

Coaching

The Community League Manifesto

*By Dan K. Scovel
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My experiences as a youth league coach are shared within for the purpose of assisting other parent-coaches to emulate my successes—and avoid my failures.

This essay is dedicated to Michael for requesting the information, the league for giving me the opportunity, and Colby for giving me the reason to coach.

Authors Experience: My coaching experience centers on baseball and soccer for 5-10 year old children in Rowayton, Connecticut, although I have also helped out with basketball and taught my own son how to snow ski. I have coached: Rowayton Little League baseball teams that included Tee-ball for 5-6 year olds 2004 and Community League coach-pitch for 7-9 year olds 2005 and 2006; and Rowayton Soccer for 8-10 year olds 2005. I have helped out other coaches and leagues, including: Rowayton Tee-ball 2003; Rowayton Soccer for 5-7 year olds 2003 and 2004; Norwalk Itty Bitty Basketball 2003 and 2004; and Rowayton Basketball 2004, 2005 and 2006.

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I. Three Revelations

I couldn't understand why my four-year-old son wasn't interested in playing catch with me in our front yard. He seemed bored. Then I bought a junior Tee-ball home plate setup with a rubber ball attached to it with a giant elastic string. My son actually enjoyed trying to whack the ball with a plastic bat—about eight to ten times over two-three minutes. Then he got a better idea: he balanced the bat up on the tee, then took the ball and walked back far enough from the tee to stretch the elastic string, and then let the ball go in an attempt to try and knock the bat off the tee. This was not what daddy had in mind, but I had to give him high points for creativity. I played plenty of sports as a kid, but my knowledge of child psychology as a 40 year-old professional was sorely lacking.

My first revelation occurred when teaching my son how to snow ski. I was too cheap to pay for ski lessons, and besides—weekends were for the family and the only chance I had to spend time with him. I knew how to ski, so I'll teach him myself! At least I was smart enough to know I didn't know how to do the teaching, so I went on-line and purchased the Children's Instruction Manual from the Professional Ski Instructors of America. Bingo! Young children have the attention span of a gnat, and you need 5-6 individual drills and group games for each element of the sport you are trying to teach. Give each drill the 2-3 minutes worth of attention it will receive, and then move on to the next one. Know your audience. Don't fight nature. As the children get older, their attention spans lengthen and you can get away with fewer drills per element. Know what? It's true and it works (and I never did pay for more than a couple of social-event ski lessons!).

My second revelation occurred after helping out other coaches over a year of seasons: autumn/soccer, winter/basketball, and then spring/baseball. I had seen a variety of coaching pluses and minuses during the first two sport seasons, but then I got lucky when baseball rolled around: my son's coach turned out to be John Maloney, and he had the kids energized as a team. Team cheer! Competitive drills! When practice was over, everyone begged to play pickle—until the coaches could stand it no more. John showed me how to create the esprit de corps and fun in sports that—surprisingly—is not always there. I wasn't confident or ready to coach until John showed me how I thought coaching should be done.

My third revelation was that coaching is a discipline that can be transferred across different sports and age groups. I know baseball fairly well and was getting comfortable in my role as a coach after two seasons when I agreed to coach soccer. However, I've never played soccer. In addition, my son was moving up to the next age-group league that I had never seen play. I learned pretty quickly this 8-10 year old age group could handle more challenging and tedious drills, but that this advantage was more than offset by the bigger challenge of establishing and maintaining my authority as coach.

II. Sportsmanship

I believe that sport is a metaphor for life, and that it is the role of a coach to teach children sportsmanship and athletics, in that order, so they can grow to become independently moral and healthy adults.

Sportsmanship means to play fair and do your best, and includes the respect for the authority of referees and coaches. Do your best means to try your hardest, and playing fair is more important than winning. Life ought to be fair, but isn't. As long as we play fair and do our best, we can accept defeat with grace—and enjoy victory with humility.

Cub Scouting has a term called Akela (ă-kay-la) taken from *The Jungle Book* that means 'good leader' to the young scout. Akela is an adult that is looking out for the child's well being that the child can trust and should respect. Akelas include parents, teachers, camp directors—and coaches.

We teach children how to be independent so they will be able to care and provide for themselves and their family when they grow up. I believe the most important element of independence to teach a child is the difference between right and wrong, and the obligation to be good. The second most important element is

health, in terms of diet, rest, and physical activity. The third most important element is intelligence, which primarily involves common sense and concentration. Qualities like physical strength, attractiveness, popularity and 'being the best' do not matter—and should not be encouraged.

Finally, criticism is an important part of coaching. Just make sure that it is performed in an encouraging way so the player knows you are trying to help them. Also, it is important to make sure that compliments occur more frequently than criticisms. Something good must have happened as part of the worst of plays.

III. Getting Organized

A. *Equipment List*: Compile a formal list of equipment for the season, including what has been provided to you by the league, what has been loaned to you by players and their families, and what you are contributing to the cause—and update it as it changes during the season. I actually apply small labels to as many items as possible in order to more easily differentiate between these asset classes.

B. *Roster*: A sample roster can be found in Appendix G. Get all this information together on one page and keep it handy at all times during practices and games. The birth date, league age and uniform sizes are optional, but the rest is not. I use the boxes to check-off attendance at practice and games, as well as notification of rain-outs, ability grading, small group sorting, and distribution of uniforms, equipment, trophies, team pictures and anything else that comes along. One page will last for the whole season and contains virtually every logistical data point you will need. The phone numbers are especially helpful when you have a cell phone and a parent is late for pick-up—or players aren't showing up when expected.

C. *Uniforms*: You will need to keep track of uniform items (hats, shirts, pants, et cetera), sizes and distribution by player. I try to include this in my roster, but invariably end-up scratching out notes to make sure I have enough of everything when it finally becomes available. Once you have received and distributed the uniforms they become the player's problem. I also try to make sure my assistant coaches get a hat or shirt out of the deal at least—but this is generally a league decision.

D. *Introductory Letter*: Also included in Appendix D is a sample introductory letter that becomes the first official notification to the parents and players that they have been assigned to a team. I include all the players names at the top, an overview of the specific league and its idiosyncrasies, the schedule for the season (as best known at the time), and what each player needs to provide as part of participating. Assume the players and parents know nothing—which may well be the case.

