

LA CANADA BASEBALL/SOFTBALL ASSN.

GOALS AND RELATED COACHING IDEAS FOR PINTO TEAMS

At the Pinto ages (7 and 8), keeping the game “fun” for the kids is of paramount importance. Baseball, more than any other youth sport, is a game in which EVERY player, even the most gifted, will experience multiple “micro-failures” throughout the course of a season. [Exhibit A: Even the great Babe Ruth *struck out 1,330 times* in his MLB career!] Part of coaching at this level is to help the players deal with those failures. This can be done by addressing such issues in a positive, supportive manner when they inevitably occur and by practicing in a way that (hopefully) results in fewer and fewer failures/mistakes with each successive game. The game is more fun for the players if they perform well, and they will perform well only if they practice a variety of necessary skills properly.

Player safety, too, must ALWAYS be considered at this level. Even with the “softer” balls and “player-protective” rules the League has in place at the Pinto level, the potential for serious injury is omnipresent in every practice and game. Every coach needs to have “eyes in the back of his/her head” and be aware at all times of who is doing what. Goofing off with bats and balls--which tends to occur more frequently when the players are not kept occupied in practices and pre-game warm ups--cannot be allowed. The skills and related practice drills noted herein are, in the abstract, safe for young players, but even “safe” drills and plays can become dangerous if not executed correctly and/or the players simply are not “paying attention.” (*E.g.*, throwing hard without proper warm up; a player swinging a bat in the on-deck circle as another player walks right behind him, both oblivious to the fact that one is swinging a metal club in the immediate vicinity of the other, etc., etc.) It is incumbent on the coaches of each team to run practices safely. Safety is enhanced and the risk of injury minimized if the practice sessions are well organized and carefully overseen by the coaches.

In that regard, the following safety rules must be enforced at every practice and game:

1. **Cups must be worn by every pitcher and catcher without exception.** They are strongly recommended for every other player, particularly those playing the infield (which includes everybody, given that every player must rotate through the infield in every game).
2. Any catcher warming up a pitcher, whether in a game or in practice, must wear a cup and a catcher’s mask, at a minimum.
3. **Batting helmets must be worn by all hitters and all on-deck batters without exception.**
4. No metal spikes at this age.
5. No goofing off or horsing around with balls or bats. Any incident of such silliness/stupidity must be stopped immediately and the offending player(s) “admonished.”

Player safety also is enhanced by warming up and stretching properly before any

real “baseball” skills are practiced. A jog around the field followed by five to ten minutes of stretching of the throwing muscles and legs do wonders to get the players focused and prepare their bodies for the stresses associated with baseball.

After the stretching and general warm up, have the players play catch at a relatively short distance, with the team divided into two parallel lines. Some coaches think it beneficial to begin throwing warm ups by having the players throw initially from their knees and/or without taking a step toward the target--the idea is to force the players to twist the torso at the waist to get the non-throwing shoulder pointed toward the target and then generate power by leading with that non-throwing shoulder and rotating the torso back toward the target, pulling the throwing arm through like a whip, snapping the ball off the fingers at the conclusion of the rotation. The throwing arm should always follow through by coming across the body, such that the throwing hand ends up on the non-throwing side of the body for a brief instant. At these initial distances, the ball should not be thrown particularly hard; the idea is to throw accurately and get comfortable with the torso rotation and arm-whip action.

After a couple of minutes of close-in catch, the players on one of the lines begin backing up together in measured increments. [“Okay; this line back up ten feet. . . Now another ten.” Etc., etc.] Once the whole team has shown it can make the immediate throw fairly well about ten times in a row, move the line back again and again until the players are throwing at least as far as the distance between the bases (50 feet), if not farther.

Any time a youngster complains of arm pain while throwing, have him/her stop. The player can make a few token throws at shorter distances and at half-speed thereafter to test the arm; if throwing at even the shorter distances hurts the arm, that player is done throwing for that day. His/her parent should be advised of the problem. Be mindful of that player’s arm soreness in future practices and games--most “tenderness” usually resolves itself without further complications by the next practice or game, but if there is any residual, chronic, or recurring pain, the parent should be advised to seek medical attention for the child.

During warm ups, overthrows and mis-handled throws are common. If you have sufficient balls available, you may want to give the tandem that just “lost” a ball another ball right away, so they don’t waste time chasing all over the field retrieving bad throws. [The bad throws can all be retrieved at once by the entire team at the conclusion of the throwing session.] If players are going to chase and retrieve bad throws, they should run the balls back to their lines rather than “launch” long-distance return throw from whatever zip code the balls ended up in. Long distance return throws typically are even more misguided than the original bad throws and can become “incoming” anti-personnel weapons as to the players who continue to play catch while the original overthrow is retrieved.



The remainder of this outline focuses on the “practice” phase of the game. It is an introductory primer on the basic skills that need to be addressed in practice at the Pinto level. It is by no means a “comprehensive” statement of everything that could or should be practiced; there are countless “issues” that coaches may need to address during the course of a season that are not identified herein. Similarly, the League is not presenting this outline as a “mandatory” plan for Pinto practices; it is merely a general overview of the skills that need to be developed by young players just starting to play “real” baseball, with some suggestions as to how those skill sets might be addressed in practice. We know that the limited practice time coaches have with their teams makes it extremely difficult to work on and perfect every skill that players will need in order to be “successful” in games. If you have a plan going into practice, however, you will be able to make more progress than if you show up with no plan and try to “wing it” with just a bucket of balls and your kid’s bat. It is the League’s hope that this outline will present enough ideas to enable all of the Pinto coaches to put together practice plans that result in positive development of all of the players over the course of the season.

THE ETERNAL CHALLENGE OF A BASEBALL PRACTICE--KEEPING ALL PLAYERS ENGAGED FOR THE DURATION OF THE PRACTICE

The problem with most baseball practices (at ALL levels, not just Pinto) that have not been planned out well is that three-quarters of the players typically end up doing NOTHING for more than half of the practice time. *E.g.*--If a coach thinks that “live batting practice” or “real pitching” will be the main agenda item for a practice, what often happens is that eight or nine boys end up “shagging balls” and, in effect, doing almost nothing productive (other than making the pitcher’s life a bit easier by returning the batted balls) as one boy at a time takes his turn in the batter’s box and occasionally puts a ball in play. Or, in similar fashion, the coach decides to hit fly balls to the entire team gathered in a group in the outfield, which means 8 or 9 boys are doing nothing other than getting out of the way of the one boy to whom a fly is hit.

