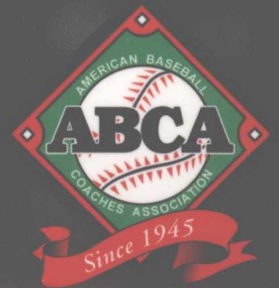


COACHING BASEBALL

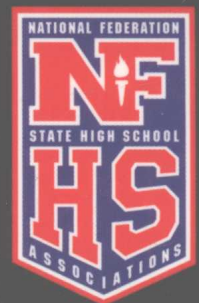
Technical and Tactical Skills



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American Sport Education Program

Coaching BASEBALL Technical and Tactical Skills

**American Sport
Education Program
with Tom O'Connell**



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preface

If you are a seasoned baseball coach, surely you have experienced the frustration of watching your players perform well in practice, only to find them underperforming in games. In your playing days, you likely saw the same events unfold. Teammates, or perhaps even you, could tear the cover off the ball in batting practice and snag all of the ground balls in drills, but could not transfer that kind of performance to games. Although this book will not provide you with a magical quick fix to your team's problems, it will help you prepare your players for game day. Whether you are a veteran coach or are new to coaching, *Coaching Baseball Technical and Tactical Skills* will help you take your game to the next level by providing you with the tools you need to teach your team the game of baseball.

Every baseball coach knows the importance of technical skills. The ability of a player to field a fly ball, make a strong throw, block a pitch in the dirt, lay down a bunt, or throw a curveball can significantly affect the outcome of a game. The book discusses the basic and intermediate technical skills necessary for your team's success, including both offensive and defensive skills. You will learn how to detect and correct errors in your athletes' performance of those skills and then help them transfer the knowledge and ability that they gain in practice to execution in games.

In addition to learning about technical skills, the book focuses on tactical skills, including offensive skills like the sacrifice bunt, getting out of a rundown and stealing third base and defensive skills such as pickoff plays, defending the first-and-third double steal and double-play defenses. The book discusses the "tactical triangle," an approach that teaches players to read a situation, acquire the knowledge they need to make a tactical decision and apply decision-making skills to the problem. To advance this method, the book covers important cues that help athletes respond appropriately when they see a play developing, including important rules, game strategies and the strengths and weaknesses of opponents.

The book also covers planning at several levels—the season plan, practice plans and game plans. Sample games approach practice and season plans are offered. The season plan lays out a season based on the skills in this book and the practice plans include a description of eight practice sessions, covering elements such as the length of the practice session, the objective of the practice, equipment needed,

warm-up, practice of previously taught skills, teaching and practicing new skills, cool-down and evaluation. Sample drills and games, as mentioned in both the games and traditional approach practice plans, can also be found in the *Coaching Baseball Technical and Tactical Skills* online course.

Of course, playing the games is what your practices eventually lead to. The book shows you how to prepare long before the first game, including dealing with issues such as communicating with players, parents, officials and the media, scouting your opponent and motivating your players. You will learn how to control your team's performance on game day by establishing routines and how to make decisions during the game, such as removing pitchers, making substitutions and setting a batting order.

contents

preface **v**

PART I Teaching and Evaluating 1

chapter 1 Teaching Sport Skills **3**

chapter 2 Evaluating Technical and Tactical Skills **9**

PART II Teaching Technical Skills 17

chapter 3 Offensive Technical Skills **19**

chapter 4 Defensive Technical Skills **63**

PART III Teaching Tactical Skills 149

chapter 5 Offensive Tactical Skills **151**

chapter 6 Defensive Tactical Skills **177**

PART IV Planning for Teaching 207

chapter 7 Season Plans **209**

chapter 8 Practice Plans **219**

PART V Game Coaching 237

chapter 9 Preparing for Games **239**

chapter 10 During and After the Game **253**

index **259**

about ASEP **264**

Teaching and Evaluating

Being a good coach takes more than knowing the sport of baseball. You have to go beyond that and find a way to teach your athletes how to be better ballplayers. You also need to know how to evaluate your players to find effective ways to improve their performance.

