



## Giving Kids the Competitive Edge

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Organized youth sports provide children with opportunities to learn on a multitude of levels. The impact that youth sports can have on a child's physical, social and physiological development is significant and long lasting. For many children, youth baseball is their first exposure to organized sports. In addition to providing children with the fundamentals of our nation's pastime, organizers of youth baseball have the opportunity to develop a sports program that promotes general athleticism and a foundation for lifelong healthy social and physical habits.

### FOUNDATIONS OF A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM:

The success of any youth sports program is contingent upon the organization's mission and core values. Most children will participate in a variety of sports as they grow. It is important to offer programs that are well rounded and provide participants with low-pressure opportunities to experience success.

#### Athleticism before sports specific skill development:

Developing athleticism before sport specific skills provides children with the basic foundations of all sports. Flexibility, speed, agility and strength are a few examples of skills that are required for participation in all sports. Integrating general athletic skills into practices and pre-game activities ensures that participants leave the facility having improved as athletes.

#### Healthy kids make healthy adults:

Every athlete can't be an all star, but there are more important aspects associated with youth athletics than winning or making an all star team. The life lessons associated with participation in athletics are significant. Life long healthy social and physical habits need to be established early. Development of life skills such as the ability to work with others, cope with negative outcomes and accept instruction from an individual in an authoritative role like a coach are benefits of youth sports that last a lifetime. Teaching individuals to be comfortable with exercise, exercise environments and in competitive situations as kids makes these environments less intimidating to them as adults. People tend to gravitate towards activities that are more comfortable to them. Adults need to be more involved in wellness based exercise activities as methods promoting health and improved long term quality of life. Establishing these behaviors early improves the chances of them becoming a long standing way of life.

#### Perfect practice makes perfect:

Like most people, children learn through repetition. Developing routines for developing athletic skills like flexibility, running speed development and agility are just as important to kids as taking infield or batting practice. In order to successfully field, hit and throw, players should be able to run, jump and rapidly change directions without sustaining an injury. Educating young athletes about the essentials of athletic skills and correctly reinforcing those skills at regular intervals provides participants with simple, consistent opportunities to learn and improve as athletes both mentally and physically.

#### Knowledge is power

Understanding the basic concepts of what it takes to be an athlete empowers a young athlete with a powerful tool for growth and improvement. Once athletes understand the rationale behind the use of athletic enhancement drills like form running, flexibility exercises and agility drills as well as how and when to use them, their potential to improve as athletes first and subsequently ball players is limitless. Teaching young people how to think, move and train like an athlete are fundamental steps towards them improving and reaching their potential as baseball players.

#### Make it fun!

For many young people, sports programs like youth baseball are their first experiences in an organized or team format. In most cases, these programs are also a young person's first experience in a coach/athlete situation. Therefore, it is imperative that early experiences are enjoyable. Activities that de-emphasize winning and losing or statistical success provide participants with a low pressure, low stress opportunity to play and develop. Creating situations that present an equal challenge for all, make more participants feel as though they belong and have an equal opportunity to succeed. For example, teaching and drilling a 9 and 10 year baseball team in a 10 station circuit of age appropriate agility, running and medicine ball drills gives all children a chance to experience success on many levels. Activities like these enable all participants to improve as baseball players by improving in a multitude of athletic skills. Since each station is timed and completed by each athlete at their own pace, all athletes will experience the success of completing the activity and will not be subject to the disappointment of losing or finishing behind others.

#### The Seven Elements of Athleticism

Developing athletes requires a plan for improvement. Athleticism is the foundation of every sport. Without the ability to improve as an overall athlete, individuals can not improve as players in any sport. Practices and pre-game activities need to include components of each of the 7 elements of athleticism: Flexibility, Strength, Agility, Speed, Core Balance, Coordination and Power are essential ingredients that distinguish an athlete from an individual who participates in athletic activities. Effective developmental and reinforcement of these critical athletic skills requires knowledgeable coaching staff, efficient practice routines and efficient pre-game drills and activities. Coaching plays a critical role in assisting athletes to develop the enthusiasm, mental discipline and desire to acquire these skills.

#### Tools and Methods

Programs that promote general athleticism can serve large groups of young people with minimal investments of time or money. In order for programs to efficiently serve a large number of athletes, they must be well organized. Standard program components should include systematic warm up, flexibility and form running routines. In order to maximize learning and assimilation of skills and concepts, these routines should change as little as possible over the course of the program. Utilization of anaerobic or aerobic circuit training is an extremely productive and time efficient method of exposing participants to the 7 essential elements of athleticism. Circuits that utilize equipment such as agility ladders, step hurdles, jump ropes, cones, domes, dot mats and medicine balls are portable and cost effective. They offer coaches and participants a multitude of drill options and levels of difficulty based on the baseline skill levels of the participants. Coaches can

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very easily customize circuits based on age and sport specific variables like aerobic recovery requirements, coordination/balance demands and gross/fine motor demands. Work to rest ratios can be easily manipulated to accommodate sport specific demands and the changing fitness levels of the participants.

### The Bottom Line

The intent of organized youth sports programs should be to provide participants with a fun and stimulating opportunity to facilitate their physical and psychosocial development. The measure of success of youth sports programs should not be measured in terms of

wins, losses and all star team appearances. Successful programs teach participants how to interact with authority figures like coaches or in group/team situations. Athleticism is a key to developing well rounded young athletes and lays a framework for life long healthy habits. Youth sports programs that emphasize fun and the fundamentals of general athleticism before sport specific skill provide participants with a healthy foundation for future development.

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