Most of the skills associated with baseball are not done “on the run,” in contrast to many basketball and soccer skills. An entire team can practice basketball lay ups or soccer shots-on-goal at a rapid pace, such that there is little time spent standing around or standing in line waiting for “your turn.” That typically is NOT the case with most baseball drills, which are not practiced out of a sprint or trot. Skills such as hitting, pitching, and fielding are, for the most part, practiced out of “set” positions rather than on the run and often are repeated several times by each player as part of his/her “turn” (*e.g.*, “take ten swings” when at bat, not just one), which means it takes much longer to go through a line of players in baseball than it does in, say, basketball.

Recognizing that baseball skills, particularly at the Pinto level, must be repeated, refined, and repeated again by each individual player, the trick is to organize a practice in such a way as to keep as many players as possible occupied simultaneously, even as they are working individually on honing and refining their respective skills. As will become apparent very quickly, the more coaches and parent-volunteers you have engaged in your practices, the more you will be able to accomplish. The primary benefit of having

multiple adults actively involved with practice is that you are able to have small groups of players simultaneously working on different drills, which minimizes the “down time” for any one player during the course of the practice.

Given the nature of League play and practice, there may well be occasions when the coach is “short-handed” and does not have the luxury of running multiple “stations” of the sort suggested above. Running a meaningful practice single-handed is difficult. It becomes even more important to have a plan in mind if you know you will be running a practice alone.

The League is acutely aware of the fact that coaches have very limited practice time with their players and appreciates that each is trying his/her very best to put a competitive team on the field. We appreciate the efforts of all of our coaches and hope that this guide makes life a bit easier over the course of the season!



There are a number of very basic, fundamental skills that we hope each Pinto player improves on and begins to master by the end of the League season. Their enjoyment of the game--and their interest in continuing to play in future seasons--will be enhanced if they begin to experience some success in playing the game, and such success will be more likely if the players each show improvement in the various facets of the game addressed below.

OFFENSE--Hitting and Base Running

Hitting

Hitting a hard-thrown baseball is considered by many to be the single most difficult act in all of team sports. It is not surprising, therefore, that it takes YEARS to become a good hitter. [There is a reason why MLB ballplayers, the very best in the world, continue to take almost-daily batting practice throughout the season!] Unfortunately, Pinto players do not have years of practice under their belts and thus typically come to the game with little knowledge of the proper technique for hitting a baseball. *Every* player at this age, even those with some experience and/or great athletic ability, is doing *something* wrong that will have the potential to impair his/her development as a hitter. In order to avoid the extreme frustration that comes with several games of strikeouts and no hits, it is essential that part of the team’s practice time be devoted to working on basic hitting fundamentals.

Having said that, though, you may not want to have real “batting practice” off the machine or a pitcher if it appears your players have “bad” swings; working on the mechanics of the swing off a batting tee or with “soft-toss”/underhand pitching may be time better spent. Having kids flail away at “live” pitching when they have no clue how to swing the bat accomplishes nothing and, indeed, may prove counter-productive if the player’s confidence and enthusiasm begin to wane or bad habits become engrained.

If you look through the internet, you will find countless articles on “how to hit.” There are different schools of thought about how best to swing a bat, and the advice of the “experts” is sometimes contradictory and inconsistent with what is seen in slo-mo videos of MLB hitters. There are, however, some common points of all theories that are important to learn at an early age, and we suggest that, at a very minimum, those basic hitting fundamentals be addressed in practice.

1. Check to see if the bat size is appropriate for the player. Have the player hold his/her bat out at arm’s length with one hand. If the player can’t keep the bat out there fairly level for at least a few seconds, the bat is too heavy for that player. It is more important that the player be able to generate speed with his bat than that he swing a “big” bat. Science has shown that “hitting power” is a function of *bat speed*, not the size of the bat. The various charts that stores and bat manufacturers refer to in recommending a bat to a kid are, in the opinion of this author, largely worthless, because they typically are calculated on some amorphous relationship between the player’s height and bat length---a relationship that has nothing to do with real-time hitting. Either the bat is too heavy or it is not, regardless of its length. [As an aside, our PONY rules (unlike Little League rules) do not permit bats with a 2 ¾” barrel; the maximum permissible barrel size is 2 5/8”.]

2. The player must stand close enough to the plate so that the bat can make contact with a pitch on the outside half of the plate. Start with weight balanced on the balls of both feet or even slightly back on the ball of the back foot. Although players will adjust their stances over the years, it is probably best to have them start with their feet approximately shoulder-length apart, in roughly the same line to the pitcher. “Open” and “closed” stances, where the front foot is either set back from, or set in front of, the line from the back foot to the pitcher, may have certain advantages, but they also have potential disadvantages as the swing develops (such as unnecessary movement of the head and the angle at which the batter sees the ball being delivered from the pitcher).

3. No “cross-handed” grips. Right hand on top for right-handed hitters; left hand on top for left-handed hitters. Hands pushed together with no “open” space between them, but the fingers are NOT intertwined (this is not a golf grip). Hold the bat with a relaxed grip until the swing is begun; “choking” the bat to death before the swing even begins can make it difficult to load the wrists and bring the bat forward. As the bat starts to move, the grip should tighten up to make the bat “part of” the hands.

4. Both eyes must watch the ball from the moment it leaves the machine or pitcher’s hand all the way to the point of contact. “Try to see the ball hit the bat”--- [which, according to most scientists, is almost impossible given the speed of the ball and the bat, but the phrase reinforces the idea that the player MUST watch the ball all the way from the pitcher’s hand to the point of contact.]

5. Step toward the pitch, not away from it! Even the best swing in the world will lose power at the moment of contact if the front foot (and hence the player’s weight and force) is moving toward the foul line instead of toward the pitch. In stepping with the front foot, the hitter’s weight is NOT transferred to the front foot before the bat is

even swung. If the hitter's weight is transferred to the front foot prematurely (*i.e.*, before the bat is brought into the hitting zone by the hips and arms), the hip rotation that generates all the real power will be "phantom" in nature and result in no real power. The player's weight may well end up on the front foot in some good swings, but that transfer occurs at the start of the follow through, not before the moment of contact.

