

How To Coach Tee-Ball



By Gary Price

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INTRODUCTION

Every year thousands of youth stop playing baseball across America after only one season. Why is that? Truthfully, there are probably countless reasons for this but I can't help but think that many of these kids quit because they don't think they are as good as the other players and that makes it no fun. I can still remember one particular little boy beginning his first year of baseball several years ago. That kid didn't have a lot of natural athletic ability...he couldn't throw or hit all that well. It would have been easy for his coach to give up on him and spend more time with the promising players. Yet his coach gave him just as much attention as the rest of the players and made it fun for everyone. That young boy developed confidence and went on to play baseball throughout his school years enjoying countless hours of America's favorite sport.

Had it not been for a coach that cared enough to see that every player had fun and was treated fairly, the little boy likely would have given up on baseball. I know this story well because I am that little boy and it's the positive experience that I received from my first coach that later influenced me to volunteer.

Before I started coaching I thought that my twelve years of baseball playing experience would provide an adequate background. However, I soon discovered how little I really knew when it came to teaching five and six year old kids. You need to use an entirely different approach than you might use for an older team. I learned that during an early inning of my very first game as a tee-ball coach. Our right fielder asked if he could go to the restroom while our team was out in the field but I asked him to try and wait until the inning was over. The next time I turned around, he was nowhere to be found, he had gone to the restroom. We just kept playing even without a right fielder. You will have a lot of funny experiences like that during the course of a tee-ball season and they are a part of why it is so special. There is no doubt that kids of this age need special attention and by using this guide you can know ahead of time what to expect from your players and how to prepare them for the season.

To prepare myself as a coach I talked to other parents that had coached beginning baseball and tried to learn from them but many of the tips they gave me just simply did not work. I also searched for books on the subject of “coaching baseball” but the publications I read were targeted to more advanced players. As a result, I learned by “trial and error” over three seasons. Each time I found something that worked I wrote it down and later developed a step-by-step system that really can help anyone coach a tee-ball team and make it fun for their players.

This guide was written for all those parents who find themselves in charge of a “beginner level” baseball team voluntarily or otherwise and either have limited baseball experience or just haven’t taught this age group before. According to one respected source, organized youth sport programs have seen their player rolls nearly double over the past seven years creating a steep demand for new coaches. Some estimates indicate that each year over two million kids play tee-ball alone and that equates to approximately 180,000 head coaches and countless assistants. Understandably, many of these coaches are just not prepared to teach the game of baseball to a group of beginning players yet alone make it fun.

Most parents that find themselves coaching tee-ball have numerous commitments outside the home on top of demanding work schedules and simply don’t have time to organize a baseball team. It’s sad to think that many young players will stop playing baseball because their coach just doesn’t have the time to plan ahead and make practices both productive and fun. However, it doesn’t have to be that way...by using the proven practice plan and tips contained here, you can coach your team like you have been preparing for weeks. Even though your players are new to baseball, it is important that you go to practice with drills and activities already planned in order to keep them busy and make efficient use of the limited time you have. Best of all you can skip the “trial and error” period that I went through.

I encourage our players to always practice and play hard but

there is no rule that says it can't be fun at the same time. When the kids are having fun and laughing I don't stop them unless it gets out of hand because I want them to enjoy the experience. If their playfulness becomes distracting, I can regain control by involving the players in a practice drill and refocus their energy. This strategy has worked very well for our teams.

During our most recent season we had only two players with any previous baseball experience yet we were very competitive by the very first game. While our league doesn't keep score for tee-ball games, even players of this age know when their team is playing well. The tips and ideas contained in this booklet bring together the idea of having fun but being prepared.

I have used the practice plan contained in this book on tee-ball players between the ages of five and six since that is the age of the "beginner" league in the community where I live. However, this booklet can also work with any young team of beginning players when adjustments are made to strategy to fit the variations found among league rules. With the aid of this booklet you can know what to expect from young players before the first practice and you will find useful practice drills and tips that can help your players develop new skills. The practice plan that will be detailed later has been used to prepare new players for games after just eight practices. Of course, you can alter the practice schedule if you choose but it seemed to be just the right amount of preparation for our teams.

I assure you that if you take the instructions contained in this booklet and combine it with your own appreciation for youth and team sports, you will do fine. Actually, you will be more prepared than most of the team you will face. But remember, this is just a game ... make it fun! Your involvement with tee-ball might be the influence a certain young person needs to stay involved with baseball for many years to come.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE PLAYERS

Every coach needs to understand the capabilities and limits of his or her players in order to guide their development. This is one area in particular where I could have used more direction when I started to coach baseball so I could have better prepared my earlier teams. One former coach told me to start the team out by letting them throw tennis balls to each other in order for them to learn how to catch without the fear of getting hurt. One thing you should know from the beginning is that, on average, only one or two children on a five to six year old team will be able to catch a baseball. By the end of the season you may have three or four that can catch a ball with consistency, if you're lucky. Don't worry, most of the other teams will be in the same boat and our training strategy was developed with that in mind. The following will give you an idea of what to expect:

- Throwing- Majority of players will initially throw with the wrong foot forward or with poor arm motion.
- Catching – An average of one or two players out of ten will be able catch with consistency on a new team. Expect only three or four to catch effectively by the end of the season.
- Hitting- You will need to show them the proper grip to start and most will need help addressing the ball for at least the first half of the season. See the “hitting section” for a discussion on the proper grip and stance.

Be patient... your players will be trying their best. Give them encouragement as often as possible by looking for things that they do right and praise them for it. Support them even through failures. During a practice or in games a player will sometimes swing and miss the ball. Encourage them! Tell them they have a good swing or you like the way they keep their eyes on the ball...anything to boost their confidence. When confidence is low even the pro's perform below their potential.

When correcting a player, start off by telling the player some-

thing they did good and then ask them to correct the action that was not desirable. For instance, if a player has the habit of falling to the ground after throwing a ball, you could say something like “way to hustle to the ball...next time try to stay on your feet when you throw the ball but I like the way you hustle”. That type of approach corrects an unwanted behavior without discouraging the player or embarrassing them in front of their teammates.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- (1) aluminum bat up to 15 or 16 ounces in weight, 25 or 26 inches in length
- (1) wooden bat up to 14 ounces in weight
- (1) set of throw-down practice bases made of flat rubber
- (15) practice balls designed for youth (check your league for specifications)
- (2) hitting tees if possible (one usually provided by the league)
- (2) pieces of rope each forty feet in length
- (1) equipment bag
- copies of this booklet for each of your assistant coaches

FIELD SIZE

The length of base paths vary by league so check your local rules. Our league uses Pony Baseball regulations for tee-ball and their dimensions are as follows:

- 1) Distance between bases- 50 feet
- 2) Distance from home plate to pitcher- 38 feet
- 3) Distance from home plate to second base- 70 feet

In many communities it may be hard to find a vacant baseball field to practice on and that is not a problem in tee-ball. Find any smooth open field with a level grade and grass that has been mowed (backstops are nice for warm-up drills but not

required). If you use throw-down practice bases found at most sporting goods stores as we do, you can create your own field in just minutes. Simply measure out the distance between bases as used by your league or use those shown above.

