

# **“Better Fundamental Baseball”**

**by Paul Geller**

## **Personal Introduction**

I am a father, I am also a baseball coach. I played for years growing up, since age 6 until 13 when I started high school early, and then in college. I know the game, I was a middle infielder, a switch hitter and a pitcher. As much as I've played and coached, I don't pretend to know it all. Quite the contrary, I'm CONSTANTLY learning new things. I learn something each and every time I step on the field now as a coach and as a fan, or every morning watching MLB with my kids who by their own motivations and interests, insist on watching it when frankly I'm on overload and would rather watch Phineus and Ferb. Then I find myself saying, “wow...that's an interesting perspective” on some first and third defense, or bunt defense shift, or baseball analytics. But I digress. Because I played those positions I was able to learn multiple aspects of the game. I was not big, was not juiced up, and did not hit home runs very often; so I learned to play the game aggressively, intelligently, and instinctually. When I pitched, I was not an overpowering pitcher. I knew how to hit the spots, change speed, and had great control. I played in college during the steroid era, and as a scrappy 155 pound middle infielder who hit for average, I was not a heavy recruit for colleges or minor league scouts. They wanted big bats, big kids,

and big arms. My reputation as a scrappy and effective but smaller player was well known, but my potential ended there. At least that's how I perceived myself so I made the choice to move on after playing a couple of years in college, and to work on my business/marketing degree.

Giving up playing the game you love so much, and the dream that almost every young boy has, to play as a professional, was and is always very difficult. Even professional players that have had success at the big league level can find it difficult to eventually become a spectator or coach rather than a player. The "I can do that better" mindset is very difficult to subdue...nearly impossible. It's become part of our DNA as former players – the competition, the rewarded patience, the thrills. As we become parents and hence youth coaches, it becomes even more difficult – not usually because we want to play or do it better, but because we have other parents (typically fathers) who are still chasing their dream by pushing their kids to the limit without fully being aware of the pressures or damage they put on their kids by acting in inappropriate ways – completely forgetting that youth baseball is simply still a game, a chance for their kids to grow, learn, and have fun with their friends. Don't get me wrong – I've had my share of moments of "overcoaching"/over-fathering, being harder on my kid than others; but working now on my third son's path through youth baseball as my older two phase into high school, I'm more aware of it, and am hoping to share some insight to help coaches and parents understand the more advanced parts of the game, to communicate how important it is for parents to just be spectators and accept that they're not coaching, and to hopefully raise the baseball I.Q. of their child while helping parents to enjoy the ride

towards whatever goal they seek – whatever that may mean to any given player, rather than just the prize at the end of the road.

I have had friends make it to the big leagues, coached the sons of former big leaguers, and am so grateful for all of their opinions and in teaching, educating, and coaching me over the years, and offering their support. I also want to thank some of the dads out there that have shared my vision in trying to accomplish some of these strategies while we've coached/managed our kids. Without their support, our youth baseball league would not have spiked in interest during our tenure, at all levels, the way it did. Thank you to Bruce Beagle, Russ Stanton, Glen Mertens, Todd Reynolds, and to other LCBSA coaches/dads for their thoughts and support while sharing these lessons, that hopefully help not only the youth coaches out there but also the parents, to make their kids better players, and better kids.

### **I. Let the Coaches Coach**

**You'll never see Shoeless Joe" Again. Fundamental Goal Coaches: Help the player/child become more responsible and mature.**

As an introduction to coaches, put the parents in check right away, right after draft night. You can do it in a face to face meeting, at your first practice, or in your introductory email. Get parents out of the dugout. No more babying them. You as a baseball coach volunteer a tremendous amount of time and effort, and having little Johnny's mom or dad coming up to the dugout constantly only causes confusion in

what you're trying to teach. I like to have an open door policy for the parents to come to me, or for a player to come to me with a question, but the rule as far as parents go is 24 hours after a game. No emails, phone calls, or accusations...err...questions...the night of...I won't read it. This cooling off period usually settles down the know it alls. Also, keeping the parents away from the dugout helps build responsibility with the players. They need to start taking care of themselves. If they forget their cleats, their glove, etc....let them figure it out with some help from the coach. What are the parents going to do when the kid is older...walk them from class to class and hold their hand? It's time we start letting these kids develop into adults, and it starts early.

