may have been conducting workouts of some sort throughout the months of January and February.

Regardless, in many areas of the country, as March approaches players and coaches look forward to better weather and outdoor practices. Inclement weather causes many teams to practice in gyms and other indoor facilities.

Many coaches dread the thought of indoor practices. However, if structured correctly, indoor practices can accomplish more than an outdoor practice on a bitter cold or wet day. For the purposes of this article we are going to assume that the indoor venue is a basic fullsize high school gym. What follows are some suggestions for running an early-season indoor practice.

WARM-UP

While it's nice to have plenty of room early in the season to allow players to throw from short distances and then to back up to long toss at up to 150 feet before returning to the initial shorter throwing distances, there is plenty that can be done in the gym to allow players to begin getting their arms in shape and to work on throwing fundamentals.

First, before any throwing takes place, the players should complete a dynamic full-body warm-up routine that includes bounding, skipping, jogging, running with high knees, sprints and shoulder exercises (just to name a few). This should be followed by stretching once their bodies are warm. The initial warm-up should take 10-12 minutes and be followed by 10 minutes of throwing (throwing can be increased by one minute each day up to 15 minutes).

Because a gym only allows balls to be thrown at a certain distance, mechanics and accuracy should be stressed when players are playing catch. It's always good to use the **one-knee drill** early in the season to emphasize the idea of getting the ball up and out of the glove and keeping the elbow above the shoulder. In this drill the players throw from one knee, with the knee of the leg that they normally would step with in an upright position.

After a few minutes of the one-knee drill, have the players stand up and focus on pointing the front shoulder toward their target, stepping directly toward the target before releasing the ball, and then taking a step toward the target after releasing the ball. Have the players throw along the painted lines on the floor to make sure they are stepping toward their targets.

Line throwing as described above can be followed by a game of “21,” in which players are awarded two points for a throw that their partner catches at face level and one point for a throw that their partner catches at chest level. The first player to reach 21 points wins. Winners and losers can play against each other.

STATIONS

There’s no reason an indoor practice shouldn’t always address both fielding and hitting. Break players into four small groups with the number of players in each depending on the number of players practicing and the size of the facility. The gym can be broken down into quadrants so that there are four stations – first for fielding drills and then later for hitting drills. Fielding stations should last longer than hitting stations since players are more likely to get tired or develop blisters when taking swings at four separate stations. The time for each will depend on the time allotted for practice. For hitting stations make sure each player gets at least one turn attempting each drill.

FIELDING STATIONS

Fielding stations can be broken up into infield/conditioning, outfield/conditioning, live groundballs/throwing and flyball fundamentals.

Infield/Conditioning - The infield/conditioning station can consist of the basic groundball drill, in which a player holds the groundball position (wide base, butt down, hands out) while a teammate roles him five or 10 balls (this number can increase as players build strength in their legs). The player should maintain that position each time after fielding the ball. From there the player can hold a lunge to the backhand side and catch five backhands rolled by a teammate followed by a lunge to the forehand side and five forehands rolled by a teammate. Again, the lunge position should be held throughout this drill. After that players can do 10 pickups with or without gloves – working on the crossover step to each side as a teammate rolls balls to one side and then the other. This station can conclude with players doing 15 to 20 line pickups – starting at one line on the court, running 15 or so feet to another line, touching the line by assuming the groundball position (wide base, butt down, hands out) and then running back to the other line and doing the same thing. Touching both lines is one repetition. As the season progresses the reps for each drill can be increased.

Outfield/Conditioning - The outfield/conditioning station consists of players working on their crossover and drop steps and running pass patterns for the entire time without stopping. The player at the front of the line tosses the ball to a teammate or coach who waits for the player to complete a crossover or drop step and then throws a pass to the player who is running a pass pattern. Even though this is a pass pattern, you still want the players to try to get to the spot where the ball is coming down as quickly as possible and set up so that they can catch the ball over their heads. Baseballs, rubber balls or sponge balls can be used for this drill. Gloves should be used to catch baseballs and bare hands to catch the softer balls. The players should be moving for the entire length of the station – crossover right, crossover left, drop step and then start over.