PRE-SEASON PRACTICE SCHEDULE

1st PRACTICE – MEET THE TEAM

For many tee-ball leagues, teams are allowed to start practicing approximately four weeks before the season. The system presented here is based on eight pre-season practice sessions and in my opinion that is ideal. Normally, I schedule two practices each week until the season starts. I also recommend a practice game before the season to help the kids get a feel for the flow of a game and to help you determine where additional work is needed before the season starts. If possible, schedule your practice game with about two practices remaining before real games begin, preferably on a Saturday or Sunday to accommodate the highest attendance.

TEAM MEETING

At the very first practice, be sure and greet the players like you are genuinely glad to see each and every one. They are a little nervous about meeting their coach for the first time so put them at ease. I always have a brief meeting with the kids and their parents at the start of our first practice to let them know a little about myself and my approach to coaching. It is important to keep team meetings to five minutes in length or less because the kids will get restless and hard to control.

I give the parents a printed copy of any important information so they can read it later such as a practice schedule to avoid having to call players that may later miss a practice. I also include a game schedule (if available), team roster and a general information handout that includes items like my phone number, directions to the game field, summary of tee-ball game rules for our league and a reminder to be positive around the players. I also let them know they don't need to call me if they cannot make a practice (only games) and that they can call anytime before 9:00 p.m.

Next, I always go over my most important goals for the season:

Goal #1: Everyone has fun and shows good sportsmanship

Goal #2: Every player develops basic skills

I always tell the parents that they can help by being positive around the players and to praise a player when they see good effort. Let them know that everyone is to treat umpires and officials with respect during and after the game - no exceptions.

Goal # 2 naturally involves becoming a better player but it is actually more than that; it includes learning something about teamwork. For most kids this age, teamwork is a new concept.

Then I cover my two Safety Rules:

Safety Rule #1: Never swing a bat unless instructed to do so
by a coach

Safety Rule #2: Never go near a player holding a bat

Safety is an important issue because when you have five year olds throwing balls through the air and swinging metal bats, that can be a recipe for disaster. I am happy to say that none of our teams have ever experienced an injury at any practice or game. It's important to set the rules early and enforce them.

Also be sure and discuss equipment the players will need. In my case, I ask that all the players have their own glove but they don't have to own their own bat since I provide those. For ages five and six, I recommend a metal bat weighing no more than 15 or 16 ounces and I like to have a lighter, wooden bat on hand for the smaller kids.

Instruct the parents that want to buy their own bat that they can determine the proper size needed for their child by having them grip the bat with one hand at the end of the handle and hold the bat straight out from their body. If the child cannot hold the bat steady without shaking then it is too heavy. Remember, it is better to have a bat that is too light rather than too heavy because you want them to be able to handle it easily. Sometimes a player insists on using a bat that is too heavy for them

just because their dad bought it. Have them look for a bat that is designed especially for tee-ball since they are generally lighter.

The first practice is a good time ask for a volunteer to serve as the “team mom” and coordinate items such as uniforms, after-game snacks, team pictures and the “end of season” team party. I also ask for four volunteers to serve as assistant coaches. If you use the enclosed practice plan which I recommend then furnish a copy of this booklet to your assistants so they will know the training drills you will be using and will be familiar with the tips discussed. Visit briefly with your assistants before practices and games to discuss assignments and cover the length of drills recommended in the practice plan since that can help the kids stay busy. Excessive down-time between drills creates an opportunity to lose control of young players. If it is difficult for you to get assistants to commit for the entire season then just ask any interested parents to simply volunteer at the practices and games they are able to attend.

Next it is time to start coaching. I like to start off by placing the kids randomly at infield positions and name each position for them by pointing to the player at that spot. Then tell them this is what is called being “in the field” or playing “defense”.

FIELDING DRILL

Afterwards, break the team into three groups of three or four players each. Take one group to an open area nearby to take soft grounders from a coach hand-rolling the ball while the other two groups work on batting practice together. The group working on the fielding drill should start without their gloves about ten yards away from the coach. This allows the coach to see that their hand position is correct and the player can see and feel the proper technique. Demonstrate the proper hand position with the “pinkies” together and hands cupped. Have them show you their hand position before you roll them the ball. The coach should make sure the players’ knees are slightly bent and their back is straight. Hand-roll the ball slowly enough to allow them to field the ball successfully and build confidence.

After some practice, our team will make a game out of this by pretending the ball is an egg and the players need to field it before it stops rolling or it will break. Anything you can do to make it fun will improve the participation. The second half of this drill should be conducted with their gloves on.

Observe which players that field the ball best, they will be your best prospects for pitcher, short stop and first base. Toss some soft throws to the players that seem to handle the grounders well to determine who can catch a thrown ball. If they struggle with fielding grounders then they probably cannot catch a thrown ball. Make a note of the players that can catch because you will want to use those players at first base during the season.

BATTING PRACTICE

The two groups in batting practice should take positions in the field. Unless you are aware of a skilled player ahead of time it is best not to place an individual at the pitcher position for safety reasons. The pitcher is the closest fielder to the batter and a new player may not be able to react quick enough to defend him or herself this early in the season. Tee-ball uses all of the positions of regular baseball and many leagues will allow the use of an extra infielder. The extra infielder in our league has to be placed between the second baseman and second base. In addition, many leagues allow all players to play defense every inning with the extra players placed in the outfield (usually about ten to fifteen yards behind the infield). Check with your league for local rules on fielding positions.

Have two coaches in the field if possible (at least one) instructing the players and to help with the retrieval of the balls hit while another coach is at the plate instructing the hitter. It is important to use some safety precautions while you are learning the skill level of individual players. To assist with keeping fielders a safe distance from the hitter, lay down a rope as a boundary stretched two steps behind and parallel to the base paths between first and second base and another between second and third base. Our league requires infielders to stay

two steps behind the base path during a game but regardless of league rules it is a good idea to start the players this way for the first two practices. Check with your league for the rules regarding the position of infielders during games.

Instruct the infielders to stay behind the rope boundary until the ball is hit and don't let the next batter hit until all players have returned behind the ropes. Young players have a tendency to creep up to the batter in their excitement to catch the ball and don't yet fully understand their limitations. Rotate players in to bat after about six hits. The first practice will be the first time many of your players get to practice hitting so it will take some time.

Have the hitting coach concentrate on proper grip and stance during the first practice since this is the basic starting point of good hitting. When working on the grip, have the player hold the bat with both hands together and point the large end straight up in the air so you can see their knuckles. Tell them to adjust their hands so that their middle knuckles on both hands are lined up in a row as shown in "Illustration 2" under the hitting section. This grip helps them follow through with their swing. As for the stance, their feet should be shoulder width apart with the front foot just behind the beveled corner on the back portion of the plate. Staying toward the back of the batters' box helps the hitter generate maximum bat speed at impact. Don't try to teach too much at this practice or you run the risk of overwhelming the players right off the bat (so to speak).

When teaching your players the proper distance to stand from home plate consider using a training aid such as a long flat piece of rubber placed at the spot where the balls of their feet should be. I use the mock pitchers' mound that came with a set of throw-down bases I purchased (they are made out of flat rubber and you can buy them at most sporting goods stores). That helps them to address the ball each time before they swing. Don't try to teach new players any more than the proper grip and stance on their first day. On their last hit, have them run to first base to give them a feel of running in the right

direction. Remember, you will probably have to show them where first base is located the first few times.

