

The Ultimate in Practice Organization

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LEWISTON, Idaho — The most creative coach in the nation at practice organization is Ed Cheff, skipper at Lewis-Clark State College.

No coach in the nation utilizes practices, pre-game hitting, infield and actual game time more to his advantage than this highly regarded coach.

The success of his program borders on disbelief — nine NAIA national championships since 1984.

"One of the first things we do is give the players a solid understanding of what the coach expects in practice," said Cheff.

"We try to define what the foundation of a good practice is. To us in our program, a good practice centers on a player's total effort and emotion via intellectual, physical and mental terms throughout practice.

"Practice is more than just a series of drills and repetition of the bio-mechanical exercise. We try to integrate emotional stability and balance, intellectual appreciation for what they are doing, total physical effort and then have them demonstrate a good mentality. We incorporate those four qualities into everything we do.

"Doing those four things achieves more focus better than just honing in on the bio-mechanics of a swing or footwork in a double play or pitching mechanics.

"I feel practice must be structured and monitored so this type of effort is explicitly defined and recognized. There is no question what we are after when we go to work."

Cheff discussed his practices.

"A lot of times in a single practice we won't incorporate a lot of different things into it. I think back to when I was a high school football coach. We had a defensive day and spent time on defense. The next day we might spend time on offense. Then we might spend time on the kicking game and special teams

"Our baseball practices are regimented from the very first practice. In our stretching, we don't talk. It is not a time for conversation between players. We're developing a focus on what practice is all about. If coaches have any comments, then the players can listen as they stretch. We preview what will be incorporated in that practice. When we get down to the structure of playing catch, we play a unison type of catch to begin our practice.

"We have players in straight lines equally spaced. We are doing it in a rhythm and timing together so it looks like one guy is playing catch. It's something we have always used pre-game and pre-practice. It is our way to get our players to focus on the practice or game coming up. So often, playing catch is a goof off activity. But we want our catching to be useful and not wasted."

Unique Drills

Cheff was asked what unusual drills he uses in practice.

"We have specialized throwing drills where we might have catchers at each base on the infield diamond. Since we have four catchers, we have one at each base. The catcher at first base will throw a ball across the diamond to third while using proper footwork and throwing fundamentals. The catcher at home will throw to the guy at second. Then those players throw back to the other base across the diamond.

"After a certain number of throws, two of the catchers will snap throw to the next base on the right as the second phase of this drill begins. Then we may go back with the diagonals across the diamond which simulate throws to second again.

"We can incorporate the specifics of the footwork and the throw for all four catchers and be pretty productive in a short period of time."

Cheff said his first baseman all play catch together as well as his middle infielders and outfielders. During throwing practice, he said there might be some 4-corner catch with infielders or quick hand catch.

"We want to incorporate some specifics of ball handling, footwork and throwing of the ball which we think we should work on while we're warming up. Warming up is not strictly an activity where you get your arm loose. It is a structured type of situation where there are specific things going on with specific throws."

For the vast majority of practices, Cheff said he shies away from drills.

"I am not a big drill guy," said Cheff.

"We do some drills. But I am not all that excited about gimmicks, especially hitting gimmick drills. I like some Tee work a little bit. But I don't like to see balls on strings and a lot of soft toss and things with weighted bats, light bats or fungo bats. I feel regular BP is a great help to hitters with good BP pitchers throwing pitches. But if you're only going to have one guy hitting at a time in a field BP situation, then you better have a lot of other things going on that are productive for other players as well."

BP Organization

Cheff gave an example of a typical batting practice.

"We will face a particular type of pitcher in BP. He might be a soft lefthander or a power righthander.

"Maybe he is a split finger righthander with decent velocity. Whatever we create will be pitcher specific. At all of our BPs, we try to make it pitcher specific or at least pitch specific.

"For the first segment of BP, we might have the hitters look at nothing but inside third pitches with fastballs. If we are using machines, it will be 88-90 mph."

Cheff then digressed.