So why won't we ever see "Shoeless Joe" again? Well, maybe we will on YOUR team, because the parents aren't going to go and buy a new pair of shoes on a moment's notice because little Johnny forgot his cleats...play in socks! Or share cleats with another player who is sitting that inning. If anything, it'll teach Johnny not to make that mistake again, plus it'll teach him how to deal with it in a way that he'll suddenly realize is not the end of the world.

## **II. Better Fundamental Baseball**

We all know how the game is played. Boys take the field. Pitcher holds the ball. Batter steps into the box. Pitcher throws the ball. Batter hits it, and runs to first base. If the batted ball is on the ground, the fielder fields it and throws to first. If the ball is hit in the air, the fielder tries to catch it before it drops. Batter tries to

go to second if possible, then third, then home for a run. Pretty simple. Hit, catch, throw. But the variations are endless.

We all know that infielders need to practice catching ground balls, good form, etc.; outfielders need to practice catching pop ups and throwing the ball in quickly, taking good routes, using proper form to receive the ball with two hands. Hitters need to practice hitting, using simple “short to the ball” approaches, etc. Pitchers need to throw bullpens, and catchers need to practice catching, blocking, and throws down to bases.

There are basic skills with all of the variations described above, things that will make an infielder a BETTER infielder, an outfielder a SMARTER and BETTER outfielder, a pitcher a SMARTER more ADVANCED pitcher, and a catcher a BETTER more SKILLED catcher. Same goes for hitting, but with more specific instruction towards each individual hitter.

Here are some things that I want to bring to this treatise, to coaches looking for the extra edge.

## **1. Outfielders**

- a. **Fundamental Goal: Drop step on fly balls.** Especially young players, many have a tendency to run forward whenever the ball is hit. They need to learn to wait, and react accordingly – a good drill: put them on a cone in the outfield and stand 20-30 feet away. Do 10 fly balls, making sure they “drop step” first and read it. Then begin backing up another 20 feet. Then again. And again. Until eventually you’re hitting or throwing pop ups from near the

plate...they should be drop stepping. Do this for with about 5-10 pop ups per player, at each distance, at every practice.

- b. **Fundamental Goal: On grounders hit to outfielders, take a knee and keep it in front.** No fielding on the side – keep it in front. They should not be fielding the ball like a middle infielder, and let's master this and keeping the ball in front until moving on to fielding on the run for the do or die play.
- c. **Fundamental Goal: Good routes.** I CAN'T express this enough...GOOD ROUTES. A good route means that the outfielder goes deeper and gets AROUND the ball in the gap, then comes in on it. The tendency is for the fielder to cut across, and if they don't cut it off, it runs to the wall and a long single becomes a double or triple. By going deep and AROUND the ball, the outfielder 1) cuts it off from being extra bases; and 2) it psychologically tells the batter not to run to second base because the outfielder is coming up on the ball in front of him. If he cuts it off and misses, the ball instead goes to the wall is extra bases. An easy drill for this is to simply roll balls from a distance, having them take "good routes", and move deeper and deeper towards home.
- d. **Fundamental Goal: React on contact, not on the miss by the infielder.** I watched a travel/club team of 14 year olds the other day, and was amazed to see that the outfielders did not move on a ground ball in the 5/6 hole until the ball was missed by the

infielders. Why? They should have been on the move on contact. It would have prevented the batter from going to second on what should have been a routine single. Be smarter than that, and teach your players to be smarter than that.

- e. **Fundamental Goal: Right Fielders Be Aggressive and Throw to First Base.** Free out number 5 are right fielders throwing to first base on singles to right field, especially for younger divisions. If your first baseman is ready for it, you can record lots of outs by throwing people out from right field.