Keep rotating groups so that each has a turn hitting and fielding. We limit practices to one hour because that happens to be the approximate length of our games and that is about as long you can hold their attention anyway.

RUNNING BASES

When everybody has had a turn to bat, call the players in and have them line up on the first base side of home plate. They will be running around the bases so make sure that the players waiting to run don't stand in the way of a runner crossing home plate. Let all the kids have one turn. Have someone that has played before go first to demonstrate the proper direction to run and let them run all the way around without stopping. This seems very basic but I remember hearing a parent of one team that we played against say their players didn't know where to run during their first game because the coaches had forgotten to instruct the kids. Many of the basic rules of baseball that adults take for granted have to be taught to these players and they learn better through action drills like this one. Lectures do not work.

A quick word about positive reinforcement. Brag on the team after practice and tell them how proud you are of them. I don't have to tell you that kids (and adults alike) thrive on praise and now is the ideal time. Most of the kids are trying very hard to please their coaches even though it may be hard to spot. Please remember, they are just young kids and playing baseball to have fun. You can be organized and still have fun.

ADMINISTRATIVE

At the end of the first practice, remind the parents that the team needs a "team mom" if you haven't already had someone volunteer. Depending on the amount of time before the first game, the first practice may also be a good time to have the "team mom" coordinate the effort of obtaining uniforms which varies among leagues. We have a local uniform shop that allows any

team to borrow pants and shirts to try on for sizes. Create a checklist for taking down the uniform sizes of the players. Let the parents tell you the size for their own child but be sure and help any kids that don't have a parent in attendance. By the way, for about \$2 each you can usually have their names put on the back of their game shirts which helps the parents and coaches learn them easier and the kids seem to like it. For tee-ball we use just their "first names" on the back of the shirt.

Ask for the "e-mail" address of all the parents so you can advise them of weather cancellations or update them on any other matters such as uniforms or schedule changes. Ask the parents to check their "e-mail" if there is any question regarding bad weather. If you send them an "e-mail" be sure and request a "reply" so you will know who has received the message and then just call those who don't respond. This seems like such a little thing but utilizing "e-mail" for team messages can save a tremendous amount of a coach's time over the course of a season. I strongly recommend you use it if available.

PRACTICE # 1 - SUMMARY

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 5:00 min. | Meet with parent and players to cover ground rules. |
| 5:00 | Line up the kids at positions "in the field".
Name all the positions. |
| 15:00 | Break into three groups of three or four. One group works on fielding nearby while the other two groups take turns hitting. |
| 15:00 | Rotate another group to field grounders. |
| 15:00 | Rotate another group to field grounders. |
| 5:00 | Call players in. Line up on first base side of home plate to run bases without stopping. |
| | Practice ends |

PRACTICE #2 – REINFORCE BASICS

At the start of each practice gather the team together and tell them the drills they will have that day. Then ask them a question relating to something learned the previous practice. For instance, at the second practice you may want to ask a volunteer to show you how to grip the bat. Reward the player with a piece of gum. This seems to reinforce ideas already presented and repetition is necessary for young players.

FIELDING DRILL

Next, place the kids at infield positions and tell them the name of each position. Tell them when their team is in these positions it will be called “in the field” or “defense”. Let them know that there will be a surprise for the one that remembers that at the next practice. Then break into three groups like in practice #1, with one group taking hand-rolled grounders from a coach and the others hitting. For the group in the fielding drill, take them to an open area away from the field and again start without gloves for the first few minutes and then use gloves the remainder of the time. Please remember to make it fun for the players when they start to lose interest. You may recall during the first practice we pretended that the ball was an egg and fielding the ball before it stopped kept it from cracking.

Another game we play toward the end of the fielding drill is called “speed ball” and it helps young players develop quick hands and learn to hustle for past balls. With the group in the fielding drill, have them line up side-by-side with enough space between them that they can’t touch each other with their arms out. The coach should stand in front of the line, about ten yards away and hand-roll balls to each one in order, as many times as he can within one minute. Count how many times they can field the ball and throw it back to the coach during that minute. Do it again and try to increase the number of times the group can field the ball each time you do it. Have them run for past balls and make it fun.

BATTING

It is best to work with new hitters on proper grip and stance at this practice. For the more advanced hitters, it is a good idea to work with them on lifting their lead leg (leg closest to the pitcher's mound) slightly to start their swing motion. The new players will need to work on their footwork at a later time, after they are comfortable with the grip and stance.

While the players take a turn batting, select a player that you know can catch the ball and place them at first base. Let the defensive players field balls that are hit to them and practice throws to the player at first base. Be sure and have a coach in the field reminding the first baseman to watch for throws. You will have to remind the fielders to throw the ball to first base after every hit since this is a new concept for most of them. Have a second coach in the field instructing the defensive players and to help with the retrieval of balls. As in the first practice, lay a rope two steps behind the base path between first and second base and another between second and third base as a boundary for the defensive players to stay behind until the ball is hit. Place one of your skilled fielders at the pitcher position, however, if you are unsure of the skill level of your players at this point, then have them all stay safely behind the rope boundary.

While one player is batting on the field, have another warm-up in a hitting station. This will not only warm them up before their turn to hit on the field but it is also good practice. Our hitting station consists of setting up a second tee about five feet from a chain-link fence or back stop and point the batter so that they hit directly into the fence. For this you will need a second tee and a bucket to hold about ten balls. Have a parent that is watching practice assist with this drill by pulling a ball from the bucket and place it on the tee for the hitter after each hit and let the batter keep hitting one after another. When the player leaves the hitting station to hit on the field, call in another player from a position in the field and keep rotating until everyone in the group has had a turn.

RUNNING BASES

Rotate the groups around so that everyone has a chance to hit and participate in the fielding drill. When finished, call the players in and have them line-up on the first base side of home plate. Let each player take a turn running the bases one time all the way around and back to home plate. However, this time have a first and third base coach stop them at each base to get them used to the idea of following the instruction of their base coaches.

PRACTICE #2 - SUMMARY

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 5:00 min. | Discuss drills for practice |
| 5:00 | Line up the kids at infield positions and remind them this is called being “in the field” and tell them the names of each position |
| 15:00 | Break into three groups with one fielding grounders and the rest hitting |
| 15:00 | Rotate another group to field grounders |
| 15:00 | Rotate another group to field grounders |
| 5:00 | Have all players line up on first base side of home plate and run the bases one time. Have a base coach stop them at each base. |
| | Practice ends |

PRACTICE #3 – ADVANCED FIELDING

Before practice begins, set out the bases like always and today take two long pieces of rope about 40 feet in length each and place them between second and third base. These are meant to illustrate the edges of the base path needed for a tag drill. Generally the edges of the base path run parallel with a straight line between the bases (baseline), approximately four feet on each side of the baseline. Therefore the ropes should run parallel with each other and be about eight feet apart.

