

Something that will separate the Thunder Academy 10u from most youth baseball teams is that we hold Chalk Talk classroom practices — particularly during the winter and early spring months. These classroom sessions make a big difference on the field during the season.

You've seen the agony from coaches during games. ***"Why are you not where you're supposed to be?!"*** Or ***"What are you thinking?!"*** Coaches may cover certain situations during an on-field practice, but they're missing an important opportunity for understanding and reinforcement.

The practice field is a good place for movements, reps, and drills. But it's not always the best place for deep thought and conversation on strategy and responsibilities. That's why the Thunder Academy 10u will hold several 30-45 minute classroom sessions for this purpose.

Let's take a closer look at the types of topics the Thunder Academy 10u will cover in our Chalk Talk classroom practices...

## 1. Cutoffs and Backup Responsibilities

Thunder Academy 10u will have a playbook that outlines every player's responsibilities for cutoffs and backups based on the situation and type of hit. While the players should study and learn this guide, it's also important to walk through the responsibilities and why.

The plan is to create something more polished for future seasons, but this whiteboard does the trick for now. Here's how it works...

On the left-hand side, we assigned nine players a position. Those who aren't assigned will often be a batter or baserunner to allow them to think through the situation from that perspective.

The situation includes the following:

- Runners on base
- Speed of the runners (red for slow, green for fast, black for unknown)
- Balls, strikes, and outs
- Score and inning

Some of this won't apply to backup and cutoff responsibilities, but it will come in handy for other situations discussed below.

Given the runners on base, I'll say that, for example, there's an extra base hit over the left fielder's head. Grab the magnet for your position and move it to where you need to be.

After each player moves his magnet, we'll talk about it. Did you get it right? If not, why should you be in a different place? Why are we moving where we are? Are there any gray areas and other considerations?

The result is that we're often very crisp on cutoffs and backup responsibilities, leading to executing more outs on the bases via relays and preventing runners from getting extra bases that they don't earn.

## 2. Hitting Situations and Approach

We use this same whiteboard as a jumping off point for discussion of hitting situations and approach.

Once again, we provide a situation, but this time from an offensive perspective. We know which bases are occupied and by type of runner, the count, outs, score, and inning.

How does this situation impact your approach? For example...

- With a runner on second, you're looking to hit to the right side to move him over.
- With a runner on third, you're looking to drive him in via fly ball or ground ball.
- With a 2-0 count, you're looking for a fastball in your wheelhouse that you can drive.
- With a 2-strike count, you're looking to shorten up, make any contact, and thinking up the middle or opposite field.
- With a 3-0 count and a runner on second with two outs, you're going to be aggressive on your pitch.

***Or would you?*** That's the whole point of this discussion. We want kids to be thinking about how their approach changes based on the situation and to thoroughly understand why. As a result, they have a strategy when coming to the plate without coaches having to remind them.

### 3. Pitching/Catching Situations and Approach

When you come watch the Thunder Academy 10u play and you pay close attention, you may notice one very minor difference between the way our pitchers and catchers interact compared to most teams: ***Our catchers call the game.***

For most teams, the coaches are sending in signs for every pitch. I've seen this all the way down to the 9u level. We don't do it, and for a couple of primary reasons.

**First, I don't want to create robots.** A catcher taking signs for every pitch isn't thinking about what to call and why. A catcher who calls a game is constantly thinking about what to call and why. It makes him a more valuable and knowledgeable catcher down the road.

**Second, coaches give very simplistic signs that are easily stolen.** The signs must be quickly and easily understood by the catcher. As a result, any parent, coach, or player paying attention can often decode those signs after only a handful of rounds. The result: Your pitchers may suddenly get rocked when hitters "strangely" adjust well and seem to know what's coming.

The catcher will make mistakes. But he may also do things the coach wouldn't that work. The result is that the catcher will consistently improve in this area.

Calling a game becomes an area to teach and learn. It's something we focus on during these Chalk Talk classroom sessions.

We talk about things like...

- How do we approach the first batter versus the third or last batter in the lineup? How might that change based on strength of the opponent?
- How does our approach to calling pitches change depend on the score? The inning? The count?
- When is a good time for an off-speed pitch? How does having a runner at third in a close game impact your pitch calling?
- How might baserunners in general impact your calls?

The beauty of pitching is that there are plenty of gray areas where there isn't necessarily a right and wrong answer. Sometimes, being unorthodox and unpredictable is effective.

But it's important to talk through situations so that pitchers and catchers have a plan of attack.

#### 4. Baserunning Situations

We use this whiteboard to talk through baserunning situations as well — both offensively and defensively.

When is a good time to take a risk on the bases? When is a bad time? How does your approach at third base on wild pitches change depending on the number of outs? How does it change depending on the batter?

We also talk through how to defend baserunning situations. One, in particular, is the first and third situation. What is the opponent trying to do? How does the speed of each runner impact our approach? Why does the score matter? How would the number of outs impact our strategy?

The conversation is often centralized around what the opposition is trying to do and why. Understand that first. Now, do we want them to be able to do that? If not, how do we stop them?

#### 5. Team Goals and Philosophies

You can hammer away at your team goals and philosophies while on the practice field or before and after games all you want, but it's helpful to set a firm foundation in a classroom setting. This allows your players to contribute to the conversation.

Use a blank whiteboard to write down thoughts like...

1. What are ways that you can show hustle?
2. Why does hustle matter? How does it impact the game?
3. What are examples of things that separate great teams from everyone else?
4. What are ways that you can positively and negatively impact your teammates based on your attitude?
5. How can you show respect for umpires, teammates, yourself, opposing players, and coaches?
6. What kind of team do we want to be? What are our goals?  
How do we define success?

This is just a starting point, but these classroom sessions can be very productive as we put these types of things in writing.