"Batting practice can mean many different things to different coaches. It can mean a bunch of pitchers hanging around the outfield. It can mean some guys lazily catching a fly ball or an infielder maybe picking up a ground ball off a bat and more than likely not. BP can be very laid back and not very productive except for the person who is actually hitting."

"Or you can make batting practice highly productive to everybody and incorporate the key element of batting practice which is the guy throwing the ball."

Cheff said having enough pitchers for a BP can be a problem for many programs. But he has a solution.

"If you don't have enough pitchers to throw BP, I tell high school coaches all the time that they should go out into their community and find former baseball or softball players who can donate their time to be a core of batting practice pitchers for your program. You might get a stock broker who has an afternoon off.

"Find some guys in your community who like baseball and will train in the off season so they are ready to pitch when practice begins. They will become BP pitchers for your program. Try to get six or seven of them, including a couple of lefthanders.

"In our community, we only have 30,000 people. We have a batting practice core of guys. Some of them are 35 years old. But I have had an association with them either at Lewis-Clark State or with another baseball program. A lot of guys like to go work out in a gym, do aerobics or jog. We try to convince people that a great workout throwing BP is, and they can become a very important part of the ball club in the process."

Freeing Up Head Coach

Cheff said this frees the coach up so he can monitor all areas of practice.

"The most ridiculous thing in the world is one coach on the field trying to throw BP. It's just him and a kid hitting, and the rest of the players are wondering what's going on? It also behooves coaches to teach all their players how to throw BP. It helps arm strength, control of the ball, etc. You teach kids that when they are freshmen in the program. What happens with all of this is that you have a lot of good, productive firm BP pitchers who will help your hitters progress.

"You will have guys consistently throwing balls on the inside third of the plate firm or outside third consistently firm."

Cheff said when BP is taking place, he does not want any pitchers shagging loose balls in the outfield.

"We have three outfielders who play shallow. Those guys have a competition each practice as to who will make the greatest catch of the day. Every time a ball comes off a bat, it is a contest to see who can make the greatest catch. You are rewarding the effort and hard-nosed mentality of who will go all out to catch a ball.

"At the end of BP, an outfielder is recognized as making the greatest catch of the day. Your focus as an outfielder is that you work your tail off on every ball that is hit in your vicinity. Now if the ball is hit and is obviously not catchable, don't dive after it. The kid is wasting his time. We may even have four out there where one of the outfielders will trade off. But we always have players in left field, centerfield and right. Nobody is standing in the alleys or on the lines. You would be surprised at the great plays which are made daily in our practices. If a ball gets through the outfielders, they retrieve the ball, throw it back in and get back to their position as quickly as possible so they get more chances to make that great catch.

"As far as infielders, they play the ball off the bat first. If the ball is not hit to them, then we are in a sequence with the two fungo guys who hit balls to two infielders immediately with purpose specific ground balls. We might be working backhands for the first 20 minutes. These are real firm, hard backhands. So therefore, the fungo hitter has to be well trained so he hits the ball exactly where he wants it to go."

Pitchers Waste Time

Cheff said he at times hates to have pitchers waste their time hitting fungoes.

"Sometimes pitchers feel practice revolves around shagging balls and hitting fungoes for them. But sometimes for the high school coach, he has to utilize all available players who can chip in to help. The key is training the fungo hitter. Every time he hits a bad fungo, it's a waste of everyone's time. If he hits three out of four bad ones, we aren't getting any productivity. It has to be a quality fungo. If it is a ball hit to the fielder's back hand, make the person on defense extend himself and bust his butt to get there and make the play. He

gets the ball back to the fungo hitter and immediately sets up to prepare for a ball hit by the batter in the cage.

"There is a lot of defensive effort happening during every batting practice. We may have a great fungo hitter and have him hit 'divers' where every infielder is extended for 15 minutes. Then every infielder will work on diving to his left and right and coming up with the ball. The production of the entire practice is outstanding while one guy is hitting in BP."

Cheff said he always has three men on base during BP as well.

