



Keeping the Game Fun...

The coach who teaches young players in the five- to twelve-year-old age group may well be the most influential coach a developing athlete will have. Teaching at this level, I believe, is the most important. At this age, the players will begin to develop the two things that will be crucial to their long-term success as an athlete: the basic fundamental skills, and their attitude toward the game. Players in this age group can be influenced every time they step out on the field for either practice or a game - either positively or negatively. A love of the game can be ignited or forever damaged based on their early experiences.

Let's think of it in terms of planting a seed. An interest in the game can start for any number of reasons. This part is relatively easy. To retain that interest, and grow the interest (watering the seed), is more difficult. I believe the secret is in the fun. Everything you do with your players should be fun. With this age group, teaching is accomplished almost second to having fun. If you do it right, you teach basic fundamentals and learning takes place almost without the kids knowing it. The players will look forward to the games, and especially to practice, because they know they are going to have fun.

Coaches and parents - use all your creative powers to make things fun. Break away from traditional teaching methods and create an environment of fun and excitement. If you do so, your young players are definitely going to enjoy themselves. This is especially true for kids aged five to eight. As one continues along in baseball, softball, or any organized sport, the structure of the game takes shape in its traditional form. As a player ages and climbs the baseball ladder, skills sharpen and the competition becomes more intense. The game will get serious enough, fast enough, on its own.

This seriousness of the game, however, has been accelerated from its normal progression and now lives in even the youngest divisions of youth baseball and softball. It does not belong there. It zaps the kids of their energy and enthusiasm for the game, and consequently, their fun and enjoyment of baseball and softball. When they cease to have fun and enjoyment in the game, they cease to play the sport.

So, how do we teach baseball and softball to our kids? By making it fun, right? I think we all get that point. But here's the kicker- HOW do we do it? I don't believe there is an exact model but the key is to combine your knowledge of the game with your creativity and develop it through the eyes of a kid. My wife says that I'm just a big kid (I take that as a compliment). Let's see, I'm a big kid and I know baseball, and I think I can be creative. So, here's my "top ten" list of points all youth coaches and parents of players should keep in mind:

1. Keep things simple.
2. Avoid technical information and language.
3. Apply basic fundamentals.
4. Use easy-to-understand terminology and use it consistently.
5. Adopt the kids' slang and apply it to your baseball or softball teaching.
6. Celebrate individuals' talents and difference- no cloning. Everyone contributes in his or her own way.
7. Work in small groups - I call them "stations".
8. Keep things interactive and fast moving. Remember a kid at this age has a short attention span.
9. Involve parents as your helpers.
10. Whenever possible at practice, make things (drills) into a game.

All you need in order to accomplish number 10 is some creativity. Once you put your mind in creative mode, there is no end to the ideas you can generate that will make practice and the game fun that require no, or very few, extra resources. Below is one game I like to use when teaching hitting. The highlight of the game for most players is their time at bat with a chance to hit the ball. Remove any pressure by making it fun. Hitting is a very difficult thing to do successfully. A player, especially a young one, can become frustrated very quickly. I try to move the focus off of the frustration and turn it into something we can laugh about as a team. Try putting on full catcher's equipment and sit on a stool at a closer distance than the normal pitching distance and pitch to them. Encourage the hitter to hit the ball back at you. First of all, from the kid's perspective, it just looks funny. Secondly, this hitting thing is just part of a bigger game: "Knock the Funny Looking Guy Off the Stool". Become animated in a funny way when the ball comes near you or actually hits you. For example, when the ball hits you, fall off the stool and kick your legs in the air like a bug. This adds to the fun (and as an extra benefit, it will add to your fun as well as the kids'). There are basic hitting fundamentals being taught while having a great time. The fundamentals they will learn with this game are:

- Staying on the ball
- Creating a short, compact swing
- Not pulling off
- Not over-swinging
- Striding towards the pitcher
- Swinging on a level plane
- Going straight to the ball

Safety and Monitoring: As with all activities, when creating fun drills and "games", common sense and caution should be applied. Keep your eyes open and be prepared to make adjustments. Is the distance too close or too far? Are there any complaints of sore arms from the players? Is the drill just too plain hard for this group? You are the coach and you have to decide with your own eyes how things are going. Observe, make adjustments as needed, and seek feedback from your players. Every day is a learning process.

The key to your success is going to be asking yourself that one question every time you have your players on the field: "How can I make this fun for them?"