



The Perfect Youth Baseball League

A few weeks ago I asked my readers to give input to help develop an ideal youth baseball league. Over the past three weeks, I have received over 50 different submissions through email, my blog, and various other social media outlets on how to design the perfect youth league. I did read all of them, and responded to most. This article is a synopsis of the most commonly brought up ideas. It was no surprise that most of the ideas were similar, after all common sense prevails when designing a league from scratch. It's when ulterior motives get involved that the best interests of the kids gets pushed to the background and leagues fail to lose focus on what is truly important.

Mission Statement:

Perhaps the simplest, but most profound idea was to create a mission statement that describes the league's desire to put the athlete first and make every decision based on that mission statement. The league should hold every board member, parent, player, and coach to those standards. Make this mission and your core covenants public and be strict in its enforcement. Coaches need to coach to this mission or not be invited back. Believe it or not, this will get more coaches involved because there is a clear mission and something to work toward.

Tee Ball:

There were a lot of good ideas on how to implement tee ball, but this was the area with the second most divergent ideas. Everyone did agree that the current state of tee ball is not effective. The players who survive and continue playing are the lucky ones. The game of tee ball with 9 on 9 or 10 on 10 is very slow, boring, and doesn't really teach too much about the game. Players and parents leave bored and are not left wanting for more.

The idea of playing 6 on 6 came up quite often. The players get to hit more often, and the ball comes to them more often making the game more exciting. Since most 4-6 year olds can't hit the ball very far, most readers felt that having no outfielders was ok. Either let the infielders chase the ball down, or put a "double line" where any ball that crossed that line was an automatic double.

Since there was a lot of uncertainty, I am going to present my own ideas here. They fall in line with what my readers presented, but have a few innovative ways to spice up the game of tee ball.

- 1.) No more than 6 players on a team
- 2.) At least 2 coaches per team
- 3.) Day 1 - Skill and rules day - This day would be exclusively used to teach skills and rules. The league would have a pre-determined curriculum for each day and would have a rotation set up for the coaches. Three teams could probably use the field each hour and rotate them between hitting (on the outside of the field), fielding in the infield, and using the outfield to teach throwing and catching. Ensuring there are enough tees and baseballs so players can be constantly active is key to making this day a success.
- 4.) Day 2 - Skill and tactical games day - The league would set up four small "games" that each team would play for about 15 minutes. These small games would focus on various skills and tactics, and would allow kids to stay active while competing and having fun. Examples of these might be throwing for accuracy, balloon tosses, up the middle hitting games, and running bases. These games would teach some aspect of the game, but would be simple so that every kid, regardless of skill could still participate, enjoy, and learn. The league could decide if they should keep "score" at each small game or not.
- 5.) Day 3- Game days - Teams would play a one hour game of 6 v. 6. Coaches would use these games as a teaching tool and would get kids used the procedures of playing the game. They would clear the bases after every 3 outs (or 6 hitters) and let the same team hit one more inning to minimize transition time.

Each week would consist of two days, and the schedule would rotate through 3 times resulting 4 1/2 weeks. A sample schedule may look like this:

Monday - Day 1
Thursday - Day 2
Monday - Day 3
Thursday - Day 1

Monday - Day 2

Thursday - Day 3

(Continue for two more rotations)

Coaches

There was a lot of common ground on how to arrange and work with coaches. Volunteer coaches are the backbone of an organization, there is no debate about that. Without them, it doesn't run. It was consensus that volunteer coaches need training and resources in order to be successful. Remember, your volunteer coaches are bankers, lawyers, plumbers, construction workers, and policemen by day. They are not specifically trained in teaching and coaching methods and they are busy doing other things all day. The coaches are the face of the league and they need to be on board with the league mission statement, goals, and be able to retain athletes from year to year.

There was some differences of opinions on how to achieve the goal of better coaching. The obvious answer is to hire coaches to run the teams. If you pay head coaches \$1000 and assistants \$250, that could lead to a \$60,000 coaching budget for a league of around 100 coaches. Since paying someone \$1000 doesn't really guarantee they will be any better than the volunteer you might get for free that seems like a lot of money that could be wasted.

What really makes a good youth coach is some knowledge of the game, a good understanding of the learning process, and an understanding of the developmental level of kids. Many suggestions said to train coaches in the league's mission, skills, tactics, organization, practice planning, management, and give them resources to be successful. This is a much more cost effective method than hiring coaches for an entire league. I happen to know of a very good coach training program that accomplishes all of those goals. (shameless plug for Cornerstone's Silver Certification!), but many suggested enlisting high school and college coaches to help train youth coaches. This is a great idea and hopefully your league is in an area where there are such coaches available.

