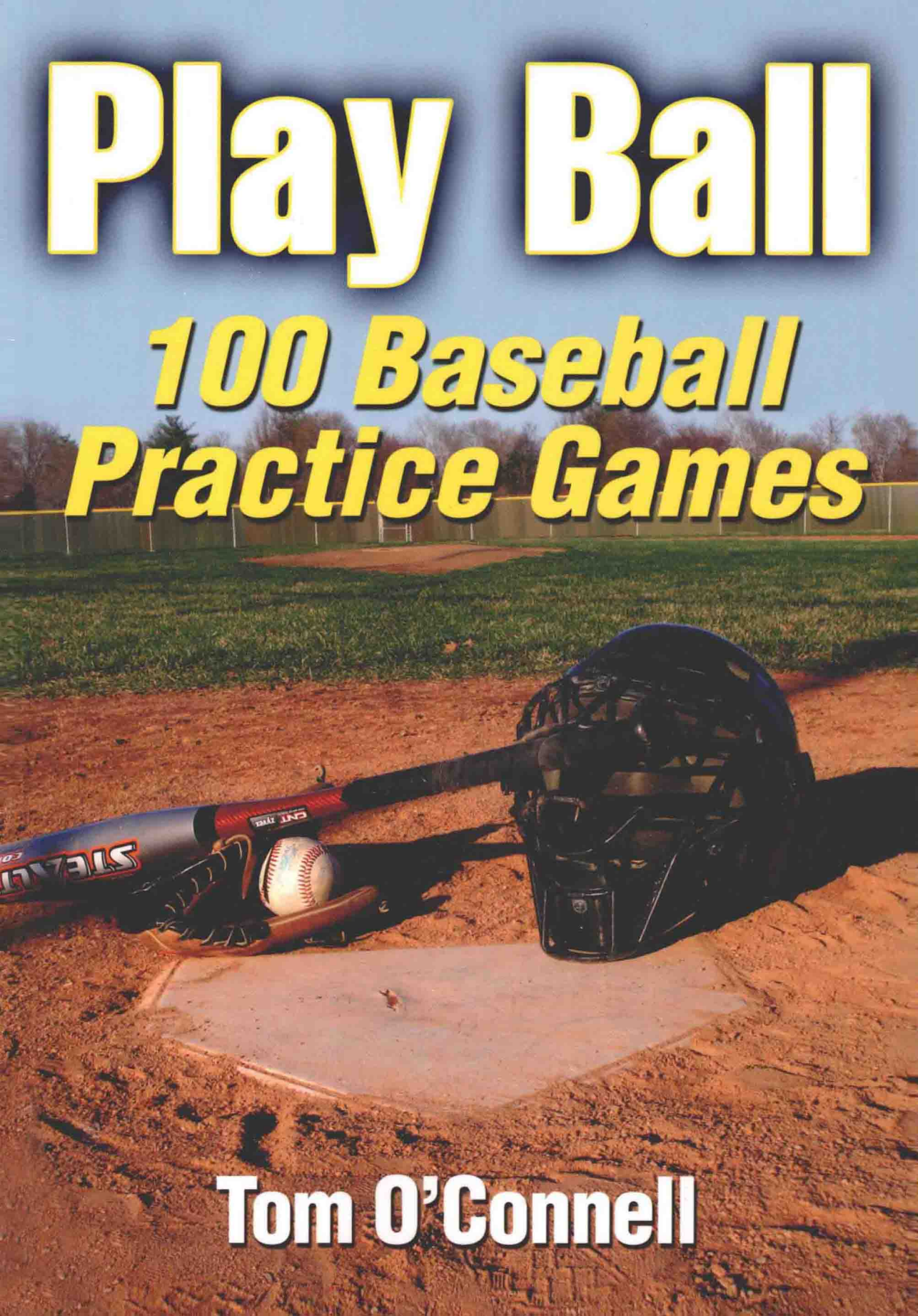
Play Ball

100 Baseball Practice Games



Tom O'Connell

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Human Kinetics

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Game Finder

#	Game	Defensive Skills				Offensive Skills			Strategy	Age	Skill Level	Page
		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 1 Throwing Games												
1.1	Four Corners	✓	✓							All	All	2
1.2	Hit the Target Squarely	✓	✓							All		4
1.3	Yoga Toss	✓	✓							All	All, especially beginners	6
1.4	One-Knee Throwing	✓	✓							All	All	8
1.5	Whoosh	✓								All	All, especially beginners	10
1.6	Touch 'Em All	✓					✓	✓	D	8 and older		12
1.7	Doubles	✓					✓	✓	D	8 and older		14
1.8	Progressive Long Toss	✓	✓							All		16
1.9	Four Corners Against the Clock	✓	✓							12 and older		18
1.10	Globetrotter	✓	✓							12 and older		20
1.11	Stars	✓	✓						D	12 and older		22
1.12	Soft Hands	✓	✓							High school and older		24
1.13	Cutoff and Relay Throw Race	✓	✓						D	12 and older		26

