

LITTLE LEAGUE[®] DRILLS AND STRATEGIES

A LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL[®] GUIDE

THIRD EDITION



Features
the latest rule
changes—including
new pitch count
requirements

IMAGINATIVE PRACTICE DRILLS
TO IMPROVE SKILLS AND ATTITUDE

NED McINTOSH



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LITTLE LEAGUE® DRILLS AND STRATEGIES

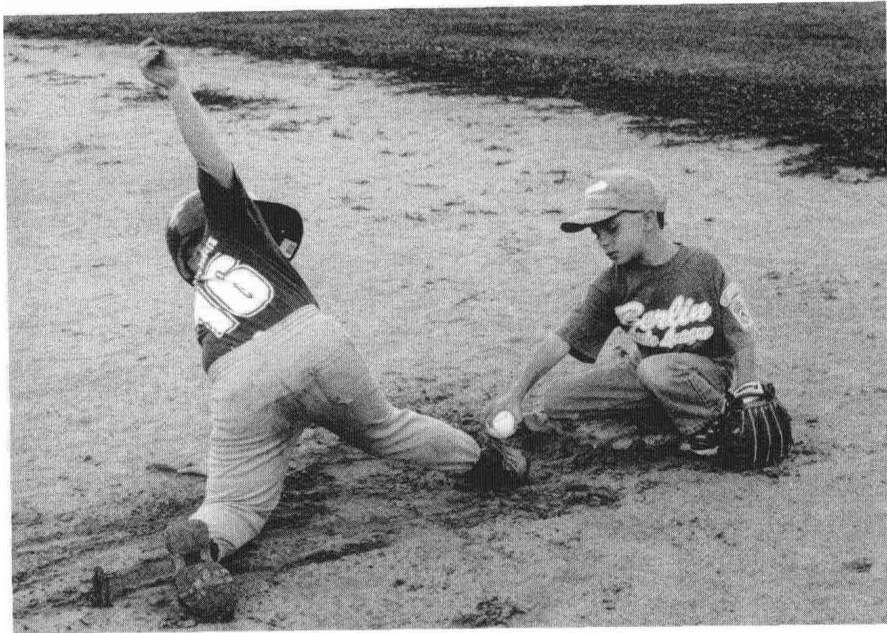
*To my wonderful wife, Elaine, and our
beautiful daughters, Bethann, Amy, and
Lynne, whose husband, father, and brothers
deserted them every spring when Little
League baseball season began*

Introduction

This is the third edition of one of three books on Little League baseball that I originally wrote between 1986 and 1993. *Managing Little League Baseball* was the first-ever book on coaching Little League baseball, written in 1986, revised into a second edition in 2000, and now being updated into a third edition for 2008. It became so popular, the publisher asked me to write a second, *Little League Drills and Strategies*, which is now also being updated into its third edition for 2008. Little League baseball has grown into an international sport; it is the largest and most popular youth sport in the world. With new generations of children and their parent/coaches entering the sport every year, it has matured, and with more experience and input from the thousands of managers and coaches and literally millions of youngsters who have played it, new rules, better protective equipment, and more player-friendly drills and strategies have been developed. A younger version of the sport, Tee Ball, was introduced, and my third book, *Little League Guide to Tee Ball*, was written, with a second edition released in 2003.

After having coached my three sons over a 20-year span, in Little Leagues from Pennsylvania to New Jersey to West Virginia, I retired. However, I came out of retirement to coach my two grand-

Introduction



It starts with Tee Ball, where anything can happen and usually does.



x

sons, Parker and Duncan, in Berlin, Maryland, where I've lived since my retirement. Many changes have occurred in Little League since I started coaching in the 1980s. When I was coaching the first of my three sons, there was no Tee Ball, and 9 was the minimum age for boys and girls to play Little League baseball. Players from ages 9 through 12 all played on the same team. The smallest 9-year-old was often intimidated by the biggest 12-year-old and played only the mandatory two innings in the field and one turn at bat.

