

How do you define success?



By Cal & Bill Ripken

What determines whether a game, practice, or season is successful? If your first thought is winning, then we really need to take a look at your priorities as a youth baseball coach.

Wins and losses only determine success at the professional level. The pros are paid to play and they are expected to win. If your players aren't getting paid to be on the field, then your success has nothing to do with winning.

In fact, a record of wins and losses should never determine success in youth baseball. As coaches, our responsibility to the game of baseball is to create a positive, organized, enjoyable environment that promotes the love of the game within our players. Success is solely determined by whether or not the experience is enjoyable for the kids and whether or not they learn something.

If the kids are having fun and taking away some lessons, we should feel very good about ourselves as coaches.

If you're goal is to be the best coach you can be then here are some goals you can focus on, regardless of the age group you are coaching.

Are the kids having fun?

Baseball is a game. We stress that over and over whenever we're coaching. It should be fun.

You can tell very easily if a group of kids is having fun.

- Do they move quickly to the field when they arrive or do you have to force them to play?
- Are they smiling when they're on the field, or do they appear sad or bored?
- Is there a lot of laughter and energy, or are the kids lethargic?
- Do they ask to stay and practice or play longer, or do they want to leave early?

Kids are not hard to read. If they're having fun, keep doing what you're doing.

If they appear lethargic, sluggish, bored, or unhappy, it's time to make some adjustments. Keep groups small and keep them active and moving around. Have a variety of activities planned for your practices. Turn drills into contests. Give out prizes. Come up with funny nicknames for your players. Move players into unfamiliar positions. Have a sense of humor.

Generally speaking, if you're having fun as the coach, chances are your team is having fun too. If the team is having fun, there's a good chance players will come back for more the following year. That's the ultimate goal, and that determines your success as a coach.

Are the kids improving?

One of the most rewarding things about coaching youth baseball is getting to see players improve. It's not

a stretch to say that kids can improve each and every time they practice.

At our camps, we often have groups of kids who have trouble playing catch on the very first day. By the end of the week, we'll see that same group of kids turning double plays during our daily camp games. A season spans several weeks, so there are a lot of opportunities to help your players improve their baseball skills.

It's important that the skills you are teaching fit the age group that you are coaching. With the youngest kids, between the ages of 4 and 6, you want to focus on teaching the basic rules of the game, the mechanics of throwing and hitting, and the basic roles of each position on the field.

As players progress to the older age levels, your coaching should advance as well – all the way up to high school baseball, where you can work on advanced baserunning situations, team fundamentals and strategy, and breaking and off-speed pitches.

Kids have an innate desire to learn and improve. When they're successful, and those successes are celebrated, the thirst to learn increases.

It's your responsibility as a coach to put your players in a position to experience success and then go out of your way to point out the improvement. Success and positive reinforcement are important at all age levels.

Are the kids learning?

Players can improve at a skill without actually learning anything – this is where understanding the why comes into play.

Beyond helping your players improve through drills, you also need to be focused on teaching. Make sure that your players are learning the reasons behind the fundamentals you are teaching.

As kids learn and understand, they get better and want to learn more. When they improve, they have more fun. When they have more fun, they stay attentive longer and more easily absorb what you're trying to teach.

See how fun, learning and improving all tie together? If kids are having fun, they often don't even realize that they're learning or practicing, which means you can hold their attention longer. This leads to more efficient and effective practices.

As you look forward to next season, think about how you're going to have fun with your team while teaching them something and celebrating their improvements.

Accomplish all three and regardless of your win-loss record, you'll be a successful coach.