Strategy: D = Defense; O = Offense; B = Both offense and defense

Skill Level: = Basic; = Basic to Intermediate; = Intermediate; = Intermediate to Advanced; = Advanced

#	Game	Defensive Skills				Offensive Skills			Strategy	Age	Skill Level	Page
		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 2 Infield Games												
2.1	Backhand Force	✓			✓				D	12 and older	●●●●●	30
2.2	Balls in the Dirt		✓		✓					High school and older	●●●●	32
2.3	Crossover		✓		✓					All	All	34
2.4	Double-Play Rotation	✓	✓		✓				D	12 and older	●●●●	36
2.5	Enhanced Crossover	✓	✓		✓					10 and older	All	38
2.6	Follow the Bouncing Ball		✓		✓					All	●	40
2.7	Get 50!	✓	✓		✓					10 and older	●	42
2.8	Get There!		✓		✓					All	All	44
2.9	The Hot Box		✓		✓					All	All	46
2.10	Goalie		✓		✓					All	●●	48
2.11	Hold and Go	✓	✓		✓				D	12 and older	●●●●	50
2.12	Hot-Corner Reaction		✓		✓					High school and older	●●●●	52
2.13	Hot Shots		✓		✓				D	12 and older	●●●●	54
2.14	Mass Fungo		✓		✓					12 and older	●●	56
2.15	PFP (With a Twist)	✓	✓		✓				D	High school and older	●●●●	58
2.16	Slow-Roller Throwing	✓								High school and older	●●●●	60
2.17	Spin and Fire	✓			✓				D	12 and older	●●●●●	62
2.18	Z Ball Reaction		✓		✓					High school and older	●●●●	64

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Skill Level: ● = Basic; ●● = Basic to Intermediate; ●●● = Intermediate; ●●●● = Intermediate to Advanced; ●●●●● = Advanced

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		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 3 Outfield Games												
3.1	Two-Line Communication		✓						D	All	All	68
3.2	Five Alive		✓		✓					12 and older		70
3.3	Harvey's Wallbanger	✓	✓		✓				D	12 and older		72
3.4	Hustle!		✓		✓					10 and older		74
3.5	Do or Die	✓	✓		✓					12 and older		76
3.6	Cut 'Em Down	✓	✓		✓				D	12 and older		78
3.7	Line Drive		✓		✓					12 and older		80
3.8	Fence		✓		✓				D	12 and older		82
3.9	Turn and Burn		✓		✓					12 and older		84
3.10	Tweeners		✓		✓				D	12 and older		86
Chapter 4 Pitching Games												
4.1	Diamond and One	✓	✓	✓	✓				D	12 and older		90
4.2	In the Box			✓					D	12 and older		92
4.3	Location, Location, Location			✓					D	12 and older		94
4.4	Pickoff Rotation	✓	✓		✓				B	12 and older		96
4.5	Pitcher's Duel			✓					D	High school and older		98
4.6	Smash Ball		✓	✓					D	12 and older		100
4.7	Dueling Pitchers (U-R-O-U-T)			✓					D	12 and older		102
4.8	Pitching by Script			✓					D	12 and older		104
4.9	Pick at Two	✓	✓	✓	✓				B	12 and older		106
4.10	In and Out, Up and Down			✓					D	High school and older		108

