

Madison Little League Player Development Guidebook



By Mark LaFontaine

I. Context

This year one of my son's hockey teams played in 60 games and had 49 practice sessions over a six month period. In my time in Madison Little League, the teams I have coached have had about 6 to 8 practices and 16 to 18 games for the spring season. My sons and I typically got in extra work by throwing or hitting in our yard or by finding a vacant field to use from time to time. Two years ago, about half-way through the spring season I organized a group of my son's friends for an informal workout focused on skills, drills and a coach-pitch scrimmage. We got together once a week and judging from the response, the kids really enjoyed themselves and they developed their skills in the process. I was lucky to have several willing dads participate in various ways so that we could keep the boys moving, work in small groups, and get in high-quality repetitions in each session.

What is the key message here? *Young athletes over-compete (too many games), and under train (minimal emphasis on skill development).*

Why does this matter? *Because underdevelopment of skills at ages 7-12 cannot be fully overcome (athletes will not reach full potential).*

What might be a better approach? *Ages 6-9: learn fundamental movements and sports skills (make an athlete, then make a player). Ages 9-12: sensitive skill learning period (now or never for ingraining baseball specific skills).*

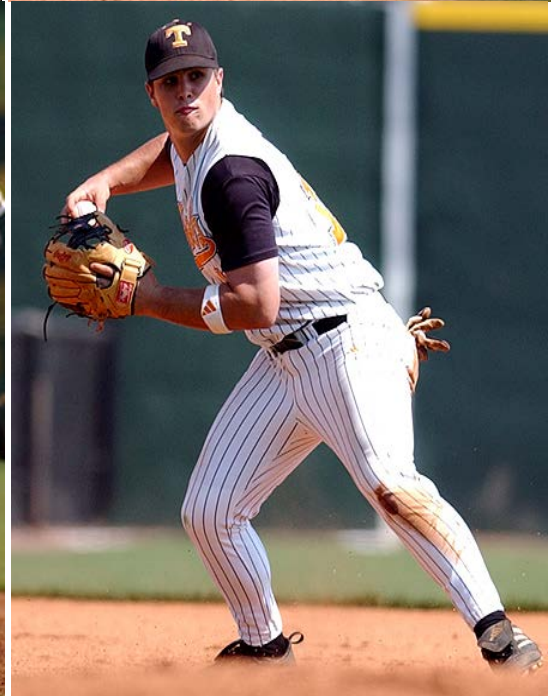
Greater emphasis on skill development produces what? *More athletes reaching their baseball potential and greater player confidence and retention.*

Because practice time is so precious then, we need to use it well. Pre-game work should also be thought of as practice time, as well as infield and outfield warm-ups between innings of a game. These are all opportunities to execute and ingrain either the correct way of doing things or the wrong way to do things and it is the coaches responsibility to establish an environment in which striving to perform skills correctly is the norm.

In the pages that follow I'll share my take on the key skills of the game, and break them down in a way that has been helpful to me in coaching young players. Each skill section contains a list of drills as well. Because drills are difficult to describe, it will be important for coaches to attend the coaching clinics where all the drills will be demonstrated. Why is it important for coaches to know the drills? Because they need to demonstrate drills and skills accurately to provide proper imagery for players. Finally, there are several practice plans which you can adapt for use with your teams. Coaches should feel free to contact me with questions or suggestions on any of the material I've offered here.

II. Core Skills

Throwing



Every successful throw in a game situation contains three elements: 1) it is made on the move; 2) it must be accurate; 3) it must be strong. The fundamental checkpoints to develop and look for in your players are: 1) grip, 2) eyes on the target, 3) front-side

aligned with target, 4) smooth, continuous arm circle, 5) consistent overhand release point, and 6) leg drive.

Grip: The basic grip on the ball is a four-seam grip across the seams. Four younger players describing this grip as “across the horseshoe” might be helpful. The four-seam grip used in an overhand throw promotes backspin which keeps the ball in the air longer and on a straight path. The ball should be in the fingers, not in the palm of the hand.



Eyes and Front Side: Eyes should be level and focused on a specific target. The front side should be aligned with the target. The front foot should stride directly toward the target but in a closed manner. The easiest way to ensure that the upper body stays properly closed and aligned to the target is to have the glove-side elbow point to the target.

Throwing Arm Motion: Proper arm motion begins with the throwing hand in the glove on the ball, securing a proper four-seam grip. The sequence of movements in the arm motion are: 1) taking the ball out of the glove keeping the hand on top of the ball; 2) making a small circle; 3) repeatable overhand release point, and 4) snapping the wrist to start the ball on its way.

