

Off-season Workouts: Take It Slow

With more travel baseball teams than ever before and the high school season fast approaching – or even starting in warmer climates – more emphasis is placed on off-season workouts than ever before. While it's great to provide kids who are really energized by the sport with an opportunity to work on their skills, please remember that you have a long season in front of you. Resist the urge to implement more intense workouts that might burn the kids out and focus more on getting their muscles into baseball shape and developing fundamental skills in a light, fun environment.

Your practices and games will get more serious as you progress toward your in-season routine. For a coach – or even a parent working out with a kid one-on-one – there will be a strong temptation to pick up where you left off last summer or fall. You figure that the players have had some time off to rest their bodies and you are eager to get out there and really get after it. It's like the person who has taken a few months off from exercising and has gained a few pounds. The temptation is to get back into the gym and crank the level on the elliptical machine all the way up and to lift as much weight as you can. What happens the next day? You can't move.

The same thing can happen when it comes to baseball workouts. While kids' bodies certainly seem to adapt more quickly than ours, many of the muscles used for fielding ground balls, swinging a bat and throwing a baseball have not been trained on a regular basis since the end of the previous season. Sometimes coaches and parents who want to give their kids an edge end up hurting them by pushing them too hard too early. A slight muscle strain can lead to a pull or a tear if it is not rested and treated properly.

So, even a minor injury, especially in the off-season, should be given proper time to heal. If not, it could lead to a more serious injury that lingers into the season. So, many times the best intentions when it comes to off-season workouts can lead to a situation in which a player has to sit out for a while or ends up missing part of the season. Either way, that player is going to be behind the other kids – even those who didn't work out at all!

Our suggestion is to ease into the workouts, focusing on developing the fundamental skills that work all of the baseball-related muscles. We all know how kids feel about working on fundamentals over and over. That can get boring and tedious. So, find ways to make the workouts fun and competitive without doing too much too soon. Utilize small groups and stations that rotate frequently – just as we recommend you do during your in-season practices. The main difference at this time of year is that the duration of your stations should be shorter, meaning that the kids will start with fewer repetitions of each skill or drill, building up as the season approaches.

The other difference should be the coach's approach. Keep the atmosphere light and fun. Don't hesitate to instruct and correct problem areas, but really emphasize a fast-paced, fun environment. Be ready to turn any drill into a contest or game at a moment's notice to keep the kids focused. You don't want this to seem like work. Instead, you want the kids to look forward to their baseball workouts as an exciting alternative to the practices for their current, in-season sports.

Here are some suggestions to guide you through your off-season workouts:

THROWING AND CATCHING

The two essential elements of defense are throwing and catching. "The team that plays catch best usually wins." Playing catch can never be emphasized too much, especially this time of year. Throwing is not a natural motion; the shoulder really is not designed to throw a ball overhand. So, it stands to reason that the best way to build the muscles that are essential to throwing properly is by throwing. But, just like anything else, the process of building arm strength – for pitchers and position players – should be gradual. The earlier that you start focusing on throwing properly, the better off your team is going to be as the season progresses.

Teaching kids to play catch properly – and taking it seriously – is one of the most overlooked facets of coaching. Many coaches use the time when their players are throwing and catching to talk to their assistants, mingle with the parents or set up equipment for practice. Many times kids are on their own to play catch and end up having to dive to catch throws, chasing

throws to the backstop, throwing off the wrong foot, dropping their elbows, throwing curveballs, etc. Absolutely nothing is accomplished, and when practice really begins the defensive drills are either sloppy or someone develops a hurt arm as a result of not warming up properly.

Playing catch properly develops many good habits that become second nature in game situations. Baseball is a game of consistency, so makes sense that, “The better we play catch, the better we play baseball.” Taking the time to develop arm strength and muscle memory this time of year will make your team better and healthier down the road.

Since most teams around the country are working out indoors during the winter months, we like to take advantage of the lines that often are found in gyms or other indoor facilities. Have the players stand along a line when warming up and make sure that they turn and point their front shoulder toward their partner and step toward the target so that the front foot lands on the line at about the same time the ball is released. This gives them two solid fundamental concepts to focus on and execute. Of course, please stress that they keep the elbow above the shoulder when throwing.

Players receiving throws should always present a two-handed target out in front of the body. They need to get into the habit of following the ball into the glove with the bare hand each time – to allow for a quicker transfer – and catching the ball out in front of their bodies so that they can see it go into the glove. Many young players tend to back away from throws or catch them off to the side instead of out in front. Ask them to keep their feet in one spot and to catch the ball firmly out in front. Playing catch should not be an aerobic activity. Many injuries occur when players get out of control playing catch and end up running in front of or behind another player who is receiving a throw.

After a few minutes have the players playing catch back up three or four steps. Have them throw maybe five balls at that distance and then move back again. At some point, if they are losing interest, teach them how to play “21.” In 21, the player throwing the ball gets one point if his or her partner catches the ball in front of the chest and two points if the partner catches it in front of the face. See which player can get to 21 fastest. Have the players continue

moving back until many of them have to shuffle or take a long step to get the ball to the partner in the air. One-hop throws are okay as the distance increases. Challenge them to see who can get it there in the air and who can make the most accurate throws. Only have them throw three or four at this distance the first time out. As your off-season workouts progress you can have them make more throws from the longer distances. This is a great way to build arm strength, and after a few weeks you'll find that the kids are able to throw the ball longer distances with greater ease and accuracy.

