

Preparing Practices

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Typical Questions We All Face As Coaches vis a vis Practice

- “Now that I have been assigned a team, what should we do in our first practice?”
- “What should I do to prepare my team for my first game in 2 weeks?”
- “How do I keep my practices fun but make sure the girls are learning and improving?”
- “What is the right mix between talking and showing?”
- “What should be the right mix between teaching fundamentals, doing drills and practicing game scenarios?”
- “I have taught the basics and did some basic drills the last few practices, what should I do in my practice tomorrow?”
- “What other drills can I do so the girls don’t get bored?”

This document can’t answers all these questions, but will hopefully give you some useful tips to help you deliver higher quality practices!

Tip #1: Review “Welcome to Coaching”

- Especially the part about coaching philosophy, as practice is where you will spend the most time with your team
- Highlights to remember:
 - Align your goals with the players’ goals
 - Keep it fun
 - Always encourage, not discourage → apply the sandwich principal
 - Keep it fresh by not repeating the same ol’ stuff in practice
 - Make sure the girls are practicing good sportsmanship during practice (e.g. supporting and respecting their teammates, no bullying or teasing, etc.), as bad habits will impact players’ desire to participate in practice and will spill over to games

Tip #2: Be Familiar with the Fundamentals

- Attend the coaching clinic where we will present on the Fundamentals
- Get ACE Certified which mainly covers the fundamentals
- Read the “Fundamentals” documents on the Coaches Corner

Tip #3: Divide and Conquer Your Season ...

- Consider dividing your season into a set of major milestone events, e.g.
 - First practice
 - First game
 - Middle of season game that acts as a benchmark
 - Last game of season where the players should be at their most skilled
- Practices are the building blocks that lead to these milestone events
- Think about how you will work backwards to leverage your practices to complete the next milestone, e.g.
 - You don't have to have them learning advanced fielding techniques in the practices leading up to the first game, that can wait until later games in the season
 - In the first practice focus on starting them off feeling good they made the right decision to play softball (i.e. softball = fun) vs. jumping into intense drills

Tip #4: ... and Then Divide and Conquer Your Practices

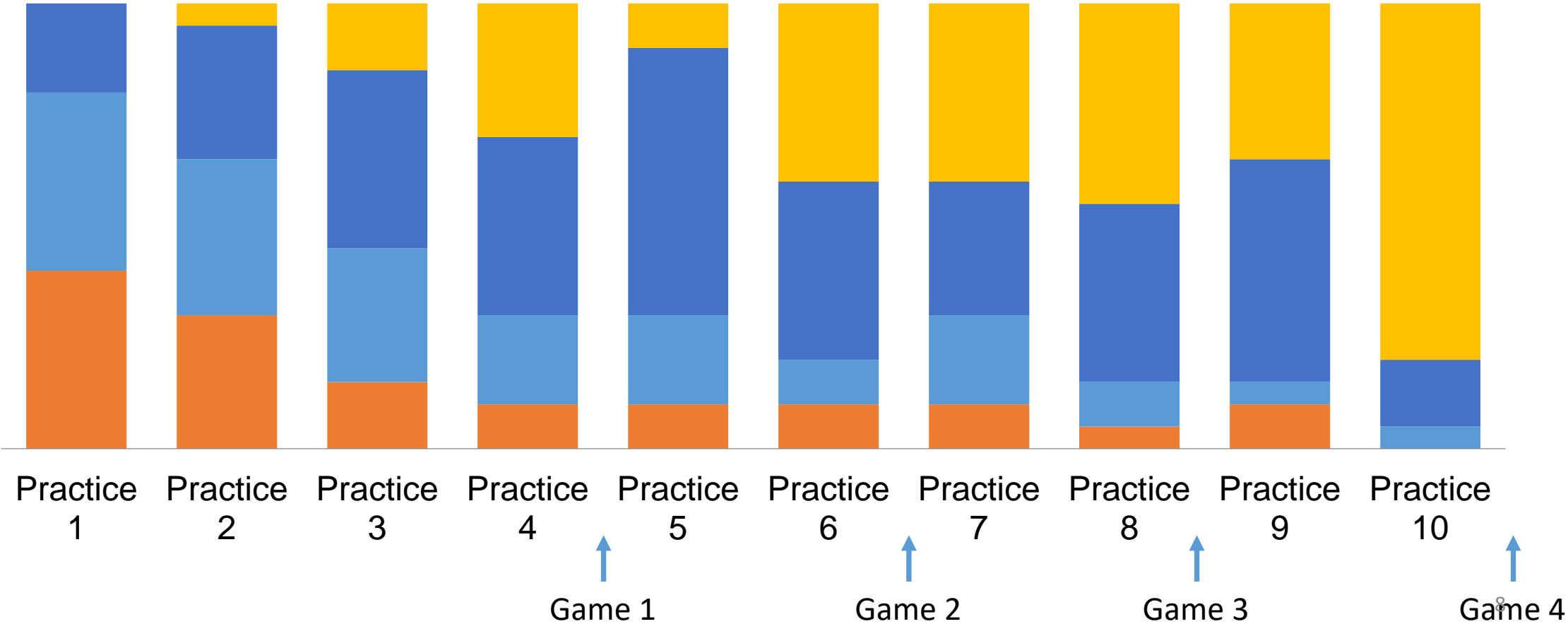
- Consider dividing what you do in a given practice into four main buckets:
 - Teach basics of the game (“Basics”) such as teach players the concepts of outs, balls vs. strikes, etc. as well as culture of the game such as sportsmanship, supporting teammates, etc. — more applicable to younger girls
 - Teach fundamentals of the game (“Fundamentals”) which is instructing the players in the proper form for throwing, catching, fielding, hitting, running, etc.
 - Develop competency via drills (“Drills”) and other form of repetition
 - Model game scenarios (“Game Scenarios”) through intrasquad scrimmages and specific advanced drills regarding who fields ball given where ball is hit, where to throw in what scenario, when to steal, etc.
- Note you should always allocate time for warmups, light stretching and jogging, water breaks etc. in your practices