6. Do not take a giant, "hard" stride toward the pitch. All that is needed is a quick, short, soft step of a few inches toward the pitch. The stride/step is not the source of any real power. [Note that some "power hitters," such as Albert Pujols, really do not "stride" at all; they do a little toe-tap, which serves the same purpose as the traditional stride-step.] The stride/step is just a timing mechanism during which the batter "loads" his arms, tightens his grip, and sets up to begin rotating his/her hips (and then pulling the bat) toward the ball. Over-striding by young players typically does nothing more than cause their heads to move up and down (bad), slow their swings down (bad), and result in late, "loopy" swings that are not level through the hitting zone (bad). Ideally, the knee of the striding leg begins to straighten out at the conclusion of the step, just as the batter begins to torque the bat around with his hips and arms. If the front knee stays noticeably bent or buckles in mid-swing, a good deal of the power generated by the hips and legs will be dissipated, resulting in an "arm-swing" that is akin to flailing at the pitch.

7. In "loading" the arms and wrists, try to avoid raising the bat "up," dropping it "down," and/or pushing the barrel up behind the head. Similarly, the back elbow really should not be lifted up much beyond the starting angle during this "loading" process. Any upward movement of the elbow or the bat will simply require an even longer counter-movement downward to the ball, which tends to make the swing slow and "loopy." Most real "loading" consists of the upper body cocking/turning slightly away from the pitch and the shoulders pulling the arms and bat back just as the stride is being taken. There isn't any "up" or "down" action with the arms or the bat to speak of; the "load" is a slight movement of the torso and arms "back," away from the ball, like a spring coiling up.

8. Weight must be on the balls of the feet as the stride/step is taken. A flat-footed stride/step makes it very difficult to rotate one's hips, such that there will be no power in the swing.

9. Avoid dramatic uppercut swings. Great MLB hitters might get away with trying to "jack" every pitch up and out, but Pinto kids usually will not. While virtually every hard swing will have something other than a perfectly level trajectory, players should practice "level" swings during batting practice. [Meaning level to the *trajectory of the pitch*, not necessarily level with/parallel to the ground.] A level swing keeps the bat in the hitting zone longer than a hard uppercut, which means there are more opportunities for the bat to "intersect" with the ball as they travel on their respective "planes."

10. Ted Williams said something to the effect of, "The hips lead the way," in explaining how a hitter generates sufficient power to "attack" a pitch. ***Hip rotation is the source of real hitting power***, as even the strongest player cannot generate a great deal of

bat speed just standing flat-footed and swinging with his/her shoulders and arms. Before a player spends any time in real batting practice, (s)he should demonstrate at the tee and/or in soft-toss that (s)he is generating power by rotating the hips and allowing the torso muscles to pull the arms (and hence the bat) through the hitting zone. Probably the easiest way to “teach” hip rotation is to have the player practice rotating his/her weight on the ball of the back foot after the front foot has completed the initial timing step (without actually swinging the bat at any meaningful speed). The hitter should end up with his/her belly button practically facing the pitcher at the moment of contact, and the back foot will have been turned toward the pitcher by the back leg as it (leg) is being turned inward by the hips. [Sort of like squashing out a cigarette butt, although that may not be the best analogy to use with kids this age!] If the back foot remains “planted” parallel to the back line of the batter’s box and does not rotate toward the pitcher, it acts as an “anchor” on the leg, which in turn prevents the hips from rotating the way they should---which dramatically decreases the power of the swing.

11. The shoulders and then wrists/hands pull “inside” the path of the ball as the swing develops, so as to pull the barrel/“sweet spot” of the bat to the ball. [Fair warning! There are all sorts of buzz-phrases and clichés used to describe what the arms and hands should be doing as they bring the bat to bear on the ball (*e.g.*, “hands to the ball,” “hands inside the ball,” “kiss the bat,” etc.)--*none* of which is self-explanatory or self-evident to young, inexperienced hitters who tend to take directions literally. (One young--and very bright--hitter once responded to the “Keep-your-hands-‘inside’-the-ball” advice by stating matter-of-factly, “Coach, I don’t get what you mean by ‘stay inside the ball.’ The only time my hands ever would be ‘outside’ the ball is if I’m getting hit by the pitch on my forearm!”)] Use whatever expression/description seems to get the point across, but the “point” will have to be demonstrated countless times by the coaches in slow motion in order for the players to get the idea that their wrists and hands have to snap the barrel of the bat to the ball quickly in order to make powerful contact with the pitch. Generally, unless the pitch is way outside, the hitter will want to bring his back elbow down and in toward (but not actually touching) his hip as he rotates his hips; this tends to bring the bat level and helps pull the barrel through quickly. A “long,” straight-armed swing with little wrist snap is likely to be slow, “loopy,” and a cumbersome way to bring the barrel of the bat through the hitting zone.

12. **The head should move as little as possible throughout the swing.** It should not “pull off” and turn with the shoulders or bob up and down as the stride is taken. “Keep your head still!”

13. Complete the backswing, whether the ball is hit or not. If the player has developed a one-handed backswing (releasing the top hand as the swing is completed), make sure that (s)he is not releasing the top hand prematurely; *both* hands need to be holding the bat firmly as it is being pulled through the hitting zone. Similarly, make sure the hitter is not “over-rotating” the hips and upper torso prematurely or stepping away from the mound in an unconscious effort to generate sufficient power to pull the bat through one-handed. [The one-handed backswing that came into vogue as part of the “Charlie Lau” school of hitting is often difficult for Pinto-aged players to execute

properly and, indeed, some young hitters complain that it “hurts” the front shoulder as the shoulder suddenly is forced to control the weight of the bat one-handed. (FWIW, Charlie Lau was a lifetime .255 hitter with 16 total home runs from 1956 to 1967, so one might wonder what qualified him to re-think the science of hitting!)]

14. Develop some sense of the strike zone. Do not swing at “bad” pitches below the knees or above the shoulders. Even if you hit such pitches, you are unlikely to hit it hard.