Consistent Overhand Release Point: As players mature they will need to be able to throw the ball from a variety of angles or release points. But a young player should strive to find a consistent overhand release point. A healthy release point to strive for has the upper arm almost parallel to the ground with the forearm at about a 90 degree angle and closely resembling the shape of a capital L that rotates forward toward the release point.

Leg Drive: The legs need to provide a balanced, athletic foundation for the upper body to function properly in the throw. The legs also are a source of power.

Throwing Drills

- Ready Break Throw
- QB Drill/One Knee/Skip and Throw/Clock Drill/Long Toss
- QB Dropback/Quick Feet/Box Throwing/Relay Race

Catching



The fundamental checkpoints for catching the ball are: 1) athletic position with your legs, 2) elbows inside shoulders and away from body; thumbs up, “drive the bus, 3) move to catch the ball in the middle of your body, 4) always use two hands.

Catching Drills

- Infield Receiving Drill/Wide Receiver Drill/Underhand Hot Potato Box/2 Ball Juggle with Coach
- Quick Feet/Box Throwing/Relay Race/On the Fly Fungos

Infield Groundballs



Good infield play is about 1) footwork, 2) timing, 3) creating an angle to the ball, 4) keeping your elbows inside your shoulders and away from your body, 5) staying low. The fundamental progression to develop in young players for fielding a straight on groundball is creep, glide, field and throw.

Creep

The creep is a two-step, pre-pitch routine to get in an athletic position as the ball crosses the plate so the infielder can be ready to move if the ball is hit to him.

- Right step, then left step; left foot should hit the ground as ball crosses the plate.
- Eyes and the palm of the glove should be focused on the strike-zone.



Glide

The glide involves footwork and timing to get to the ball and breakdown into a fielding position.

- During the glide you need to get to the ball quickly, but under control.
- Imagine there is an eye in the palm of your glove and that eye has to stay on the ball that is hit to you.
- Create an angle for fielding the ball so you can see the hops from the side and create momentum toward first base for the throw; some coaches call this “getting to the right of the ball”.

Field

The proper fielding technique on a straight on ground ball:

- Chest square to the ball, feet spread, knees bent, tail down.
- Field the ball off the glove-hand eye.
- Throwing hand goes on top of the ball.

Throw

Infielders need to position themselves to make a strong, accurate throw.

- Left shoulder pointed to the target, eyes focused on the target.
- Eyes should remain on the target after the release and until the ball is caught - “eyes to leather.”

Groundball Drills

- Perfect Play/GB Toss at SS/3 Play GB Toss at SS/Light Fungos at SS/Agility Ladder GBs
- Little Glove/Stopwatch/Divers/Last Man Standing
- DP Rotation at 2B/QB on the Run

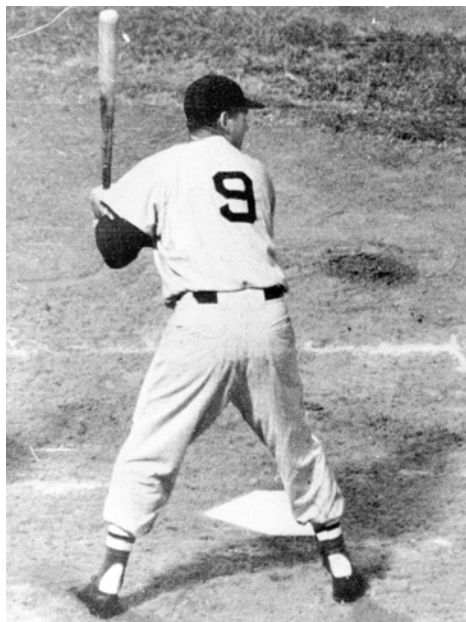
Hitting:

Common traits among the best hitters are that they see the ball better, have better balance, and better rhythm and timing than average hitters. These traits can be worked on along with the more technical fundamentals of stance, stride and swing.

Stance

Great hitters have different stances but they have a few key elements in common:

- Eyes level
- Balanced and relaxed
- Rhythm and movement



Stride

The stride creates timing and moves the hitter into the hitting position. The stride consists of footwork and hand movement. The most common stride is to reach forward with the front foot about six inches or so in a closed position while moving the hands slightly back. This “traditional” stride is the easiest for young hitters to repeat consistently.

- The stride should be in “slow motion”.
- The stride foot remains “closed”.
- Head stays “in a picture frame” ie still; eyes stay level; shoulder, hips and feet aligned.
- Hands move back slightly, to a position about in line with the back foot.

When the front foot touches down from the stride, the hitter is in the *hitting position*. Though great hitters may take slightly different paths, they all arrive at a common *hitting position* when their front foot touches down.



- Front shoulder is down and tucked.
- Head stays in the “picture frame”, eyes, shoulders, hips and feet are aligned.
- Hands are shoulder height and in line with back foot.
- Bat is slightly wrapped and at about a 45 degree angle.
- Feet remain closed.

