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CHAPTER 5: Making Your Team Better

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COACHING OPTIONS

You should always reevaluate your coaching options each season. What worked best one year might not work the next. What didn't work one year may now be effective. What was available one year might not be available the next and new options may present themselves.

Player Coaches

Many teams are unable (or simply don't want) to find a non-player coach. For these teams, having player-coaches is the best option. Most club teams are required to have a group of officers who handle the administrative side of being a club. These officers are often elected by the team and many teams find that they are also the best people to coach the team. Officers need to be responsible, dependable, and dedicated; as do coaches. If you plan on having your officer's coach as well, this should be made clear when they are being elected. In addition, coaches also need to be knowledgeable, decisive, and fair. Good officers don't necessarily make good coaches.

Some teams choose to have separate player-coaches who are not officers. Some people are better with administrative tasks and others are better with on-field responsibility. How you choose to divide up the responsibilities is up to you, but it should be made clear when electing officers and coaches. Additionally, if you do plan on using player-coaches, it may be a good idea to have more than one. Not only does it spread some of the responsibility, it allows for conversation and discussion about coaching decisions. One person may see something that someone else does not and having a collaborative coaching effort allows for multiple points of view to be discussed. However, while having assistant coaches may be beneficial, the NCBA recommends having one head coach who has the final say on things.

Volunteer Coach

Another option for coaching your team is to find a volunteer to do the job. Since most team budgets can't support a paid coach, this has to be someone who is willing to give up their time to help your team. It can be another student, a former player, a professor, a parent, an outside coach: basically anyone you feel is right for the job. But do not accept someone simply because they volunteer for the position. Make sure he/she is qualified, knowledgeable, and able to put in the time that is necessary. It is also important to make sure that this person's objectives and philosophies match with those of your team. It is your team, so select a coach who shares your goals and vision. If you are able to find a coach that is qualified and fits your team, it can be a very valuable asset. It sometimes helps to have someone making decisions who are objective and not a current player.

Paid Coach

A third coaching option is to have a paid coach. If you are able to compensate your coach, you may be able to draw a more talented person for the position. Whether you pay your coach and how much you pay is up to you.



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ROSTER SIZE

More Players, More Money

More players mean more dues coming in each semester. You can have up to 33 players on your NCBA roster each season, but this doesn't mean you cannot have more guys on the team. You can have as many guys as you want practicing with the team and playing in exhibition games (only players on the roster can play in NCBA games). Having extra players on your team also allows you to have inter-squad scrimmages at practice.

Additionally, having more players on the team means you have more people to help with fundraising, thus making your fundraising more successful.

Prevent Forfeits

Having more guys on your team creates depth on your bench. This allows you to replace injured or missing players and avoid forfeiting games when you lose a player. Many teams have run into trouble in the past when they unexpectedly lose a player due to injury or other unforeseen circumstances.

Creates Competition

Having more players on your team creates competition among players that are vying for the same position. As players compete for playing time, it raises the level and quality of play of all the players. If there is only one shortstop, that player knows that he has a spot in the lineup. But, if there are two or three players competing for that spot, each will try to step up their game to outshine the others and they will end up pushing each other to constantly improve the entire season.

PRACTICE

Set a Schedule

It is important to create structure for your team. You can do this by making a set practice schedule of at least 3 (preferably more) days per week. This will obviously depend heavily on the facilities you are able to use, when you have access, and how much it costs. However, if you cannot set a permanent practice schedule at the beginning of the season, be certain to set the days and times for practice each week. Let all the players know about the practice schedule at the beginning of the week so they can plan ahead.

Plan Each Practice

It is also important to make sure that the activities of each practice are scheduled in advance. The coach should plan each minute of practice so that the team can move right from one activity to the next without unnecessary downtime. Having practice planned out not only makes the time more efficient, it also creates structure and earns respect from the players. Having a coach that is organized and running an efficient practice shows the players that the coach is capable and dedicated. It is important for the players to be made aware of the fact that practice time and space are limited so efficiency is a crucial aspect of each practice session.

Set Goals

You should set clear and defined goals for the team as a whole as well as for individual players. For the team, a goal may be to complete a certain drill without making a bad throw. For pitchers, it may be the number of pitches they throw in a practice or building their strength within the week. You should set goals for each practice as well as overall goals, such as having pitchers game ready by week 3 of practice. It is important for players to know what you expect from them and what they are working towards.