In chapter 1 we will go over the fundamentals of teaching sport skills. We will first provide you with a general overview of your sport and talk with you about the importance of being an effective teacher. Next, we will define some important skills, helping you get a better understanding of technical and tactical skills and the traditional and games approaches to coaching.

We will build on the knowledge of how to teach sport skills with the evaluation of technical and tactical skills in chapter 2. We will discuss the importance of evaluating athletes, review the core skills that you should assess and describe how you can assess them. Chapter 2 stresses the importance of preseason, in-season and postseason evaluation and provides you with sample tools that you can use to evaluate your players.

By learning how to teach and evaluate your players, you will be better prepared to help them improve their performance.

Teaching Sport Skills

Although the rules and the look of the playing field have changed over the years, the basic concept of baseball has not—the team that scores the most runs wins. From its beginnings in the 18th century these basic concepts have become so ingrained into America that its terms are part of our everyday language. Many state judicial codes have “three strike” laws on the books for repeat criminals. Goofy people are said to be “out in left field.” And when a young romantic says that he “struck out,” everybody knows what it means.

A certain uniformity exists at all levels as far as rules are concerned, and a playing field in Indiana looks the same as a playing field in Oregon. Youth fields are merely shrunken versions of their high school and collegiate counterparts, with diamond-shaped infields and a fence in center field that is usually farther from the plate than the fence in left or right. The modern mound is 60 feet, 6 inches from the plate, and the pitcher has to keep one foot on the pitching rubber before throwing.

In the heyday of baseball, in the years when Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio were stars, seemingly every child in America learned the skills and the rules of the game at an early age. It would not have been necessary to explain the infield fly rule to children living in Brooklyn; they would have known it intuitively. But the teaching of baseball, like American society, has had to evolve. No longer can one assume that most Americans know the game; too many diversions are available to them. So, too, it cannot be taken for granted that youth will know how to perform the skills of baseball as soon as they step out of the cradle. Today those skills have to be taught.

Effective Teaching

A commonly held fallacy is that an athlete who excelled as a player can excel at coaching too. Great players often play instinctively and don't know why they do what they do. They just do it. Players who are not as skilled sometimes try to make up for their limited skills by becoming more knowledgeable about the tactics and techniques needed to become good baseball players. These players, although never able to perform at a high level themselves, learned enough about the game to know how to pass that knowledge of skills on to others. This is not to say that good players cannot be good coaches. Rather, you should realize that just because you were a good player you will not naturally become a good coach. You will need to work at it.

Good coaching is good teaching. There is no simpler way to put it! Coaches who discover the best way to help all their players succeed become the best coaches. Coaches must recognize this fact and be responsible for their athletes' learning. Coaching requires teaching.

Good coaches, then, not only teach the mechanics of the game but also understand the way that athletes learn. Rather than tell players how to play, good coaches teach them how to learn the game for themselves. This approach demands that you do more than just work with the Xs and Os. The great player is the sum of many parts: technical skill, tactical skill, physical ability, mental acuity, communication proficiency and strength of character (Rainer Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2004, pp. 186-188).) Although all these skills are important, this book focuses on the technical and tactical skills that you need to be aware of in coaching baseball. To learn more about other skills that should be part of the makeup of a great athlete, refer to Rainer Martens' *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*.

A baseball player could master literally thousands of technical and tactical skills. Covering every aspect of the game—from the simple act of gripping and holding a baseball to the complexity of successfully executing a bases-loaded pickoff play—would be impossible. Instead, this book focuses on the essential basic and intermediate technical and tactical skills, developed from a list of skills compiled with the cooperation and assistance of the American Baseball Coaches Association (ABCA).

