

## **How to Conduct a Youth Baseball Tryout**

**By Adam Sarancik**

The fate of a defendant at trial may be determined before the actual trial even starts. Most experienced trial attorneys will tell you that if you select the wrong jurors it may not matter what you say or do during the trial itself. The same can be said of your baseball team. Choose the wrong team members and it may not matter what you say or do during the season. Your team may never reach its full potential.

Of all of the things youth coaches do during a season, how they conduct a tryout may be the one thing they copy most from what they have seen other coaches and leagues do and what they experienced when they were a player. Many times there is very little thought, creativity, and planning that goes into the process. Sadly, many times team members are pre-determined for political reasons or are validated as a rite of passage from being a team member the previous season.

### **Start with Why**

I think every team selection should start with a careful consideration of why the team, division, and league exist in the first place. Is this primarily a recreational team, a developmental team or a team expected to compete against teams of experienced and highly talented players? Are the goals of the league, coaches, parents and team members compatible with one another?

Obviously, if the goals of everyone involved are not aligned, conflict in cooperation and deflation in enthusiasm are inevitable. This may lead to not only disappointing results for the current season, but may lead to dissension and disassociation for team members, parents and coaches in the future. The viability of the league may ultimately be in jeopardy.

### **Select the Persons, Athletes, and Players Most Compatible with Your Goals**

*Persons-* No matter the purpose of the team, recreational, developmental or competitive, what coaches want most are team members with a teachable spirit, i.e., they want to learn and get better every day, and a growth mindset, i.e., they are willing to be challenged to achieve what they initially thought may not be possible and are willing to accept failure as a necessary part of learning and improvement. Yet, during tryouts, I rarely see coaching done throughout the evaluation process so coaches can determine whether the candidates have these qualities or not.

Coaches also must have players who will not miss practices or games and will give their best effort during their time with the team. Coaches should ask players during tryouts such things as what their favorite sport is and what other sports they participate in. This may give coaches an indication of the competitive tenacity of the player, as well as, their availability if participation in those other sports is done concurrently with the baseball season. Parents should be asked about personal appointments and family obligations that may conflict with the baseball practice and game schedule.

Leadership is one of the most prized traits in a player, and yet, rarely are opportunities given for players to lead during tryouts. Coaches should ask for volunteers to lead parts of the tryouts such as the dynamic movement and stretching phase. Throughout the tryout, coaches should demonstrate how a drill should be done and then should ask for volunteers to demonstrate it to the group. Competitive games should be played during the tryout and coaches should ask the players to choose captains so the coaches can see who the players think are the best leaders.

*Athlete* – The best athletes have the most potential to be the best players. Even recreational and developmental teams should have a daily athletic training component so those players may have the opportunity in the future to play on elite teams in that sport and/or other sports. Leagues should have a system to progress players within a season and from year-to-year as athletes, not just players. Qualified strength, conditioning, and athleticism coaches should be utilized to assess, teach, and write programs for coaches and leagues to accomplish this purpose.

During tryouts, it is common to have players timed in a sprint, but not often enough are players asked to do speed ladder drills, shuttle runs, and competitive games of chase and tag. All types of plyometric skills such as skips, bounds, shuffles, backpedal, jumps and hops in all planes of motion should be assessed. Components of reaction as well as action should also be included in the drills.

*Player* – The most common deficiency I see at tryouts are too few qualified coaches and evaluators involved in the process. During the season, a ratio of one qualified coach per three players is the goal. During tryouts, evaluators can be used who will ultimately not coach during the season, but have valuable knowledge and experience to contribute. Experienced coaches at higher levels, e.g., high school coaches for whom this league is a feeder program, are excellent candidates for this purpose.

Leagues are many times dependent on parents to coach youth teams and are very grateful for their commitment and hard work. However, these traits and former playing experience, do not guarantee quality coaching. Leagues must provide sufficient equipment, facilities, and training so coaches have the ability to teach the fundamental

skills of the game, not just how to play the game itself. Again high school coaches are an excellent resource for these purposes.

One additional point of cautionary advice - do not cut a player with a passion and commitment to your team and sport. Find a supporting role, e.g., at practice, in technology, in administration, etc. for them. They may be your biggest booster now and in the future. They may also turn out to be a “late bloomer” contributor as a player in your program.

### **Use Your Practice Format for Your Tryout Template**

One of the best formats for a tryout is to have it simulate a practice the players will participate in once the season begins. Phase 1 – Dynamic movement, stretching and athleticism training; Phase 2 – Baserunning; Phase 3 – Throwing and Receiving Progression; Phase 4 – Position Fundamentals; Phase 5 - Hitting Fundamentals; Phase 6 – Game Simulation. And just like during the season, coaches should demonstrate and teach during each phase and players should be asked to compete individually and in teams during each phase.

As in any practice environment, all players should be active all of the time, getting as many repetitions as possible, and competing in game-like drills to keep it fun. Multiple stations being run simultaneously and assisted by as many qualified people as possible are the keys. If you have a line of players waiting their turn, you have a design flaw in your tryout/practice plan.

Of course, having adequate time, i.e., days, administrative help, and pre-tryout planning meetings are essential for a successful tryout too.

Parents, players, coaches and leagues should align their goals and should plan with an open mind the content and format for tryouts. Failure to do so may sabotage the season before it even begins.

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