2. **Infielders: “FREE OUTS”** - I call this section “free outs” because they are given to you by the other team. The other team won’t be paying attention to the little things, and because your team does, you’ll reap the benefit of these free outs and get back to hitting.

- a. **Fundamental Goal: Take advantage of sleeping, distracted runners.** Pick offs: A free out is having pitchers and infielders pay attention to this so pitchers are picking off runners that take over aggressive leads, turn their back on the bases, or don’t pay attention - those are free outs. It just requires the fielders to be paying attention, using their baseball I.Q. that we are trying so desperately to increase over time, so they anticipate. We’re trying to teach and raise aggressive, scrappy, smart baseball players. The way to do that – hold them accountable to paying attention all of

the time. Another way to ensure this: remind them to “**always keep your eyes on the ball.**” Daydreaming by looking around, talking to the basecoach, looking back at the base while they take leads – that’s what your defense is going to take advantage of for free outs, and your players should never be doing those things when on offense – “always keep your eyes on the ball.”

- b. **Fundamental Goal: Be vocal!** Second free out is when kids try to anticipate steals and this free out is based on communication. Short stops and first basemen need to learn how to be vocal. When they yell “STEP OFF, STEP OFF!”, you’re able to now have a runner who’s stuck in no man’s land. That’s free out number two. Pitchers – run right at the runner, make him commit (hopefully back toward the base he came from), and pick him off with one throw or simply tag him...that’s a free out!
- c. **Fundamental Goal: Proper Pickle Approach.** Free out number three is also linked to free out number two - it is the proper way to do pickles and is not necessarily only on a pick off : a runner may hit a ball and round a base too far, for instance, or get stuck trying to steal home on a pass ball and realize he’ll be out so he heads back to third but is too far off. Bottom line: you’ll have a runner stuck and you have to be able to take advantage of this free out. To do so, you need to properly execute a pickle. There are three things I like to teach to properly execute a pickle, and I used to

have my players repeat these things to me over and over again, so it became second nature to them. We would then practice it at every practice.

- i. “Ball up, no dogging or faking”. The player with the ball holds it up, near a 90 degree angle, so the player who is going to receive it can see it. No fake throwing - the ball goes up in the bare hand and stays there until the tag is made or the flip to the other defensive player is made, period.
- ii. “Run at the runner full speed” - you don’t jog and then fake throw and jog and then fake throw. Put the ball up and then you run full speed. What that does is make the runner commit, or its simply a tag play.
- iii. For the receiver of the baseball, the other defensive player - “Shorten the baseline”. This means stepping in front of the base a couple of steps. Do NOT straddle the base and wait for the throw. Stand in front a couple of feet, and create a throwing lane for the person with the ball. That means recognizing where the person with the ball is. By “shortening the baseline”, we are taking the base away from the runner.
- iv. More advanced things that all players should also do:

1. As the receiver catches the ball, he's stepping forward or creating momentum towards the runner, yelling "ball ball ball", so the thrower knows to throw it. It shouldn't take more than one or two throws to pickle. That's is free out number three.
2. Run the runner back to the base he came from, rather than the next base.

NOTE: Don't underestimate the value of just letting kids play pickle. They can institute these things, and work on these things as fielders. While doing so, the runners will also be learning and anticipating how to be aggressive and take the extra base. So when you're playing teams that are NOT good at handling pickles, your runners can go crazy, and take extra bases at will.

3. **Infielders - Fundamental Goal: Proper Tag Position.** This is applicable at all ages but is really prevalent with younger kids – proper tag position. Almost all kids tag too high. They don't take the base away from the runner (by standing on the inside corners or just inside the inside corners of the base) so they give the runner the opportunity to slide in. They'll often straddle the base too deep on the base, giving the runner the opportunity to slide in with ease, and having to reach toward runner way too far. When the tag is eventually made, it is too high and the runner's foot goes in. First, the fielder has to stand on the inside corner, closest to

the baseline, so they are taking the base away slightly. Next, the tag has to be on the ground – get the glove dirty. High tags lead to runners getting their foot in under the tag. We have all seen this, and far too often – a ball beats the runner by several feet, but the tag is too high and the runner slides under it. There goes the free out.