We recommend that you spend no less than 10 minutes before each workout emphasizing throwing and catching. This means 10 supervised, efficient minutes. Extend this by at least one minute each practice until you max out at about 15 minutes. You can always have the kids throw longer if they are enjoying it or seem challenged by long tossing.

INFIELD DRILLS

The proper position for fielding a ground ball is not natural for most people. Again, kids' bodies have an uncanny knack for adjusting to awkward positions more quickly than ours, but we still don't want to risk injury. Break your team up into groups (one small group for each coach) and divide your baseballs among the groups. Place empty buckets next to each line of kids to give them a place to put the balls they catch and to allow the drill to function more efficiently.

Ask the player at the front of each line to assume a proper ground-ball position – wide base, butt down, hands out in front, glove open so that the fingers are pointing down and touching the ground. Have each player hold that position for five rolled ground balls and then go to the end of the line. Again, before we start hitting ground balls or asking players to explode in one direction or another, we want to condition the muscles, the hands and the eyes to fielding a ground ball properly. Remember, the players should hold the proper ground ball position throughout the drill. They toss the balls back to the coach without standing up and stay in the proper fielding position until they have caught five balls and move to the end of the line.

Go through this drill several times with each player. Feel free to move back a little bit and to

roll the balls harder as the players progress. In future weeks you can move even farther away, roll balls harder and eventually start hitting ground balls. As the players' leg strength builds you can do a similar drill by having them hold a backhand position for three to five ground balls at a time.

If players seem to be losing interest, a fun drill is to get a bucket of sponge balls and have the players stand against a wall or protective mat as if they are hockey goalies. Designate an area on the wall that they need to protect. Back up so you are 30-50 feet away and hit the softer balls hard at them. You are trying to score a "goal." They are doing whatever they can to keep the ball out of the "goal." Obviously, if you have access to a soccer, lacrosse or hockey goal, that's even better. See which kid can stay alive longest. This will add some excitement to your workout and will help the kids improve their reflexes and develop the mindset of doing whatever they can to keep the balls in front of them.

OUTFIELD DRILLS

Many off-season workouts are constrained by the low ceilings found in indoor facilities. In some ways, for outfield play, this is a benefit. While kids are not going to learn how to read balls off of a bat, this gives coaches a great setting to really have players focus on catching fly balls properly with two hands above the head. There's no reason that every player shouldn't be able to catch the ball with two hands over his or her head when the balls are being thrown by a coach. Run all of your players through this exercise until each of them is consistently catching the ball properly. The balls will not be high enough to make any kid feel uncomfortable catching the ball directly over his or her head. This repetition should make the players feel more confident catching fly balls properly when you finally do get outside. If you already are outside, this type of drill work still is important as part of the confidence and fundamental-building process.

The kids may tire of this quickly. If they do, spice it up by having them run pass patterns to work on the crossover and drop steps as well as catching the ball on the run. Again, place the players in groups. Each kid has a ball. The first player in the line steps up, tosses the coach the ball and assumes a proper ready position. The coach says, "Go," and the player

crosses over and starts running with the coach playing quarterback and trying to hit the kid in stride with a throw. If the crossover step is not done properly, have the player come back and start over. You can do this with the players crossing over in both directions and later by having them perform the more complicated drop step with you tossing balls directly over their heads. See which player can catch the deepest TD pass. This drill is great for conditioning and working on the fundamentals described above.

HITTING

When it comes to hitting, the main thing to concern yourself with at this time of year is overdoing it. Be wary of blisters, pulled core muscles and kids just swinging too much. You're not going to win any games or batting titles in February! Again, break your kids into groups, but make sure that each group has supervision. One group can hit off the tee into a net, another group can do soft toss into a net and the other group can do short toss from the front with foam or plastic balls.

Remember, each drill has a specific purpose and should be used to refine one element of the swing. In soft toss we like to take the lower half of the body out of the equation and focus on utilizing a loose grip to have a quick bat. The tee is used to focus on weight shift and to get the hitters' body accustomed to the idea of going back before going forward. With short toss from the front, the tosses should be thrown to the outside of the plate with the hitters concentrating on stepping toward the pitcher and keeping the front shoulder in as long as possible. This time of year it is important to emphasize the importance of developing eye-hand coordination, keeping the head still when swinging and watching the ball all the way to the bat. The new Ripken-Kinect Bat is ideal for working on swing timing and accuracy simultaneously. Try not to have your players take more than three rounds of 10 swings at each station at this point. In fact, for your first workouts two rounds might even be better. You can make any hitting drill more fun by instituting a point system for hitting the ball into a specific target or hitting hard ground balls or line drives.

For those of you fortunate enough to have access to a batting cage, by all means let your kids take some live batting practice. Again, don't overdo it. One or two rounds tops. This time

of year you want them to be able to focus on the ball and to enjoy success. It's confidence-building time. No 90 mph fastballs. As always, let the kids hit and have fun when in the cage. Use the drills to teach and work on any problem areas.

If you use this article as a basis for your initial preseason workouts, your players should have a good time while actually building the fundamental skills that they will need to be successful during the season. As your workouts progress, the level of your team and their progress will dictate your direction. It's okay to challenge your kids, but be careful not to go overboard. Use common sense. Championships are won during the spring and summer, not the winter!

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