15. Upon contact, drop the bat immediately and start running to first base. DO NOT THROW THE BAT as part of the follow-through.

As noted above, batting practice, while absolutely necessary, can become nothing more than wasted “down time” for the players who are not actually hitting. To the extent possible, practice of the hitting fundamentals should be organized in a way that keeps those not in the batter’s box engaged until it is their turn at bat. Use of multiple hitting stations, such as a tee, underhand “soft-toss” of baseballs or weighted practice balls, on-deck/“pretend” swings, etc., keeps several hitters busy simultaneously and is highly recommended. If a hitter is having trouble putting balls in play while at the plate in “live” batting practice, a coach who is not pitching might want to hit balls to the fielders shagging balls in between pitches, so that the fielders don’t “tune out” over the course of batting practice. This obviously requires multiple coaches/volunteers to be run properly.

Base Running:

1. Home to first---Run full-speed through the base. No head-first dives into first (or any base at this age). Run just to the right of the baseline (foul side). Do not slow down until AFTER you have crossed the base. Do not watch the ball after seeing that it’s a ground ball into the infield; watch the first base coach instead as you approach the base. After crossing the base, turn to the right (into foul territory) to slow down and look for the ball.

2. Home to second---If the ball gets through the infield, veer into foul territory about half way to first, so that you can take a “wide” turn toward second at first base without slowing down much. [If you run straight to the first base bag, you will necessarily have to slow down to make the 90-degree turn toward second.] Try to hit first base on the inside corner as you push off and head toward second.

3. First to third, second to home, home run, etc.---Wide turn around each base and accelerate to full speed on coach’s command to proceed to next base. No trotting on the bases.

4. Sliding is always an interesting exercise at this age. If you have access to a real sliding mat, use it. Improvised mats (heavy cardboard pieces and such) can be used, but they don’t provide the padding on “impact” that a true sliding mat provides. If you intend to practice sliding, alert the team in advance so that they all remember to wear

their sliding pants under their uniform pants. If you have access to an older player who knows how to slide, have him demonstrate sliding a few times for the team's benefit; an action often speaks louder than many words when it comes to teaching the techniques for an action that some players may be reluctant even to try.

The general points to practice with regard to sliding are:

A. Do not slow down to slide. Rather, you run full speed and slide to slow down, so that you end up touching the base when you come to a stop.

B. Very important at this age---**Begin the slide well in advance of the base (at least a body length away, if not more)**. At this point, it's better to slide too early and not get to the base than to slide too late and risk sprained ankles by hitting the base at speed. You should mark out a line well in advance of the base where you want the players to begin their slides when you practice sliding,

C. Tuck one foot and lower leg under the knee/lower thigh of the other leg as you "sit down" and make contact with the dirt. Reach for the base with the foot of the outstretched leg. At this level, it's easier and better if the runner lands and then skids pretty much evenly on his butt and doesn't try to roll over on to his side as he hits the dirt (even though all sliding pads protect the side of the upper thigh rather than the butt itself). Do not throw your head and shoulders back as you make contact with the dirt; you will be leaning back slightly, but you don't want your head/helmet in the dirt.

D. No "ninja/kung fu" leaps up into the air to start the slide, as this makes the "contact angle" with the ground more acute and more dangerous than it need be. The sliding motion begins by "sitting down" into a slide, not by jumping up into the air to "get to the base."

E. Ideally, both hands should be off the ground until the runner stops at the base. Although every boy this age will put his hand or arm down into the dirt, the hand really does not slow the runner down; the friction of the *body* sliding on the dirt is what really stops the runner. Putting a hand or elbow on the dirt risks sprains, etc., that can be avoided if the runner simply keeps both hands up in the air as he goes down. Easier said than done. . . .

F. It's not a good idea to hit the dirt with the lower/bent knee; strive to make the initial contact with the ground with the butt or side of the upper thigh rather than with the knee. The knee typically is not well protected, and sliding on the knee almost always results in abrasions (and possibly worse). In practices, have the boys look at where the dirt smudges are on their pants after each slide; if the knee has the biggest smudge, that means the runner is not "sitting down" properly (and the absence of dirt on the butt or upper thigh will further reflect the poor slide).

G. Tell your players that **they must slide if the play is going to be "close."** Just because a runner goes in standing up and, by some miracle, ends up "safe"

by a fraction of an inch does not mean that he should not have been sliding. We want players to learn that sliding is the proper way to go into a base on a close play (as opposed to slowing down to enable them to go in standing up and remain on the base).

H. Impress upon the players that they must be touching the base at the conclusion of the slide, whether the slide was good or bad. If they under-slide or over-slide/over-run the base, they need to get back to the base immediately.

5. Explain and practice the “tag up” rule. By the end of the season, every player should know that, with less than two outs, they must tag up if they want to advance after a fly ball or line drive is caught. With less than two outs, they must WAIT UNTIL THE BALL IS CAUGHT before leaving the base; no “cheating” by leaving early. With two outs, runners should not bother tagging up; they move as soon as the ball is hit.

6. Follow the base coaches’ directions--which must be *yelled* with some volume: *E.g.*, “Run straight through.” “Go for two/second.” “Turn and look.” “Get back!” “Slide!” “Hold at second.” “Score, score, score!” Etc., etc. Players need to learn that the coaches, not the individual runners, direct traffic on the bases. The best way to teach this is to have the kids practice running the bases with base coaches yelling directions to them at every stage, so they get used to shifting gears and starting and stopping on command. [Major leaguers mess up base running more than they should, so don’t expect your Pinto players to run the bases perfectly after just a practice or two!]

DEFENSE--FIELDING, THROWING, AND BEGINNING PITCHING

While hitting a baseball may be the single most difficult act associated with the game, fielding (particularly on a hard hit ground ball) is what distinguishes the “real” players from athletes who “pretend” they’re ballplayers. At the Pinto level, the team that can make most of the “routine” plays for outs will win most of their games. In order to execute the routine plays for outs, the players need to practice the following fielding fundamentals:

1. **Positioning.** Few players at this age really know where they are supposed to set up. As making throws to first base is often a struggle, you may want to move the shortstop and 3rd baseman in to start, perhaps even with the bag or even closer. [Runners are not leading off at this level, so there really is no problem with a fielder standing in the baseline when the ball is pitched. The fielder will have to move out of the runner’s way once the ball is hit, of course, UNLESS HE IS MAKING A PLAY ON THE BATTED BALL, in which case the runner must avoid the fielder.] The first baseman needs to understand that he must field all balls in his area as well as receive throws from other infielders at the base. Outfielders should stay a bit closer to the infield at this level than will be the case as they get older, as most batted balls will not be “crushed” over their heads.