Let the team know it will work on tag and batting drills today. Like before, place them at positions in the field and name each

position for them. Ask the players what it is called when their team is in this position? The answer should be “in the field” or “defense”. Reward a correct answer with a piece of gum. Afterwards, break the team into two groups of four to six players with one group batting in an open area nearby while the other uses the field working on the tag drill.

TAG DRILL

The players in the tag drill line up at second base to take turns acting as base runners. You will need an assistant to help organize the base runners during this drill. The assistant can tell the base runner to run to third after the ball is rolled. Have one player get in position as a third baseman to field the ball and tag the runners. See “Illustration 1” to see the base paths and position of the fielder.

ILLUSTRATION 1



Before actually starting the drill, a coach should illustrate the proper tag technique which is on the hip – never at the head. Show them how to hold the ball inside the glove while placing their free hand firmly on top of the ball. This way they are less likely to drop the ball during a tag. The tag drill is mainly intended for the defensive player so make it easy enough so the player can field the ball and successfully tag the runner who will be running to third base. You can make it easier for the

fielder by having the coach get closer to the fielder and rolling it as soft as needed to allow the player to field the ball. Normally, the coach rolling the ball should only be about ten yards away to start. As confidence builds, move further away and roll the ball faster. About half way through the drill remind your players the proper technique for tagging the runner.

The coach organizing the runners of this drill should instruct the players to stay inside the ropes when running to third base. At this point don't encourage the runner to avoid the tag since you are trying to build the confidence of the fielder right now - avoiding tags can be taught later. It is also a good idea to instruct the runners not to run into the fielder. Then after three or four chances at fielding the ball and tagging the runner, rotate a base-runner to the fielding position. This drill will help all infielders regardless of what position they play so have them all participate.

BATTING PRACTICE

The coach working with the batters should continue to instruct on proper grip and stance but also begin to work on lifting the lead leg to start the swing. That will help them shift their weight during the swing and give them more power. Also make sure the batters bend their knees slightly when addressing the ball. It is helpful to use a hitting station again as in practice #2 to warm up the hitters. Place a coach in the field instructing the defensive players and if needed, use the rope boundary for the defensive players as recommended in the first two practices.

Identify a player that has shown good fielding ability and place them at the pitcher position for practice fielding and throwing to first base. In tee-ball the pitcher does not throw pitches but is required for fielding and should be played by the more talented fielders since that position will often have to catch the hardest hit balls. That is also the position that will frequently have the most balls hit their way during games. Again, the first baseman needs to be a player you have identified earlier that can catch a thrown ball. We played a team once that didn't have a first baseman that could catch a thrown ball and so they

had the pitcher just roll the ball to the first baseman and it worked. That strategy should only be used as a last resort for obvious reasons. Between hits in batting practice, hand-roll balls to the pitcher for extra practice throwing to first base.

After rotating groups and everyone has had a chance to bat and participate in the tag drill, finish practice by lining-up the players on the first base side of home plate. Let them take turns running the bases and use base coaches at first and third base to stop the players at random on the bases. This drill will help them learn to watch their coach for instruction while running the bases.

PRACTICE #3 - SUMMARY

- 5:00 min. With the team placed in defensive positions, ask them what it is called when a team is in this position. The answer is “in the field” or “playing defense”.
- 25:00 Break into two groups of 4 to 6. Have one group work on a tag drill where the players line up at second base as base-runners while one player is in position as a third baseman. Give the defensive player approx. four grounders and let them attempt to tag runners going to third.
- The other group should practice hitting.
- Let the players in the tag drill stop and take a five-minute break.
- 25:00 Rotate groups from hitting to the tag drill. Break out a player that shows good fielding ability and let them work as a pitcher fielding grounders and making throws to (a player you have identified that can catch) first base.
- Let the fielders stop and take a five-minute break.

5:00 Call players in and have them line up on the first base side of home plate. Take turns running the bases. Have a first and third base coach stop them randomly on the bases.

Practice ends.

PRACTICE # 4 – ADVANCED HITTING INSTRUCTION

Let the players warm up by taking hand-rolled grounders as they arrive. Up to this point, time has been split equally between defensive drills and batting while this practice focuses more on batting and base-running. I recommend taking time for batting practice every time you meet with your team.

After the team has arrived, gather them around and ask for a volunteer to show how to tag a runner. Hand the volunteer a ball and let them illustrate by holding it in their glove with their free hand on top of the ball. They should tag below the waist in the demonstration. Reward the volunteer with a piece of gum.

BATTING TECHNIQUE

Have all the players line up next to the batter box so that everyone can see a coach demonstrate the proper batting technique. They have already had three batting practices by this point and so hitting instruction should make more sense to them. Include the following points:

- 1) Explain the grip and ask them to hold their hands that way and pretend they're holding a bat
- 2) Show them the proper stance and distance from the ball
- 3) Wait on the pitcher to make his motion to pretend to throw (if required by your league)
- 4) Lift front leg closest to the pitcher to start swing
- 5) Watch the ball as you take a swing
- 6) After the ball is hit, drop the bat
- 7) Run to first base

BASE RUNNING

After you have demonstrated batting technique (three to five minutes), have the players line up on the first base side of home plate. Demonstrate signals for a “run through” first base and another for “turning” first base. “Running through” first base is used on a close play and the player simply steps on first base in stride as they run past and turn to the outside. Our coaches signal a “run through” with both hands straight up in the air similar to a football referee signaling a touchdown. When you start this base-running drill, have the first base coach stand two steps beyond first base and give the runner a high five when he goes by. This will reinforce the importance of running hard past the base. Demonstrate another signal for “turning” first base which could be as simple as pointing your arm toward second base. This is useful for a ball hit through the outfield and you want the player to advance to second or beyond.

With the players lined-up at home plate, have the players each take two turns “running through” first base. Have an assistant help with lining them back up at home plate after their turn. With the players again starting from home plate, give each runner two opportunities at “turning” first base and running to second. Assistant coaches can again gather the runners back into line. Once all the players have seen both signals a couple of times then gather all the players next to first base.

With all the players on one knee next to first base, demonstrate the proper running stance. Demonstrate a running stance by putting one foot on first base and the other foot toward second base. A base runner should always face the batter so they can see when the ball has been hit. The proper stance should include bending the knees while slightly leaning toward the base they are running toward. This helps them get a quicker start during a game and is something that your base coaches will probably have to remind them each time they are on the bases.

For the next drill, demonstrate the “stop” and “go” signal that the third base coach will use as the runner approaches second

base. A good “stop” signal is holding your arms straight out from the body with the palm of the hands facing out. For the “go” signal we use one arm to make a spinning motion by making large, quick circles in the air. Let each player take two turns running from first base to second following the verbal instruction of the first base coach. As they approach second base, the third base coach should alternate between the “stop” and “go” signals to force the players to watch for the signal. Let the players run all the way to home plate and have an assistant coach assist in gathering the players back at first base.

BATTING PRACTICE

After each player has finished with the base-running drills, place each one at positions in the field for batting practice. It is a good idea to start with your best fielder at pitcher to give him an opportunity to field real hitting. Have the player that can catch the best play first base to take throws from the fielders with each hit. Hand-roll extra grounders to the pitcher to give them more practice making throws to first base. Rotate the fielders for a turn at bat and use the hitting station as in practice #2.