"The guy at first base may be practicing secondary leads and reading line drives or balls in the dirt. He always makes a three or four step reaction to what he sees. The runner at second might be working on his stealing of third. That's why all of our BP pitchers throw from the stretch. The runner at third looks for ground balls to score or wild pitches. Any area of base running can be incorporated at any given time.

"Overall, we have four guys involved in offense — the guy hitting and three guys on the bases. The base runners are reading balls hit by the batter whether it be grounders, line drives or fly balls and reactions to balls which can and can't be caught. They read and react to every other pitch. The first BP pitch, they are expected to react to it. The second BP pitch, they return to their preliminary lead. Then on the third pitch, they have full secondary leads and anything else we have incorporated into the process.

"It's one thing to line them all up and say this is what we're doing. It's another thing to talk about total effort and total secondary lead with a ballistic 3-4 step reaction from the hit ball which is hit in the gap or a runner at third reacting to a ball hit in the infield which he will score on. The reaction time for that is critical as well as the effort.

"While BP is going on, we incorporate a lot of defense and base running. Another thing we do is have the outfielders in BP play shallow so they get an awful lot of chances for hard shots over their head. Anything hit in front of them that they might be able to catch is left to the infielder to go after which helps the infielders develop better range on short fly balls to the outfield.

"The outfielder is screaming to the infielder 'You, You, You' so he goes after it. We want the infielder making diving, hard catches over his shoulder in practice with Texas leaguer type stuff."

All-Encompassing System

Cheff said the beauty of this system is that one high school coach can observe three base runners, nine players on defense and his hitter.

"The key thing is the quality of the fungo guy and the quality of the BP pitcher. If these folks are not good, you can't have a quality practice. So you must train your pitchers to be good fungo hitters. Some kids have no idea what is involved in hitting a fungo. Some coaches are bad fungo hitters, and they need to become more adept at doing it through practice. One of the saddest things is a coach having infield practice and not being able to fungo the ball where he wants to. He also might not be able to get the hop in the ball he is after because he doesn't practice himself.

"A good coach is one who not only has his kids practice. But he must go out and refine his skills in this area as well to keep sharp. It's not a bad idea for a coach to take his pitchers with him on a Saturday morning and teach his pitchers how to hit fungos for two or three hours into buckets which are strategically placed on the field."

It was brought up to Cheff that many college teams today only have one scheduled practice a week once the season begins. Teams typically play three games on the weekend with a mandatory day off, usually on Monday. Games may be slated on Tuesday or Wednesday. Often times the team packs up and hits the road on Thursday for a 3-game weekend series.

"I have found that proper pre-game practice is absolutely essential. Nine innings of baseball isn't taxing at all. It's hard to exert yourself enough prior to a game to be tired in a BP setting. You just don't get enough chances. You won't wear yourself out. But if you make some great plays on defense in BP prior to a game in the outfield, your confidence will build for the game. It's tremendous pre-game training."

Amazing In-Game Practice

Cheff said he came up with a unique in-game practice regimen for infielders to help them become better at double plays in the Alaska League six years ago because of the lack of practices. Almost every day the team is playing a game or traveling for a game just like teams in the minor leagues.

"The structure of the pre-game BP for a high school or college coach is just critical. My first year as a coach in Alaska, I did something a bit different during games. We had four guys who were playing an infield position they didn't play in college. I told the kids that at the end of the year we would be the best double play team in summer collegiate baseball.

"I told our infielders we could turn up to 12 double plays during the approximate two minute warm up time our pitcher had when we ran out to play defense. After nine innings was over, that infield double play total reached approximately 85. By the time we played 50 games, we turned over 4,000 double plays during this warm up time. This is in addition to all our practices and pre-games."

Cheff was asked how in the world this system worked.

"Instead of going out between innings and letting the first base-man roll the ball out where infielders flip it back to him, which is totally non-productive, I thought it would help the infielders grow more by going to a different system.

"When we take the field on defense, we have the third base-man and shortstop take a ball with them to their positions. The third baseman takes three steps to his right with the ball in his glove and simulates a backhand play. He fires the ball to the second baseman who relays the throw to first. The first baseman keeps the ball. The shortstop, with ball in his glove, takes three steps to his right and also simulates a backhand and throws the ball to second base which is turned for a double play. The first baseman immediately turns and throws the ball back to the second baseman and keeps the other ball in his glove.