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		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 5 Catching Games												
5.1	Catcher Challenge		✓		✓					12 and older		112
5.2	Fielding Bunts	✓	✓		✓				D	10 and older		114
5.3	Guard the Castle		✓		✓					10 and older		116
5.4	Sway and Frame		✓							10 and older		118
5.5	Egg Drop		✓		✓				D	12 and older		120
5.6	Tag and Score		✓		✓			✓	B	12 and older		122
5.7	Transfer and Let It Fly	✓	✓							12 and older		124
5.8	Wild Pitch	✓	✓		✓			✓	B	12 and older		126
5.9	Pick 'Em	✓	✓		✓				D	12 and older		128
5.10	Rapid Fire		✓							12 and older		130
Chapter 6 Hitting Games												
6.1	Target Hitting						✓			10 and older	All	134
6.2	Over the Line						✓		O	8 and older		136
6.3	Flip It						✓			10 and older	All	138
6.4	Three-Man Bunting				✓	✓			O	12 and older		140
6.5	Wastebasket Bunting					✓			O	10 and older	All	142
6.6	Four-Corner Bunting	✓	✓			✓		✓	O	12 and older		144
6.7	Hit the Target						✓		O	12 and older		146
6.8	Pepper		✓		✓		✓			12 and older		148
6.9	Read the Pitch						✓		O	12 and older		150
6.10	Short Toss				✓		✓		O	12 and older		152
6.11	Right Side		✓		✓		✓		O	12 and older		154

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#	Game	Defensive Skills				Offensive Skills			Strategy	Age	Skill Level	Page
		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 6 Hitting Games *(continued)*												
6.12	Top Hand, Bottom Hand						✓			12 and older		156
6.13	Triangle Hitting	✓			✓		✓		O	12 and older		158
6.14	Walk-Through						✓			12 and older		160
6.15	Timing Sticks						✓			12 and older		162
6.16	Speed Stik						✓			12 and older		164
6.17	Take or Hit			✓			✓		O	12 and older		166
Chapter 7 Situational Games												
7.1	Pickle	✓	✓		✓			✓	B	10 and older		168
7.2	0-2 Breaking Ball		✓	✓				✓	B	12 and older		170
7.3	Advancing From Second	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	B	12 and older		172
7.4	Cat and Mouse	✓	✓	✓				✓	B	12 and older		174
7.5	Contact	✓			✓			✓	B	12 and older		176
7.6	In the Hole			✓			✓		B	12 and older		178
7.7	Long Tee				✓		✓		O	12 and older		180
7.8	Overthrow							✓	O	12 and older		182
7.9	Bobble and Go!							✓	O	12 and older		184
7.10	Read and Run	✓	✓		✓			✓	O	12 and older		186
7.11	Take Three	✓						✓	B	12 and older		188
7.12	Long Pepper				✓		✓		O	12 and older		190

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		Throwing	Receiving	Pitching	Footwork	Bunting	Hitting	Baserunning				
Chapter 8 Team Games												
8.1	Keystone Cops	✓	✓		✓		✓		B	All	All	194
8.2	Move Up	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	B	10 and older	All	196
8.3	Situations	✓	✓		✓			✓	B	10 and older	All	198
8.4	21 Outs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	B	12 and older		200
8.5	Bingo, Bango, Bongo	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	O	12 and older		202
8.6	Bunt Game	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	B	12 and older		204
8.7	Combat Scrimmage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	B	12 and older		206
8.8	Hit-and-Run	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	B	12 and older		208
8.9	Relay, Relay, Relay	✓			✓			✓	B	12 and older		210
8.10	Double-Steal Challenge	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	B	12 and older		212

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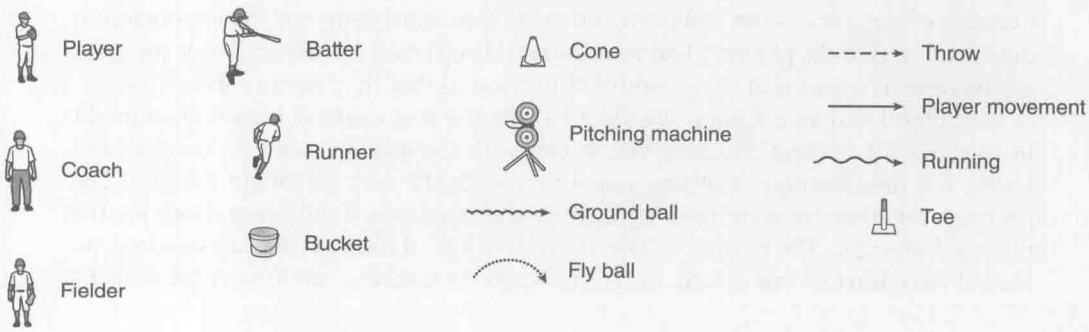

Introduction

Over the years I've gone to many clinics and listened to some outstanding speakers give excellent talks about great drills. And at those same clinics, I've had many conversations with my coaching friends from all over the country about using those drills and the best way to teach the game. Through the years of clinics and hot-stove discussions, one thought kept irritating me. Why is it that at practice we work on drill after drill after drill, our players master the drills and look better and better, but they keep making the same mistakes in games? Maybe, I thought, they are just getting better at doing drills. The science of coaching has improved 10-fold in the last 40 years, but fewer of our players seem capable of playing the game at a high level. The lapses of concentration, the mistakes in judgment, and the failure to execute often plague our teams and players. Was it my fault? Was I working the players hard enough or concentrating on the right skills in practice? Finally, out of frustration, after the umpteenth time one of my players failed to execute a bunt in a crucial game situation, I took a long, hard look at the way that I was teaching bunting.

