

20 Common Pitfalls You Need to Avoid as a Baseball Coach

Everyone that has ever had a chance to coach baseball has undoubtedly realized that you can't please everyone. It also seems that these people you can't please also seem to know more about the game than you do - maybe it is true sometimes, but it can't ALWAYS be that way. However this is one of the realities that any coach will have to come to terms with as they don the uniform.

A coach can do himself a lot of good in the eyes of many if he is able to avoid certain coaching pitfalls throughout the season...and stay out of the crosshairs of the know-it-alls. These pitfalls are part of coaching and unfortunately sometimes are not so apparent to see - something like missing the forest for the trees kind of thing. And best of all is that avoiding them should help result in a more fulfilling and fun experience for the players that we are serving.

Here are 20 of them:

1. Operating the same practice the same way all the time: Routine is good. Essential. But doing the SAME THING EVERY PRACTICE is a bit overboard. Plus, there is NO WAY that you, or anyone else, has the ultimate practice plan that covers each and every detail of team preparation such that you never need to alter things. Effective practice organization takes time, prudent thought processing and attention to detail, but to be a coach you must make that time happen. Plus it keeps it fresh and CAN be fun if done well.
2. Line up and everyone take ground balls: There is nothing more disconcerting than to see 12 players line up at SS and one coach hits ground ball after ground ball at each player. Just think, it may take 2-3 minutes between ground balls that each player gets and this drill is done for 20 minutes. Hmmm, how many ground balls are each player receiving in this time line? I need not tell you. (Refer to Pitfall #1 for BORING too)
3. Rocket ground balls: Hey Coach, are you trying to make the team? There is really no need to see how many base hits you can get. That girl you were trying to impress left the stadium 20 years ago anyway. Learn to hit ground balls right at each player so each player can work on the routine play, read hops and decide on the movements they need to use when fielding the ball.
4. Cancelling practice because numbers are low: What a great time to work with the players. Less players, more coaching, more individual work, more development. Don't let the no shows dictate what goes on. Their loss, BIG gain for others.
5. "You're my closer": So the team is a group of 13 year olds (for argument's sake) and you've decided that so and so is going to be the closer. The closer? Geez, I didn't know closers started out that young...uhhhhh...they don't. Let 'em pitch, mix up the roles, get them all work, and maybe...just maybe...at the end of the year have a bit more definition of roles. But it is a KID's game for only so many years. Let them be kids. Enjoy it. No one is getting a job with the Yankees based on the make up of the

pitching staff.

6. Controlling baserunner movements: Only letting players run when you direct them to run otherwise they have to mimic some Roman statue. I am sorry, but this does not permit players to develop their own thought processing or baserunning instinct. Next time you are at a youth league game, watch how much coaches control when and where players should run to and from.

7. The prestigious positions: Oh boy, this one may have hit a sour note. Giving partiality to certain players at a young age, such as the same SS for EVERY game. This should not happen until later in their teens, when players bodies have changed and skills have developed. And they are kids. KIDS! It is not your fantasy anymore...if it is anyone's, it's theirs.

8. Over coaching hitters while in the 3B coaching box: Throwing out oodles of information (sometimes garbage information anyway) to a hitter while he is at the plate. "Get a good pitch", "Stay back", "See the ball", "Use your hands", "Keep your head down", "Short stride", "Rotate the body", etc...oh ya, and don't forget to swing if you can get around to it! Come on. MLB coach Dwayne Murphy had a great quote at a Blue Jays clinic last year. To paraphrase: "Coaches, be quiet. It is hard enough to hit a baseball as it is." Well said.

9. Asking the hitter to shorten up with two strikes: Did you work with each hitter and actually practice this two strike approach? If you haven't, then how do you expect any player to make the adjustment in a game? Again, please see the Coach Murphy quote.

10. MLB versus Amateur: Hey coaches, it is like comparing apples to oranges. Clearly it is not the same and trying to compare how big leaguers play versus amateur players do is ludicrous. Big leaguers are bigger, stronger and of course much more skilled, so don't try to compare. It isn't remotely fair nor productive. Amateur players should be compared to themselves - hey did you get better today or not? How a 12 year old compares to Derek Jeter is irrelevant for the most part.

11. Don't be a critic: It is easy to say a kid can't play; it is much tougher to go out on a limb and see what a player CAN BE. Be a coach first. Model your coaching with a positive, growth-oriented position. There are more than enough negatives kids get away from the field.

12. Keeping the batting order the same: It doesn't happen in the big leagues, so no need for it to happen at the youth level. Give kids chances to hit in different parts of the order, let them experience the experience. You want to build self esteem not knock it down. You might be surprised with what occurs anyway.

13. Throw the curve ball: That's a good one. We need to win, don't worry about getting hurt or developing the fastball...just throw the deuce! "I saw a video last night and it is actually pretty easy." Haha ok. Keep it simple and productive, guys and gals. Command a fastball, develop a change up, then see what happens from there.

14. I like to call pitches: There is a time and place, but not at the youth level. And really - how many REAL pitches do your pitchers have in their arsenal? Former MLB pitching coach Brent Strom once said to a teenage group of ours: "Hey guys, big league pitchers OWN, on average, about one and a half pitches. So how many do you think you OWN?" A lot of slouching in chairs ensued.

15. The trick play: The only trick play I know is making routine plays, running the bases with intelligence, throwing strikes and swinging at good hitter's pitches. The trick play?! I don't see big leaguers working on trick plays, so save yourself some time. Work on the 99.9% of the plays that will dominate your games.

16. Team defence failures: So a rundown got messed up or a there was a breakdown on an infield pop up? Did you practice it? If it has not been practiced, then it is not the kids' fault. You can't expect them to be perfect at what they practice, so don't expect a flawless night at the improv either.

17. Making the 9th hitter bunt: Teach him to swing the bat. Not sure the kid would like to always bunt anyway. Fastest way to have the kid quit baseball. Hey, if the bunt is needed, it should not matter who the hitter is.

18. You missed the sign: Don't ever assume your players know the signs just because you went over them 6 months ago. Practice your sign system, test your players, make the system simple and have as few a signs as possible.

19. Not disciplining your best player: It is a team, all players are equal as team members. All consequences should be the same no matter if it is the number one player or the number twelve player. That is, unless you want to lose the rest of your squad for one player. You, he and the team will all be better off for it.

20. Giving signs to first hitter: OK, now WHAT sign could be given to the first hitter of the game?

I hope you have had a chuckle or two with these pitfalls. I have. But on a more serious note, these are all common pitfalls that we can become prey to if we don't watch out for them; if we don't prepare; if we don't remember that this is a game for the athletes to grow in, not for us to shine in. Let them play. Let them fail. Let them learn. Let them grow. Let them face struggles and adversities. It is a fun game in which they can learn a bit about life and themselves, so let's let them do that.