There was also a lot of debate on if parents should be able to coach their own kids or not. I understand both sides of the argument here. Parents who coach their own can easily have a conflict of interest and either give their kid special privileges, or be overly hard on their kid. This would eliminate a lot of problems and complaints, but it may also eliminate a lot of the coaches who want to see their kids play. I know several high school coaches who resign when their kids are playing at a different high school so they can go watch them play. I am going

to steer clear of making a recommendation on this topic, but it is something to be considered.

Travel

This was by far the most controversial topic, and I imagine it will continue to be going forward. Virtually every person I heard from agreed that travel baseball is very watered down and is no longer truly for the elite player. Because of this, in house leagues are having trouble with declining numbers and potentially being swallowed up by travel programs to the point where other kids will not want to play in house any more.

Several of you felt that a youth league should not have a travel division, and that it should purely be a recreational league. More people wanted to have a travel division, but keep it truly separate from the rest of the league in all ways so that they did not take away from the resources of the league (obviously travel families would pay more for the extras they receive).

A novel idea I received was the idea of “part time” travel. I also heard this from a group I spoke with this past Tuesday night. It would be for the next level of players below travel players. They would play in house during the week, then play other surrounding towns on the weekend. This accomplishes two things; it allows players to see different and slightly better competition, and it doesn't dilute the house league because they would still be playing in house games during the week.

Practice to game ratio:

The practice to game ratio has to change. The model right now is to have a few practices at the beginning of the season, then have none while they play games the rest of the season. Without exception, the responses I got recommended changing the practice to game ratio to 1:1, 2:1 or 3:1. In my opinion, this would be the biggest improvement a league could make for several reasons.

The current model for travel teams has teams playing league games during the week, then entering tournaments on the weekend. Assuming they play 2-3 league games and each tournament has 3-5 games, teams are playing between 5 and 8 games per week. This means that teams need to account for anywhere between 35 and 56 innings on the mound per week. To do this AND follow ASMI guidelines for youth pitchers would likely require 7-9 pitchers. Most teams of 12

do not develop 7-9 pitchers, so pitchers end up throwing way more than they should. It is no small wonder that pitchers are having Tommy John surgery and other major injuries younger and younger.

Another reason to increase the practice to game ratio is to develop players more completely. A well designed practice teaches the game much better than the game itself. It is possible for a player to go through an entire 2 hour game, get 3 at bats, never get to run the bases, never get a ball hit to them, and not be involved in the game in a meaningful way (to them). In a two hour practice, a player can get hundreds of swings, get several dozen reps in the infield and outfield, run the bases, and work on their specific weaknesses. The model with at least a 1:1 ratio gives players a great chance to improve and avoid overuse injuries.

Participation:

Everyone agreed at the non-travel level, players should be allotted equal playing time and should get to play a variety of different positions. No kid wants to keep coming to baseball if they sit in right field from age 6 to 10. A little player development may find that this player usually relegated to the outfield is could become very adept at playing infield positions as well. Plus, the best player on your team NEEDS to play in the outfield too. When he gets to high school, there may be ten kids lined up at shortstop during freshmen tryouts and four total outfielders. Being versatile will help the best player on your team too.

A few other ideas that stuck out to consider:

- Board of directors cannot have players in the system
- Eliminate all stars and give those resources to all players
- Move the season back, start it in mid-May and run it until mid-August
- Have no affiliation with any of the major leagues (Little League, Pony, etc.)
- Hire independent evaluators to pick travel ball teams (this wouldn't break the budget), then hire coaches from an application process AFTER the teams are picked.
- Enlist local high school and college coaches to help build a baseball community
- Create a league where players are on a different team each time they showed up. Make games more like pick-up games, and focus solely on player development.

I apologize if I didn't include your specific idea as there were many good ideas I didn't include in my post. To include every idea presented would have taken more than 20 pages. Thank you to everyone who participated and to all who read this post. My hope is that this post gives you some ideas and ammo to go to your board of directors and try to effect real change in your youth league to make it better for all kids.

I would still love discussion on this topic since I know there are many people who didn't express their opinion and experience who have valuable insight!

Sincerely,

Coach Nelson
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