#### **4. Smart Baseball for Pitchers**

This chapter is not only about keeping a low pitch count but going after batters who struggle against your pitcher and not wasting pitches, throwing curve balls in the dirt or balls you want batters to chase, when in fact those batters can't catch up with the fastball. Punch them out and get them out of there. Don't make things more complicated for the pitcher and the catcher.

- a. First pitch strikes. Jump ahead, stay ahead. Period. You can get fancy later on. Get that first strike.
- b. Once that ball leaves their hand, they become a defensive player. So...there is always somewhere to be. Back up throws. Too many pitchers stand around complacent. And when a ball is hitting the gaps or hitting the outfield, they don't back up throws. Make sure the pitchers are headed to the lead base for backing up a throw, period.
- c. Ground balls to the right side. Pitchers are now defensive players, expected to cover first base. The proper route in doing so – run to the cut out for first base, not the base directly, and then turn up

the line and receive the ball early so the pitcher can step on the base. If the pitcher beats the first baseman or second baseman's throw, stop and become a first baseman. But no matter what: be there.

- d. With a man on third, pitcher throws a ball in the dirt. Do NOT look to the runner to see what he's doing. It wastes time and causes delay. If running, the runner is already on the move and will beat the pitcher to the plate. Ball hits dirt, pitcher starts running home...period.
- e. Proper pick offs at 1B for right handers. Why step back off the rubber and then throw? 1) It's slow. 2) You become a position player, which means if you overthrow first, that's TWO bases. If you're in front, it's ONE base. Coaches – teach this properly.

#### **5. Defense -Fundamental Goal: There is always somewhere to go.**

Catchers and pitchers touch the ball the most, but it doesn't end with just catch and throw. A catcher can back up to first base on ground balls with nobody on. Obviously they should stay put if you've got a runner on second or third. Pitchers should become defensive players after they throw the ball. Infielders can be moving on every pitch, outfielders on every hit. Have somewhere to go, have somewhere to back up. By playing this type of fundamental baseball, you shut down the offensive opportunities on over throws. Outfielders – back up grounders on the infield, balls in the opposite field gaps depending on where the throw is going, etc.

**“THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEWHERE TO GO.”**

## **6. Batting Practice - Fundamental Goal: Quality/Productive BP**

### **Routines**

Batting practice does not mean letting kids stand around while another kid hits a ball every 10 seconds or so with instruction in between pitches,. And if you really want to slow your batting practice down, play out every hit. I don't understand why coaches do that, especially at the youth level where some kids are still learning to catch the ball, and have shorter attention spans. Have small groups involved, and small drills occurring during batting practice. You'll need to incorporate the assistance of parents/assistance coaches to help with this, but your BP will be incredibly more productive.

The way I like to conduct batting practices is this:

The person who just hit (or when starting, it will be your last batter) can be on first base as a runner. The batter's first job is to bunt the runner to second base – move him over. Then bunt him over to third. Now the runners can work on reading the ball properly if it's bunted, popped up, etc. They can also be working on lead offs if they're older kids. Once the runner gets to third base, have the batter work on hitting the ground ball for an rbi run. Maybe even make it interesting by making it two strikes on the batter. After that, give the batter about 10 swings.

Now for the fielders: What are the fielders doing? The outfielders are working on the things mentioned earlier – drop steps, routes, etc. You could even have another coach doing some of the outfielder drills that I mentioned earlier.

Infielders have been spread out in infield spots, and have a parent or coach on either side of the infield (preferably the on deck circles) hitting ground balls in between pitches to that particular infielder who then throws the ball back the person hitting the ground ball. For instance, the coach stands in front of the 3<sup>rd</sup> base dugout/3<sup>rd</sup> base on deck circle and in between pitches, hits a ground ball to the shortstop who throws it right back to the coach. Then the coach does the same to 3<sup>rd</sup>, possibly, but only those positions, period. The same would be true on the first base side, with grounders to the second baseman and/or the first baseman.

