

Recommendations for Keeping the Focus of Recreational Youth Baseball Leagues on Participation and Learning

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The following are ten recommendations for keeping the focus of recreational youth baseball leagues on participation and learning:

1. Create player selection methods involving ways to spread the talent across all of the teams. Rules exist which prohibit having only so many of a particular age group on a team. Why not have rules about having only so many level five, four, three, etc. players on each team. Chance circumstances may still create teams that dominate, but everyone will know when it happens by chance rather than by design.
2. Remember that youth baseball leagues are for all of the children not just the “mini-professionals” that some adults think the children should be. A couple of practices a week for most of these kids are plenty. For those children whose parents want them to practice daily and begin their quest for the big-time, there are travel teams in which players as young as nine and ten can practice almost every day of the week in the summer, and play three to five games every weekend.
3. Expose all of children to the best coaches in the league. Are the coaches who always have the best teams the best coaches or are they always the coaches who somehow have the best players? If the leagues really want all the children to benefit from what baseball has to offer, then why not show some creativity in how that goal may be accomplished. Perhaps weekly clinics are the answer.

4. If the development of baseball skills and learning the game are goals, then create ways in which all players can progressively improve at his/her own rate. A “professional” model or competition intensive structure is only going to develop those who have an advantage due to age, maturity, athletic ability, or an interested parent. How many weak players become average players before becoming frustrated and giving up the game? There are a lot more good players that become better players because they receive more attention in the form of repetitions in practice, playing time in regular season games, and extended seasons due to league and all-star tournaments.
5. Keep in mind the children’s safety; provide opportunities for the children to play numerous positions. How does a player become locked in as a first baseman by the age of eleven? Many times children have difficulty playing outfield positions when they are older because by the time they are sixteen they have spent twelve years in the infield.
6. Teach children to throw, catch, hit, and run at least to some minimal level before putting them on display in a high pressure competitive situation. Why is there such a rush to get to practice games and other competition? There are lead-up games, fun drills, and activities that can be used to develop skills without having the major “failure” scenarios of game competition.
7. Develop methods of analyzing and assessing performances to provide helpful feedback for players, coaches, and parents. Many players play on successful teams when they are in the 5 - 12 year old age groups but never really learn the proper mechanics of the sport. The emphasis is often placed on successful performance in terms of winning rather than improving baseball skills.
8. Hitting consistently is probably the most difficult task in all of sport. Give children a chance to be successful at the plate and put the ball in play. Most players 12 years and younger are not going to be remotely successful as they attempt to hit curve balls. Children twelve and

under

shouldn't be throwing curve balls and the hitters should not have to hit them until they can make consistent contact with a straight pitch with moderate velocity.

9. Restrict pitchers at this young age to a reasonable pitch count. Approximately fifty pitches for a child ten years old and under is a good number to work around. For the eleven and twelve year olds, seventy-five pitches is a reasonable number. Young players throwing 150 pitches and then moving to shortstop or catcher is ridiculous and borders on child abuse.

10. Let the children rest. Provide or seek treatment for those who have sore arms. Continuing to ask children to pitch when they have sore arms is not going to make them tough; it will make the injury worse. There is a difference between an adult playing with pain and "gutting it out" as we say and a child who may suffer damage to developing muscle tendons and apophyseal sites (sites of muscular attachments). Glorifying and supporting this behavior illustrates a "win at all cost" attitude. Why is it that certain restrictions about innings pitched is more liberal for season-end tournaments and all-star tournaments? A player performs under certain training rules for the season and then faces different rules for participation when winning is more important.

After reviewing these recommendations ask yourself, if the competition among adults, developing elite players, and developing winning programs (all-stars) were not part of the agenda (recognized or hidden) would these recommendations be unreasonable for a youth baseball league wanting to expose all children to the fun game of baseball?