Live Groundballs/Throwing

The live groundball/throwing station can have several components. Fungoes can be hit, with players throwing to a teammate after catching the ball. A gym floor is a great place to learn proper fielding technique without worrying about bad hops. If you are not allowed to use hard balls at your facility, consider using a softer-cover baseball. In addition, our basic throwing drill, in which players start with a ball in fielding position at one cone, shuffle and throw at the second cone and follow the throw to the third cone, can be included. Players can throw to a teammate or at a target on the wall. Finally, a pitching machine can be set up that is shooting softer-cover balls so that players have to field them on the short hop. We recommend players attempt this drill by fielding the balls with one hand and no glove to promote soft hands. Another variation of this drill if no machine is available is to have a player face a wall in fielding position with another player behind him. The player behind throws a ball off the wall so that the player in fielding position has to field it on the short hop. This can be done with almost any type of ball and with or without a glove.

Flyball Fundamentals - This station can consist of a machine throwing sponge or rubber balls as high as the facility permits and having players learn to catch them with one hand over their heads. Having the players catch these softer balls with one hand will teach them the proper glove position and force them to watch the ball into their hands. If no machine is available the balls can be thrown. Real baseballs can be thrown high to players with gloves as well. In addition a communication drill can be set up where balls are thrown between two players, forcing one of them to call the ball and to get to the spot quickly.

HITTING STATIONS

The hitting stations are simpler, but no less important. These stations help players develop the building blocks for a fundamentally sound swing. Even in a gym with no fancy amenities a lot of hitting can be done. The set-up is very simple: three stations with hitting screens; one station with a batting tee; one station with plastic balls and a stickball bat (any bat thinner than a regular bat); one station with either baseballs, plastic balls, rubber balls or sponge balls for soft toss; and one station with a machine that throws plastic or softer balls for free hitting. If there is no machine available, a protective screen and a chair should be set up with plastic or softer balls for short toss from the front.

Soft Toss Station - One player tosses balls to another, who hits them into the net (or a toss machine can be used). The player can hit until he is tired, but this is not a race. The hitter sets the pace. For this drill we don't want players to think about the lower half of their bodies. All we want them to think about is having a loose grip and a quick bat. The loose grip unlocks the wrists and allows for greater bat speed. Players should always swing hard.

Tee Station - Another traditional drill is hitting off a batting tee. Like soft toss we use this drill to work on a specific component of the swing. When hitting off of a tee we want the players to concentrate on their weight shift. We want them to think about going back to go forward. The hitter should load all of the weight onto the back foot (almost like a pitcher's wind-up) and then take it all forward as the swing is completed. Again,

the hitter should swing hard. The tee is the ideal place to work on the weight shift, because the ball is stationary. Hitters can really get the feel for taking the weight back before going forward without having to worry about a fast-approaching pitch. A good weight shift allows a hitter to gather his energy before exploding forward into the swing.

Stickball Station - At this station we use small plastic balls and a shaved down wood bat that we call a stickball bat. There are variations of stickball bats – wood and metal – available on the market. This is an eye-hand coordination drill first and a balance drill second. The batter takes his stride and then stops, leaving the bat in the cocked position. A teammate then tosses the batter a ball just like in the soft toss drill. This time the batter swings hard without striding and recoils as fast as possible. As soon as his bat is back and cocked the second ball is tossed. This is done five times. If the player does not maintain his balance throughout the swing he will not be able to complete the drill and hit all five balls successfully. Although the pace is quicker than soft toss it still should be set by the batter.

Free Hitting or Short Toss Station - With soft or plastic balls and a machine that throws them you don't need an indoor cage. You can get a lot of live hitting repetitions without worrying about destroying the facility or anyone getting hurt. Make sure you set this up so that the players are hitting into a wall and away from the other stations. If you don't have a machine, set up a protective screen about 15 feet from a home plate with a chair behind it. Have a player or coach toss balls to the outside half of the plate and have the hitters try to hit the ball up the middle or to the opposite field. Don't try to tinker with a player's individual swing. If the hitter is pulling the ball and hitting line drives, that's okay. If the hitter is pulling weak groundballs then he needs to think about keeping the front shoulder in and hitting the ball to the "big part of the field."

Don't forget that almost all stations can be turned into games or contests to help keep them interesting. Sometimes it is fun to set up a scoring system at each station and to have each small group keep its own score. Then, at the end of practice, the winning group can go home without helping to pick up any equipment. This article should provide you with an effective and efficient plan for an indoor practice. Use this as a guide. It is my hope that this will give you some creative ideas of your own for indoor practices.