"Now the second baseman goes backhand three steps to his right with the ball in his glove and flip feeds the ball to the shortstop who turns it and fires the ball to first base. Now the first baseman comes off the bag and simulates a backhand play and fires the ball to the shortstop covering second who then fires it back to first base. The first baseman then fires the two balls he has in his glove back to the third baseman and shortstop to start the process all over again.

"With those kids in Alaska, we were shooting for 12 double plays between each inning in a little under two minutes. But we don't just simulate the back hand. We would simulate every double play you could think of. And we would have a sequence in how we did it. The coaches would watch for proper footwork and proper throwing angle, give a good feed, etc. We incorporated all aspects of the double play between innings. I asked our players if we could incorporate this system into the game every night and still be fresh to play the game. They said yes. It worked extremely well.

"Inevitably what would happen is that in the late innings the third baseman would get a hard hit down the line. He would take three steps to backhand that ball and be forced to make a great feed to the second baseman for a double play to be turned. The third baseman just did it three minutes ago. Here he has been doing it the whole game. Look at the pivot man (second baseman or shortstop). He has been turning double plays the whole game and is ready.

"The players have two minutes between innings. Should they just stand out there or utilize the time wisely and work on double plays? I started doing that up in Alaska about six years ago out of necessity. Think about

it. That is over 4,000 extra double plays over 50 games. By the time we play in a tournament, we are 4,000 double plays ahead of where another team may be in addition to all the double plays we turned in practices."

Futuristic Concepts

Cheff said most coaches won't incorporate systems like this into pre-game practice or game situations because nobody else does it.

"Baseball has been the slowest game in the world to change tradition. We all know that. From what I've seen, practices in base-ball have only become practices in the true sense of the word in the last 15 years. Prior to that in pro baseball, there was no such thing as a practice. It was just a series of mundane, boring drills which made you wonder what was going on. It was an exercise of killing time in all reality."

Another superb technique Cheff has used for years takes place in scrimmages.

"We never scrimmage the first six innings of a nine inning game," said Cheff.

"It's a waste of time. Always scrimmage starting with the seventh inning of a 0-0 game. On your scoreboard put up zeros through the first six innings, and you are ready to begin the scrimmage. Play the seventh, eighth and ninth inning of the game. If you want to play longer, start all over again at the top of the seventh inning. The seventh, eighth and ninth innings are where it all happens in baseball. The most important part of the game is the end. The first five or six innings can get real boring for kids. They don't ever get fired up until the end.

"We will always operate at high intensity in this fashion. Years ago when we scrimmaged quite a bit with Coach (Bobo) Brayton's teams at Washington State, we always played three inning games from the seventh inning on. One team would win, and we would start it all over again. In one evening, we would be able to finish five pressure games."

Football Mentality

It was pointed out to Cheff that baseball coaches who come from football backgrounds seem to be highly organized in practice and also highly successful. Skip Bertman of Louisiana State University and Gordon Gillespie, previously of St. Francis College who now coaches at Ripon College, are two noted coaches with football backgrounds besides Cheff.

Bertman has guided LSU to four national championships in the last seven years while Gillespie is the winningest baseball coach in 4-year college history with 1,452 wins heading into last season.

"One guy I have always respected highly is Mel Didier," said Cheff.

"I've seen his practices and watched him as a player development guy do things in practice which were tremendously structured years and years ago. I understand he had a football background at Alabama, although I'm not sure. If you watch a football practice today and saw a baseball practice 20 years ago, you would go 'Wow'. The effort being given is totally different with a much different structure.

"I think the football guys may have been ahead of baseball coaches in this regard. I think at times in baseball you see just one coach attempting to do everything and is totally overwhelmed. Consequently, he doesn't really do anything."

Teacher, Pupil Ratio

Cheff said in any form of instruction the teacher to pupil ratio is crucial, especially on the high school level of baseball instruction.