E. *Email notification*: I use email as my primary communication mechanism, and it has proved to work well—as long as you understand that it could be a day or two before the information is received. Set up a group list in your email editor, and always use the team name in the header so the recipient knows how important it is. I email: the introductory letter; a practice reminder a day or two before that includes day, time and place; a similar game reminder; cancellations due to weather; the final written test; and other league events. Do NOT solely rely on email for last-minute cancellations—use the phone.

F. *Coaching Assistance*: Recruit as many parent assistant coaches as possible. Even if they don't know the game, you can use them as adult supervision and show them what they need to know. The ideal number of assistant coaches is four, and I consider one to be a bare minimum. During the game this includes a pitcher, catcher, and first and third base coaches. During practices it includes a pitcher and catcher to oversee a hitting drill, and two more to oversee the other two drills. This frees up the head coach to work on individual player batting swings for younger players on-deck, or to roam around among all three drills underway and pull-out individuals to help improve upon specific weaknesses.

I try to keep the same pitcher throwing to the players all season in the coach-pitch league. The players get familiar with the throws, and the pitcher gets experience and learns each players needs. During a game the pitcher reminds the batter to give him a good practice swing before he starts throwing. Coaching is a

lot more work if you have to do your own pitching—but it can be done. Just make sure you are that much more prepared.

G. Player Rotation: I have spent a lot of time on this aspect of coaching because participation is what these youth leagues are all about. My rotation scheme ensures all players will participate equally, and that each player will be exposed to every position over the course of the season. Reference the Player Rotation in Appendix E.

Each 11x11 grid represents one game, with the field positions across the top and the players' names down the side. Inside each box I write the inning number that each child played that position. Across the top is a blank space for the date the game is played, a blank space for the name of the team you are playing, and a home/visitor option to circle to remind you whether your team batted at the top of the inning (visitor) or the bottom (home).

The square grid is set-up for Tee-Ball or Coach-pitch leagues where everybody plays. The order of playing positions from left to right alternates each player between infield/high-action positions and outfield/low-action positions. The abbreviated codes of positions across the top include: first base, left field, pitcher-left-side, center field, third base, left-center field, short-stop, right field, pitcher-right-side, right-center field, second base. These positions assume 11 players in the field, with an adult playing catcher. The outfield will need to be balanced after all the players take the field. For example: the center field position will be more like right-center field if you have a total of 10 or eight players available.

The notes to the right of the top grid on the page tell you which positions to eliminate if some of your players don't show. For example: if you find yourself with only seven players, then cut right-center field, left-center field, right field, and left field. Draw lines down these field columns to remove them from the rotation grid, and also draw lines across the rows of the players that didn't show. This preserves the square configuration for rotation purposes, no matter how many players attend. It's a little bit trickier, but this system can also accommodate different players leaving and arriving during the game by subtracting and adding positions and players. You will need to set up your grid for the season based on your player count. If you only have nine players, don't bother including the right-center field and left-center field positions in your grid.

The column of players' names down the left side is also your batting order. I try to spread out the players and alternate stronger and weaker hitters, boys and girls, older and younger. I keep this same order all season to ensure everyone gets to bat the same number of times—and pick up in the order the next game where we left off the previous game. The column to the left of the player's names contains the inning number for the first batter. I would start the first inning of the first game of the season with Andy, and write the number '1' to the left of his name. If Harry is the third out of the first inning, then John will get a '2' to the left of his name. If we stop the inning because we batted around the order, then the last batter gets to bat first the next inning. If this were to occur during the second inning where John batted first, then Harry would get a '3' next to his name. I use some kind of benign mark, like an 'A', to indicate which player is scheduled to bat first the next game.

Not only do I make sure everyone bats and plays all the positions equally, but I have a record of it in case anyone wants to complain. And if the player doesn't show, then they miss those batting and position opportunities.

IV. Forming a Team

Team building occurs via the sharing of common experiences and adversity, and is basically accomplished through a series of activities and rituals. The activities I use include the team cheer and the congratulatory cheer for the other team. The rituals I use include the feedback embodied in the Three Rules of Being on a Team and the Rules of the Game, and the regularity of warm up and sprints as part of

practices. The adversity is inherent when playing a game against the other team, but also manifests itself as a certain amount of disciplinary tension the players may collectively harbor against the coach.

A. *Uniform:* The uniform is the obvious team identification, even if it only happens to be a cap or t-shirt. As such, it should be treated with a certain amount of respect. I have not been real sticky about this—except when it comes to the cap: no backwards or sideways stuff. This is baseball, not rap music.

B. *Team cheers:* I consider a team cheer to be the absolute minimum requirement to establish esprit de corps. Gather all the players up (don't exclude anyone), have them put one hand in the middle, and then yell 'Go Tigers!' on the count of three. I've gotten lazy in recent seasons and settled for a simple 'go (insert team name here)' yell. However, creativity, wit and topicality go a long way. This should be yelled at the beginning of every game and the very end of every practice and game.

Also do a 'Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? (other team name)!' at the end of every game. There are other yells that work, too. Then immediately line up behind the coach and shake hands with the other team. Respect for the other team is an important element of sportsmanship.

C. *The Three Rules of Being on a Team*

1. *The First Rule of Being on a Team: Listen to the coach.*

The coach must establish authority, and this is the single most critical rule that players must follow. I use a semi-Socratic method of making points to my players. If they interrupt me or don't seem to be paying attention, I ask them 'What is the first rule of being on a team?' and then follow up with, 'What did I just say?' If they don't like what position they have been assigned and try to argue or negotiate a change, I pose the question. The question requires them to articulate the answer, and they understand and appreciate it better when they say 'listen to the coach' rather than just hearing the coach say 'listen to me.'

2. *The Second Rule of Being on a Team: Be nice to your teammates.*

Being a team means the players must be nice to each other—especially if they are enemies at school or in the neighborhood. I don't care if they don't like each other; they need to be nice to each other as long as the team is together. Ironically, I have found this to be most challenging with siblings, and found myself telling them to defer their differences until after practice. If a violation occurs, just posing the question seems to solve it (getting more than a mumbled answer on this one is really tough, but fortunately not necessarily required).

3. *The Third Rule of Being on a Team: Be helpful to your teammates.*

The team needs to work together to be successful. If the stronger players can help the weaker ones improve, then the whole team will benefit. I also like to use this as a follow-on to someone who is not paying attention: after they answer me with 'listen to the coach' and then realize they can't repeat what I just said because they weren't listening, I will go to a teammate and ask them to help out by repeating what I just said.