Every year, at least once a week, we worked on bunting in practice—dry drills, partner drills, bunting before batting practice, bunting after batting practice, bunting in hallways, bunting in the gym. Yet even after all that practice there were too many times when I gave the bunt sign in a game and a player failed to execute. He would hit the ball hard right back to the pitcher or miss it completely or, even worse, pop it up. I chalked it up to a lack of focus, a lack of skill, or a lack of belief in the importance of bunting—the same explanations that my coaching peers offered when we met at clinics. Too many video games, we said. Too many distractions. Too little effort.

Our kids just didn't have baseball sense, as I called it—what some would call baseball IQ. Besides having crucial letdowns in key situations, players seemed to miss the little nuances of the game—the ability to anticipate that something will happen before it does. I knew that the players I had were smart. I keep track of their academic progress all the time. It wasn't that they couldn't think; it was that they weren't always aware.

And then I had an epiphany. Could it be that the root cause of the problem might lie in the word *teaching*? Nothing was wrong with the way my assistant coaches and I were teaching bunting. Nothing was wrong with the way we taught fielding. The problem was that we were *teaching* it when the emphasis should have been on the players' *learning* it. The burden was on the wrong half of the equation. As coaches, we should have learned our lesson. Forty years ago, as teachers, we discovered that the

lecture method, another term for direct instruction, wasn't the best way to reach young learners. Ever since, the classroom has been a place where good teachers avoid giving lectures; instead, they facilitate learning.

Forty years ago a revolution also took place in baseball instruction. When I was in high school, teams spent most practice time running, taking batting practice, taking infield and outfield, and then running some more. Then in the 1960s and 1970s a new era of instruction began. Articles and books flooded the market touting drills that could teach skills. And they were fine books written by excellent coaches—Dick Siebert, Danny Litwhiler, and Bob Shaw, to name a few. The era of the scientific approach to baseball began. But somewhere in that transition, from the good ol' days of practice to the science of baseball, something got lost—baseball IQ, or the ability of players to sense and unconsciously react to changes in the game around them.

So in the classroom as we were getting away from the direct approach, on the athletic field we never gave it up. I believe that it is time for coaches to start imitating the methods that work in the classroom! Just as mastering multiplication tables doesn't mean students have learned math, mastering the mechanical skills of baseball, although important, doesn't mean that players have learned the game. They need to learn not only how to play the game technically but also how to connect the dots tactically. Most baseball texts overlook these tactical aspects. Coaches even omit them from practice regularly because they become focused on technical skills. They develop tunnel vision and lose sight of the strategies that players need to understand. Besides, teaching tactics is harder and takes much more effort than teaching technique.

After the light bulb went on above my head, I reassessed the way that I ran practices and what my own players were doing. For years, I had been using a game I called Situations (chapter 8). I used it at the end of practice as a challenge to my defense. It was gamelike, seemed to help my players learn, and gave me a chance to see how they ran the bases and reacted to batted balls. I have always thought that it was an effective use of practice time. The players responded to it well—in fact, they had fun playing it. Hmmm? I looked at other drills that we used in practice and thought of ways to make them more like my Situations game—challenging and at game speed. Somewhere around the same time I heard about a technique being used in gym classes called TGfU (Teaching Games for Understanding) based on the work of pioneering British professors David Bunker and Rod Thorpe. That work in turn led me to the games approach, articulated first by Australian pole vault coach Alan Launder in his seminal book *Play Practice: The Games Approach to Teaching and Coaching Sports* and enhanced more recently by Rainer Martens in *Successful Coaching*. Bam! Suddenly, a whole philosophy of practice approach landed in my lap and started to make sense. There was another way of doing things—a way that was more gamelike. That's why Situations worked. I became convinced that the best way to make my players into better thinkers was to let them play more games. If, as my coaching buddies and I thought, kids don't play the game enough, why not let them play the game more in practice? That approach might help them become better thinkers, become players with game sense. This newer paradigm of play practice, the games approach, is discussed by coaches Launder and Martens in their own books. For a detailed and thorough exposition of these methods, I urge readers to consult those two texts.