"We know that knowledge without a good learning philosophy and teaching structure is worthless. You can have all the knowledge in the world. But if you don't have a teaching structure and a solid learning theory, nothing will happen. To get into the right ratio, the high school coach has to bring his pitchers to practice a little bit before everyone else. If school is out, possibly the other players can go to the library for a half hour. I would ask the non-pitchers to do their homework during this half hour period because I don't want them on the field for 2 1/2 hours.

"During the first half hour of practice, if I were a high school coach, I would work with only the catchers and pitchers. We could do all of our bullpens, pitcher and catcher communication sequences and bunt communication work along with other things such as what to do on wild pitches, etc. If one of my pitchers is also a shortstop, then he must be there for the full duration. We will do quality work with these people for 30 to 40 minutes. I just don't want to bore everybody else, and I can't possibly give these guys quality time unless I isolate them.

"Then the rest of my high school players show up, and we do a tremendous amount of work out of our BP mode, which was explained earlier. If I see the middle infielders have horrible footwork and just can't turn the double play properly, I will make the four middle infielders stay after practice to work an extra half hour on better techniques.

"You always must have quality time for the pitchers and catchers so they improve. I can't have kids standing around who play other positions at this time. But after the pitchers are done, the team work can begin with the high intensity BP practice. If you don't leave your feet for a ball you have a chance at, someone is chewing your rear end out. It's a time to perform and is challenging."

Hitting Sins

Cheff was asked if he becomes extremely upset at any problem that may erupt in practice or games.

"We have three key hitting sins in our program which include taking a called third strike, hitting into a double play ground ball when you are ahead in the count and taking a first pitch fastball. But everything else is OK with us. On a hit and run if you hit it to the left side of the infield, that's fine. Maybe it's not where we wanted it to be, but we don't rant and rave at the player. Maybe the defense has shifted over thinking it will be a hit and run, and the ball goes through.

"You can't penalize everything. The hardest thing to do in practice or a game is not make a big thing out of everything. Make a big thing out of the big things. You can't be nit picking all the time and stopping practice all the time. If I don't like something going in a team setting, we will come out the next day and correct it in pre-practice.

"Once we develop the tempo of the practice, we don't want to break that tempo. We want to maintain a high tempo."

Performing At Top Level

Cheff said one problem he has found with players is that many feel they are capable of performing at a lower level than they are capable of.

"Players will tell me they tried their best. We tell players they may believe they tried their best, but you are not a very good judge of what your best is. So if I am all over you hard, trust in me that I am a better judge than you are in trying to evaluate what you're capable of. If I'm on you hard in practice, I really believe you have a higher ceiling than what you're giving yourself. You must trust in me. You've got to believe that I think you're capable of a lot better.

"I certainly would not challenge a player in practice if I felt that was the best he could do. It's pointless to challenge somebody to be something they can't possibly be."

Vary Practice Times

Cheff said his practice times vary from practice to practice.

"You have got to know the mood of your kids. It depends on the time of year. There are so many components to recognize, and you as a coach had better be smart enough to recognize those things. So many times an hour on the field is the best thing in the world for your team. And there are other times when on a Saturday we will practice three hours in the morning, take a break for lunch and then come back later in the day for three more hours in a scrimmage type setting.

"One thing I believe is that the coach must be on the field 4 1/2 to 5 hours a day. The high school kid should never be on the field more than two hours at a time. It's ridiculous if it is more. But, when those two hours occur are important. If practice takes place right after school, you may have a certain group practice for 1 1/2 hours while the other kids are studying and doing homework in the library. Then the next group can come out and practice the final 1 1/2 hours. As I said earlier, you can get some great work in with this procedure.

"The worst thing that can happen is one practice which goes four hours. You have way too many guys you're trying to deal with. Too many guys are standing around watching."

Cheff said that repetition is absolutely crucial to making players better.

"Our players are trained to see every possible situation that can come up in a game. And we go over those scenarios thousands of times to be prepared. When a first and third situation crops up defensively, our guys instinctively know what to do because they have worked so hard learning those scenarios."