As plays develop, the fielders need to stay in their assigned areas. Although the fast, alert kids may want to “roam” all over the infield and outfield to field or retrieve hits and errors themselves, that usually is counterproductive. While the hustle is commendable, leaving bases uncovered and over-crowding a play are not. Players need to learn at an early age that they have specific positions and responsibilities to handle, and that other players on the team have responsibility for the other parts of the field.

2. **“Ready Positions.”** It will take several seasons before every player moves into a ready position on every pitch as a matter of routine, but you need to start that process NOW. Infielders should be bending over slightly as they take one or two steps toward the batter *just as the pitch is delivered*. As these steps are taken, the arms come forward so that the hands are slightly out in front of the body, at waist level or lower, just as the pitch is delivered. The hands must be apart, with the mitt open toward the batter. Real first- and third-basemen tend to bend over lower to the ground and may even have their mitts touching the ground just as the batter swings, because ground balls tend to get to them much quicker than to the middle infielders. No one stands upright and flat-footed as the pitch is delivered. The head remains up, watching the pitch all the way to the batter. The infielder’s weight remains balanced, so that (s)he can move in any direction quickly.

Outfielders don’t need to bend over toward the ground like the infielders, but they do need to take a step toward the batter as the pitch is delivered, so that they are already “on the move” and ready to sprint in any direction.

3. **INFIELDERS.** The classic ground ball fielding technique for infielders is often referred to as the “alligator” technique and can be broken down into, and repeatedly rehearsed as, distinct movements. The movements (hopefully) will all flow together in a fluid motion on the field as the fielder collects the ball and makes a throw, but each distinct movement needs to be addressed and practiced separately.

If the ball is hit in your direction, you move immediately to get in front of the ball, if possible. You want to be in a position so that the ball is headed right at you. Once in front of the ball, ***bend the knees AND back together so that the butt can get low to the ground*** while balance is maintained. If the butt is not down, it becomes difficult to extend the arms out toward the ball so that the mitt can stop the ball OUT IN FRONT of the fielder. You do not want the fielder fielding routine ground balls underneath him or off to the side; the balls become difficult to follow and control in those awkward positions.

As the knees and back are bending, BOTH arms/hands extend forward and down toward the incoming ball. The mitt must be open to the ball, with the upper-backside of the web actually touching the dirt. The throwing hand also is extended toward the ball, remaining slightly higher than the mitt. [Unlike the mitt, the throwing hand does not touch the ground as it awaits the ball; it just “hovers” above and slightly off to the side of the mitt. See the attached photo; sorry it’s ARod, but it’s about the best MLB photo of this technique we could find!] It is much easier to field a ground ball if the hands start

“low” and come up as necessary to deal with hops; starting up high and then attempting to “jab” down at a ball that’s rolling between the legs at game-speed is almost always an automatic error at this age.

Once the ball hits the mitt, the throwing hand immediately covers it by coming down on to the ball to lock it into the mitt. [The action of the forearm and throwing hand coming down on to the mitt is the “alligator”-jaw action that gives the technique its name.] If possible, avoid fielding ground balls “one-handed,” except when making a “great play” on the move.

After securing the ball, immediately begin the throwing action. This begins by bringing both hands up toward the chest area and grabbing the ball out of the mitt with the throwing hand. At the same time, **the body needs to start turning sideways toward the intended target** (usually first base); this typically is done by rotating the torso in the direction of the throwing arm, pulling that throwing arm back, and doing a slight, sliding drop-step to the side or behind the body with the push-off leg (right leg for right-handed throwers, left leg for left-handers). This results in the non-throwing shoulder pointed in the general direction of the target.

Ideally, once the right (or left) foot has moved into this “plant” position, the fielder would take ONE (and only one) step toward the target with his other foot and throw the ball by following through with a full-arm throw across his/her body. (S)he would push off the plant foot hard to drive his/her body into the throw, rotating the torso and pulling the throwing arm toward the target. Practice breaking the bad habit of taking several hops or shuffle steps in preparation for a throw; the better technique is to take two steps [right-drop-step, then left (vice versa for lefthanders)] and then throw. Aim is always an issue at this age; we suggest telling the players to “aim for the head” and to bring the throwing hand “right through the target” as the ball is released. [Gravity is going to pull the ball down some by the time it gets to the target, so don’t have the fielder “throw at his belt” or something like that.]

Fielding ground balls should be a constant agenda item for practice. If possible, have two or even three coaches hit ground balls to small groups of fielders, each throwing to a different target, so that each player gets more “reps.” Have PLENTY of practice balls available, so you don’t waste a lot of time chasing bad throws and errors before a “set” of players has completed a station or drill.

4. **OUTFIELDERS/FLY BALLS.** Fielding fly balls, whether in the outfield or infield, is, in theory, less complicated than fielding ground balls, but the reality of Pinto play is that every fly ball/pop-up is a nail-biting adventure. Practice is essential to maximize the chances of the fielder’s mitt actually being where it belongs when the ball descends to his/her level. For true beginners, it may be better to practice with tennis balls at first until the player(s) develop enough confidence to overcome their fear of getting hit by a descending ball.

Instruct players in practice that **they must first “run to the spot” where the ball**

is coming down and THEN put their mitts up to catch the ball. Running with your mitt waving around just slows you down.

“The ball does not come to you. You have to run to the ball if you want to catch it.” Do not stand in place, looking at the ball before deciding to go after it. **RUN AFTER IT AS SOON AS IT IS HIT**, even if you only have to go a few steps to get into position.

It is better to turn and run back to get a ball hit over your head than to back-peddle in an effort to “catch up” to the ball as it descends behind you. Reacting and moving to line drives that are hit hard right at you and to balls hit over your head are the hardest aspects of outfield play and take years to master. Young players need to begin that process by learning to turn and run rather than back peddle on such hard hit balls.

