

Situational Coaching

If you've read any of our instructional materials or watched our CD-ROM or DVD series, we make it pretty clear that extensive repetition of the basic fundamentals is one of the keys to success on the baseball field. While baseball is a simple game in which the teams that throw and catch best often are victorious, there is so much more to the game than physical execution...

Baseball is a thinking man's game. There is more time between plays in baseball than virtually any other team sport, giving players and managers more time to analyze and strategize in an attempt to give their team a competitive advantage. Baseball is like a chess match in which the pawns are human beings. Situations, options and strategies can change with virtually every pitch.

It's conceivable that an infielder may change his positioning as many as four or five times during a single at-bat. A ground ball to second base that would normally be a routine double play changes when the runner on first base is put in motion with the second baseman vacating his position to cover the bag on the steal attempt. The same ball that might have resulted in two outs may become a hit. The most the defense is likely to get out of the play in this instance is the single out at first base. If the ball does get through for a hit, the right fielder may try to throw the runner out at third early in the game, but if it is late in the contest and the batter represents the tying or go-ahead run, the fielder instead should opt to throw the ball to second to keep the tying or go-ahead run out of scoring position.

Because of the seemingly endless situations and decisions that can arise during a baseball game, the best players have to be able to do more than just catch and throw. They have to be able to think on their feet, adapt and understand every potential action and reaction that can occur each time the ball is pitched. The only way to develop this kind of an understanding of the game is to be placed in these situations over and over, to have the game slowed down and explained so that each possible decision and its ramifications can be presented and understood. Like we always say, the players have to experience the plays firsthand and to understand why they should be handled in different ways at different times. Remember one of our teaching philosophies is to always explain why.

Another concept that we talk about throughout our instructional materials is the "teachable moment." Baseball presents a catch-22 for its coaches. Games present the best opportunity to expose young

players to the various game situations to that they must come to understand and execute if they are going to be successful. However, games often are the worst time for a coach to attempt to instruct or make corrections.

The atmosphere surrounding a game is too chaotic for any substantial instruction. For players to fully understand what is being taught, they need to be able to concentrate and listen. That becomes impossible when everyone is watching the action on the field and yelling or cheering.

In addition, you can't just stop a game to go over a situation that needs to be addressed or to correct a physical or mental error. You just don't want to halt a contest and single out one or two players for a mistake that was made. First and foremost, this can embarrass the players involved and cause them to play in fear of making additional mistakes. This feeling can build over time and cause a player to dislike the game. Second, a player usually knows when he or she has done something wrong and is either thinking about that play, getting ready for the next one or looking for support from parents, friends or siblings. Either way, the lesson is not being absorbed.

While some things, such as minor flaws in technique or more simplistic individual errors, can be discussed during downtime between innings, team fundamentals and group responses to game situations are best covered at the next practice. It's important for a coach to realize this and to keep a mental or physical list of notes about what situations need to be discussed at the next practice. Practice time offers plenty of "teachable moments" that do not occur during games.

Situation Drill

While it can be helpful to diagram plays and situations that were handled improperly in the previous game, young players prefer action over talking. So it makes sense to place them in similar situations to those that were not handled properly at game speed, to see how they respond, to walk them through the proper method of handling the situations and to let them attempt to handle the situations again at game speed. The best way to accomplish this is through a situation drill.

There are a couple of ways to go about this, but no matter what the approach, the set-up is the same. Place a full defense with nine players, including a pitcher and a catcher, in the field. The catcher can be in full gear if you think that will be helpful or no gear. Remaining players will be used as

baserunners.

The coach stands in the batter's box with a ball and a fungo bat, simulating the stance of a batter. The pitcher has a ball and delivers a pitch just like in a game situation. After the ball is received by the catcher, the coach hits a ball fungo-style, simulating a specific game situation. The runners start behind a line that is drawn in the dirt and aren't allowed to leave until the ball is hit. You don't want them to cheat and turn a routine ground ball into a nearly impossible play.

If you just want your team to get a lot of repetitions handling basic game situations, you can have the defense play several full innings, setting up specific situations as you go along. You might challenge the defense to play three innings and see how many runs that particular group of baserunners can score in that span. Then, you might send those runners out to defensive positions and present the same challenge with a new group of runners and a different defensive lineup.

As the coach, you are in total control and can simulate almost any type of game situation. You can hit the ball where you want to check out how players react and move. You can set up situations to test various bunt and first-and-third defenses (and to work on first-and-third offensive plays). During this type of situation drill, have the pitcher practice holding runners on, ask the base runners to be aggressive by attempting to steal and to take extra bases and have the catcher work on throwing out baserunners.

Your players will enjoy the game atmosphere, and the quick pace of the action will help you hold their attention. Because there is none of the chaos surrounding a real game, you will be able to halt play when mistakes are made and to walk players through their various options while explaining why they should have reacted in a certain way. Keep creating the situations they struggle with and correct the mistakes until they respond correctly with little or no hesitation.

Working on Specific Situations

If there are specific situations that you feel need to be covered from the previous game, you can set up a situation drill in the exact same manner and work specifically on those situations that gave your team trouble. Let the players react to the play at game speed the first time to see how they handle the situation. Stop the play if necessary to walk them through the various options. Then let them try it

again at full speed. Rotate all of the players through the positions that they might play and allow each of them several chances to experience the situation before moving on to the next one.

Soft Toss Game

A unique and fun twist to the standard situation drill is to play a soft toss game. If you have enough players, divide them into two teams of seven or eight (it is too dangerous to use a pitcher, and the catcher is optional; the coach who does the tossing can be the catcher). If you don't have enough for two teams, create small groups to hit against full defensive lineups. You can see which group of players scores the most runs in a set amount of innings.

The beauty of the soft toss game is that there is action virtually on every toss (the ball is put in play using the traditional soft toss drill with a coach serving as the tosser), and players get plenty of opportunities to field balls that are coming off the bat. Infielders get to simulate fielding ground balls and throwing out runners at a realistic game speed. Outfielders get a lot of work fielding ground balls, tracking line drives, cutting off balls in the alleys and throwing to bases. The batters get to hit utilizing one of the game's most fundamental hitting drills and run the bases in game situations. The only drawbacks are that you can't practice plays involving pitchers and that catchers don't get to receive pitches or attempt to throw out runners stealing.

Once your team seems to be comfortable making all of the routine plays individually, start introducing situation drills during your practices. When done prior to the beginning of the game schedule, these types of drills can help prepare your players for the faster pace they will face when they take on opposing teams. After the season begins, situation drills provide the perfect opportunity to correct individual and team fundamental mistakes.

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