

Making Practice Fun and Effective

Baseball practice can be, by definition, a chore. In order to perfect game-related skills, players must perform repetitive, sometimes mundane tasks in a quest to build muscle memory and skill.

Even so, beware of making practice boring - players who dread practice won't get as much (or anything) out of it, will distract the rest of the team, and may even quit.

Don't get me wrong - I firmly believe in organized, disciplined practices. Troublemakers should be dealt with swiftly. "Running laps 'till their tongues hang out" is a great solution for many a problem. I am not at all above assigning pushups for stubborn cases.

But if you find yourself spending more time handing out laps than teaching the proper way to lay down a bunt, ask yourself why. Do you have twelve guys standing around while you hit one grounder at a time? Are the only players getting action the pitcher, catcher, and batter? Does your entire outfield want to sit in the grass, and do they seem to be influencing your third baseman to follow suit? If so, you may have a problem.

Come to practice with a plan.

Before you practice, identify the areas you'd like your team to work on. If you don't have any idea what's going to happen in practice, chances are, the results won't be good... at the very least, you'll waste a lot of valuable time.

Stations are the gospel of practice.

You should spend very little time with the entire team working on the same thing. Instead, break your team into three or four groups. Have one work on hitting, one work on ground balls, another work on relay throws, etc. After 15 or 20 minutes, rotate the groups. This ensures that each player gets many more repetitions than they ever would have otherwise, and it breaks the monotony - by the time the player is used to doing one station, it's time to move to the next one.

If you don't have enough coaches for this, ask for parental help - or conscript them from the stands, if need be. Tell them what to do, then go to the next station before they can protest!

Be inventive, and reward your players.

Turn drills into contests - give points to different teams within your squad, and watch the intensity level rise. Raise the stakes by offering a small reward; a stick of sugarless gum will motivate a player like you wouldn't believe. Consider handing out helmet stickers (think of the tomahawks that the Florida State Seminoles get on their football helmets) for outstanding performers.

Don't underestimate the power of encouragement.

Keep in mind that, as a Little League coach, you are one of the most influential people your players will ever have in their lives. Don't fall into the trap of always criticizing failures without recognizing achievement and effort. If a kid is giving something his all, recognize that fact, even if he is failing. Support him, and he may amaze you - and himself - with what he can do.