Technical Skills

Everyone involved in coaching baseball knows the importance of technical skills. The way a player fields a ground ball, lays down a bunt, throws a curveball or executes a bent-leg slide has a big effect on the outcome of a game. Technical skills are “the specific procedures to move one's body to perform the task that needs to be accomplished” (Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, p. 169). The execution of technical skills, the capability to teach athletes how to perform them, the flair to detect errors and correct them and the ability to recognize when those skills come into play in a game are all things that you will develop over time with the accumulation of experience. You may need years and hundreds of games to acquire the knowledge necessary to know instinctively what to do. This book will help you reach that stage more quickly, taking you from your current level of knowledge to a higher plane by showing you how to

- focus on the key points of the skill,
- detect errors in an athlete's performance of those skills,

- correct the errors that athletes make, and
- help athletes transfer the knowledge and ability that they gain in practice to execution in games.

Developed from the expertise of the ABCA, the plan outlined in this book will help you learn how to teach athletes to become masters of the basic to intermediate technical skills of baseball and will assist you in providing athletes with the resources necessary for success.

Tactical Skills

Although mastering the technical skills of baseball is important, it is not enough. Baseball players need to know not only how to play the game technically but also how to choose the tactics necessary to achieve success. Many baseball texts overlook the tactical aspects of the game. Coaches even omit tactical considerations from practice because they focus so intently on teaching technical skills. Teaching tactics is much harder and takes much more effort than teaching techniques, but the resulting dividends are substantial.

Tactical skills can best be defined as “the decisions and actions of players in the contest to gain an advantage over the opposing team or players” (Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, p. 170). One way that coaches can approach teaching tactical skills is by focusing on three critical aspects, the “tactical triangle”:^{*}

- Reading the play or situation
- Acquiring the knowledge needed to make an appropriate tactical decision
- Applying decision-making skills to the problem

This book as a whole provides you with the knowledge you need to teach players how to use the tactical triangle. Part III covers important cues that help athletes respond appropriately when they see a play developing, including important rules, game strategies, and the strengths and weaknesses of opponents that affect game situations, as well as ways to teach athletes how to acquire and use this knowledge. Part III will help you teach athletes how to make appropriate choices in a given situation and will show you how to empower players to recognize emerging situations on their own and make sound judgments.

Anyone who has observed baseball for any length of time has witnessed players making errors in games on plays that they have practiced many times in training sessions. Such situations can cause tremendous frustration, for both players and coaches. As you will see, however, these errors can be prevented!

Traditional Versus Games Approach to Coaching

As mentioned previously, transferring skills from practice to games can be difficult. A sound background of technical and tactical training prepares athletes for game situations. But you can surpass this level by incorporating gamelike situations into daily training, further enhancing the likelihood that players will

^{*}Reprinted, by permission, from R. Martens, 2004, *Successful Coaching*, 3rd ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 215.

transfer skills from practices to games. To understand how to accomplish this, you must be aware of two approaches to coaching: the traditional approach and the games approach.

Traditional Approach

Most coaches are comfortable with the traditional approach to coaching. This method often begins with a warm-up period followed by a set of drills, a scrimmage and finally a cool-down period. This approach can be useful in teaching the technical skills of baseball, but unless coaches shape, focus and enhance the scrimmages or drills, the athletes may not successfully translate the skills to game situations, leaving coaches to ponder why their team practices better than it plays.

Games Approach

Using the tactical triangle in practice supplies athletes with the tools they need to make appropriate and quick decisions. But unless they can employ these tools in game situations, they are of little value.

You have surely seen players jump into the batting cage in practice and tear the cover off the ball on the tees or the pitching machine but then have trouble making good contact after the game begins. This type of hitter has learned the art of performing well in drills but has not learned how to transfer those technical skills to tactical situations that occur during a game. Some people call this choking, but a more accurate description would be failure to adapt. The same sort of thing happens to the player who can field every ground ball flawlessly in practice but bobbles easy grounders in a game or lets them go through his legs.

The best way to prevent this scenario is to use the games approach to coaching, which provides athletes with real-time, gamelike situations in training that allow them to practice and learn the skills at game speed. This philosophy stresses the importance of putting technical skills rehearsed in drills into use in practice. You can drill players in a skill like bunting until they are sore, but if they never get the opportunity to use the skill in a gamelike setting, they will not be able to perform when it really counts—in an actual game. When players make mistakes in game-speed situations, they learn. You have to provide gamelike opportunities in which players can feel secure about making mistakes so that they can file those mistakes in the “baseball sense” parts of their brains. By doing so, the chances of their making the same mistakes in games will lessen.