D. *Team Building exercise:* I used a great team building exercise in soccer. All the players locked arms together in one big line, and then ran together as a group the width of the field. It was up to them, without coaching help, to organize themselves and get it done within a minute. It took considerably more effort than I had anticipated, and they finally got it right at the end of the season. But it seemed to work well. I have not yet discovered as effective an activity in baseball—but the team cheers seem to work just fine.

E. *Playing the Role:* I always wear my baseball cap and a whistle around my neck when I am coaching, although I only seem to use the whistle when bringing the team together or triggering drill rotations. If you're going to be a coach you need to act like one and look like one. No sense in giving any mixed signals—especially when it comes to authority and discipline.

F. *Discipline*: Just being loud and asking my Three Rules of Being on a Team questions maintains authority for the six and under crowd, but running laps seems to be required for the 10 year olds. A lap is approximated by a 200-300 yard run that I usually include as part of the team warm-up, and also for energetic and disruptive players to run as individuals. It seems to work fairly well. If a disruptive player has the energy to screw around, it serves double duty to remove the distraction from the rest of the players and burn-off some of that extra energy at the same time. If they miss what I'm trying to teach them, I counsel myself that at least the rest of the team will not be disrupted from getting the message.

The next level of discipline is non-participation. If a player refuses to perform his disciplinary run, then he is not allowed to participate in whatever the rest of the team is doing until he earns his way back in. The better your activities, the sooner the player will want to re-join.

At this point I haven't had to go any farther, but the next step would be pretty close to expulsion from the team. This would probably cause the league and parents to get involved, but frankly—if it's that bad, then they need to get involved anyway. In the limit, if the team cannot be controlled in order for the coach to teach sportsmanship and athletics, then the team should be disbanded. And if a player needs to be cut to salvage the team, then so be it—even if he is the best player or the most popular (make that 'especially if he or she is the best player or most popular').

V. Exercise the Mind

Exercising the mind is more important than exercising the body—in general, as well as in athletics. During the first practice I introduce the Three Rules of Being on a Team and the first two Rules of the Game at the very beginning, and then quiz the players individually a couple of times throughout the rest of the practice—and then throughout the rest of the season. I want the players to engage their brain and tell me the answer, rather than me broadcasting all season to a group of passive observers. I roll out the rest of the Rules of the Game throughout the season, pretty much in the presented order, as soon as the vast majority of players have learned all the prior rules. Announcements-1 is a good time in the practice agenda for formal lesson introductions and review.

A. *Three Rules of Being on a Team*. This is the first part of getting the players brains engaged. The details were described above under Forming a Team, and their use is described below under the First Practice.

B. *Rules of the game*: These are basic one-liners relevant to the sport, and I pose them as questions repeatedly throughout the season. The first two rules should be introduced and drilled as soon as possible at the onset of the season. Introduce each subsequent rule as soon as all previous rules have been understood and digested by the vast majority of players—but no sooner.

1. *The First Rule of Baseball: Keep your eye on the ball*. This is absolutely required when hitting or fielding for two reasons: first, so the players can perform the function; and second, for safety purposes. It's fairly easy during a game because there is only one ball on the field. But this becomes especially important during practice when lots of balls are flying around. The ball is hard and it hurts if it hits you, which is why they have a glove in the field and a bat at the plate.

2. *The Second Rule of Baseball: Careful with the bat*. The bat is used for hitting baseballs—and nothing else. I show them how to get comfortable using the bat, but remind them it can also be very dangerous and we don't want anyone to get hurt. First of all, never swing the bat unless you are standing away from anybody that could get hit. And secondly, always wear a helmet when batting. If you take a swing with the bat at anybody, you are off the team. No second chances—it's too dangerous.

3. *The First Priority When You Are Playing in the Field: Get the ball*. Getting the ball is the most important priority when playing in the field. If you don't have the ball, then you can't make

a play and get an out. This is also true if someone misses a catch—go get the ball! The base runners can still score, and we want to stop them.

4. *What do you do when you get the ball? Get an out.* Know before the play what the situation is: number of outs and base runners. Where does the ball need to go so we can get an out? Know what your options are so you make the right choice when the play happens. You generally want to get the leading runner out before he scores, but at least take the easiest or closest out. At the beginning of the season, just have them throw the ball to first base.

5. *How many outs per inning (per side)? Three.*

6. *Name three ways to get an out.* Catch a fly ball. Tag the base when the runner is forced. Tag the runner if he's off the base. Later in the season tagging the base after a runner has failed to tag-up after a caught fly ball becomes an issue.

7. *What do you do if you don't get the ball? Cover your base (or back-up your base if you are in the outfield).* Every player in the field has a base to cover, or back-up, after someone gets the ball. I use an infield situation drill during practice specifically to develop the first base, second base and short stop fielding and base coverage situations. I walk around behind the outfielders during the game and tell them which base to back-up based on the position they are playing. Later in the season I ask them to tell me.

C. *Written test:* I give a one-page, 20-question, take-home written test at the last practice of the season, and then email the parents the answer key. It provides a nice summary for what I tried to teach during the season (and also reminds me what my curriculum is the next year!). See all three pages of Appendix F.

D. *Avoid Theory:* The only effective way I found to teach position names and responsibilities is through experience by doing in a game situation. Also, certain terminology like 'on deck' and 'in the hole' is similarly learned through common usage. Chalk talks just don't work. I tried. Don't bother. The players only care about the position name, location and responsibilities when they have to perform them—and no sooner. My players play all the different positions over the course of the season, and eventually they pick up on the names, locations and responsibilities. The only exception is the incorporation of fielding situations as a drill for the infield positions. For the outfield positions, I wander around behind the outfielders during the game and tell them which base they are responsible to back up as the play unfolds. I have found no effective way to communicate this level of detail in a practice.

VI. Practices

Practices must be planned. If they are not well planned, then the time won't be used well. And if the time isn't used well, then the players will not respect the coach, will lose interest in the sport, and will stop showing up. Preparation and the efficient use of time will make or break the season.

You may have to set up your own bases, depending on the field you use. Little league baselines are 60-feet, and the pitchers mound is 45-feet in front of home plate. I carry a set of bases and a 60-foot string wrapped around a wood block to help me set up the field ahead of practices (and games).

I have a standard practice agenda I use, with options depending on the number of players and the amount of parental coaching help that may or may not be available. However, I never seem to remember the announcements I need to make at the end of the practice or game, so I specifically write myself a note.

