

Let's start with you. How much time and effort are you willing to give? That's the defining factor in how successful you will be as a coach. A little honesty goes a long way, here. If you don't think you're up to it or if you tend to quit things when you get tired, raise your hand right now. It will save everyone, including you, a lot of grief.

Assuming that you are ready and willing (we'll discuss able in a moment), the first thing you should do is to schedule a meeting with the parents. That's right, even before you have a practice with the kids, it is important that you get to know their parents, establish some ground rules for behavior (their's and their children's) and help them to adjust their expectations. This, too, will save a world of grief later.

At this meeting, you should stress a number of things. Begin by telling them what they can expect of you. If you have coaching or playing experience, be sure to describe it for them as it may assuage some of their concerns. Relate to them your personal commitment and goals for the team. Detail your philosophy for assigning defensive positions and playing time. Be sure to address the latter, because it is the single greatest source of unrest in little league. Next, tell them what you expect of the players. Things like punctuality, respect, effort and a teachable spirit are essential qualities to instill in young athletes. To accomplish that, you will need the help of the parents.

Ah, the parents. Establish right away that you are coaching the team. They may coach little Tommy at home but they must not engage in it while he is on your practice or game field. Doing so is not only a challenge to your authority, it is confusing and disconcerting to the child, who is trained to hear and obey the voice of mom or dad. Make sure that you get this point across to everyone. It only takes one vocal parent to ruin the atmosphere at a little league game and create dissension on your team. Bad apples unfortunately do appear from time to time. They must be confronted and, when diplomacy doesn't work, it may become necessary to cull them from the bushel. Yes, that's your job as well.

Another important thing that you must accomplish at this meeting is to enlist the aid of two or three parents as assistant coaches. One is too few and four are too many. Trust me on this one. Obviously, you will want those with the most coaching experience and/or knowledge of the game. Finally, institute a system for team administration to include fund-raising, phone chains, car pooling, etc.. Ask one person to spearhead the effort. He or she can always enlist more help. It's also a great idea to have this team administrator schedule two team outings per year - one at about mid-season and one at the close. Remember, little league is also a social activity.

Now it's time to address your preparation. I would begin by scheduling a casual meeting between your coaching staff and the director or commissioner of

your baseball league. Ask him about skill levels, league policies and any resources that may be available to you. In addition, be sure to attend any coaches meetings that might be scheduled. While you're there, introduce yourself around and pick a few brains, particularly those of the older, more established coaches. Traditionally, that's how this game is learned. It's also a great idea to join a national organization dedicated to positive youth athletics. Generally, they will offer resources that will aid you in increasing your coaching knowledge and expertise. Membership in these organizations costs very little and will often include an insurance bond, which is a good thing to have in our litigious society. Next, go to the internet (or your public library if you're not connected) and acquire a few coaching videos, particularly those that address practice organization. Fruitful practices make winning teams. Don't fall into the rut of "winging it" at team practices.

The most important task that you have, and I cannot stress this enough, is to make sure that your boys survive the little league experience. The road to college and professional baseball is paved with the shattered dreams of youngsters who left their shoulders, elbows and knees somewhere on a little league field. If you do not already understand the physiology and proper mechanics of pitching, to name the greatest danger to young bodies, find someone that does and seek their counsel. There are pitching schools and mentors in every city these days, not to mention some very good resources available on-line. Furthermore, be sure that the parents of your players understand these principles and reinforce them at home. Here is the bottom line, coach: be sure that you never, ever compromise a young man's future for the sake of a win or a plastic trophy.

Concerning games and practices, your players should be made to understand that their preparation for athletic activity (stretching, loosening, practice throws) should be done prior to the actual start time. With that in mind, "on-time" means perhaps 30 minutes early, more or less. When planning a practice session, it's a good idea to begin with skills and drills, then progress to a teaching session. This might be anything from coordinating defensive coverages on stolen bases, bunt attempts, cutoffs and relays to offensive plays such as the hit-and-run, safety squeeze, etc.. The greatest mistake made by amateur coaches is to reduce team practice to a coach on the mound, one kid at the plate with a bat and the rest shagging flies. Keep everybody involved and busy at all times. Station drills are wonderful for this purpose. I would suggest, especially for the younger players, that you conclude practice sessions with something they enjoy, like a scrimmage or their favorite drill. That's what they will remember and it keeps them coming back.

Let's wrap it all up with some general housekeeping tips. If you smoke or drink, never do so during team time or around the practice or game field. I have seen coaches slip behind the dugout to sneak a drink or pull on a cigarette. That's a terrible practice, not only because we want to discourage the use of tobacco and alcohol, but also because it appears as though your creature comforts are being

placed above the team activity. Don't do it. Remember, you are modeling proper behavior and character for these youngsters.

If two or more players arrive at the field ahead of you, you are late. That's right, it's important for you to already be there when your players arrive. It's a mark of good leadership and preparedness. Make sure that your assistant coaches follow that example. The field should be set up with the day's necessities - bases, hitting nets, marker cones, etc., prior to the start of practice or a game. Your players should see that you are always prepared and that your moves have been carefully planned.

When it becomes necessary to correct a player, do it one-on-one whenever possible and always keep it positive. You want your players to be confident and aggressive. That is best accomplished by reinforcing what they *should* be doing, not what they shouldn't. Continually calling attention to bad play will cause them to be timid and tentative, afraid to make a mistake.

Little league is a wonderful thing. It's one of the few family activities still pursued by our fast-paced, overstimulated society. You are to be commended for dedicating yourself to working with these youngsters. Nevertheless, such labors are not without their own rewards. To this day, when walking through a grocery store or shopping mall, I'll occasionally hear a baritone voice say, "Hey, coach!" Turning, I'll look up at a vaguely familiar face - vague, because it was scarcely 15 when last I had seen it. At that moment, I am always very pleased and very grateful. I am pleased to see my old friend and grateful that I took the time to involve myself in a young man's life, thereby becoming a small part of a grown man's fondest memories.