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Traditional Approach

Most of us follow a model of practice that has produced great benefits for us over the years. The paradigm of the traditional method is tried and true. Practice starts with a little stretching and a little running. A throwing warm-up follows. Then we pick a skill that we need to work on. Maybe in the last game, the team didn't handle relays and cutoffs well, so in practice we start with a relay drill, focusing on hitting the cutoff, throwing with good technique, getting the feet in position to throw before receiving the ball, and so on. From there, perhaps we move into other drills that cover skills that need retooling—the double play, bunting, pickoffs at second, and so forth. We follow those up with batting practice. We keep everyone busy with stations leading up to hitting on the field. They take 10 cuts, or 15 cuts. During batting practice, we give our pitchers work by having them throw to hitters or letting them throw on the side. After batting practice, we have the daily scrimmage, or we finish up with infield and outfield practice. We might throw in some physical training at the end—running bases, doing sprints—and then everyone grabs a rake. We police the field and then send everyone off to the showers. Some days we eliminate the scrimmage and do more drill work, hoping to get the kinks out of the bad plays that occurred during our last game, but practice is largely the same every day.

This model has worked for many teams. It is organized and moves from point to point well, but it does have shortcomings. For one it overemphasizes mechanical skills. Our players might become better at fielding techniques or double-play pivots or playing the ball off the wall, but at what expense? The traditional approach also puts too much stress on direct instruction. The coach tells players what to do and how to do it. It also relies heavily on the use of drills—usually out of context of the game. Often, the result is that players learn how to do drills well but can't execute the same skill with proficiency in the game. Every coach has seen players jump into the batting cage in practice and tear the cover off the ball on the tees or against the pitching machine but then have trouble making good contact once 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 the tactical situations that they face when at bat during a game. Some people call this choking, but a more accurate description would be a 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. These examples show that sometimes players haven't been able to translate the work in the cage or during infield drills into game situations. This transfer of learning is a key in education today and should be a key in coaching.

Drills also stand the risk of being boring, especially when repeated without change from one practice to the next. I've seen players going through the motions with a drill even on the first day of practice because, as they say, "We've done this before."

Drills should have a prominent place in practice, but they should not be the focus. Drills work well at times, especially when teaching a skill for the first time or when trying to lower the risk of injury. Teaching players how to slide or how to drag bunt might fall into this category. The best way to teach these skills would be to (1) explain the skill, (2) model it, and (3) create a drill for the players to work on the skill, all along providing good feedback.

Games Approach

But practice that focuses on drills, live hitting, and scrimmaging does not increase players' baseball sense. The alternative approach, the games approach, helps your players become smarter and puts the coach squarely in the role of facilitator, not commander in chief. This method allows players to learn the game through enjoyable learning activities featuring gamelike practices that create realistic situations through which they can develop baseball sense.

This book incorporates the three major components in the games approach into the practice games. The first of these elements is shaping—taking a drill and tweaking it a little so that it fits the purposes of the skill that you want the players to learn. This can be done by changing the rules, changing the number of players involved, changing the size of the playing field, modifying the objective of the game and scoring, or modifying the equipment used. Knowing how the tactic fits into the team's game or season plan also helps players buy into the tactic. Coaches can assist their athletes with this by providing them with clear objectives and explaining how learning these objectives elevates their capability to play and helps their team win games. 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. In short, shaping means redesigning the game.

The second element of the games approach is focusing play. This means that a coach can stop the game at any time to explain a point or correct mistakes in judgment. Using the Bunt Game (chapter 8) as an example, if a fielder in a sacrifice situation bunts the ball back hard to the pitcher, enabling the pitcher to make a play on a lead runner, then the coach can stop the game and point out to the bunter why the bunt was unsuccessful. The player, we hope, will not do the same thing the next time. If a fielder tries to make a play that might be beyond his physical limitations or not appropriate for that moment in the game, the coach can use a freeze replay to put the play into perspective. Freeze replays are crucial to the concept of the games approach. Simply put, they capitalize on teachable moments, the mantra of the classroom, and give the coach an opportunity to put the players and the ball back into the positions where they were when the tactical error occurred and have the players note the situation. Then by questioning players about why they were doing what they were, the coach can let the players come to the realization themselves about why their actions were incorrect. This method gives players the responsibility for solving the dilemma of the situation, which in turn helps them build their baseball IQ.