Farsighted directors in Little League saw the wisdom of helping youngsters to learn fundamentals and also have fun, and so they adjusted the structure to accommodate different skill levels to allow them to compete more comfortably. The program starts with Tee Ball at age five, where every player on the squad gets to bat in succession. They hit off the tee, which means that the ball is put in play in nearly every at-bat. Fielders have to make defensive plays,

base runners circle the bases, and lots of whooping and hollering occurs, both on the field and in the stands. It is exciting, everyone has fun, and the score is not kept. My youngest grandson, Ian, who lives in Texas and at age five is in his first year in Tee Ball, called me excitedly one night to tell me he had hit a home run. When I asked him the score of the game, he said, "We don't keep score; we just have fun!" Since the theme of all my Little League books has been, "Keep it simple, and make it fun," I smiled in appreciation.

After Tee Ball, the players advance to the so-called Rookie League, normally at the age of seven and eight, and learn to hit pitched balls from a pitching machine or thrown by a coach. The next level of play is called the Minor League, normally for players aged 7–11, where there is competitive action mixed with developmental instruction. And finally there is the Major League, normally



This is Berlin Little League baseball, played the same way three million kids play it in more than 100 countries throughout the world.



for players aged 11 and 12, who compete at the highest skill level, with the Little League World Series their ultimate dream.

With respect to defining ages at each skill level, I say “normally” because there are exceptions in cases where chronological age differs from coordination age. For example, a gifted athlete of 10 could play in the Major League, while an 11-year-old whose coordination has not caught up with his growth could benefit from another year in the Minor League. It makes sense to let kids play where their skill levels fit best.

I appreciate the contributions of several others who are active in youth baseball in other parts of the country. From St. Matthews, Kentucky, Mike Powers has provided some data, based on his many years of Little League coaching experience, especially in his summer instructional league. From Santa Rosa, California, Johnpaul McIntosh-King, former professional baseball pitcher (and my son-in-law), has contributed, in the chapter on pitching, his know-how on teaching the pitching of breaking balls without straining a young pitcher’s arm.

I am grateful to “Woody” Bunting, longtime president of the Berlin Little League, and his successor, Mike Forest, now Umpire-in-Chief for Maryland Region 8, and their cooperative board of directors, managers, coaches, and umpires for allowing us to use their league—in its twenty-second year—as the model for this book. Berlin Little Leaguers will be the stars, appearing in most of the action shots. Both their 11–12 and 9–10 All-Star teams went further in their respective quests for the state title in 2007 than any other teams in their league’s history. Not every organization in the international family of Little Leagues does it quite the same. But the Berlin, Maryland, Little League does it well and enthusiastically embraces the coaching philosophy to which this book is dedicated: “Keep it simple, and make it fun.”



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STRATEGY FOR PRESEASON PLANNING

A parent/manager needs to do a great deal of planning before the season begins. The first official event of the Berlin Little League, and most other leagues, is registration, normally held in the month of February. Then tryouts are held in early March, followed shortly thereafter by the player drafts. A savvy manager does some preseason homework and gets involved in every preseason activity of the league.

Registration

Registration, tryouts, and player draft are familiar terms in the sporting world that are utilized in every sport at every level. And the same kind of “homework” is required in preparation for each. A local league should market the unique opportunity of participation in Little League through publicity to reach the maximum number of children. Good relations with the local media, schools, and community organizations are essential. It requires the combined efforts of the members of the local Little League board of directors to make sure that the word is spread and enthusiasm generated that will stimulate local youngsters to want to participate.

I recommend that the schools be asked to cooperate by distributing flyers, printed by the league, to all league-age children to take home to their parents. That is one way to be assured that the parents of all eligible children receive the necessary information about the Little League opportunity. Some leagues provide registration forms to be distributed via the children to their parents, with the instructions that the parent should bring the completed form, along with their child's birth certificate, at the designated time and place. Alternate registration dates should be offered. The Berlin Little League, with the cooperation of the City of Berlin, has registration for four consecutive Saturday mornings in February at City Hall. The advantage of spreading out the registration period is that every interested child has a chance to sign up. It also allows the league officials more one-on-one time with parents to explain what they should expect. This is particularly important for first-time Little League parents. At the Berlin Little League registration, the parents are reminded that all managers, coaches, and league officials are volunteers, and that parents will also be expected to participate in one or more of the various volunteer opportunities—from coaching to taking a turn at the refreshment stand.