The first most important job as coach is to memorize the players' names—and use them. The sooner, the better.

The second most important job as coach is to spend one-on-one time with each player on the basic elements of the game. This will help you to understand each player's personality, ability, strengths, and weaknesses, as well showing them that you care and that they matter as individuals. If this happens to not be true, then don't be a coach.

A. *First Practice:* Greet each child as they arrive: introduce yourself, have them introduce themselves to you, share a high-five, and send them off to the Trickle-In Exercise. During Announcements-1 I introduce myself and the assistant coaches, overview the league and how we play it, remind the players what they need to bring to each time we play, and tell them the practice and game schedule for the season. This is the same basic information I emailed their parents in the introductory letter.

I then introduce the Three Rules of Being on a Team. After that, I immediately single out individuals and quiz them on the three rules I just described. Then I introduce the First Two Rules of Baseball. After that, I immediately single out individuals to quiz them on these two rules—as well as the previous three. If they don't know the answer, I ask another player or eventually take volunteers until I get the players to give me an answer. I just told them the rules, and I will spend the rest of the season asking them to tell me the rules. Then it's off to the warm-up.

B. *Practice Agenda:* Practices generally run 60-90 minutes. Consider the following agenda a theoretical construct that you will never have time to complete. The drill number and time is a huge variable, and the only time I make sure to play a practice game is just before the season's first real game so the players have some idea what to expect. Use the excess in this theoretical agenda as options you may need to employ in case your player or assistant coach attendance differs from your expectation. The point is that there is more to be done than you will have time to do, so make sure and keep things moving along.

1. Trickle-In Exercise (10 minutes)
2. Announcements-1 (1-2 minutes, except for the first practice)
3. Warm-Up (10 minutes)
4. Drills (small group rotation through hitting, fielding, throwing, or catching)
 - Drill-1 (10-15 minutes)
 - Drill-2 (10-15 minutes)
 - Drill-3 (10-15 minutes)
5. Practice Game (all together) (20-30 minutes)
6. Sprints (10 minutes)
7. Announcements-2 (1 minute)
8. Team Cheer (1 minute)
9. Pickle (trickle-out)

C. *Trickle-In Exercise.* Ideally all players will arrive to practice on time and you can begin with announcements. Unfortunately, that never happens on this planet. Welcome each player as they arrive, and get them playing catch. The coach or assistant coach plays catch with the last-to-arrive, odd-numbered players. Mix-up stronger and weaker players, boys and girls, and younger and older. I tried for a while to match skill levels to accelerate development, but found that it didn't necessarily accomplish that intent and when it did, it intensified the imbalance of skills across the team. A strong thrower needs to learn how to help a weak catcher catch, and the weak catcher will learn from the strong thrower. Baseball is a team sport for a reason. After several minutes rotate the players around so they are playing catch with different teammates. This is also a good chance for one-on-one throwing and catching time with your players.

Another good Trickle-In exercise is hitting—especially if you don't have any coaching help. Pitch to the first player. The second player that arrives shags balls. The third player plays first base. By the time the fourth player arrives, hopefully the second one has hit and the first two can go play catch. For each pair

that arrives, spin out another catch-playing pair. I consider this okay if you're short handed and/or player turnout is slim and/or you have a couple of players that need extra hitting help.

Other Trickle-In exercises include any of the minor drills noted below performed one-on-one with the coach until the next player shows and pairs can go play catch.

D. *Warm Up*: Get the heart rate up and stretch out the muscles.

20 Jumping Jacks

Stretching

Reach for the sky—and hold it for a 5-10 count.

Touch your toes with straight legs—and hold it for a 5-10 count.

Squat like a frog—and hold it for a 5-10 count.

Spread knees while squatting—and hold it.

Legs spread, arms out, cross over and touch the opposite toe with hand—and hold it.

Other hand to other toe—and hold it.

Windmills—hold onto glove and rotate arm around by the shoulder in a giant circle.

Right arm, 10 clock-wise circles. (glove in right hand)

Right arm, 10 counter-clock-wise circles.

Left arm, 10 clock-wise. (switch glove to left hand)

Left arm, 10 counter-clock-wise.

Run a Lap (200-300 yards)

Some teams have players that like to run the laps, and just consider it another way to compete. Other teams I have coached needed bribes to do the running. For example: the first one or two back get to skip the lap at the next practice. This got them pretty motivated, and gave the less-faster players a chance to win when the fast ones were enjoying their spoils of a break.

E. *Drills*: I prefer to run three separate drill stations from which groups of three players rotate around every 10-15 minutes. Each station generally drills a different element of the game: throwing, catching and hitting. Try not to let these drag on for 20 minutes. Also, three drills assume three assistant coaches are available to help since at least one is required per station. The number of drills and players per small group will vary with available coaching help, which is why it is nice to have a rough idea of how many players and coaches are expected to attend a practice. The group size will vary from 2-4, but certain drills have natural minimum and/or maximum and/or even-numbered limitations. Just make sure to match activities with resources—and have back-up plans in case stuff happens. Also, choose your player groupings to maximize productivity and minimize disruptions. This usually entails splitting up buddies, and once again involves spreading out stronger/weaker players, boys/girls, and older/younger players.

1. *Hitting (early-season)*: One hitter, one player on-deck getting individualized coaching help with their swing, and one or two players shagging balls. A pitcher and an on-deck hitting coach are required as a minimum, and add a catcher-coach if you have one. Batter hits several balls, and then runs on the last hit. Hit the ball, place the bat down (do NOT throw it), then run to first. The batters job is to hit every good pitch. See Appendix A for coaching the hitting swing.

2. *Hitting (late-season)*: The player tosses the ball up by himself, and then hits it with the bat. Set up three hitting stations at least 10-15 feet apart along the first base line way out in right field. Each station gets one batting helmet, 4-5 balls, one bat and one cone so the players remember to stay spread out. Place the fourth cone out in the field in the direction they are supposed to hit. Remember Baseball Rule Number Two: Careful with the bat. Always wear a helmet, and nobody hits while players recover the balls. Be aware of your resource limitations—if you have four bats, helmets and enough balls, set up four stations. I always seem to be short of bats.

3. *Throwing (early-season only)*: Set up each child with 3-5 balls and place a near cone out at 60 feet and a far cone another 20-30 feet beyond that. Players throw towards the cones for accuracy and distance, and then recover their own balls after every player is done. I prefer this drill earlier in the season, because many players will hold-back on their throws to avoid hitting or hurting whomever they are playing catch with. This drill removes that inhibition. I use the point, step and throw methodology. Graduate the throw to the far cone when the player is ready. See Appendix B for coaching the throw.