The games approach emphasizes the use of games and minigames to provide athletes with situations that are as close to a real game as possible (Lauder, Alan G., *Play Practice*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001). This approach requires more than just putting the team on the field, throwing them a ball and letting them play. Rather, according to Lauder, the games approach includes three components that make each minigame educational:

1. Shaping
2. Focusing
3. Enhancing

Shaping play means modifying the game in a way that is conducive to learning the skills that you want to teach in that particular setting. The games approach shapes play by modifying the rules, the environment (playing area), the objectives

of the game, and the number of players used (Lauder, p.56). In a typical scrimmage situation, the stronger players dominate and the weaker players rarely get a chance to play an active role. When play is shaped—say, for example, by reducing the number of players—the weaker players are put into positions where they will have more opportunities to play active roles. But you cannot simply shape the play and expect miracles to happen. You need to focus your athletes' attention on the specific objectives that you are trying to achieve with the game. Young players are more apt to learn, or at least to reduce their reluctance to learn, if they know why you are asking them to grasp new tactical information.

Knowing how the tactic fits into the team's game plan or season plan also helps players buy into the tactic. You can assist your athletes with this phase by providing them with clear objectives and explaining how learning these objectives elevates their capability to play and helps their team win games. Shaping play and focusing players on objectives, however, cannot be successful unless you play an active role and work on enhancing their play. You can enhance minigames by adding challenges to make the contests between the sides equal. You can also enhance play by encouraging your players and give them confidence by frequently pointing out their progress. Minigames also give you an opportunity to stop the game whenever you recognize an opportunity to teach something that will improve their play even further.

Most coaches have used aspects of the games approach one way or another in their training sessions. Although you may already have a basic understanding of how to use this approach, this book takes the concept further by presenting a games approach season plan as well as sample practices for you to use with your team.

Both the traditional and the games approaches are sound coaching practices. Part IV examines both approaches to teaching the skills in baseball. Although both approaches have value, the philosophy of this book slants toward the latter. Providing athletes with game-speed, real-time situations that have clear objectives creates a productive, fun-filled learning environment. Athletes who have learned to think of training as a necessary evil will be more motivated to come to practice if they are engaged on a daily basis. More important, if they sense that they have ownership over what they learn in practice, they become more responsible team members. An added benefit is that baseball players who learn through the games approach will be better prepared for competition because they have already faced stiff challenges in their everyday practice sessions.

Knowing how to teach the technical and tactical skills of baseball is important, but you will never know how your players are performing unless you create good assessment systems. Next, you must learn how to evaluate players.

Evaluating Technical and Tactical Skills

Baseball players must master many technical skills and know how to apply those skills in tactical situations. Most of the focus in team practices and individual training sessions is the development and improvement of these baseball skills. Coaches, however, must also be concerned about objectively evaluating those individual skills and using the gathered information to aid in developing the team's season and game plans. For example, decisions about lineups, pinch hitters, relief pitchers, stealing bases, etc. can only be made if coaches have the necessary information at their disposal to make the "right call."

In order to gain competency in the decision making process, coaches must develop accurate measurement tools to help them assess their players. In addition to mechanical abilities, a vast array of nonphysical talents—mental capacity, communication skills and character training—overlay athletic performance, affect its development and should be considered (Rainer Martens, *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*). But, even though all of these skills are important, the focus here will be only on evaluating the technical and tactical skills of baseball. Please refer to *Successful Coaching, Third Edition*, to learn more about how to judge those other more intangible skills.

