

## Setting Goals for Your Team

Youth baseball coaches often fall into the trap of trying to teach too much. Remember that baseball is a simple game. In general, the teams that throw, catch and hit the best are the ones that are the most successful. What determines whether a game, practice or season is successful? Success in youth baseball should not always be about wins and losses. In fact, winning should be way down on the list of priorities. If the baseball experience is enjoyable for the kids and they learn something, as coaches, we should feel very good about that.

It is imperative for coaches to set goals for their teams and to celebrate all of the successes – small or large. There are general goals that cut across all age levels and there are age-specific goals. If these goals are accomplished, regardless of the team's final won-loss record, the season should be considered a success. Sometimes all of the goals are not attained. Circumstances beyond our control can intervene to prevent us from accomplishing some things we set out to accomplish. In these instances it is human nature for a coach to be hard on his or herself. It is important to look back at what you as a coach might have been able to do to accomplish more, but don't beat yourself up too much about it. If the kids had fun and learned something the experience was more than worthwhile.

### **General Goals for Coaches of All Ages**

There are basic goals that all baseball coaches should strive to accomplish with their teams – even coaches at the highest levels. In the broadest sense these goals are a good barometer of how successful the season was from a coaching perspective. As a coach, continually ask yourselves these questions to help determine if you are on the right track:

#### ***Are the kids having fun ...***

Baseball is a game. We stress that over and over. It should be fun. You can tell very easily whether a group of kids is having fun. Do they move quickly to the field when they arrive or do they have to be forced to play? Are they smiling when they are on the field or do they appear to be sad or bored? Is there a lot of laughter and energy or are the kids lethargic? Do they ask to stay and practice or play longer or do they want to leave early?

Kids are not hard to read. If they are having fun, keep doing what you are doing. If they appear lethargic, sluggish, bored or unhappy, take a look at what you are doing and make some adjustments, remembering that kids of all ages have limited attention spans. Some suggestions for keeping the game fun:

- Keep them in small groups during practices.
- Keep them active and moving around.
- Provide them with a variety of activities.
- Turn drills into contests.
- Give out prizes.
- Give your players nicknames.
- Create a rotation where every player gets to play every position.
- Be demonstrative in a positive manner – enjoy yourself on the field!

### ***Are the kids improving?***

One of the most rewarding things about coaching youth baseball is getting to see the players improve. It is not a stretch to say that kids can improve each and every time they practice. At our camps we often come in contact with groups of kids who literally have trouble playing catch at the beginning of the week. By the end of the week in our afternoon games we actually will see some of these kids turn double plays.

One of our past articles dealt with age-appropriate goals. There we got into a deeper discussion of motor skill development and what types of skills can be taught successfully at different ages. It is important that the skills that are emphasized are not too difficult for the kids to master. Kids have an innate desire to learn and improve. When they are successful, and those successes are celebrated, the thirst to learn more increases. As coaches we have to put the players in positions to experience success and then go out our way to point out the improvement. This sounds like an oversimplification, but just like throwing and catching, success and positive reinforcement are as important for the 8-year-old as they are for the 22-year-old.

## ***Are the kids learning?***

Every day at our camps we make a point to review what we did the day before. At the beginning of each session we ask questions about what was covered the previous day to reinforce the lessons and make sure the concepts were understood and absorbed. If we find that the kids are struggling with a lesson or concept, we need to spend more time on the review to make sure that they have grasped the lesson completely. If the kids understand everything we move on to a new lesson. The following day we will repeat the same process, reviewing everything that has been taught to that point.

It is important for coaches to make sure their players are learning something in addition to having fun. Learning and fun go hand in hand. As kids learn and understand they get better and want to learn more. When they improve they have more fun. By keeping the kids active and being creative we can make sure that they learn while having fun. If kids are having fun they often don't realize that they are learning or practicing, which means you can hold their attention longer. This leads to more efficient and effective practices.

When coaching, especially when dealing with skills that build upon one another, it is important to review and make sure that the players have grasped the initial lesson before something that is more complex is introduced. Introducing new concepts that the players are not prepared for can lead to failure. Repeated failure often leads to frustration. Frustration can cause kids to quit playing baseball and to try something different

At our camps we like to use different buzzwords to emphasize our teaching points. For example, for the soft toss hitting drill all we want the kids to concentrate on is "loose hands, quick bat." For weight shift and hitting off of a tee we say that you have to "go back to go forward." In the infield we catch a ground ball with a "wide base, butt down, hands out in front." You will find these buzzwords throughout our instructional materials. Use them to help your kids understand and remember the lessons you teach them.

The bottom line is to do whatever it takes to help the players learn what you are attempting to teach them.

**By Bill and Cal Ripken**