

The Building Blocks for Success

What separates great teams from good teams, good ones from bad? What are the best teams doing that others are not? Are there building blocks for success?

There are a few characteristics of a team which I believe are important for any group of athletes to succeed...

DEFENSE

We won't always out-hit you. Our pitchers are often less dominant than our opponents'. But our defense will often stifle and frustrate the other team.

When most coaches assemble a team, they focus on two primary things:

1. Big bats
2. Big arms

You want power hitters and ace pitchers who can shut down the opposition. That's the focus.

And I get it. I wouldn't mind having those things, too. But tunnel vision focused only on these attributes can and will cause issues on defense.

If you have three or four big, strong, and slow power hitters, where are they all going to play? Typically, these players are designed for

first base. The overflow goes to third base and the outfield. But are they good in those positions?

You can pitch, but where do you play when you aren't pitching? Once again, this often creates a situation where you're trying to hide a player who isn't a plus defender.

In our case, the focus is on building a roster of athletes who can play multiple positions. That flexibility makes it easy to have a 1a, 1b, 1c, and 1d defensive alignment, regardless of who is pitching or sitting.

Outfield

Okay, we're still talking about defense, but I felt this needed its own section. That's just how important it is, particularly as kids get older.

We consistently play teams at the 14u level with players who can hit the ball hard and far. It's imperative that you have outfielders who are fast, get good reads, and can run down the ball.

With good outfielders, you can turn what may otherwise be an extra base hit against some teams into a single or an out. That is huge at the older ages when scoring becomes more difficult.

At younger ages, the outfield positions get neglected far too often. Kids don't want to play there, and coaches often put their weaker players there. If you aren't developing good outfielders, you will pay for it later.

The truth is that outfield, as you get older, may be the most important defensive position on the field. No other position can make a bigger difference between whether a drive into the gap is an extra base hit and multiple runs or an out.

Practice Failing

I believe that the experience our players had the past few seasons helped them become the players and team they are now. Losing and failing ultimately provide more lessons than does winning.

When you win, it's easy to overlook the mistakes that were made along the way. Everyone is happy. Big smiles all around.

When you lose, teams take a deeper introspective look at what happened. Why did it happen? What could we have done differently? How do we prevent this from happening again?

Granted, I'm a strong believer in process over results, and I'm less satisfied with an ugly win than a well-played loss. But there's some human nature here. When you win, there's less urgency to change and fix something.

Losing gives the bad feeling that no one wants to repeat. And it will often motivate you to get better.

Practice in Adversity

Looking back at the past seasons, I'll fully admit that we weren't the most mentally tough team. What I mean by that is that we'd often crumble under the pressure.

What do you do when an umpire makes bad calls? When the other team starts coming back? When the other team starts building a big lead? When the other pitcher is difficult to hit? When parents start freaking out? When the weather is bad? When it's hot? When it's cold? When it's raining? When it's windy?

Some teams and players can be amazing in perfect conditions. But the minute things are just a little bit off, they fall apart.

This may simply be because they haven't dealt with adversity enough times yet. Or they haven't figured out how to properly manage it.

I firmly believe that our experience in adversity as well as how we learned from it is a big reason for our success this season. We consistently win close games, come back at the last minute, or prevail under against-all-odds conditions.

I don't believe this is luck. Our players have learned how to handle these situations after years of dealing with it poorly.

The Little Things

We constantly preach the “little things” because they are so easily ignored. When we aren’t playing our best baseball, it’s because we aren’t executing the things that are so easy to control.

I’m not talking about anything that takes physical skill. I’m referring to the things that anyone can do (but very few players do it consistently)...

1. Hustle: Harp on hustle more than anything else. It drives me absolutely insane when a player doesn’t hustle. A baseball player has very few moments in a game when he gets to run as fast as he can. Take advantage of those moments.

Hustle is often the difference between a hit and an out, a rally ended or a big inning. It’s the difference between an easy out and a close play — and, as we know, umpires are human. Force them to make a difficult call.

2. Energy: You don’t need to be the boisterous, annoying team that is constantly shouting nonsense. But energy and body language are contagious. A drop-in energy during adversity often accelerates a downward trend.

3. Positivity: You’re down. The other team just scored three. You just made an error. You struck out. **SO, WHAT??** Teams that remain positive in adversity — supporting one another and not getting down on themselves — are teams that can always fight back.

Teams that dwell in negativity unravel at the first sign of trouble. And it can get ugly.

4. Awareness: What's the situation? What's the count? How many outs are there? What is the pitcher throwing? Players can't be reactionary. They must have awareness — a basic understanding of what is happening so that their approach will be the most productive.

5. Responsibility: Do you know what to do in the event of a bunt? What about your backup responsibilities? Or first and third situations? Players who get distracted and lack focus are often the first to neglect their responsibilities. This can kill a team's chances for success.

6. Team First: Successful teams are built around players who care first about the success of their team and second about themselves. Yes, a player should want to improve himself and expect the most of himself. But the team is the primary concern.

Is a player smiling and happy about his big game after a tough loss? Is he moping in the dugout due to his bad day after a big win? This is selfishness than can suck the life out of a team.

No Free Passes

The greatest defense in the world goes to waste if you can't throw strikes.

Our strength is defense. As a result, we need our pitchers to pitch to contact. Strikeouts are great but walks and hit batters are the worst possible outcome for us.

Walks kill teams. I've seen too many big arms who look pretty on the mound kill teams because they can't throw strikes. And coaches often ignore it because the velocity or breaking stuff are impressive.

Granted, you also need to play to your team's strengths and understand your weaknesses. If defense is a weakness, the risk and reward of such a pitcher makes more sense. For us, if you can't strike out the batter, we need contact.

The Other Things

Of course, there are many other things that contribute to winning youth baseball games. Baserunning, pitching, situational hitting, and more all contribute. We could go on for days with this list.

But I wanted to focus on the primary factors that have contributed to one particular team's success. The truth is that we may not be the best team when it comes to some of these "other" things. We won't always outhit and outpitch you. But it's all the primary things above that often make the difference for us.

The beauty is that many of these things can be controlled and can help any team find more success.