Once you get to the spot where the ball is coming down, extend both arms up toward the descending ball, keeping the elbows slightly bent and “relaxed.” [It is much more difficult to move the mitt to the ball if the arms are “locked” in a fully extended position.] The mitt should be pointed “up” toward the ball (palm out, fingers pointed up). Routine fly balls should be caught just above the head, slightly out in front of the body, between the center-line of the head and the throwing shoulder. Trying to catch balls “behind” or “over” your head, off to the side, below the shoulder-line, or in close to the body is a recipe for an error, as the eyes may lose the ball for just a split second as it zooms past the line of vision.

The ball is caught one-handed in the mitt but is *immediately* secured by the throwing hand; that can happen only if the fielder has the throwing hand up next to his mitt as the ball descends, ready to lock in the ball as it hits the mitt. [See attached photo of the position one should be in just as the ball descends to the field level.] Do not “steer” the mitt to the ball with the throwing hand; the mitt hand moves independently of the throwing hand.

Once you secure the ball in the outfield (whether by clean catch, stopping a ground ball, chasing a ball in the gap, recovering an error, etc.) **THROW THE BALL IN TO THE CUT OFF MAN IMMEDIATELY. NEVER “HOLD” THE BALL IN THE OUTFIELD**; throw it in to the appropriate cut off man as soon as you get the ball under control. Although the idea is to hit the designated cut off man, at this age, it is usually better to throw the ball in to ANY infielder, even if it’s not the correct cut off man, than to hold the ball in the outfield. No tag play or force out on the bases is going to be executed by an outfielder standing out in the grass; the ball needs to be returned to the infield ASAP, so that a play on a runner may be attempted by an infielder if necessary.

Practice having the fielder who thinks (s)he is going to make the play yell, “Mine,” “Me, me, me,” or something similar. Be sure all your fielders understand that **if one of them calls for the ball, (s)he better follow through and go for the ball**, as *everyone else is going to get out of the way*. This takes many practices to perfect, but the sooner players begin to “call off” other fielders, the sooner they all will learn to execute those plays correctly.

Practice backing up somebody on **every play**. All outfielders should be moving somewhere on every hit ball, even if the ball is not hit at them. If a ball is hit into the outfield, the closest fielder goes directly for the ball and the next closest fielder runs to back him up. The other outfielders run in toward the infield to act as possible back ups for wild throws on the continuing play. On ground balls to the infielders, all outfielders should be running in as soon as the ball is hit to back up the infielder taking the ground ball and back up the bases, particularly first base. [Ironically, outfield is often thought of as the place where kids just “stand around” for an inning, doing nothing unless the ball is hit at them. Nothing is further from the truth---properly coached outfielders may end up running more in an inning than any infielder, even if they are not involved in any of the plays! Try running in from right field to get into a position near the foul line where you could back up first base three times in a row, and you’ll get the point!]

5. Selected Position-Specific Issues To Be Addressed in Practice

1st base---If the ball is hit in your area, go field it; don’t just watch it roll by. If the ball is NOT hit to you, go cover 1st base immediately and get ready to receive a throw.

“Find” the inside edge of the base with the ball (NOT the heel) of your throwing-side foot. (Right foot for right-handers; left foot for left-handers.) Do not await the throw with the foot on top of the base; the ball of your base-foot should be wedged against the inside edge of the base.

Square up to the fielder who is making the throw. The other (non-base) foot should be roughly parallel to the base-foot, with the shoulders/body squarely facing the thrower. **DO NOT have the front leg out in front of the back/base leg before the ball is thrown; similarly, do not extent the glove-arm out as a “target” before the ball is thrown.** Stay squared up to the thrower with both arms down in a relaxed, balanced position until the ball is actually thrown.

Once the ball actually is thrown---**and not before**---stride out directly toward the thrown ball with the front, non-base-foot while keeping the ball of the base-foot planted against the inside edge of the base. The timing of the stride should be practiced repeatedly, as beginners tend to stride out prematurely and are often off balance when the ball reaches them from an angle that is not consistent with the direction of their stride.

The glove arm/mitt reaches out in the same direction as the stride. Practice moving the mitt-arm and the stride/non-base foot toward the ball together, in tandem. Both the stride and the mitt should be moving directly toward the ball together.

Catch the throw one-handed; it is almost impossible to play first base well if you are “steering” your glove with your throwing hand and/or trying to catch every throw with two hands, because the throws will often be coming from odd angles that make it difficult to bring both arms to the ball simultaneously. [Try catching a throw out wide to

the glove side or to the backhand side with two hands while keeping a foot on the base, and you'll see why first basemen catch most throws one-handed.] You must watch the throw all the way into the glove. Do NOT take a peek at the oncoming runner. You cannot take your eyes off the incoming throw.

If you drop the throw, go get the ball immediately and run it back into the infield.

If you catch the throw successfully and can feel your foot on the base, push off the base and bring the mitt and ball back to your chest to prepare for a throw. If you cannot feel the base, turn and quickly touch it with your foot and then get your foot off the base.

If the incoming throw is "bad," do whatever you have to do (jump, block the ball, run off the base) to stop the ball from getting past first base. If you pull your foot off the base in pursuit of a bad throw, that's okay--and should be encouraged.

2nd base---If the ball is hit into your area, go make a play on it. Don't just stand and watch it roll by you. If the ball is not hit into your area, go over to second base and then watch the play develop---you may end up making a play at second if the play at first is messed up somehow, or if the third baseman or shortstop throws to second to get a "force out."

If there is a runner on first base and a ground ball is hit to the shortstop or third baseman, go cover second base IMMEDIATELY in case those fielders try to get the runner out at second. That will be a "force play," not a tag play. In making a force out at second, get to the base quickly and get into position to receive the throw with your *left foot on the base*. [This will be important in later years when they are learning to turn double plays.] Catch the throw, touch the base, and then push off the base immediately and look to make a throw elsewhere if necessary. You do not have to tag a runner who has already been "forced" at second.

The right- and right-center fielders should be throwing balls that are hit to them to the second baseman as the "cutoff man." The second baseman needs to go out into the outfield grass to receive those throws as soon as it's clear that the batted ball is headed in those directions.