It is also important for the coaches to have goals. Goals for an individual practice may include things such as getting each player 20 swings off the pitching machine and 5 off live pitching. You may need to accomplish this through 2 or 3 different drills, but knowing what you want to accomplish will help you plan and run practice more efficiently. It is also important that you are working towards overall goals. If you want your pitchers to be game ready by week 3, you need to plan each practice with that in mind so that you are helping them work towards that goal.

Conditioning

Conditioning is an important part of training, especially during the off-season. When and how you do this is up to you. You can have the whole team run together at the end of practice or have individual groups (pitchers/catchers, infielders, etc.) do it at different times throughout practice. Some options for conditioning include running bases or running hills/stairs if available. However, if your practice time and space is limited (as it is for most teams), you don't want to waste valuable practice time doing conditioning drills. Instead, you can schedule separate conditioning practices.

You can hold conditioning practice in the off-season as well as during the season, especially if you are not able to get on a field every day. The good thing about conditioning is that you don't need a field or a gym: it can be done outside for free. Conditioning practice can consist of specific lifting exercises in the weight room, running as a team, bringing jump ropes to intersperse jumping with your running, or any other activity you can think of to get your team in shape. Conditioning is not only good for the physical health of the players, but team conditioning also builds unity and creates camaraderie among the players.

Use the resources that you have. Talk to trainers, people within the kinesiology department, sports medicine majors, etc. Ask them to help you set up a conditioning program for your team. These people are knowledgeable and can help you create a program specifically for baseball players and designed with your teams' goals in mind.

Mix it Up

Be sure to vary the activities and drills you do in practice each day. It is important to have structure and repetition, but it is also important to have variation to keep players motivated. Concentrate more on offense one day and more on defense the next. Focus on base running one day and throwing drills the next. Also throw in some fun activities



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every now and then like hitting or skills competitions. These activities are still good practice while also adding some lightness and fun that keeps practice interesting.

Make it Mandatory

Practices should not be optional. Players should never be late or miss a practice without clearing it with a coach in advance (unless it is an emergency). Players must have a legitimate reason for being late or missing a practice (such as a school-related commitment). This again creates structure while also promoting discipline and dedication. When players are late or miss practice, they are being disrespectful to both the coaches and their teammates. Players should know that they are expected to be on time, which means they are ready to practice at the scheduled start time. This does not mean they are still walking up to the field or putting on equipment.

Give Consequences

Players need to be held accountable for their actions. Players need to know in advance that lateness, laziness, and absence will not be tolerated. If they are late, their playing time suffers. If they miss practice, their playing time suffers. If they are lazy in practice, their playing time suffers and the team does extra sprints. Because you win and lose as a team, you should live and die as a team during practice. If a few players are fooling around and being lazy, the entire team will pay for it. This will prompt players to not only monitor their own behavior, but to police their teammates' behavior as well. Everyone should be pushing and motivating each other.

GAMES

Make Them Mandatory

Games should not be optional. There should be a set time for players to be ready to warm up before each game. If a player does not have his cleats on and glove in hand at this time, he is late. Players must have a legitimate reason for being late or missing a game and they must discuss it with a coach prior to the game. Making games mandatory legitimizes both the team and the coach(es). It shows the dedication that is required to be a part of the team while also providing structure.

Set Goals

You should create realistic goals for your team at the beginning of the season. These goals can include attaining a certain overall winning percentage, winning your conference, or winning the World Series. Goals can also include a certain team batting average, fielding percentage, or run differential. It is important to honestly evaluate your team at the beginning of the season and set high yet attainable goals. It is always good to shoot for something that may be out of reach, but you don't want your team to fall short of all their goals and feel they haven't accomplished anything. You should constantly be reevaluating your team and its goals and setting new goals along the way such as winning a specific tournament or cutting down on your errors from the previous week. Having goals set in advance allows each player to know what they are working for and to also know that all their teammates are working towards the same things.



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Create Rules

Let your players know what you expect of them during a game. Players should remain in the dugout area at all times. Only team members and staff are allowed in the dugout area during games. Players should not be interacting with fans during the game. Players must show respect to their own team and coaches as well as to the opposing team and coaches, all fans, and the umpires. Players are to be loose and ready to enter the game at any time, even if this means they must jog and throw in between innings. Players should always know what is going on and be able to tell you the score and situation at any point during a game.

