

Are We Playing Too Much?

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Perhaps you have heard of a concept that leadership and management guru Stephen Covey calls "Sharpening the Saw." While he was aiming this idea to the business world, it has applicability to those who coach and play sports as well.

Basically, the concept goes like this:

Don't get so busy sawing that you forget to sharpen the saw.

What happens to the saw while you are sawing?

It gets dull.

What happens when your saw becomes dull?

You can still saw, but the process becomes much less effective. The work is harder and takes longer - you just don't saw as well.

To bring this back to baseball and softball, I've noticed a trend that is not new, but may well be developing into a problem. The situation is the growing proliferation of travel teams at all age levels at nearly all times of the year. While things do slow down a bit in areas of the country with cold winters, in many places baseball and softball are becoming nearly a year round activity.

First, there is the normal spring ball season. Practice for this may begin in January or February (in some places, even earlier), with games beginning in late March. The season continues until June, and then summer league begins. This typically will run into August, and then school starts again.

In many areas of the country, this means Fall league ball. Practice for this often begins in August, and the Fall season can run into late October.

So, you have 10 or so months of 'sawing' with young ball players, leaving perhaps two months to 'sharpen the saw.' I wonder if this is enough time for players to work on new skills development, along with appropriate strength and conditioning.

No doubt that the best way to improve in baseball and softball is to play a lot. This is why many of the best (but not all!) players come from warm weather states - California, Texas, Florida and others. They simply have better weather allowing them to play and practice more.

But is there a point where the returns for all these games and travel diminish? Where it's time to stop and take some time to 'sharpen the saw?' I think there is. Consider the Major League season: April - September, then the playoffs. Two teams go all the way to the World Series in October.

Therefore, the vast majority of big leaguers are playing about 5 months (admittedly, a LOT of games), not counting Spring training (pre-season). And there are various winter leagues that certain players participate in for additional skill development.

But, while playing a lot of games in a relatively short period of time is physically demanding, the big boys have a LOT of down time with which to recover or 'Sharpen the Saw.'

I submit that coaches and parents need to consider this idea carefully. It is well known that acquiring a new skill takes time, and that there is usually a decrement in performance as one learns and implements a new skill. That's why it's usually best to not make any major mechanical adjustments during the regular season. And, with all the games and practices during the regular season, coaches know it's tougher to provide a lot of individual attention to their players.

This is becoming more apparent by the increasing number of questions I get about how to implement a good all around Strength & Conditioning (S & C) program during the season. Or how to fit in arm strength or bat speed workouts between games and practices. It can be done, but it's not easy.

Here are some key points to consider:

1. In what areas does your player(s) need to improve? Prioritize them.
2. Take the first priority (let's say its running speed improvement) and make it the first thing to work on after any skill work for that day. Skill work requires more precision as it is performed. For this to be most effective, one should not be tired or the skill work can suffer.
3. If your player has multiple areas where they need to improve, consider taking some time off from all the playing and games. Will missing Summer or Fall ball really hurt you, considering you'll be working on new skill development, along with S & C?
4. This brings us to the idea of 'active rest.' The athlete remains physically active, but in some other sport or activity than baseball or softball. Sort of the 'cross training' concept, which allows the ballplayer to recover physically and mentally from their regular routine. As long as the ballplayer is staying active, most any activity will suffice.

Here's a basic format for a well rounded off-season S & C workout:

Monday - Strength, Flexibility work

Tuesday - Power work, Flexibility, Energy System conditioning

Wednesday - Strength, Flexibility

Thursday - Power work, Flexibility

Friday - Strength, Flexibility

Saturday - Energy System conditioning, Flexibility

Do any hitting or pitching mechanical work before these workouts, e.g., skill work in the AM, S & C work in the PM.

5. Let the energy level of your player(s) be your guide. If s/he is having fun, is full of energy and enthusiasm about their workouts, is not feeling unduly sore, etc., then let them go. On days they may be feeling tired and worn down, it's time for a day off. Just pick up at the next day's workout - don't worry about making up for the missed work.

Remember, everyone needs to stop and 'Sharpen the Saw' at some point. If it means not playing as many games in order to do so, so be it. The idea of taking one step back in order to more quickly take two steps forward is very legitimate and worth making a part of your player development program.