Some leagues require the pitcher to make a throwing motion before the batter swings and if yours does then practice it that way. They may as well get used to the way they will see it in a game. Let them have more hits this practice than the previous sessions since they will have more time to work on their hitting than normal. On the last hit have the batter run to first base. It’s helpful to have the batter stay on the base to advance with each following hit and have assistants on first and third base to instruct the runner when to go or stop. This will be the first opportunity for the runners to advance on contact by the hitter and it is a very important learning opportunity.

I always have my best pitcher and first baseman stay at those positions for at least the first three batters before rotating them. Only rotate players to pitcher and first base if they can catch or otherwise defend themselves from hard hits or throws. After all players have had a turn at bat, have the team line up at home plate, again making a line to the first base side. Have each

player run the bases while following the instruction of base coaches at first and third, stopping them randomly on the bases.

PRACTICE # 4 - SUMMARY

- 5:00 min. Have the kids warm up by taking grounders while waiting on the others to come.
- Ask the team how to “tag” a runner. Touch the runner on the hip with the ball in your glove and the free hand on top of the ball.
- 5:00 Line up the kids near home plat to watch you illustrate the main points of hitting:
- 1) Check grip and stance
 - 2) Wait for pitching motion (if your league requires this)
 - 3) Lift lead leg slightly to start swing motion
 - 4) Swing the bat hard
 - 5) Drop bat
 - 6) Run as fast as you can to first base
- 5:00 Line all the players up near home plate and instruct them on “running through” first and “turning” first base. Let them have two turns for each signal.
- 5:00 Line all the kids up near first base to watch you illustrate proper base running stance. Instruct players of the “stop” and “go” signals. Runners should watch the third base coach for a signal when moving to second base. Have them take turns running the bases with the third base coach stopping them at random all the way to home plate.
- 35:00 Have the kids take a position in the field. Then let everyone take a turn at batting practice.

Let each player hit eight times and watch for good grip and stance. Also, have the batter wait for the pitcher to make a throwing motion. On their last hit, let them run to first base and advance on each hit by the following batter. Runners should advance on each hit until they score or are put out. Have base coaches at first and third to get the runners used to watching for instruction. Have the fielders practice tagging the runner or making throws to first base.

5:00 Have the team line up at home plate, making a line toward the first base side. Have all players run the bases while following the instruction of base coaches at first and third.

Practice ends.

PRACTICE #5 – MORE ADVANCED FIELDING

Before the players arrive, set up the bases and the ropes illustrating base paths as we did for practice # 3. Let the arriving players warm-up by taking grounders and making throws back to the coach working with them. After all the players have arrived, gather them together and ask for a volunteer to show you a “base-running stance”. Reward a correct answer with a piece of gum or other treat. Then ask the team if a base-runner can be tagged-out while standing on a base. Naturally the answer is “no” because we won’t discuss force-out plays at this time. Reward another correct answer.

BASE RUNNING

Next, line up the kids next to first base and let them take turns running the bases at the instruction of their first and third base coaches. Tell the players they need to watch their base coaches for run signals and demonstrate each one again as in the previous practice. Have the runners get in the habit of looking for the third base coach as they approach second base so they can know whether to keep running or stop. Give each player a turn

to run the bases all the way around to home plate. Stop some runners at second or third base and let others keep running at random to reinforce the need to watch their coach.

TAG DRILL

After everyone has had a turn running bases, break the team into two groups of four to six players with one group working on the tag drill (see practice #3) using the bases while the other group takes batting practice nearby (use the hitting station as in practice #2). The group on defense should line up at second base and ask them to pretend to be base runners. Have one player take a position as a third baseman to take grounders. Before starting, show all the players the proper way to tag a runner on the hip with both hands on the ball—never tag the head of the runner. As before, have an assistant organize the runners as another coach hand-rolls a ball to the fielder. The fielder should attempt to tag the runner on their way to third base.

After each player has had three or four tag attempts, rotate another defensive player and let everyone have a turn fielding. Remember, you can make the drill easier for the defensive player if necessary by getting closer to the fielder and rolling it more slowly to be sure they are successful. As they master the drill, make it more challenging.

While the defensive group is working on this drill, I take a pitcher and first baseman to work on fielding and making the throw to first base. This is the most frequent play that your team will face and it's a good idea to give this area plenty of attention.

After everyone has had a turn at the tag drill, let the group sit down and take a five-minute break. After the break, rotate this group to batting practice. After the second group has had their turn at the tag drill let them take a five-minute break.

OUTFIELD DRILL

The final drill will be an outfield grounder drill that all the players will practice together, although, in separate groups.

Keeping the team divided into the same two groups and have one form a single line in left field with the other group in right field. Have at least one coach working with each group. The coaches should hand roll grounders to the outfield and give them an opportunity (one at a time) to field the ball and throw it quickly back to the infield.

Using a long rope, make a large circle around the pitcher's mound. Have an infielder get the retrieved ball to the circle as quickly as possible. I like to have them practice getting the ball back to the circle quickly because some leagues require it and it helps prepare them for real baseball. When balls get by the outfielder, prompt them to run after the ball as fast as they can. This will happen in games and you may as well prepare for it. Have the infielder run halfway to the outfielder on past balls. You can make a game out of this drill by telling the players that the ball is a rabbit and they need to catch it before it gets by them. It is important to stress throwing the ball quickly once they field it.

You will need to be familiar with your league rules on how to stop play so runners can no longer advance. Some leagues allow the outfielder to stop play when he makes his throwing motion toward home while others require that the ball be returned to the pitchers mound before play is halted. Whatever your league requires, adjust this drill to fit. Be aware that young players have a tendency to fight over the ball when it is in the outfield so you will need to stress teamwork.

PRACTICE #5- SUMMARY

5:00 min. Warm up the team by hand rolling them grounders as the team arrives.

Ask for a volunteer to show a "base-running" stance. Ask the players if they can be tagged-out while standing on a base (They should answer "No"). Reward correct answers with a piece of gum.

- 5:00 Line up the team near first base to illustrate a base-running stance. With base coaches in place, have the players take turns running the bases.
- 15:00 Break into two groups of 5 to 6. Have one group work on the tag drill by lining up as base runners on second base while one player starts the drill at the third base position. Hand-roll the ball to the third baseman and have him tag out the runner. The other group will work on batting away from the field. Have a coach work with a pitcher fielding and throwing to a first baseman.
- Let the defensive group take a five-minute break before hitting.
- 15:00 Rotate groups.
- Let the next defensive group take a five-minute break before the next drill.
- 15:00 With the team still in two groups have one line up single-file in left field for outfield grounders, the other in right field. Hand-roll balls to the outfielders and have them practice getting the ball in quickly. Use a rope to make a circle around the pitcher's mound and with the help of an infielder have the players get the ball back to the circle as quickly as possible.
- Practice ends.

PRACTICE #6 – GAME SITUATIONS

Before the team arrives, set up the bases as normal. Have a coach warm-up the arriving players by hand rolling grounders to them and let the players throw the ball back to the coach. When you are ready to start practice, have them gather around and ask the players what they should do if the ball rolls past them in the outfield. The answer should be they “run as fast

as they can to field the ball and throw it toward the pitchers mound as soon as they pick it up”. Reward a correct answer with a piece of gum.