Again, once the batter has hit the ground ball to score the person from third or a tag up/etc., now they get their batting practice in - maybe ten-fifteen swings. And you don't have the fielders play out the hit, because the infielders are taking ground balls in between, and the outfielders are shagging in the outfield. So what happens? They throw to the "bucket boy". The bucket (or an equipment trolley if you want) is behind second base. You have a fielder there as sort of a rover, manning the bucket. After every hit the fielders throw the batted ball to the bucket boy - do NOT play it out. The bucket boy then deposits the ball into the bucket or trolley. Eventually, when switching batters, the bucket boy replenishes the bucket to the pitching coach throwing BP.

On the last batting practice hit for each batter, THEN the runner runs it out and then the defensive players play it out. Now you rotate: outfielders shift over - the right fielder moves to 1B, center fielder to right field, left fielder to center field; the first basemen in the infield shifts over to 2<sup>nd</sup> base, 2<sup>nd</sup> base to SS, SS to 3<sup>rd</sup>, the third baseman becomes the on deck hitter, and the hitter that just finished hitting

does his base running and when finished, becomes the left fielder. You keep this rotation throughout batting practice. With this, everyone gets an opportunity to work on bunting, hitting, and scoring people, and working productively on defense. It's productive batting practice, or batting practice with a purpose.

### **7. Baserunning – Fundamental Goal: Eyes on the Ball, Anticipate**

The single most important thing to do when stepping off of a base for a lead off is to keep your eyes on the ball. As a baserunner, if you take your eyes off of the ball, you are susceptible to becoming a free out. Always keep your eyes on the ball.

Now for the lead off:

a. Proper technique for leading off – get there quickly, no cross overs, no baby steps, be aggressive. The runner should take anywhere from two to four shuffles to get to the proper place to be. How do you know where that is, from first base for instance? When diving back, it should be on cross over with the right foot back to the base, and a dive to the back corner of the base. If the player isn't getting the uniform dirty, they're too close. If they're reaching, they're too far.

b. Once the player has reached back to the base safely, they should "ladder crawl" their way around toward the left/back side of the base with their hand still on the base, walking their way back up, and once their foot AND hand that was originally on the base are BOTH on the base, simply stand up. This takes practice, but is important because it allows the player to be quickly ready to head to second in the event there was an overthrow, and/or allows the runner to get back into his lead if the other team is trying to quick pitch. Do not allow the player

to simply lay there on the ground. Swing the feet around quickly, stand back up, and be ready to get back into the lead off position.

c. Pop ups – If you're a runner on first and there is a flyball to left field for instance, going "halfway" doesn't really mean "halfway". It means, **get as far as you can with the chance to get back in time without getting thrown out if the ball is caught. Or, anticipate the ball falling and keep on running.** Also, if the ball is hit extremely deep but appears to be caught, maybe tag up. The situation will have to dictate what the runner does here, but "halfway" does not mean "halfway", but is a good reference point to start with for younger players...just develop it as they grow and become more intuitive.

d. After the lead off and then the pitch to the plate, players should be shuffling off, typically two good shuffles. If the pitch is hitting the dirt, the movement that has already started by the runner is allowing them to get a jump into taking the next base quickly. If they are stagnant, not anticipating the ball in the dirt, they could get thrown out if they try to steal it too late, or completely fail to even take that extra base. By anticipating the ball in the dirt and beginning the movement towards the next base early, the runner will have the upper hand on both batted balls and balls in dirt. This is easily worked on during batting practice for the baserunners. Also, if the pitcher is extremely slow with the delivery to the plate and you have a fast runner, encourage the runner to steal the next base on their own. Why not? Try to improve their baseball I.Q.!

### **III. CONCLUSION**

There are many other techniques, strategies, and things that can be done at each and every position to make players more aggressive, to raise their baseball I.Q. I'm anxious to learn and see some of these in action, and will continue to be a student of the game. I hope these things will help coaches at every level to improve their own players' baseball I.Q., and can help make them more competitive. Best of luck.