4. *Catching (early-season) and/or Fielding*: Get the ball in the glove—as many times as possible. Inexperienced players may need to start with tennis balls to get comfortable catching—but move them on to real baseballs as soon as possible. Catching is by far the most difficult activity for 5-7 year olds.

- a. Players play catch with themselves by tossing the ball up, and then catching it. If the child catches 10 out of 10, then have them toss it higher for 10 of 10. Then maybe really high for 10 of 10. This is also a good homework assignment for all players. When bored or completed, move on to . . .
- b. Play catch with the coach or another player. When bored or completed, move on to...
- c. Line up the children and throw them ground balls or fly balls to stop or catch and throw back. Maybe call out their name to field the ball.
- d. Or use a bat to hit them grounders or fly balls to field.

5. *Catching (late-season)*: Coach plays catch with one player to make sure and throw catch-able balls to the child, and drill the five catching positions specified in Appendix C. The other two players practice perfect throws and perfect catches. Catcher always puts their glove up to provide a big, fat target for the thrower. Rotate all three players around until the coach gets one-on-one time with each. This also gives you good one-on-one time to fine-tune throwing.

6. *Infield Situations*: Part way into the season when hitting practice can occur with self-tossed balls, you can then introduce infield situations with 3-4 players. You need a first baseman, second baseman and short-stop. If you have a fourth player, use him as a base runner. Hit grounders to each fielder, and create situations with number of outs and runners on base to get them thinking where to make the play. Sometimes the short-stop needs to cover second base. Sometimes the second baseman needs to cover first base, if the first baseman is chasing down a grounder that takes him away from his base. Mix it up, and make sure each player plays all three positions.

F. *Mini-Drills (and other stuff)*: These things are worth doing, but are not necessarily worth a whole drill by themselves. I suggest either incorporating them as part of another, somewhat related drill, or just doing it as a quickie Trickle-In exercise before sending them off to play catch.

1. *Under-Hand Throw*. Use this when a player needs to throw the ball, but the player catching is too close—say within 10 feet or so. A quick push of the ball, not a lofty arc.

2. *Stopping Grounders Without a Glove*: Practice the proper form of putting your body in front of a ground ball with one knee on the ground by having them take off their gloves and putting their hands behind their back. Don't make the grounders too hard—but not too easy, either.

3. *Proper Stance for a First Baseman*: Right foot on the side of the base to avoid getting stepped on by the runner, and left glove hand providing a nice, big, fat target for whoever is throwing the ball. Practice keeping foot on the base as long as possible, until it is clear the throw is poor enough to require leaving the base. Sometimes waiting for a thrown ball to bounce before it arrives is the best way to get an out.

4. *Three Ways to Get an Out:* Catch a fly ball. Tag the base when the runner is forced. Tag the runner if he's off the base. I have not had good luck describing this to the whole team, but the message seems to be received better when I communicate it to a small, drill-sized group of 2-3.

5. *Strike Zone:* Over the plate, above the knees and below the shoulders. Have players stand behind the backstop when another is batting and identify balls and strikes (quietly to you, or silently to themselves). This is good to do if the player already has a decent swing and is waiting around on-deck for his chance to bat as part of a hitting drill.

6. *Black Eye.* Originally I only did it because I knew another team was using it and I didn't want my players to get intimidated. However, I discovered two-thirds or three-quarters of my players liked it and wanted to use it. It's like black lip stick and is smeared under each eye to cut down on the glare of the sun. It also looks cool.

G. *Practice Game:* If you have enough players, go ahead and split them up and play a game. Otherwise, just rotate the players like a giant snake throughout the field, where the first baseman goes to pitcher, the pitcher goes to bat, and the last base runner moves out to right field. I try to make sure and do this at least once before the season starts to the players will have a better idea how a game is played. This sensitizes the batter to the fact he only gets one hit, needs to run to first after he hits it, and doesn't get to stay on base if he gets out. It also shows the fielders how hard it is to get an out in this league in an attempt to encourage them to work on throwing and catching basics.

H. *Sprints:* Clock each player running to first base from home plate with a stop watch, and announce their time to the nearest 1/10 of a second. I continue to be amazed how much the kids love this—and it's also an easy way to burn 20 minutes if you're short-handed or somewhat unprepared for practice that day. Lately I have taken to limiting the first base sprints to two rounds, and then moving on to second-base runs where they learn to round first base and not overrun second. Also, missing first base is a disqualification.

I. *Pickle:* Two coaches play catch while the whole team runs back and forth between two bases and try to avoid getting tagged out by one of the coaches. The kids love this. I let this game continue unabated once just to see how long it would last—it went almost an hour!

J. *Last Practice:* Baseball Olympics becomes the drill and/or game, and I hand out the take-home written test just before they depart.

I include some combination of the following for Baseball Olympics, and only worry about first, second and third place among the distance events. I email the complete data and top three distance events winners, and the players are free to argue amongst themselves who is the overall best.

First Base Sprint. Fastest of two attempts. I use a stop watch and record the times.

Second Base Sprint. Fastest of two attempts. Cannot overrun the base. Record the times.

Home Run. Fastest of two attempts. Disqualified if a base is not touched. Record the times.

Long Throw. Best of three attempts.

Accurate Throw. Closest to a cone on the grass at least 60-feet away after three attempts.

Hitting Frequency. Each player tosses up his own ball and hits it. Record hits out of six attempts.

Hitting Distance. Longest ball out of the six frequency attempts.

Fly Ball Catching. Number of catches made out of five attempts.

Ground Ball Fielding. Number of stops made out of five attempts.

VII. Game Day

Have the players arrive 30 minutes before game time so they have a chance to do a Trickle-In exercise and Warm-Up (including running a lap) prior to the start—just like in practice. Ideally you need four parents to help out during the game: a pitcher to throw to your team, a catcher, a third base coach, and a

first base coach that does double duty for runners as well as the first base player when your team is out in the field. You will need a minimum of one parent to help if you have to pitch, so that they can manage the batting order on the bench. You can always get one of the other team's coaches to play catcher for you.