The final element of the games approach is enhancing play. This goal can be accomplished by challenging players further than they will be challenged in games. Limiting the area into which they can hit or handicapping drills helps keep the games competitive. Games like Long Tee in chapter 7 or Triangle Hitting in chapter 6 effectively limit where a player can hit. Using the Bunt Game as an example again, placing cones on the field to delineate a hitting area further limits and focuses players on their bunting skills. Not allowing fielders to charge, even when they know that a bunt is coming, challenges the defense even more. All the games in this book test players' mettle by having them compete against their partners, part of the team, or the whole team. These challenges enhance practice and build players' baseball IQ.

How can the games approach work for you and your practices? Most of the games in this book are derived from drills that I've used for years. But I've tried to give all of them an element of competition that they were lacking before. Take some of the drills in this book or drills that you like to use and make them more competitive. Shape them so that they accomplish more than just having players work on technique. Use freeze replays often, especially in situation games or scrimmages and let your players come up with the solutions. I know that many of us learned the game under the philosophy that baseball is not a democracy. The my-way-or-the-highway approach hinders our players from exploring, learning, and developing baseball sense. They have to learn for themselves what works and what doesn't. And they have to learn in a caring, safe environment where they have plenty of chance to succeed. A good coach, like a good teacher, can use the questioning method and have players come up with the right answers. We just have to ask the right questions.

Games such as those in this book teach players to play the game, not the opponent. Often, a player can perform a skill in a drill, but when base runners or batters are added to the mix, he loses focus and thinks more about the opponent than executing the skill. Balls bounce and roll the same way in practice that they do in a game. The game remains the same. The trick is to get players to handle each situation in a game the same way that they deal with it in practice. The more skilled they become in challenging situations, the more confidence they gain in their ability to carry out their responsibilities and just *play the game*. And they have fun doing it!

Recently, the "Next One," NHL hockey star Sidney Crosby said, "I have been practicing since I was four or five years old, but that wasn't really practice. I was just having fun. . . . I just loved to play hockey." That's what the game should be for our players—fun. A by-product of the games approach is that practices become more interesting and, more important, more fun. All our players should be like Crosby. When they say, "Coach, practice was fun today," that is a good thing. We did our job, and they didn't even realize it.

In closing, I'd like to thank those coaches whose passion for the development of baseball inspired me to write this book. Special thanks to Dick Birmingham, Jim Jones, Rodger Grey, Pete Caliendo, Bill Arce, and Charlie Greene. You've kept the game growing—and kept it fun.

Let's play ball!

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CHAPTER

1

THROWING GAMES

1.1 Four Corners

Age: *All* **Skill Level:** *All*

Introduction

Baseball is often considered nothing more than a game of catch. Four Corners focuses on involving the entire team in catching and making accurate throws over the length of the distance between two bases, and forces players to concentrate on catching, throwing mechanics, footwork, and making accurate throws. If players have problems playing this game, they probably should not progress much further until they master it. The object of the game is to move the ball around the four corners of the infield as accurately as possible for a specified number of times.

Equipment

Baseballs, gloves, bases

Setup

- Divide the team into four equal groups.
- Each group assembles at one of the bases and forms a line so that the first person in the line is standing in front of the base straddling the base line. The other players in the line should be at least 10 feet (3 m) behind the first player and facing in the same direction.
- The first player in line should be facing the next base.
- Place all infielders at their respective bases and mix in outfielders and pitchers to even up the lines.
- Place two or three balls safely off to the side near each base.
- The coach should occupy a spot where he can observe best.

Procedure

The coach gives a ball to the first player at home plate. On command, the player steps with his right foot over his left and throws the ball to the player standing at third. After completing the throw, the player hustles to the back of the line and the next person in line takes his place awaiting a throw. When the player at third catches the ball from home, he steps with his right foot over his left and throws to second base. He then hustles to the end of his line. (Before throwing to the next base, left-handed throwers will have to turn their bodies so that the glove-side foot can step in the direction of the next base.) Players follow the same procedure at each succeeding base. The ball continues going around the bases until the coach tells the team to stop. Before starting the game, the coach should give the team a goal. For example, a good goal for a novice team might be to make 20 throws without a mistake. This kind of goal involves them in spurring on their teammates.

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