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We know it is hard to think about baseball and softball when there is snow on the ground. But this is the time of year many leagues are very busy with their planning and preparation for next season.

Listed below are some *tips* to help you prepare for the 2018 season.

Baseball and softball are meant to be enjoyed by all, especially the participants. In order for the game to be fun, participants must learn to execute the basic fundamentals. When it comes to developing young baseball and softball players—from 4 years-old right up to 18-years-old—the importance of practice, even during the season, cannot be underestimated.

Sometimes we place too much emphasis on the learning of skills and not enough on learning how to play skillfully—that is, how to use those skills in competition. The games approach, in contrast to the traditional approach, emphasizes learning what to do first, then how to do it. Moreover, the games approach lets kids discover what to do in the game, not by your telling them, but by their experiencing it. It is a guided discovery method of teaching that empowers your kids to solve the problems that arise in the game, which is a large part of the fun in learning.

On the surface, it would seem to make sense to introduce baseball and softball using the traditional approach—by first teaching the basic skills of the sport and then the tactics of the game—but this approach has been shown to have disadvantages. First, it teaches the skills of the sport out of the context of the game. Kids may develop a great-looking swing while hitting off a tee or in soft-toss drills in practice, but they may find it difficult to get a hit in a game. This is because they do not yet understand the fundamental tactics of baseball and do not appreciate how best to use their newfound skills. Second, learning skills by doing drills outside of the context of the game is downright boring. The single biggest turnoff in sports is over organized instruction that deprives kids of their intrinsic desire to play the game. The games approach is taught using a four-step process. These steps are as follows:

1. Play a modified game.
2. Help the players discover what they need to do to play the game successfully.
3. Teach the skills of the game.
4. Practice the skills in another game.

Step 1: Play a Modified Game

It's the first day of practice; some of the kids are eager to get started, while others are obviously apprehensive. Some have rarely hit a ball, most don't know the rules, and none knows the positions in baseball. What do you do?

If you used the traditional approach, you would start with a quick warm-up activity, then line the players up for a simple hitting or throwing drill and go from there. With the games approach, however, you begin by playing a modified game that is developmentally appropriate for the level of the players and also designed to focus on learning a specific part of the game.

Modifying the game emphasizes a limited number of situations in the game. This is one way you “guide” your players to discover certain tactics in the game. For instance, you may set up an infield and place a runner on first base, then hit ground balls to the infielders. The goal of the game is for the defense to prevent the runner from advancing to second base. Each time a ground ball is hit, a runner at first base will be going to second. Playing the game this way forces players to think about what they have to do to keep the runner from advancing in a variety of situations.

Step 2: Help Players Understand the Game

As your players are playing a modified game, you should look for the right spot to “freeze” the action, step in, and ask questions about errors that you’re seeing. When you do this, you help the players better understand the objective of the game, what they must do to achieve that objective, and what skills they must use to achieve that objective.

Asking the right questions is a very important part of your teaching. Essentially, you’ll be asking your players—often literally— “What do you need to do to succeed in this situation?” Sometimes players simply need to have more time playing the game, or you may need to modify the game further—perhaps by making the playing field smaller—so that it is even easier for them to discover what they are capable of doing. It may take more patience on your part, but it’s a powerful way for players to learn. For example, assume your players are playing a game in which the objective is to keep the runner on first base from advancing to second base, but they are having trouble doing so. Interrupt the action and ask the following questions:

- What are you supposed to do in this game?
- What do you have to do to keep the runner from advancing?
- Who covers the base if the ball is hit to the right side of the infield?
- Who covers second if the ball is hit to the left side?
- At first, asking the right questions might seem difficult because your players have little or no experience with the game. Or, if you’ve learned sport through the traditional approach, you’ll be tempted to tell your players how to play the game rather than wasting time asking questions. When using the games approach, however, you must resist this powerful temptation to tell your players what to do.

Instead, through the modified game and skillful questioning on your part, your players should come to the realization on their own that accurate fielding skills and tactical awareness are essential to their success in keeping runners from advancing. Just as important, rather than telling them what the critical skills are, you led them to this discovery, which is a crucial part of the games approach.

Step 3: Teach the Skills of the Game

Only when your players recognize the skills they need to be successful in the game do you want to teach the specific skills through focused activities (that is, activities consisting of the skills needed to be successful in a specific game situation). This type of teaching breaks down the skills of the game. It should be implemented early in the season so that players can begin attaining skill, which will make games more fun.

Step 4: Practice the Skills in Another Game

As a coach, you want your players to experience success as they’re learning skills, and the best way for them to experience this success early on is for you to create an advantage for the players. Once the players have practiced a skill, you can then put them in another game situation—this time changing the rules of the game slightly to create an advantage. For example, if the skill being worked on is bunting, you can change the rules to favor the bunter: If strikeouts aren’t allowed or fielders aren’t allowed to charge the plate until the ball gets there, this would make it easier for players to lay down successful bunts and gain confidence in their ability. Your players may concentrate more on getting the bunt down on the ground if they know they have more time to do it (instead of hurrying to get the bunt down under pressure).

We recommend first using the regular rules of the game before making changes to the number of players, the size of the field, or the rules. This sequence enables you to first introduce your players to a situation similar to what they will experience in competition, and to let them discover the challenges they face in performing the necessary skill. Then you teach them the skill, have them practice it, and put them back in another game—this time changing some aspect of the game to give them a greater chance of experiencing success.

As players improve their skills, however, you may need to again change the rules. Not allowing fielders to move until the ball crosses the plate will eventually make it too easy for your batters and won’t challenge them to hone their skills. When this time comes, you can lessen the advantage—for example, by moving the fielders in a little—or you may even decide that the players are ready to practice the skill under regulation rules. The key is to set up situations where your players experience success yet are challenged in doing so. This will take careful monitoring on your part, but having kids play modified games as they are learning skills is a very effective way of helping them learn and improve.

And that’s the games approach. Your players will get to play more in practice, and once they learn how the skills fit into their performance and enjoyment of the game, they’ll be more motivated to work on those skills, which will help them be successful.



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