Let the team know they will be practicing like they are in a real game today. Place the players at specific defensive positions. Have everyone take batting practice together and give the defensive players “game-like” situations where the fielders will field hits, attempt tags and make throws to first base. Give them a look at base runners by having the batters run to first base on their last hit and keep them on base as a runner. Let them advance with the hits of the following batter until they score or are put out and then place them in a defensive position. It is a good idea to use the hitting station to warm-up the batters as in practice #2.

Before starting this session, remind the infielders of the following points:

- 1) After fielding the ball, look first to tag a runner. If you can't tag a runner throw the ball to first base.
- 2) If you have a fast pitcher, teach them to watch for a runner at third and try to tag them going home if possible. Otherwise throw to first base. Explain to the pitcher that when you tell him “force at home” that he needs only to touch the base. Otherwise you will tell him “tag at home” when that applies. Again, that is only for the faster players. Others should always throw to first base.
- 3) Tell outfielders to get to the ball as fast as possible and throw it as soon as they pick it up.

This is a really good opportunity for the players to experience what a game will feel like. Have the pitcher mimic a throwing motion before the hitter can hit if your league requires it in games. Also, give your pitcher plenty of practice by rolling them extra balls if they don't get many hits. Keep in mind, the third baseman and shortstop will rarely throw out a runner going to first base during games. However, they can still practice making

throws to first since that is good practice for real baseball. Always emphasize that infielders look first to tag a runner out since that will be the play with the highest success rate.

At the end of practice, line up the players on the first base side of home plate for a base-running drill. Have first and third base coaches stop the runners on bases at random. Let each player have a turn running the bases and finish at home plate.

I have found that after the sixth practice it is an ideal time to schedule a practice game with another team in your league. If you have fewer pre-season practices then schedule a practice game with two practices remaining. That is the best way to give your team a look at real game-like situations and find the areas that need the most work

PRACTICE #6 - SUMMARY

5:00 min.

Have the team warm up with grounders.

50:00

Take batting practice with all players at a specific defensive position. Practice “game-like” situations and make it fun. Have batters stay on base after hitting and advance on the hits by the following batter until they score or are put out. Cover the following points with the defense before starting:

- 1) Look first to tag a runner. If not, then throw to first.
- 2) Teach the meaning of “force out”.
- 3) Teach the faster pitchers that when a runner is at third, they should run home and tag the runner. If no runner at third, throw to first base.
- 4) Have outfielders get to the ball and throw it in as quickly as possible.

5:00 Have players run the bases with base coaches either stopping the players on a base or letting them run at random.

Practice ends.

PRACTICE #7 – MORE ADVANCED FIELDING

Before the team arrives, set up the bases as normal and set up the base path ropes similar to practice #3, this time between first and second base. Have a coach warm-up the arriving players by hand rolling grounders to them and let the players throw the ball back to the coach. When you are ready to start practice, have them gather around and ask the players “what they will do if a ball is hit to them in the infield”? The answer is “to look for a runner to tag, if not, then make a throw to first base”. The answer for the outfield is “to get to the ball as fast as possible in the outfield and throw it toward the pitcher as soon as they pick it up”. Reward a correct answer with a piece of gum.

TAG DRILL

Break the team into two groups of five to six players each. One group will work on the tag drill while the other takes batting practice nearby (also use the hitting station as in practice #2). The group working on the tag drill should line up next to first base to take turns as base runners for this drill. Have one player positioned as a second baseman. Before starting, remind the players of the proper tagging technique - that is holding the ball in their glove while the free hand is firmly on top of the ball. Demonstrate the proper way to tag on the hip. For this drill they should first attempt to tag the runner but if they cannot then let them make a throw to the coach at first base.

The coach at first base should also organize the runners. Runners waiting their turn should be next to the base but out of the way so they aren't hit by a wild throw. Have the runners go to second base as a coach hand-rolls the ball to the fielder. The coach rolling the balls should get close enough to the fielder to let them make the tag as the runner goes by. The distance

may be ten yards or more depending on the skill of the fielder. Instruct the player to look for the tag first in these situations and throw to first as a second option. Remember, the coach rolling balls to the fielder can back further away if necessary to make it more challenging. After four or five attempts, rotate another fielder until everyone has had a turn. After this group has finished, let them take a five minute break before rotating groups.

OUTFIELD DRILL

After both groups have had a turn at fielding and hitting, place one group in a single line in left field and the other in right similar to practice #5. Hand roll balls for the outfielders to practice grounders and let them work on getting to the ball and throwing it in as quickly as possible. Set up a rope circle around the pitchers mound and have the players throw it to an infielder as quickly as possible who runs the ball to the circle around the pitchers' circle. Consider using a game such as pretending the ball is a rabbit and instruct the players to catch it before it gets by them and remind them to throw it quickly after they field it.

PRACTICE #7 – SUMMARY

5:00 min. Have the team warm-up by fielding grounders. Before starting drills, ask for a volunteer to tell you what a player should do if the ball is hit to them in a game. The answer for infielders should be to look for a tag first, then throw to first base.

20:00 Break into two groups of 5 to 6. Have one group work on the tag drill by taking turns as a second baseman and the others acting as base runners on first base. Hand roll the ball to the fielder and have him tag out the runner if he can, or otherwise throw to first base.

The other group should practice hitting.

Let the players in the tag drill take a five-minute break before hitting.

- 20:00 Rotate Groups.
- Let the players in the tag drill take a five-minute break before the outfield drill.
- 15:00 Have one group line up in left field for outfield drills and the other group in right field. Have a coach work with each group hand-rolling balls; have a third coach near the pitcher's mound working with the infielder getting the ball into the circle.
- Practice ends.

PRACTICE #8 - GAME SITUATIONS

Before the team arrives, set up the bases as normal. Have a coach warm-up the arriving players by hand rolling grounders to them and let the players throw the ball back to the coach. When you are ready to start practice, have the players gather around and ask for a volunteer to tell you how they know when to stop on a base. The answer is to “watch their base-running coach”. Reward a correct answer with a piece of gum. Let them know that the team will practice like it's a real game at this practice.

BATTING AND FIELDING PRACTICE

Use the hitting station to warm-up the batters prior to hitting on the field. Like practice #6, take batting practice with all the players on the field playing “game-like” situations where the defensive players field hits and make tags or throw to first base. Let the batters become base runners after their last hit and let them advance with the hits of the following batter until they either score or are put out. Have the hitting coach monitor the amount of time each hitter to make sure it is equal.

Repetition is important at this age so remind the defensive players of the following points:

- 1) After fielding the ball, look first to tag a runner. If they can't then they should throw the ball to first base

- 2) If you have a fast pitcher, teach them to watch for a runner at third and try to tag them going home if possible. Otherwise throw to first base. Explain to the pitcher that when you tell them “force at home” that they only need to touch the base. Otherwise tell them “tag at home” when that applies. Again, that is only for the faster players.
- 3) Tell outfielders to practice getting to the ball as fast as possible and throwing it as soon as they pick it up.