Tip #5: Milestones and Your Team's Experience Level Influence Your Practice Buckets

- How much time you spend in a given practice on each of the four “practice buckets” (Basics, Fundamentals, Drills and Game Scenarios) should depend on
 - Your next milestone event
 - Age and experience of your players
- For example, the “first game milestone” means you allocate more on Basics and Fundamentals in the practices leading up to the first game then drills or game scenarios (especially for younger girls)

Example Bucket Allocation for 8U By Practice

Basics Fundamentals Drills Game Scenarios



What The Prior Example Shows You

- It shows you that as you progress through more and more of your practices that you shift your focus from purely teaching the basics and fundamentals to focusing more on drills and game scenarios
- It also shows you that the practice that is right before a game has a focus more on game scenarios, and for the practice immediately after a game has you focusing more on drills in areas that the players may not have excelled at in the last game
- For older and more experienced girls, the basics and fundamentals would be smaller percentages in the first set of practices, and focus more quickly shifts to drills and game scenarios

Tip #6: As Practices Go By, “Fundamentals” Merge Into “Drills” and “Game Scenarios”

- As your practices progress, you integrate and teach the fundamentals as part of doing the drills vs. having separate focused time allocations just to teach fundamentals
 - This means that you may pull a player aside from a drill if she is not properly executing the fundamentals and work with her one on one
 - Or it may mean that you quickly demonstrate for a given drill what you want to see fundamental-wise, or stop a drill in the middle and point out what should be the optimal form if you see girls executing the drill with poor form
- In effect “fundamentals” becomes a common theme across drills and also game scenarios, i.e. we are always teaching fundamentals

Tip #7: For Each Practice Have a Plan and Purpose

- The night before each practice you should clear your mind and write down what do you want to accomplish in tomorrow's practice, e.g.
 - What are the skills you want them to learn
 - What mistakes they made in your last game you want corrected
 - What areas they need improvement or more work (e.g. hitting)
 - Are the girls having fun and is there things I can do to make it more fun and enjoyable
- Then create a plan for that practice
 - Always allocate time for warm ups in the beginning and be sure to schedule times for water breaks
 - Assume things will always take longer than you plan so give yourself a buffer
- Collaborate with your fellow coaches on your team (e.g. share practice plans via email and/or meet a few minutes before practice begins and brainstorm on that day's practice)

Example 8U Practice Plan

- 5:30 – 5:40 Warm-ups (throwing and catching)
- 5:40 – 5:50 Light stretches and jogging
- 5:50 – 5:55 Discuss basics of softball or demo proper form for particular function (e.g. fielding a ground ball)
- 5:55 – 6:10 Group #1 does infield drills with Coach1
Group #2 does outfield drills with Coach2
- 6:10-6:15 Water break
- 6:15-6:30 Switch (#1 does outfield, #2 does infield)
- 6:30-6:35 Water break and get on helmets
- 6:35-6:55 Batting stations
- 6:55-7:00 Base running relay game

Tip #8: Don't Leave 'em Standing

- Practices should be designed to be fast-paced ... there is nothing worse than girls standing around waiting 2 minutes for their turn to finally field a ground ball
- Break the team into groups and have multiple stations, e.g.
 - Coach 1 works on infield drills while Coach 2 works on outfield drills, and then switch groups
 - For hitting, set up stations ... e.g. one station with tee and bownet, another station with whiffle toss, and another station with coach pitch from the pitchers mound (assuming proper spacing of stations for safety reasons)
- If you only have 1 coach, use drills that have players throwing / fielding with each other OR do drills that leverage multiple players involved (e.g. have live runners as part of infield practice)

