

TECHNIQUES FOR COACHING SUCCESS

Why do some teams seem to perform well under pressure while others fall apart? What sets successful teams above the rest? Beside developing and teaching his players there are some skills the winning coach must acquire.

- Teach your players to **focus only on the things they can control**. When an athlete focuses on “uncontrollables” he is more likely to tighten up and "choke." The chart below lists things beyond a player’s control and subsequently he should block them out and focus only on things he can control.

NO CONTROL:

1. Winning the game.
2. Hitters’ hits.
3. Teammate’ errors.
4. Umpire’s Calls.
5. Crowd noise.
6. Weather.
7. Playing conditions.
8. The play of the opponents.

CAN CONTROL:

1. Work Ethic.
2. Practice Habits.
3. Attitude.
4. Developing mental toughness.
5. Ability to focus developed through sound practices.
6. Desire.

- **Do not coach the outcome-** When a baseball player focuses on the importance of the game, winning and losing, or anything to do with the outcome, he will not be as effective. This distracts the player from his performance and inhibits his ability to relax. Get your athletes to focus on specifically what they have to do to compete, not on winning.

That is where a sound practice routine comes into play. If you have properly prepared your players you have done your job.

Any sign from a coach to his players that the outcome of a game is vitally important to him or winning is more important than anything in the world, will have a tendency to “tighten up” his players. Just as a coach can read his players’ body language so can the players read their coach.

- **Teach your players HOW to relax-** Don't just tell them to relax. Show them how. Spend some time in the preseason going over relaxation techniques; breathing exercises, visualization techniques, muscle relaxation and if you have a copy of "HEAD GAMES" have them read it.

Again, establishing and teaching routines to each player and position will help them relax. Examples are:

- ✓ Teaching infielders the proper "set" and "ready" positions.
- ✓ Teaching pitchers how to relax when on the mound.
- ✓ Teaching hitters a good On-Deck routine and teaching them to focus on the situation and what they need to do.
- ✓ Teaching catchers a pre-pitch glove relaxation technique.

A confident player is a more relaxed player. If a coach will focus on his players' improvement rather than the results they achieve, it will have a tendency to instill confidence. Approached correctly a coach can instill confidence in his players during his post-game and post-practice talks.

- **Teach your players how adversity can work for them, not against-** Teach your players to try to find an advantage in a disadvantage; i.e. "We have practiced in this kind of hot weather before so we are prepared."

Or: (To his hitters) "That umpire's strike zone is low, so be ready to be aggressive low in the strike zone." (To his pitchers) "The umpire is calling a low strike zone. Keep the ball down and you are going to have a great day."

There is always adversity in competition; be ready for it and prepare your players to "play above" it.

A large part of this is to not allow excuses to creep into the players' conversation. To be effective through adversity players must not make an excuse for their performance. This is an on-going challenge for a coach.

- **Keep games and competition in perspective-** If you make the game "bigger than life" your players' performances will not be their best.

If the game is hyped too much, or if that "must win" situation becomes too vital, then chances are good you will not get a winning performance from your team. A baseball player that chokes may have lost his perspective and made the game too important. Helping him handle a pressure situation is an important aspect of a coach's job.

I have always felt that a coach should make his practices vital and important. "Skills are developed in practice. They are displayed in games."

If he puts pressure on his players in practice they will respond well in games. If he will provide the perspective that practices are more important, then games will become a piece of cake.

Coaches should also make players aware that baseball requires a proper decorum among opponents, umpires, coaches and teammates.

Intensity must be tempered with respect for the game.

- **Challenge your players; avoid threatening them-** This is where the coach can fail miserably. “One more error and I’m going to bring in Tommy to play your position.”

Threats will surely distract a player from a solid performance. A coach should ask himself; “Do I care about myself or my players?” By directing their focus away from the “what-ifs” of losing to a “You can do it” atmosphere the players will perform better. Challenge them to do better; in practice as well as games.

Coaches should develop an open understanding (connection -bond) with his players and a part of that understanding is that he will accept no excuses from his players. (That in my opinion is one of baseball’s great life lessons.)

- **Put your players under pressure at practice-** That is where the pressure should be; practice and not games. Constantly challenge your players to practice at 100% effort. Teach and “Never Give In.”
- **Separate self-worth from performance-** “I didn’t play well so I am not a good person.” Do not make the mistake of equating their performance with how you feel about them as people. And do not let them fall into that trap on their own.

If your practice routines are sound and if you teach the game, your players will give you everything they have. They will know you care about them. And they will respond to you.

- **Allow your players to fail-** Baseball is designed around failure. No one gets a hit every time and no team wins every game. Failure is inevitable so teach your players how to deal with this fact.

Encourage your players to let their mistakes go immediately and to focus on what they want to have happen, not what they are afraid will happen. You want your players to “go for it” and not be afraid of failure.

Praise good swings at a pitch even if it’s missed. Praise a great fielding attempt. Praise a player’s effort, not the result.

Evaluate your players on their progress, not their statistics.

If your players can put the idea of failure aside and focus on the effort they produce, they will be able to learn and gain positive feedback from failure itself. When athletes are not concerned about making mistakes they perform their best.

Players who react negatively to failure exhibit the worst kind of immaturity on the baseball diamond. It is a coach's job to help his players put this distraction behind them.

"Play like you expect to win: not like you're afraid to lose."

- **Use Humor-** Humor is a wonderful tool for putting things in perspective, helping players relax and taking their mind away from failure.

Nothing is more boring than a coach who takes himself too seriously. This kind of coach will have his players taking the game too seriously as well.

A quick wit and a wry outlook can be effective if it is not used to ridicule the players. It can break up a stern demeanor and make the coach more accessible and human.

It can make the players more comfortable. And it can ease tension. A light touch of humor can drive home a point to a player.

If you are a good coach your kids will be really playing hard for you. Since the game often includes failure a little humor can ease a player's misery sometimes.

Humor is a stress reliever. You have to be relaxed to play baseball effectively.

Don't be afraid to use it. A laugh once in a while can lighten things up.

Kids have a way of testing adults. They want to see how far they can go. A sardonic statement can sometimes keep them in line and let them know who is in control. "Billy, you've got more alibis than Jesse James. No excuses, son"

Humor can have a way of telling a player his job performance is not quite up to par.

If you decide to use your "rapier-like wit" as a coaching tool, use it sparingly and at opportune times. It may surprise you how effective humor can be.

- Teach your players to enjoy themselves.
Teach them to find satisfaction in the way they play; not the outcome of the game. Teach them to take pleasure in their environment; the beautiful field, the green grass, the baseball smells. Any player who takes pleasure in the way he performs will perform at a higher level.

Thanks to Baseball Excellence.com Tip of the Week.