They are also informed that the players and parents are expected to participate in the fund-raising programs of the league. Since the registration fee does not begin to cover the total cost for a child's participation, most of the funding for the league comes from volunteer sponsors, such as local businesses and community organizations. Fund-raising, however, continues to play an important part. At the Berlin Little League registration, boxes of candy bars are provided, and players are expected to sell their quota. Raffle tickets are also sold to the parents, and then sold at all community events. Berlin Little League includes 25 teams: six Major League, seven Minor League, six Rookie League, and six Tee Ball teams. It also supports three Junior League teams and one Senior League



team. The Berlin Little League complex includes four Little League-size fields, one of which is lighted; two Tee Ball fields; a Junior/Senior-size lighted field; three batting cages; a refreshment stand; and an equipment building. Portable toilets are set up at strategic locations throughout the complex. It provides recreation for more than 430 boys and girls, and its annual budget exceeds \$38,000. A lot of fund-raising and sponsorship is needed to run such a large organization. If your team is fortunate to have a building that is a combination refreshment stand and bathroom facilities, count your blessings. It should be centrally located in your complex, because it will get a lot of traffic in both regards.

Managers should volunteer to help at registration. It gives them the first opportunity to meet new players and their parents. Conversations with both parent and child can provide the manager with information that will be helpful in evaluating a new player's potential. It is also a great recruiting opportunity for finding volunteer coaches to help. In my experience, one manager, two parent/coaches, and a team mother are a desirable combination to handle all of the details of managing a team.



Scouting Talent

The manager who waits for tryouts to evaluate potential team members could be disappointed in several ways. Frequently, particularly in northern climates, tryouts are held on cold days, when the players are dressed for winter and are not able to show off their skills for a spring/summer sport. Tryouts that are brought indoors to a school gymnasium are only marginally successful.

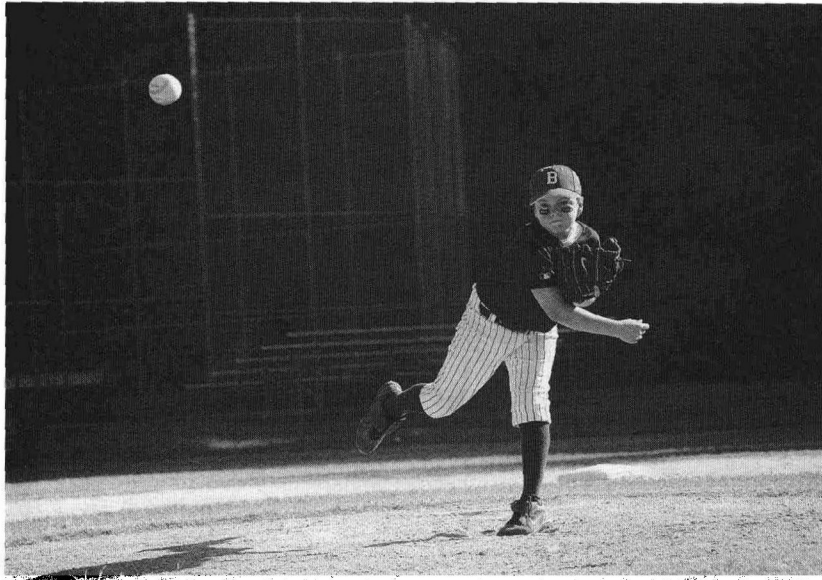
The smart manager will have started making his scouting notes a year in advance. A Major League manager will have watched some Minor League games in the previous season and talked with the Minor League managers about their best players. If there is a

Minor League tournament ending the season, the manager should make a point of scouting for next year's team by watching the best players showcase their talents. A parent/manager who is new to the area or to Little League will be at a disadvantage in not having had the opportunity to do scouting during the preceding season. However, there is nothing to prevent a new manager from calling the team managers from the previous year and asking their advice on drafting youngsters who played for them and will be in this year's draft. The new manager will still be able to scout, along with the experienced managers, at other local youth sports competition—for example, soccer, football, and basketball games. Even though each sport has its own skills, the physically well-coordinated youngster will stand out in every sport. Any coach of a youth sport acknowledges that physical coordination comes to different children at different ages. Being able to spot the kids who have good eye, arm, leg, and body coordination for their age level is a scouting talent managers should cultivate. And the smart manager will not be bashful about talking to coaches of other youth sports and asking for evaluations of kids they have coached who will be signing up for Little League in the spring.