A great way to see if hitting position fundamentals are sound is when a hitter takes a pitch. If the take is easy, balanced and in control, then the foundation is laid for a proper swing.

Swing

The swing is about the path of the barrel of the bat to the ball.

- Hands pull the knob of the bat across the body.
- Barrel of the bat takes a short path to the ball.
- The hips turn against a firm front leg.



Just as with the hitting position, all great hitters look alike when they make contact:

- Head down with eyes at the point of contact.
- Shoulders and hips square to pitcher's mound.
- Upper body in line with back thigh.
- Rear toe to the ground, front leg is firm.
- Impact occurs at front foot.
- Top hand palm faces the sky.



The barrel of the bat should be accelerating through the hitting zone to drive the ball with backspin. After that, the follow-through is more a matter of personal style. Some hitters take their top hand off the bat and others do not.

A final word in working with young hitters. Keep everything simple. From a big picture standpoint, young hitters need to work on 1) seeing the ball, 2) balance, 3) rhythm, and 4) timing. From a technique standpoint, coaching checkpoints should be: 1) hands

controlling the barrel, 2) front-side staying closed, 3) short path to the ball, 4) hitting against a firm front side

Hitting Drills

- Overhand Lumberjacks/Side Lumberjacks/Bat Dips/Impact Wiggles/Windmill
- Stance Stride Swing Progression/Call Out
- Tee Drills: Stance Stride & Swing/Balance Drill/Step Up/45 Open/Close Tee Drill/Bottom Hand
- Soft Toss Drills: 45 Open/2 Strike/2 Ball/Target Practice/Left Right Center/Toss from Behind
- Short Toss Drills: Middle Opposite/Left Right Center/Wait and Hit/2 Strike

Practice Programs

Pee Wee Practice Program

Notes: Every player should bring a bat to practice in order to participate in team hitting drills that are part of the warm-up.

1) Pre-Practice Block

- Pepper

2) Team Warm-up Block (12 minutes)

Players line-up in four lines of three, well spaced out.

- Jumping Jax (10)
- Reach for Sky on Toes
- Explosions (8)
- Pushup Position Hold (10 seconds)
- Shoulder warm-up: big circles forward (8) then backward (8), little circles forward (10) then backward (10), screw in light bulb, forearm press (10), flaps down (10)
- Hitting progression: overhead lumberjacks (10), side lumberjacks (10), windmills (10), Impact Wiggles (10), Stance/Stride/Swing Progression, Perfect Swing Call Out

3) Team Throwing Block (12 minutes)

- Ready Break Throw Progression (25)
- Skip and Throw (2 lines, 3 throws per turn)
- Quick Feet with Coach (2 lines, coach keeps backing up to long toss)

4) Hitting/Infield Stations Block (12 minutes each station)

- Hitting: Stance Stride Swing Progression off tee (4), hit to middle of net
- Hitting: Step up off tee (4), hit to middle of net

- Infield: Perfect Play Progression (together as group)
- Infield: GB toss at SS (3; with cone)

5) Coach Pitch Scrimmage (15-20 minutes)

6) Closing Fun Block (5 minutes)

- Divers or Target Practice Hitting

9 Yr. Old Practice Program

Notes: Every player should bring a bat to practice in order to participate in team hitting drills that are part of the warm-up.

1) Pre-Practice Block

- Jump Rope/Pepper

2) Team Warm-up Block (12 minutes)

Players line-up in four lines of three, well spaced out.

- Jumping Jax (10)
- Reach for Sky on Toes
- Explosions (10)
- Pushup Position Hold (15 seconds)
- Shoulder warm-up: big circles forward (10) then backward (10), little circles forward (10) then backward (10), screw in light bulb, forearm press (10), flaps down (10)
- Hitting progression: overhead lumberjacks (10), side lumberjacks (10), windmills (10), Impact Wiggles (10), Stance/Stride/Swing Progression, Perfect Swing Call Out

3) Team Throwing Block (12 minutes)

- Ready Break Throw Progression (25)
- Skip and Throw (2 lines, 3 throws per turn)
- Quick Feet with Coach (2 lines, coach keeps backing up to long toss)

4) Hitting/Infield Stations Block (12 minutes each station)

- Hitting: Stance Stride Swing Progression off tee (4), hit to middle of net
- Hitting: Step up off tee (4), hit to middle of net

- Infield: Perfect Play Progression (together as group)
- Infield: GB toss at SS (3; with cone)

5) Outfield and Agility (15 minutes as a group)

- 2 line drills: High-Knee Skip (2), Shuffle (2), Backward Run (2), Bound and Stick (2), Lateral Mirror Partner (2), Coach Led Follow Bat (2)
- On the Fly Fungos or Thrown Fly Balls

6) Coach Pitch Scrimmage (20 minutes)

7) Closing Fun Block (5 minutes)

- Divers or Target Practice Hitting

9 Yr. Old Practice Program

Notes: Every player should bring a bat to practice in order to participate in team hitting drills that are part of the warm-up.