If the ball is hit to left- or left-center field, the second baseman covers second base while the shortstop goes out and becomes the cutoff man. The second baseman needs to be close to the bag so that he can cover second if a runner attempts to advance from first base.

Shortstop---If the ball is hit into your area, go make a play on it. Don't just stand there and watch it roll by you.

If the ball is hit past you into the outfield, go out on the grass toward the left- or left-center fielder to be his cut off man. If the ball is hit past the second- or first-baseman

into the outfield, go cover second base; the second baseman will be the cut off man.

If there is a runner on first base and a ground ball is hit to the second- or first-baseman, go cover second base IMMEDIATELY in case those fielders try to get the runner out at second. That will be a “force play,” not a tag play. Just catch the throw, touch the base, and get away from the runner.

Practice the longer throws to first base from “the hole” between 3rd and short.

3rd Baseman---If the ball is hit into your area, go make a play on it. Don’t just stand and watch it roll by you. If the ball is not hit in your area, go cover 3rd base and watch the play develop.

Be prepared to receive throws at 3rd and to tag incoming runners. Straddle the 3rd base bag while awaiting the throw, if possible. Do not stand in front of the base or on top of the base to receive a throw with a runner approaching.

Practice the long throw from 3rd to 1st base.

On balls hit to the outfield, move to cover third and watch the play develop. The cutoff man may end up throwing to 3rd base in an effort to get a runner moving around the bases.

The third baseman, perhaps more than any other position, really needs to be in a “ready position” on every pitch. Even at this age, balls can be pulled hard, and those well-hit balls get on the third baseman in a hurry. If he is standing upright when the pitch is delivered, he will get “undressed” by hot shots down the line.

Catcher---At a very minimum, the catcher needs to get the return throw to the pitcher down pat, so that the pitcher is not wasting time chasing down errant throws. Even if the catcher is not going to actively catch pitches from a squat, he still must make decent return throws to the pitcher’s mound.

Real catching in a squat is hard work and takes an incredible amount of practice to master. Just getting accustomed to seeing balls with the mask on can be a challenge. There are a number of fundamental skills that young catchers need to practice.

Most modern catchers catch pitches one-handed. The catcher needs to play catch a LOT using his catcher’s mitt, so that he gets comfortable moving that heavy glove toward a throw and securing it with just the glove-hand.

The throwing hand is held back behind the butt until the pitch is gloved. If a player tries to catch pitches two-handed, he risks having foul balls and mis-handled pitches strike his throwing hand---not good.

The catcher needs to set up far enough behind home plate that he is not in danger

of being hit by the bat as it is being swung by the batter. [If the catcher's mitt hits the bat on the forward swing, it is catcher's interference, and the batter is awarded first base.]

Set a target for each pitch, so that the pitcher has a specific spot that he's trying to throw to. Set the target out in front of the chest, not in next to the chest protector. On most targets, the glove/fingers will be pointed up, not sideways. Catch pitches out in front of the body; don't let them sail in close to the body or off to the side before moving the arm to catch them. Move the mitt to the ball if the pitch is not coming to the target.

Although runners are supposed to slide on plays at home, the catcher is not supposed to "block" home plate if he does not have the ball in his possession. Once the catcher has the ball, he may block the plate, but not before. As he is awaiting a possible throw to the plate, the catcher should be *in front of* the plate (not standing in his catching position behind the plate), with the left foot just inside the foul line in fair territory and the right foot well into fair territory in front of the plate. If there is no throw made to the plate, the catcher should just step forward toward the pitcher's mound and get out of the way of the scoring runner.

Although Pinto catchers will not be dealing with steals and passed balls in League play, they nevertheless can begin working on proper technique for blocking bad pitches in the dirt. As a general rule, if a pitch is going to land in the dirt, the catcher should shift his feet and weight so as to get his body (not just the mitt) in front of the bouncing ball. The real goal is to BLOCK the bad pitch with the chest protector, not necessarily catch it on the bounce. The mitt should be pointed down, palm out, to keep the pitch from skipping between or around the legs. The body--using the chest protector, mask, cup, and knee guards--is what blocks most really bad pitches, however. Such pitches are seldom caught cleanly; more often than not, they bounce and are corralled by the catcher after they have ricocheted off his body. The idea is to keep the carom in front of the catcher, and to accomplish that, the catcher has to get his torso and mitt in front of the bouncing pitch as quickly as possible. MUCH EASIER SAID THAN DONE, believe me! If you have the time and an incredibly enthusiastic catcher-in-the-making, you can bounce balls in front of him at low speed so that he can practice the slide-and-block that is necessary to get the body in front of a bouncing pitch. It will be a rare bad pitch that is blocked correctly at this age, but if the catcher is making an effort to turn the mitt downward and sort of move his body in front of the pitch, he gets a passing mark for this level!

6. INTRODUCTORY PITCHING FOR PINTO 8

As every MLB team will attest, a baseball team can never have too many "quality arms." Accordingly, we urge every coach to give every player on his/her team an opportunity to at least practice pitching if the player expresses any interest in the position. Those players who demonstrate a basic grasp of the fundamentals of pitching should be given a chance to throw in game situations. It takes years to develop decent pitchers, and the league would like to develop as many pitchers at the Pinto level as possible, so that there will be a large pool of pitchers for future Mustang and Bronco teams.

Pitchers need to understand two things as they take the mound. First, their job is not to strike every batter out. Rather, their job is to throw good pitches, some of which will get hit--but that's what the fielders are out there for. Second, control of the pitches is far more important than velocity. Velocity is something that should be worked up only after the pitcher has developed the ability to throw his/her beginning pitches over the plate.

Most novice pitchers begin pitching "out of the stretch," without going through the gyrations of a full wind up. Basically, the pitcher places his throwing-side/pivot foot next to (not directly on) the rubber, stands sideways to the batter, and brings both hands up to his chest, where he "sets" with his throwing hand gripping the ball as it rests in the mitt. Weight is balanced on both feet, or perhaps slightly back on the back/pivot foot. The feet are about shoulder-width apart. Take a breath and relax. Pretty easy preliminary motions to practice and master. . . .