Create a Duty Roster

Even though there are only 9 or 10 guys playing at one time, you will undoubtedly have additional guys who are sitting the bench but are nonetheless an important part of your team. There are many things for these bench players to be doing during a game: keep the book, keep track of the pitch count (balls and strikes), try to pick up the other team's signs, warm up one of the outfielders, warm up the pitcher while the catcher is putting on his gear, retrieve foul balls, coach the bases (which should always be done by a coach when possible), etc. Not only are these valuable contributions, but assigning players to these roles will help them feel included and keep everyone focused on the game. Having everyone involved and focused is important for late-inning rallies as well as substitutions. You should create a duty roster before each game and post it in the dugout.

Give Consequences

Players who show up late to a game (after the time they were to be ready to warm up) should not start that game and possibly not play at all. Players who miss a game should not play the next game (and possibly more games if it is warranted). Players who are not hustling during the game or running out to their positions each inning should be given one warning before being removed from the game. Do not allow such behavior to become a persistent problem. Enforcing consequences will lead to a team of dedicated, disciplined players.

Create a Team Atmosphere

It is important to not only act like a team, but to look like a team as well. You can do this by having matching uniforms, warm ups, and equipment bags. Looking like a team helps players to feel like a team and builds a sense of unity among the players. It also distinguishes the players from other students around campus when team members wear team apparel such as hoodies, jackets, and hats.

Have Fun

There are a lot of responsibilities that come with being a coach or an officer on your team. At times, the task can seem overwhelming. It is important to remember that you and all your teammates are here because you love baseball and you want to have fun.



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OFF THE FIELD

Team Bonding

It is important to create a sense of unity among your players. This comes from the on-field actions described above as well as some off-field experiences. A good way to promote team bonding is through team gatherings and dinners where new players can get to know each other and build a sense of camaraderie. You can also have social events with other club teams or organizations on your campus.

Another great way to promote team bonding is by staying together at away games and tournaments. Having all the players in the same house or hotel is a great way for players to hang out and get to know each other. This can also be a great way to break up any cliques that may be forming within the team through room assignments that put guys from different groups together. This encourages guys to get to know teammates who they would otherwise not interact with off the field.

Traveling in one or two large vans together also gets players spending time together. This not only promotes unity within your team, but also shows a united presence to opposing teams when you arrive at the field. It also reduces the risk of staggered arrival times or lost players.

Promoting the Team

Having social events with other teams also helps your team to create a presence on campus. The more people who know about your team, the larger your presence will be. A good way to increase your presence is to increase your publicity. Get to know some people who work for the campus newspaper or radio station. Get them to do some articles about the team or promote upcoming fundraisers or games. Look to reach out to your local community with fundraising efforts as well as community service projects. Increasing the visibility of your team around the campus and the community helps people to feel like they know you. When people feel like they know you, they are much more likely to support your team both on the field as fans and/or volunteers, and off the field with donations.

Using Campus Resources

You may not know how to go about marketing and creating publicity for your team, but other students at your school do. There are students that go to school specifically for marketing and public relations. You may have some on your team or your players may know some of these students. If not, you can always go to the professors who teach marketing and public relations classes. These students often need real organizations to use for their class projects. Forming relationships with such students is mutually beneficial because they are helping to promote your team and also getting credit for it in their class.



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Annual League Meeting

Each year, the NCBA holds the Annual League Meeting. This year's Annual League Meeting will once again be done online which will allow the greatest reach to all club baseball teams and enthusiasts. The meeting will provide an opportunity for everyone to learn more about the history and future of the NCBA, ask questions, and voice your opinions on the operation of the league. The annual league meeting is your opportunity to learn about the latest Hot Stove happenings around the league, and to provide your much-needed input to assure that the league is headed in the right direction. Be sure that your team is not left out of these important discussions.

It is important for teams to have representatives to go online to sit in on the meeting. The league meeting is the time when you can enact change and really help to shape the league. It does no good to complain about something in the middle of the season and then not show up to the meeting to discuss your concerns with the staff members as well as the rest of the teams in the league.