1) Pre-Practice Block

- Pepper

2) Team Warm-up Block (12 minutes)

Players line-up in four lines of three, well spaced out.

- Jumping Jax (10)
- Reach for Sky on Toes
- Ham/Quad/Groin Stretches
- Explosions (10)
- Shoulder warm-up: big circles forward (10) then backward (10), little circles forward (10) then backward (10), screw in light bulb, forearm press (10), flaps down (10)
- Pushup Position Hold (15 seconds)
- Hitting progression: overhead lumberjacks (10), side lumberjacks (10), windmills (10), Impact Wiggles (10), Stance/Stride/Swing Progression, Perfect Swing Call Out

3) Team Throwing Block (12 minutes)

- Ready Break Throw Progression (25)
- Skip and Throw (2 lines, 3 throws per turn)
- Quick Feet with Coach (2 lines, coach keeps backing up to long toss)

4) Hitting/Infield Stations Block (12 minutes each station)

- Hitting: Stance Stride Swing Progression off tee (4), hit to middle of net
- Hitting: Step up off tee (4), hit to middle of net

- Infield: Perfect Play Progression (together as group)
- Infield: GB toss at SS (3; with cone)

5) Outfield and Agility (15 minutes as a group)

- 2 line drills: High-Knee Skip (2), Shuffle (2), Backward Run (2), Bound and Stick (2), Lateral Mirror Partner (2), Coach Led Follow Bat (2)
- On the Fly Fungos or Thrown Fly Balls

6) Coach Pitch Scrimmage (20 minutes)

7) Closing Fun Block (5 minutes)

- Divers or Target Practice Hitting

8) Post-Practice Block: Pitchers and Catchers

- Pitchers: 3 Hop and Throw from 2nd Base/Balance Point/Rock Back/Best of 4
- Catchers: Stance, Chops with Ball, Chops with Ball & Throw to 2nd, Chops Catch Ball & Throw to 1st/2nd/3rd

Minors & Majors Practice Program

Notes: Every player should bring a bat to practice in order to participate in team hitting drills that are part of the warm-up.

1) Pre-Practice Block

- Agility Ladder (Run Through/Double Touch/Zig-Zag/In and Out, 2x for each)//Pepper

2) Team Warm-up Block (12 minutes)

Players line-up in four lines of three, well spaced out.

- Jumping Jax (10)
- Reach for Sky on Toes
- Hamstring/Quad/Groin stretches
- Explosions (10)
- Lat Stretch/forearm stretch
- Shoulder warm-up: big circles forward (10) then backward (10), little circles forward (10) then backward (10), screw in light bulb, forearm press (10), flaps down (10)
- Pushup Position Hold (30 seconds)
- Hitting progression: overhead lumberjacks (10), side lumberjacks (10), windmills (10), Impact Wiggles (10), Stance/Stride/Swing Progression, Perfect Swing Call Out
- 2 line drills: High-Knee Skip (2), Bound and Stick (2), Backward Run (2), Follow Bat (2), Sprint (2)

3) Team Throwing Block (12 minutes)

- QB Throwing/Rhythm Skip and Throw to long toss/Return Skip and Throw on a Line
- Box Throwing (both ways) or Relay Races

4) Hitting/Infield Stations Block (12 minutes each station)

- Hitting: Bottom hand off tee/Step Up off tee/Stance, Stride, Swing off tee (4, 3 rounds)
- Hitting: 45 Open to middle of the net/Balance Drill/2 strike soft toss (4, 3 rounds)
- Infield: Straight on GB toss at SS (3; with cone; 2 rounds)/Straight on, Left, Right GB toss at SS (2 rounds)/Fungos at SS (can do stopwatch fungos)

5) Outfield and Agility (5-7 minutes as a group)

- On the Fly Fungos or Thrown Fly Balls

6) Silent Team Defense (15 minutes)

7) Coach Pitch Scrimmage (30 minutes)

8) Closing Fun Block (5 minutes)

- Divers or Target Practice Hitting

9) Post-Practice Block: Pitchers and Catchers

- Pitchers: 3 Hop and Throw from 2nd Base/Balance Point/Rock Back/Best of 4
- Catchers: Stance, Chops with Ball, Chops with Ball & Throw to 2nd, Chops Catch Ball & Throw to 1st/2nd/3rd