Sometimes if practice is rained-out that week (or if a chunk of the team is in a hitting slump) I will run a toss-your-own ball hitting exercise in parallel with the catch-playing warm-up before the game. Get an available parent to shag balls, limit the number of tries and hits to make sure every player gets a chance, and let the players that need the practice linger a little longer. This is a little tricky due to time constraints, but can also be very helpful to the players. Then get the team together for a warm-up that includes a lap.

Check off attendance on your roster, and assign the first batter and field positions for the first inning on your rotation grid. Cross out the appropriate rows and columns for no-shows. You will need to announce the players field positions for each inning, and use the 'at bat,' 'on deck,' and 'in the hole' terminology to make sure batters are ready to go. Don't forget to set up an appropriate 'on deck' area for players to practice their swings safely. I also roam the outfield to balance positions and remind coverage and situations. Always make sure to compliment good actions right after they are performed—even if only part of what occurred was good. I find myself not irregularly telling players they did every thing right, even if they didn't get the out. Maybe try to just do it all a little quicker next time.

End the game with a '2-4-6-8' cheer, then have the players line up behind you and then go congratulate the other team. Get your players back to announce when and where your next practice is, and then do a 'go team' yell before getting them to help you pack up the equipment and sending them home—unless you have the energy and patience for pickle.

VIII. Conclusion

Remember: the whole point of coaching is to teach sportsmanship and the basics of the game. Everything you do and that happens with the team under your watch should support these goals. If something is happening that doesn't, then shut it down.

Now, go be a coach. Be a positive role model, be prepared, wear your cap and whistle and carry your roster, rotation and season schedule with you at all times.

Appendix A: The Swing

(Authors Note: This list is presented as a reflection of my own experience as a player and coach, and is not comprehensive in any way. It may differ considerably from guidance offered by more experienced or professional coaches. I include this information at the risk of being mistaken and damaging my own credibility, but chose to do so in the spirit of guidance and help where it might not otherwise exist.)

- a) Have the player stand at home plate with proper positioning—toes pointed toward the base, feet about shoulder width apart, stand back one foot or so from the base.
- b) The right hand must be on top of the left hand when holding the bat for right-handed hitters (otherwise reverse it).
- c) Loosen-up with a leisurely swing of the bat forward and backward, without much of a pause in between. The coach should be demonstrating nearby with another bat.
- d) Make sure the child's arms are fully extended while swinging.
- e) Make sure the child is controlling the bat, and not the other way around. If the bat is too big, get a smaller (shorter and/or lighter) one. To fine-tune, choke up (or slide both hands up the handle of the bat) in half-inch increments until the child appears to have good control.
- f) The bat should flow in a smooth, flat motion across the plate at a level somewhat above the child's belly button. Some children swing too high—close to shoulder level. No chopping wood or jerking a swing in a downward motion. Likewise, no upward swinging.
- g) If the child swings too fast, the bat is jerky and does not travel along a flat, smooth plane across the plate. Have them slow down until the swing is smooth. Then find maximum speed to maintain smoothness.
- h) Make sure to follow-through with the swing.
- i) Pretend you are pitching (do not throw a ball, just move your arm as if you were), and have the child swing as if you had thrown.
- j) I don't prefer to encourage a step towards the pitcher for young hitters, with the thought that the movement of the body will only complicate an attempt to hit a moving ball. Let them take a baby step forward after they get comfortable hitting the ball. However, I do encourage a step if the player is already flinching away from the pitched ball, or is stepping outside and away instead of forward.
- k) A slightly faster pitch is generally easier to hit because it comes at the child with less of an arc, but this will depend on the level of batter discomfort.

Appendix B: The Throw

(Authors Note: This list is presented as a reflection of my own experience as a player and coach, and is not comprehensive in any way. It may differ considerably from guidance offered by more experienced or professional coaches. I include this information at the risk of being mistaken and damaging my own credibility, but chose to do so in the spirit of guidance and help where it might not otherwise exist.)

I use the Point, Step and Throw methodology to teach throwing.

- a) Point at the target with the glove. Make sure eyes are concentrating on the target.
- b) Baby-step forward with glove-side foot while throwing. Not a big step.
- c) Come around with the throwing arm and follow-through after letting go of the ball. Elbow not fully contracted or extended, but about 120-degree angle off the upper arm.
- d) No side-arm throwing (straight-arm, extended elbow), and no high-over head throwing along side the head. In the middle, between these two extremes.
- e) No cocking the elbow—some children seem to want to bend the elbow all the way so they are pushing the ball like a shot-put from their shoulder.
- f) Don't let the throws get too lofty. A straight throw that arrives at its intended destination after one or two bounces is more likely to result in an out than a sky-ball with a three-second hang time. This is especially true for almost all players trying to field a ball from third base at this age level.
- g) In some cases I have found it extremely difficult to help tune a throwing style for a player new to the game. My guidance appeared to overwhelm the child—there was just too much to remember. In these cases I recommended that they just practice throwing as much as possible, and I would then correct or tune one aspect of the throw at a time after familiarity with the activity was established.

Appendix C: The Catch

(Authors Note: This list is presented as a reflection of my own experience as a player and coach, and is not comprehensive in any way. It may differ considerably from guidance offered by more experienced or professional coaches. I include this information at the risk of being mistaken and damaging my own credibility, but chose to do so in the spirit of guidance and help where it might not otherwise exist.)

There are five catching positions for one's glove:

- a) Over the head;
- b) At the chest (thumb of the glove down or pointing away from the glove arm);
- c) Under the waist (thumb of the glove pointing back at the glove arm);
- d) At the side of the body that has the glove (easiest position—start here); and
- e) The other side of the body without the glove. This is similar to catching the ball at your chest, except you reach across your body. Remember: the thumb is down and the pinky is up for the glove hand in this position.

Appendix D: Sample Introductory Letter

Memorandum

Date: 4/8/05

To: Tiger Team Player Parents

From: Dan Scovel, Coach

Re: Coach-Pitch Little League Baseball

Tiger Team Players

Andy Anderson
Brad Butler
Charlie Cummings
Debby Darby
Emily Emerson
Frank Frost
George Gilder
Harry Harrison
John Jenkins
Kelly Konstance
Larry Llewellyn

Welcome to the 2005 Townsville Coach-Pitch Little League Baseball season! The Coach-Pitch League is for children at least 7 years old and has six sponsored teams this year: Tigers, Bears, Wolves, Pandas, Pirates and Cheetahs. Your child's name should be listed above as part of the Tiger team roster. I am the team's coach, Frank Frost has volunteered to help out, and the formal season is scheduled to run Saturday mornings from early-May through June at the School Field. We currently plan to practice on Wednesdays from 5-6pm and Saturdays from 9-10am (at least until the season starts) at the School Field beginning April 13. Please let me know if this schedule is a problem.