In addition to being on the lookout for kids who are generally well coordinated, the manager is well advised to look specifically for potentially good pitchers. It is generally conceded by baseball aficionados, at every level of the game, that pitching contributes more than 50 percent to a winning team's success. Consequently, a manager should make a note of any big, strong, well-coordinated youngster. Pitchers in action cannot be observed in the Rookie or Tee Ball Leagues, since player-pitching is not utilized in either. However, the infielder who can make a strong, accurate throw to first base is worth noting. Good pitchers first show their stuff in Minor League play. Normally they are among the bigger players who can use size and weight to good advantage in throwing a hard fastball.

Scouting for good potential pitchers has become even more important with the new pitching rules, introduced in the 2007 season. These rules have revolutionized the strategy in choosing pitchers. In previous years a manager could get by with two strong 12-year-old pitchers, who were allowed to pitch six innings a week each. With the normal two games a week schedule, a manager needed no more pitchers, except for the rare extra-inning game; or the rainout that pushed that game into the next week, as a third game. Instead of limiting a pitcher to six innings per week, the new rules limit him to 85 pitches per game. On the average in a six-inning game, that would mean only 14 pitches per inning. Walks and errors could eat those 14 pitches up in a hurry, which means a manager can rarely depend on one pitcher pitching a complete game. He should have another pitcher warming up and ready to



A team should recruit, train, and manage at least four good pitchers of varying ages because of the new pitching rules introduced in 2007. These rules restrict the time each can pitch, based on recorded pitch counts.

go in at any given time. Another new pitching rule allows a manager to take a pitcher out and reinsert him in the same game once. That suggests some interesting strategy scenarios, as noted in Chapter 3.

The new pitching rules have also elevated the role of the pitching coach, who must not only be responsible for the selection and training of a larger corps of pitchers, but also has to become a pitching statistician, since he must handle the pitch count recorder in the dugout and the pitch count chart for recording the ongoing pitch count of each pitcher. He must advise the manager and umpire when a pitcher is nearing his pitch count limit, so another pitcher can be prepared to replace him. That could occur at a difficult time in a game, but when it occurs, the pitcher may only continue to complete pitching to the current batter and must then leave the pitching mound.

If there are any instructional baseball summer camps in your area, contact the coaches who run them and ask for their recommendations on kids they coached who will be eligible for your draft. Normally the better ballplayers will be attracted to these camps.



Tryouts

Tryouts are normally arranged to allow managers to see each prospect perform five skills: hitting, fielding a grounder, throwing the ball to first base, catching the ball at first base, and catching fly balls. In the Berlin tryouts, two pitching machines are used in tryouts—one for hitting and the other, tilted upward, to toss up fly balls. The machines are set to deliver the ball at the same speed to each player. In the drill of fielding grounders and throwing to first, a coach hits a grounder, and the player fields it and throws it to first. Players stand in line and wait for their turn to be the fielder

and the first baseman, respectively. The players wear numbers, which are pinned to their jerseys when they register at the tryout, and the number of the participating player in each drill is called out, so the managers can score each player as they perform. To prepare for the player draft, the managers then add this data to what information they may have already documented in their “scouting reports” on each player.

It should be noted that the precise way in which registration, tryouts, and the draft of players are conducted may vary from league to league. Recommendations are made to presidents of each league in the Operating Manual, provided by Little League Baseball, Inc., but a local league has some freedom to adopt local rules. New managers need to find out how these important functions are performed in their local league.

Preseason Practice

As soon as the draft is completed and you have the names and phone numbers of your players, I recommend that you hold a meeting of your players and their parents. This gives you an opportunity to explain the philosophy of “Keep it simple, and make it fun” and to recruit parents to help, if you have not already lined up your staff. In the final chapter of this book, I outline how to guarantee a winning season for the team; it revolves around a plan of practice, practice, and more practice. Obviously, that requires cooperative dedication on the part of your parents to get their children to and from practice. Where there are transportation problems, you can ask their cooperation in working out car pools. In our experience, the children do not object to frequent practices, particularly if you make them fun. The only potential problem is transportation, which hopefully you and the parents can work out. It is particularly important on game day that the parent get his or her child