Give the pitchers plenty of practice by rolling them extra balls if they don't get many balls hit to them. Make sure the first baseman gets adequate practice catching throws. It is easier for a first baseman to catch the ball if you instruct them to keep their feet still with one foot on the bag. The exception is when the throw is wide, then make sure the first baseman does whatever it takes to knock the ball down which may include taking their foot off the base. That is simply because an overthrown ball is just an easy extra base for the opposing team.

BASE-RUNNING

At the end of practice, line-up the players on the first base side of home plate for the base-running drill. Have first and third base coaches stop the runners at random on the bases. Let each player have a turn running all the way around to home plate. Your team is now ready for a game.

Visit with your players after practice and let them know that you are proud of the way they have worked at practice and the next time you meet they will be playing a real game. This is an exciting time for young players and an anxious time. Assure them that they are going to have fun. Don't let yourself or your assistant coaches get too serious about the games because the players will detect your attitude and it will only make them nervous.

PRACTICE # 8 – SUMMARY

5:00 min. Have the team warm-up with grounders.

45:00 Take batting practice with all players at a specific defensive position. Play “game-like” situations and make it fun. Have the defense practice tagging runners or throwing to first base when the ball is hit to them. Let the batters stay on base after their last hit and advance on the hits of the following batter until they score or are put out.

Cover the following points with the defense before starting:

- 1) Look first to tag a runner. If you cannot, then throw to first.
- 2) Teach the meaning of “force out”.
- 3) Faster pitchers should attempt to tag runners going home if possible or throw to first base.
- 4) Have outfielders get to the ball and throw it in as quickly as possible.

5:00 Line-up the players on the first base side of home plate for the base-running drill. Have first and third base-running coaches stop the players on bases at random. Let them run all the way around to home plate.

5:00 Meet with team and let them know how proud you are of them and give them lots of praise. Let them know that a game is coming up and how much fun it will be.

Practice ends.

HITTING

Before the start of hitting instruction give consideration to the proper selection of a bat. A five year old will normally pick out the bat with their favorite color or simply the one that is biggest. You can help them select the right size bat by having the player grip one at the end of the handle with their left hand (for right-handed hitters) and hold the bat straight out from the their body. If they cannot hold the bat for five seconds without shaking or waving the bat then it is too heavy. Try it again with a lighter bat until you find one that is right for that player. Start with a bat no more than 15 or 16 ounces.

When a player starts batting practice for the first time, I have found that it is better to focus on no more than two areas of a players' swing at any practice or they will be overwhelmed. During the first two practices for new players concentrate on their grip and stance since this is the basic starting point of good hitting. For the grip, have the player grip the bat and point it straight up so you can see their knuckles as shown in "Illustration 2". Tell them to adjust their hands so that their middle knuckles on both hands are lined up in a row. This grip helps them follow through with their swing.

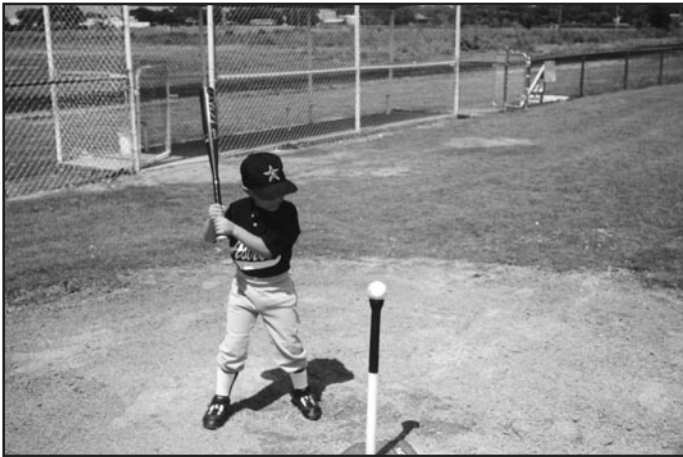
ILLUSTRATION 2



As for the stance, place them in position with their feet "shoulder-width" apart and their lead foot slightly behind the beveled

corner on the back portion of the plate as shown in “Illustration 3” below. By staying toward the back half of the batter box the player can generate more bat speed at impact. To assist with instructing proper distance from the plate, consider using a long flat piece of rubber placed at the spot where the balls of their feet should be. For this purpose, I use a mock pitching rubber that came with a set of throw-down practice bases and use it for the first two practices only. Since this age cannot conceptualize where they should stand in relation to the ball, a visual aid like this works wonders. Don’t try to teach the new players any more than grip and stance during the first two practices.

ILLUSTRATION 3



By the third practice, have the hitters keep the bat off of their shoulder and work on shifting their weight through the swing. Proper weight shift can be accomplished by having the player lift their lead leg when starting their swing motion. As they set their lead foot back on the ground, it forces them to shift their weight toward the pitcher and into the ball. It will take some practice for them to master the timing of this weight shift but it will come. Make sure they extend their arms fully during the swing and follow through.

After the season begins and the players are more confident

with their swing, some coaches position their batters in the box, turned slightly left or right and have them hit to a specific area. This can help your batters avoid hitting the ball to an ace fielder and avoid an easy out. I have seen this strategy work very effectively.

One common problem I see during a season is when the batter keeps hitting below the ball. This is frequently an indication that the bat is too heavy and the player should simply switch to a lighter bat and then make sure they stay with that bat. Make a mental note of which bat is best for each player. Young players have a tendency to pick up the closest bat or one that their friend uses.

FIELDING

I begin fielding drills for new players by demonstrating how to position their hands. Have them “cup” their hands with their pinky fingers together as shown in “Illustration 4”. Begin fielding drills without gloves so you can see their hand position and the player can visualize and feel the proper hand position. Have a coach set up about ten yards away from the players and hand-roll easy grounders to start. Make sure the players’ knees are slightly bent and their backs are relatively straight. Roll the ball slowly enough to allow them to field the ball and build confidence. The second half of this drill should be conducted with their gloves on. We use the drill without gloves for a portion of the first two practices only.

ILLUSTRATION 4



As the players develop more confidence, challenge them by rolling the ball to one side and make them move to get to the ball. During fielding drills this is a good time to demonstrate what I call the “ready” position shown in “Illustration 5”. Have each player model the “ready” position for you before rolling them a grounder. I like for our players to use this position when in the field but it is important for coaches to understand that young players have short attention spans and get tired easy. So please try not to get too upset if they don’t always have a good defensive stance throughout the game... it just won’t happen.

ILLUSTRATION 5



After your team has spent some time fielding grounders, try a fun drill. One game that we have used has the kids pretend the ball is an “egg” and the goal of the game is for the player to field the “egg” (ball) in their glove before it stops rolling or the “egg” breaks. This is very simple but it helps get all of the players interested. At the second practice we play a game called “speed ball” where a group of four to five players line-up side by side with enough distance between them that they cannot touch each other with their arms out. The idea is to hand-roll grounders to each player in order and count how many balls the players can field and throw back, as a group, in one minute. Do it again and challenge them to increase the

number each time you do it. Any game like this that you can create to make routine drills more fun will improve participation.

THROWING

Tee-ball players have a wide range of abilities when it comes to throwing a baseball and even among experienced players, everyone throws differently. There are; however, certain fundamentals that you can teach your young players as they learn how to throw. The starting point is gripping the ball; five year olds generally have to use all of their fingers to hold and throw the ball.