Guidelines for Evaluation

Regardless of the type of skill being measured and the type of tool being used to do the measuring, some basic guidelines should govern the evaluation process. These are:

- Understanding the purpose of evaluation
- Motivation for improvement
- Providing objective measurement
- Effectively providing feedback
- Being credible

Understanding the Purpose of Evaluation

Athletes need to know and understand the purpose of the test and its relationship to baseball. If the skill being evaluated is a technical skill, the correlation should be easy. But when you are evaluating physical skills, or when you are assessing mental, communication or character skills, you must explain the correlation between the skill and the aspect of the players' game that it will benefit. Doing so speaks to the importance of giving players ownership over their development.

Motivation for Improvement

The athlete must be motivated to improve. Understanding the correlation of the skill to baseball will help, but its game-time applications may at times seem far removed from practices and training. In the physical skills area, if you can create a gamelike atmosphere with lots of players watching as you conduct the testing, athletes will compete with more energy and enthusiasm than they will if you run the tests in isolation.

Still, the best motivation for players is to have them recognize their personal bests by comparing their current level of skill to a previous one. Working with players to compare past and present performances provides a graphic illustration of progress completely independent of the rest of the team. When players see themselves making progress, they will be more motivated to train harder. This concept, while focusing on the individual, is not antithetical to the team concept. You simply need to remind the team that if every player gets better every day, the team will be getting better every day!

Providing Objective Measurement

All evaluation and testing must be unbiased, formal and consistent. Athletes easily recognize flaws in the testing process and lose confidence in the results. You must be systematic and accurate and treat every player the same way for the test to have integrity. No player should receive credit for a test result on a skill if he does not execute the test regimen perfectly. You must mandate good form and attention to the details of the test. The same is true with evaluation tools that are not quantitatively measured. If you want to evaluate the technical skills of all your infielders, you must use the same tool for each and score them fairly and consistently if you expect them to trust the results, especially because most of the tests are highly subjective.

Effectively Providing Feedback

You must convey feedback to athletes professionally and, if possible, personally. Not wanting to fail, all athletes are self-conscious to a certain extent when they

don't perform to their aspirations or the expectations of their coach. At the same time, all athletes have areas in which they need to improve, and you must be able to communicate those needs to the athlete, especially if he does not see the need for improvement! Private meetings with the athletes are crucial to the exchange of this information. Factual results, comparative charts ranking the athlete, historical records of previous test results and even study of videotape of the athlete's performances can all be effective in discreetly communicating both the areas of improvement and the areas where the athlete needs to make progress. You can accomplish these individual meetings in occasional and subtle ways: by asking an athlete to stay for a few minutes in the office after practice, by finding the athlete after practice or a workout in the locker room, by going out to practice early and creating an opportunity to talk to a player individually or by calling the player in to the office at random times just to talk. A visit to a player's class or cafeteria table during the school day can have great effect on his self-esteem. These in-person, one-on-one meetings are by far the best way to communicate the need to improve.

Being Credible

Finally, you must apply the principles that you are asking of your players to the process of evaluation. You must be an expert in the technical and tactical skills for the sport, so that you can accurately and consistently evaluate the skills of your players. You must understand the value and importance of the skills to convey the importance of these skills to the team. You must exhibit outstanding communication skills to be effective in teaching, and you must display those skills in your interaction with other staff members and coaching peers, especially in the presence of players, to establish credibility.

Evaluation Tools

Coaches have many tools to aid them in the evaluation process. As always, player and team statistics are readily available, but new formulas may prove a more well-rounded way of assessing them. Additionally, most schools have digital video cameras that you can and should use for evaluation purposes. Further, in recent years, many innovative charts have been developed to help coaches assess performance beyond what standard statistics may reveal. Let's look more closely at these tools.

Statistics

More than athletes in any other sport, baseball players are evaluated by comparative statistics. Baseball is a game of statistics—the .300 hitters, the RBI leaders, the 20-game winners. People constantly examine players based on their batting, fielding and pitching stats. Other forms of evaluation have recently come into prominence—namely, the use of video and computers to analyze players' swings, throwing motions or running forms—but statistics remain the main source of comparison and evaluation in the day-to-day workings of the game.

Recently, statistics that are more meaningful have come to the forefront in baseball thanks to the work of members of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). Their studies have convinced many people that on-base percentage ([walks