Each player needs to arrive at practice with:

- a glove;
- sturdy, tie-up tennis shoes or cleats (**NO** slip-on Merrills);
- a bottle of water for breaks from the heat;
- and their uniform for each game, consisting of shirt, pant and baseball cap (when available, and make sure to write their name inside their cap).

Our responsibility in this league is to teach the children safety, sportsmanship and basic skills, while making sure they have fun. Basics include: throwing, catching, hitting, base running, and learning the positions and what an 'out' is. Parents pitch and play catcher in this league. No one strikes out, and an inning lasts for three outs or until the whole team bats—whichever comes first. Outs will be called and counted in this league, although points are not (but the players keep pretty good track by themselves).

Frank and I could use help from another couple of parents—especially during the first few practices. I plan to confirm practice time and location with you in a couple of days, as well as provide uniform and season schedule information when it becomes available.

Please let me know if you have any questions, comments or complaints—especially if you are available to help out!

Appendix E: Player Rotation

Date: _____ Tigers vs _____ home/visitor

1st Up	1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
Andy											
Brad											
Charlie											
Debby											
Emily											
Freddy											
George											
Harry											
John											
Kelly											
Larry											

- 11 all
- 10 -RC
- 9 -RC-LC
- 8 -RC-LC-RF
- 7 -RC-LC-RF-LF
- 6 -RC-LC-RF-LF-PR
- 5 -RC-LC-RF-LF-PR-CF

Date: _____ Tigers vs _____ home/visitor

1st Up	1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
Andy											
Brad											
Charlie											
Debby											
Emily											
Freddy											
George											
Harry											
John											
Kelly											
Larry											

Date: _____ Tigers vs _____ home/visitor

1st Up	1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
Andy											
Brad											
Charlie											
Debby											
Emily											
Freddy											
George											
Harry											
John											
Kelly											
Larry											

Date: _____ Tigers vs _____ home/visitor

1st Up	1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
Andy											
Brad											
Charlie											
Debby											
Emily											
Freddy											
George											
Harry											
John											
Kelly											
Larry											

Date: 5/6/06 Tigers vs BEARS home/visitor

1st Up		1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
1	Andy	1	2	3	4							
	Brad		1	2	3	4						
	Charlie			1	2	3	4					
A	Debby				1	2	3	4				
4	Emily					1	2	3	4			
	Freddy						1	2	3	4		
	George							1	2	3	4	
	Harry								1	2	3	4
3	John	4										3
2	Kelly	3	4									2
	Larry	2	3	4								

- 11 all
- 10 -RC
- 9 -RC-LC
- 8 -RC-LC-RF
- 7 -RC-LC-RF-LF
- 6 -RC-LC-RF-LF-PR
- 5 -RC-LC-RF-LF-PR-CF

Date: 5/13/06 Tigers vs WOLVES home/visitor

1st Up		1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
3	Andy					1		2	3	4		
2	Brad							1	2	3		4
	Charlie											
A	Debby	4							1	2		3
	Emily	3	4									2
	Freddy	2	3	4								1
	George											
	Harry	1	2	3	4							
4	John		1	2	3	4						
	Kelly					3		4				
	Larry					2		3	4			

(ONLY 9 PLAYERS)

Date: 5/20/06 Tigers vs PIRATES home/visitor

1st Up		1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
3	Andy	2	3	4	5							1
	Brad	1	2	3	4	5						
	Charlie											
A	Debby		1	2	3	4		5				
2	Emily											
	Freddy				1	2		3	4	5		
	George					1		2	3	4		5
	Harry	5								3		4
5	John											
	Kelly	4	5							2		3
4	Larry	3	4	5								2

(ONLY 8 PLAYERS)

Date: 5/27 Tigers vs PANDAS home/visitor

1st Up		1B	LF	P-L	CF	3B	LC	SS	RF	P-R	RC	2B
	Andy					1	2	3	4	5		
	Brad						1	2	3	4	5	
	Charlie							1	2	3	4	5
A	Debby	5								1	2	3
	Emily	4	5									1
5	Freddy	3	4	5								2
2	George	2	3	4	5							1
	Harry	1	2	3	4	5						
1	John		1	2	3	4	5					
4	Kelly					3	4	5				
3	Larry					2	3	4	5			