Windup

Before starting a windup make sure the player is looking at the target and begins the throwing motion by pointing their glove slightly toward the target. Their body should be slightly at an angle with their glove hand closest to the target. The throwing arm is brought back and up. The front shoulder should point at the target at this point and the throwing arm is extended behind the body with elbow bent and the lead foot is raised slightly.

Delivery

The players' arm is cocked and ready to fire at this point. The lead foot is directed toward the target causing weight to shift forward. The hips turn toward the target and the throwing arm is brought forward just before releasing the ball.

Follow-Through

The player directs the throwing hand toward the target and swings the back leg around. The throwing motion ends with the throwing hand down in front of the body. Eyes should stay on the target throughout the throwing motion.

Very few five and six year olds will possess good form in throwing initially and a coach shouldn't expect players of this age to master these mechanics. However, they are not too

young to start learning the right way and they can improve their throwing motion with time. I like to focus on one component of a throw at a time so as not to overwhelm them.

BASE-RUNNING

The main point here is the correct stance and making sure the players know to watch the base coach for instruction. We spend a lot of time on base-running drills as illustrated in the practice plan section of this booklet. This is an area where your team can easily develop an advantage over the competition if you spend just a few minutes each practice running the bases and use base coaches as part of the drills.

I have observed that very few teams instruct their players on a very simple component of base-running and that is the proper stance. Our players are instructed to face the batter no matter what base they are on. This allows them to see when the batter makes contact and is simply the proper stance at any level of the game. While keeping one foot on the bag and the other toward the next base, their feet should be no wider than their shoulders. Knees should be bent slightly and their shoulders should lean somewhat toward the base they will be running toward. If you follow the practice plan enclosed, by the time you play your first game your players should get in the proper stance whenever a coach says “running position”.

GAMES BEGIN

Due to the high number of games in our schedule, I normally will not schedule a practice during the first week of games and generally only schedule two practices after games begin. When we do practice during the season, those sessions will include batting practice and any drills needed to strengthen a weak area noted during games. You can schedule as many practices as you feel are necessary but keep in mind the young players will become “burned-out” if you have too many practices on top of a long game schedule. As an example, our league has 15 games and we have a total of ten practices which I feel is enough for this age.

LINEUP

Before the first game, ask your parents to call and let you know when their child cannot attend a game. This will allow you to set your roster before you get to the field. Older teams use a laminated roster that can be completed and then posted in the dugout; however, this just doesn't work as well for tee-ball. The reason is, five year old players have trouble remembering where defensive positions are located and need to be placed there by a coach. It helps if all assistants have a small copy of the roster with them on the field and then they can help get players to their position and speed up the game. To facilitate this, I put our roster on a computer spreadsheet that can be duplicated and printed before the game. When printing, just leave plenty of room between the names so you can make changes when a player unexpectedly misses a game. Using a computer spreadsheet will also allow you to save lineups to be used for later games.

I change the roster somewhat each game but typically re-use the general positions of a previous game schedule. My personal preference is to alternate schedules so that each player gets to start every other game in the infield and then I rotate three or four of the better players at pitcher. This type of rotation keeps all the kids interested and gives every one a chance to develop their skills. The exception is if your team is playing against players that hit the ball hard and in that case you certainly would not want to put a player in a position where they might get hurt. The safety of your players should, of course, be the main concern. Use your discretion in this regard.

Most tee-ball leagues will require that all players play defense every inning and personally I like that rule because nobody is left out. "Illustration 5" is an example of a sample roster that I have used and it shows how we list positions for each inning. We do this since our league limits each player to a maximum of two innings at any position during a game. When I rotate players to the infield I will usually have them play the same position they have played before because they seem more comfortable that way.

ILLUSTRATION 5

ASTROS ROSTER

SHIRT

	<u>NAME</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>INNING 1</u>	<u>INNING 2</u>	<u>INNING 3</u>	<u>INNING 4</u>
1	CLARKE	7	SHORT	SHORT	CENTER FLD	CENTER FLD
2	TAYLOR	10	RIGHT FLD	RIGHT FLD	2ND BASE	2ND BASE
3	JACKSON	8	ROVER	ROVER	RIGHT FLD	RIGHT FLD
4	TANNER	4	2ND BASE	2ND BASE	LEFT FLD	LEFT FLD
5	AUSTYN	2	CATCHER	CATCHER	RIGHT FLD	RIGHT FLD
6	JORDAN	1	RIGHT FLD	RIGHT FLD	ROVER	ROVER
7	AUSTEN	12	3RD BASE	3RD BASE	LEFT FLD	LEFT FLD
8	JACK	11	1ST BASE	1ST BASE	PITCHER	PITCHER
9	GARRETT	3	PITCHER	PITCHER	1ST BASE	1ST BASE
10	JOSHUA	5	LEFT FLD	LEFT FLD	3RD BASE	3RD BASE
11	RUSSEL	6	LEFT FLD	LEFT FLD	CATCHER	CATCHER
12	ZACHARY	9	CENTER FLD	CENTER FLD	SHORT	SHORT

I normally let each player stay at least two innings in the infield during every game. One good strategy is to put your stronger players at pitcher and first base since they will have to field hard hits or catch balls thrown to them. You will also improve your chances of making plays since a large percentage of hits go to the pitcher.

After an inning is over, I encourage our players to run off the field. Our coaches even run off the field to set the right example. I believe that hustling on and off the field projects a positive attitude and it shows the competitor that your team is ready to play.

If you choose to have refreshments for players after games, make sure the “team mom” has scheduled a parent for each game. This is one area where a dependable assistant can really be a big help.

FINAL WORD

Hopefully you will use the tips provided in this booklet and follow the practice plan. If so, I am confident your team will have fun and I know without a doubt your team will be ready

to compete. Good luck and remind your players throughout the season that you're proud of them and you want them to have fun. If they have fun then you have done your job. Coaching young players can be demanding at times but don't forget to let yourself have fun. The memories you get from coaching tee-ball will last a lifetime and I hope yours are as enjoyable as mine have been.

APPENDIX A

BASEBALL ORGANIZATIONS

American Amateur
Baseball Congress
P.O. Box 467
Marshall, MI 49068
(616)781-2002

American Baseball
Coaches Association
P.O. Box 705
Bowie, MD 20715
(301)262-5005

American Sport
Education Program
P.O. Box 5076
Champaign, IL 61825-5076
1-800-747-5698

Dixie Baseball, Inc.
P.O. Box 222
Lookout Mountain, TN 37350
(615)821-6811

Little League Baseball, Inc.
P.O. Box 3485
Williamsport, PA 17701
(717)326-1921

National Alliance for
Youth Sports
2050 Vista Parkway
West Palm Beach, FL 33411
(561)684-1141

National Amateur Baseball
Association
108 S. University Ave., Ste. # 3
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858-2327
(517)775-3300

National Police Athletic League
200 Castlewood Dr.
North Palm Beach, FL 33408
(407)844-1823

PONY Baseball
P.O. Box 225
Washington, PA 15301
(412)225-1060

USA Baseball
2160 Greenwood Ave
Trenton, NJ 08609
(609)586-2381