Tip #9: Mix and Match

- Softball is about hitting and fielding and catching and throwing and running and ...
- So mix and match drills that do each of the above, e.g. softball is not all about fielding grounders

Tip #10: Make a Great First Impression

- The first practice for any team is key in terms of setting the tone for the season
 - Parents will linger at the start and/or come early for pick up to “check you out” and see if you are a “good” and “supportive” coach that their girls will learn from and have fun with
 - Girls may still be on the fence if they really want to play softball
- Be super organized going into this particular practice, and don’t make the first practice a big long lecture, and instead maybe focus on some basics and do some drills that are fun games and that everyone can do regardless of skill
 - Try to have the players leaving your first practice feeling that softball is fun and you will be supporting coach

Tip #11: Leverage the “Drills” Documents

- You were probably wondering how we could help you in the nitty gritty of the various drills and game scenarios 😊
- We have put together a set of drills that you can find in the Coaches Corner
 - Think of these drills as “soup starters” to help you design your practices, but feel free to customize these drills or use your own proven drills
 - Picking appropriate drills for a given practice is based on a number of factors including skill level of players, how far into the season is the team, age of the players, the players capacity to pick up new drills, etc.
 - To help you decide which drills to use, we have grouped them into Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced Drills (see “Menu Items”), with recommended ages for the drills
 - It is recommended that in a given practice you do not solely focus on just one area (e.g. infielding), but you also conduct drills in other areas (e.g. hitting, outfielding, etc. – see separate documents for example drills in those areas)
- Drills do not equal a practice, drills are a key component of a practice

Tip #12Even Better ... See “Example Practice Plans” for Examples of Practices that Utilize Various Drills !!

Tip #13: Don't Forget Safety Comes First

- Scan the practice field during warmups to make sure there are not significant holes in the outfield or big rocks in the infield
- Set ground rules for when girls should swing bats (e.g. away from other players) and make sure they always swing bats with a helmet on
- Catchers should always have catching gear and helmet even in coach pitch as batters can throw bats
- If girls are running the bases in a situation where balls are being thrown, they must wear helmets with chinstraps on
- Don't practice sliding if girls are not wearing proper "sliding pants" or if the infield appears not be groomed (e.g. practice on a slip-n-slide in the outfield)
- Always have water breaks and encourage all girls to bring water to every practice
- Proper teaching of fundamentals and paying attention is key to minimizing injury
- For younger or less experienced girls, better to throw balls vs. hit to them during practice
- Having a proper practice plan in place keeps things organized and decreases likelihood of players not paying attention and getting hurt

Tip #14: Talk Less and Show More

- Someone wrote that 83% of what you learn is from what you see, and the rest is what you hear
- So focus on being a teacher by showing what to do, vs. being a talker
- i.e. spend as little time as possible talking and get the girls doing

Tip #15: KISS

- Along the lines of tip #13 of talk less and show more, also try to focus on the KISS method – Keep it Super Simple – throughout your practice and instruction

Tip #16: Always Be Handing out Sandwiches

- Always be encouraging vs. discouraging; i.e. build your players up, do not tear them down
- Building confidence is key
- No player is ever perfect in practice, and teach that mistakes are OK and how you get better, so make sure the emphasis is on effort vs. results
- When it comes to feedback, use the sandwich approach
 - Say something positive (ie the top piece of bread)
 - Tell them what they did wrong and how to correct it
 - Finish with encouragement, which is the bottom piece of bread

Tip #17: Take Pictures or Videos to Show Players Where they Need to Correct

- When you are trying to correct say a poor throwing motion, it is often helpful to take a player aside, have them throw into a fence or bownet, and video them with your phone in slow motion (stand on their throwing side)
- Then play it back and have girls see if they are dipping their elbow, etc.
- Having players see their mistake on video often helps them to correct as they can now visualize what they are doing wrong (again people learn by seeing vs. hearing)
- Same applies to hitting, fielding, etc.



Tip #18: Ask Parents to Help

- While only ACE Certified coaches can instruct and conduct practices, see if you can get parents to help and assist during your practices, e.g.
 - Shag balls
 - Help the catcher get their gear on during an intrateam scrimmage
 - etc.

Putting The Tips All Together

- Again go into every practice with a plan and purpose
 - Having a plan forces you to avoid doing the “ same ol’ same ol’ ” and getting girls bored
 - Having a plan also ensures more is packed into a practice and also makes you think more about safety
 - Having a plan also gets maximum activity with the players vs. standing around
- Pick a few drills from the “Drills” guides (or review the “Example Practice Plans” document) and then experiment with a new drill every practice
- Talk less and show more
- Keep it super simple (KISS) when it comes to instruction
- Keep it safe
- Encourage vs. discourage
- And have fun!