To get any power behind a throw/pitch from this position, two things (at a minimum) must happen. First, the pitcher must deliberately raise (not kick) his front knee up so that the knee is at belt height or higher; the weight is obviously all on the back/pivot foot during this lift. The knee need not come straight up and stay in front of the torso; the knee may be pulled slightly back across the body as it is lifted, so that it is above the back/pivot foot for a split second at the top of the lift. In the initial practice of this move, the player should just return his leg to the starting position, landing on the ball of his foot. Later, he will stride toward the batter with that foot, as he pushes his weight off his back/pivot foot against the rubber. The foot comes down on the ball of the foot, and the front knee will bend slightly as the body's weight transfers to that leg during the delivery of the pitch.

Second, at the same time the knee is lifting up, the hands begin to separate and go in opposite directions---the glove arm extending toward the batter, and the throwing hand with the ball pulling back from the shoulder. The arms move in this fashion at about chest level or higher; they should not drop down to belt- or belly button-level for this motion. At the conclusion of this separation movement, the glove arm is almost fully extended (elbow very slightly bent) with the mitt facing the target. The throwing arm is pulled back in a "cocked" position with the throwing hand slightly higher than the elbow but extended back past the elbow. In this position, the thumbs of both hands are "down," below the fingers; the thumb on the throwing hand is underneath the ball as the arm is cocked back, and the thumb in the mitt is facing down, with the palm facing in the general direction of the batter.

The leg-lift and the arm separation motions can be practiced repeatedly, both as stand-alone exercises ("Okay, ten knee lifts, keeping your balance and landing on the ball of your foot." "Set position---now reach back and reach out, with thumbs down on both hands.") and as combined quasi-pitching motions. [Think "Karate Kid"-like stork exercises!] The real objective is to get the pitchers to develop a sense of balance at the height of the leg kick, with their throwing arm poised to begin the whip-action forward as the legs and torso pull the shoulder to the target.

The pitcher should be balanced in this lifted, separated position for the split second it takes to begin the power explosion of the actual pitch. The front leg strides toward the batter, landing on the ball of the foot, which should be pointed in the direction of home plate. As the stride is being taken, the pitcher pushes off the rubber with his back/pivot foot; the back knee will bend slightly as the leg projects the body weight forward through the butt and back. As weight shifts from the back leg to the stride leg, the hips and butt rotate into the stride to generate power. That in turn pulls the torso and throwing shoulder forward toward home plate. The arm acts as a whip, with the wrist snapping the hand through to the release point. If you watch MLB pitchers in slo-mo, you will see the throwing shoulder leading and pulling the elbow through, which pulls the forearm and wrist through. The forearm and hand come through as the “crack of the whip,” with the ball being released above and slightly out in front of the head.

The mitt arm begins to bend back into the body as the forward pitching motion commences and should end up very near the chest as of the follow through. If the mitt arm simply drops down to the side and dangles as the pitch is executed, it is difficult to keep the delivery “compact” and have all of the “moving pieces” flowing as one toward the target.

The pitcher should bend his back into pitch as his weight comes forward; hard throwers are almost parallel to the ground on their front leg as they follow through. The throwing arm must follow through after releasing the ball and does not stop/decelerate until it has gone across the body. This action can be practiced by having the pitcher hold a towel in his throwing hand and having him “sweep the ground” repeatedly with the end of the towel as he goes through his pitching motion and practices his follow through; if he does not bend his back, he can’t reach the ground and probably is not following through correctly.

The pitcher should be told to “throw through the catcher’s mitt” or to “reach through the catcher’s glove” with his throwing hand as he delivers the ball and follows through. Accuracy is often a matter of adjusting the release point, which will come with practice and “feel” for the delivery.

If the pitcher has really pushed off the rubber hard and is bending over as he delivers, the pivot/back leg will come up off the ground and be pulled over as part of the follow through. Encourage the pitcher to push hard and have that back leg come flying over instead of dragging it forward on the ground. If the foot stays on the ground and is dragged forward as the pitcher follows through, the pitcher probably is not getting as much power into the pitch as he is capable of.

As the pitcher follows through, (s)he needs to keep the head up and look at the target, even if (s)he is slightly off balance and in motion during the follow through. This is very important, because the pitcher may have to field a batted ball hit back to the mound immediately after completing the pitch.

At this age, traditional pitching grips are largely useless, because the kids' hands are not big enough to get the thumb under the ball properly. Most kids use three or even four fingers to grip the ball instead of two. What you probably should work on is making the pitchers aware of their grips and having them use the same grip for every pitch (instead of just grabbing the ball and throwing it). Traditional wisdom says the "four-seam" fastball is the "straightest" pitch, which means it probably is the first pitch young pitchers need to learn. Until they learn to throw a pitch for a strike with some consistency, they don't need to worry about getting "movement" on their pitches, so they shouldn't be concerning themselves with the various grips adult pitchers use to get different spins on the ball. A four-seamer is thrown with two fingers (or three, with kids this age) holding the ball across both sides of the "big" "horsehoe" seam, with the thumb under the ball to the extent possible. [Probably best to find some pictures of the grip on the internet; a picture will make more sense than this written description.]

These are not infield throws, which can come from all sorts of weird angles and often are "short-arm" throws made in a rush. Rather, these are deliberate pitches coming from the same arm angle on every pitch. Generally, the elbow should be above the shoulder as the arm comes forward to throw the ball. These are not sidearm infield throws made to a big target; they are deliberate throws made with maximum power to a very small target. Arm angle and learning how to transfer the power generated by the legs through the back and into the shoulder are critical in developing a pitcher.

Attitude and mental focus are as important to a pitcher as delivery and velocity. The pitcher needs to focus on THE NEXT PITCH, no matter has just transpired (strike, ball, walk, hit, error, out, etc.) Nothing happens until you are ready to pitch, so take a deep breath, relax, and make the next pitch a quality pitch.

* * * * *

Coming full circle ----Have fun! We want the Pinto players to continue playing from year to year, not dropping out because they are frustrated with their inability to play the game well. In order to play the game well, young players must learn and practice the fundamental skills noted above. The game becomes fun for all involved if the skills are practiced in an organized, efficient manner, such that the players become capable of executing those skills on the field. Watching a young player's reaction the first time (s)he catches a fly ball, gets a hit, or "makes a play" makes it all worthwhile!!

Many thanks from the League, which appreciates the commitments of time and energy you all put in!