Appendix F: 2006 Tiger Baseball Test

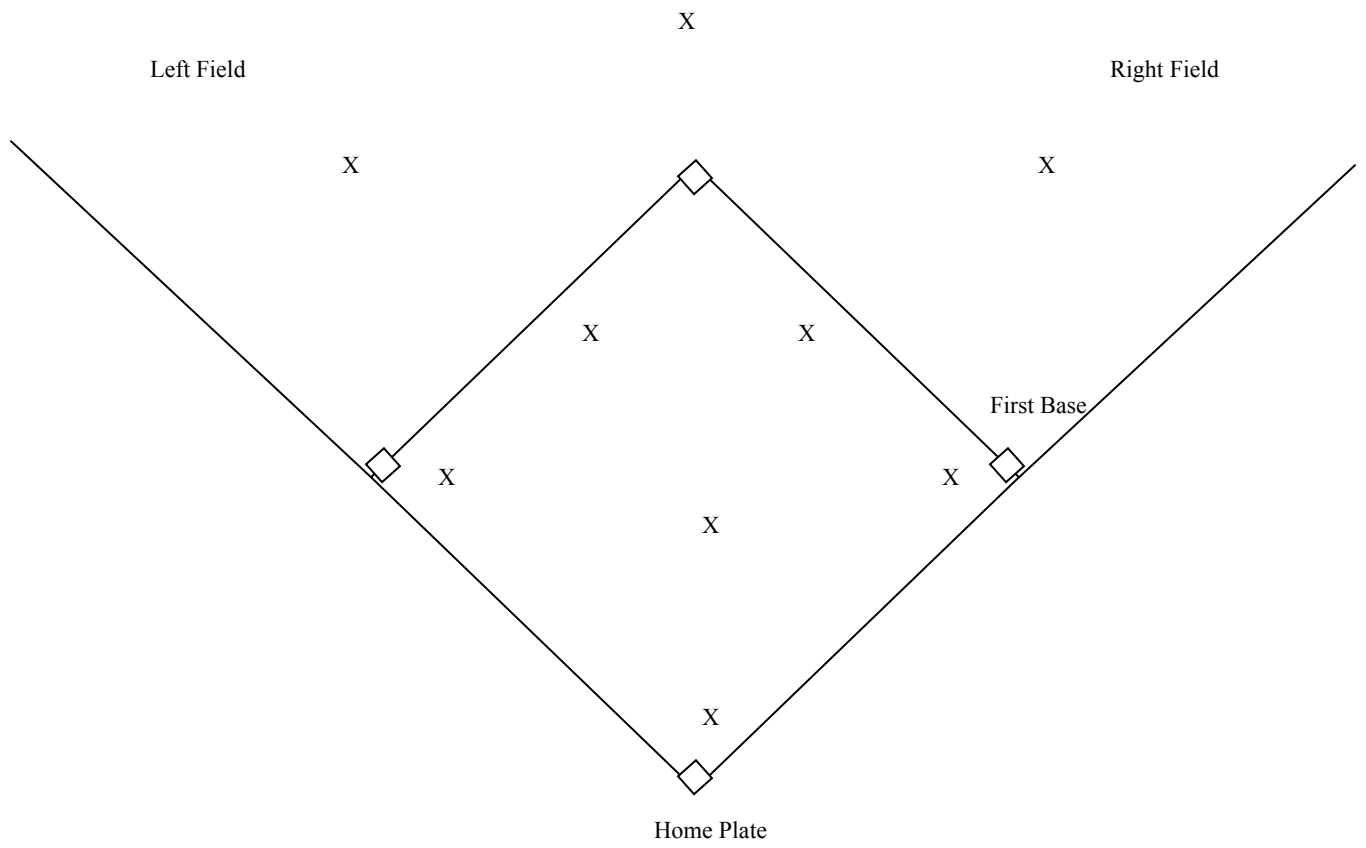
- 1) What is the first rule of baseball? _____
- 2) What is the second rule of baseball? _____
- 3) What is the first rule of being on a team? _____
- 4) What are the second and third rules of being on a team? _____
- 5) What is your first priority when you are playing out in the field? _____
- 6) How many outs per inning (for each team)? _____
- 7) If the ball doesn't come to you in the field, what do you do? _____
- 8) If you get the ball in the field, what do you do? _____
- 9) Name all nine positions in the field. (*Hint: see the back of this page.*)

a. _____	d. _____	g. _____
b. _____	e. _____	h. _____
c. _____	f. _____	i. _____
- 10) Describe three ways to get an out.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
- 11) Name the two coaches. a. _____ b. _____
- 12) What is your team name? _____
- 13) What league division is this? (*Hint: Little League has four different divisions or age groups.*)

- 14) What are the two different cheers we yell at the end of each game? Write the cheer.

- 15) Why does coach Scovel have a whistle? _____
- 16) Where is the play? (*To get an out, which base (or bases) should you throw the ball to? Careful--tricky*)

a. No runners on base: _____	e. Runners on 1 st and 2 nd : _____
b. Runner on 1 st base: _____	f. Runners on 2 nd and 3 rd : _____
c. Runner on 2 nd base: _____	g. Runners on 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd : _____
d. Runner on 3 rd base: _____	h. Runners on 1 st and 3 rd : _____
- 17) Which two bases might you cover if you are playing the Second Base fielding position?
- 18) Which two bases might you cover if you are playing the Short Stop position? _____
- 19) Which two bases might you back-up if you are playing Right Field? _____
- 20) Which two bases might you back-up if you are playing Left Field? _____
- 21) Which base should you back-up if you are playing Center Field? _____



2006 Tiger Baseball Test—ANSWER KEY

- 1) What is the first rule of baseball? Keep your eye on the ball.
- 2) What is the second rule of baseball? Careful with the bat.
- 3) What is the first rule of being on a team? Listen to the coach.
- 4) What are the second and third rules of being on a team? Be nice and helpful to teammates
- 5) What is your first priority when you are playing out in the field? Get the ball!
- 6) How many outs per inning (for each team)? Three
- 7) If the ball doesn't come to you in the field, what do you do? Cover (or backup) your base
- 8) If you get the ball in the field, what do you do? Get the best out (leading base runner, or easiest/closest).
- 9) Name all nine positions in the field.
- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <u>a. catcher</u> | <u>d. second base</u> | <u>g. left field</u> |
| <u>b. pitcher</u> | <u>e. third base</u> | <u>h. right field</u> |
| <u>c. first base</u> | <u>f. short stop</u> | <u>i. center field</u> |
- 10) Describe three ways to get an out.
- a. Catch a fly ball.
- b. Tag the base with the ball when a runner is forced to run to it.
- c. Tag a runner with the ball when not on the base (except hitter out of bounds at 1B).
- 11) Name the two coaches. a. Scovel b. Frost
- 12) What is your team name? Tigers
- 13) What league division is this? (Hint: Little League has four different divisions or age groups.)
Coach-Pitch League
- 14) What are the two different cheers we yell at the end of each game? Write the cheer.
Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? (other team name)!
Go Tigers!
- 15) Why does coach Scovel have a whistle? Because he's the coach! (to get your attention)
- 16) Where is the play? (To get an out, which base (or bases) should you throw the ball to?)
- | | |
|---|--|
| a. No runners on base: <u>First base</u> | e. Runners on 1 st and 2 nd : <u>3rd, then 2nd, then 1st</u> |
| b. Runner on 1 st base: <u>2nd, then to 1st</u> | f. Runners on 2 nd and 3 rd : <u>Hold runner, play to 1st</u> |
| c. Runner on 2 nd base: <u>Hold runner, play to 1st</u> | g. Runners on 1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd : <u>Home, then 3rd, 2nd, 1st</u> |
| d. Runner on 3 rd base: <u>Hold runner, play to 1st</u> | h. Runners on 1 st and 3 rd : <u>Hold runner at 3rd, play to 2nd, then 1st</u> |
- 17) Which 2 bases might you cover if you are playing the Second Base position? 1st or 2nd
- 18) Which two bases might you cover if you are playing the Short Stop position? 2nd or 3rd
- 19) Which two bases might you back-up if you are playing Right Field? 1st or 2nd
- 20) Which two bases might you back-up if you are playing Left Field? 3rd or 2nd
- 21) Which base should you back-up if you are playing Center Field? 2nd

