

Playing time for youth tournament baseball teams is a tricky situation. It's impossible to make everyone happy, and it's important that coaches don't leave kids and parents in the dark about the factors that impact how often players see the field and where.

The truth is that ability is only one of the many things that a player needs. And ability alone will not guarantee time on the field. Similarly, a player who isn't gifted with ability can find himself on the field more often than not if he does some basic things that any player can do.

This post is aimed both at the talented and less talented players. If you are talented, don't take that talent for granted. You must fulfill some other basic responsibilities.

If you lack that talent, you can become a valuable member of the team by doing all of these things.

## 1. Do You Hustle?

Most important of all. While kids have varying level of ability, every kid can — and SHOULD — hustle. All of the time. No exceptions.

It doesn't matter how fast or slow you are. Run as fast as you can to first base. Everyone should be able to see the desire in your face!

Every coach will list this at the top of their list. We know from experience that too many outs occur every season because a kid

doesn't hustle. It can be that half step that leads to an out and ultimately either a win or loss.

A primary goal of every coach should be to hustle more than the opposition. If you run harder and work harder than the other team, you are making them earn everything.

- If there's an easy ground ball hit to second base or the pitcher's mound, a hustling player can make that fielder rush. When a fielder rushes, crazy things can happen.
- If there's a pop-up to the shortstop, the batter should always hustle through the base. Nothing is guaranteed at this level.
- I also like when players hustle on and off of the field, to and from their positions. It shows a level of focus and commitment.

If you want to get into your coach's good graces — no matter your ability level — do these things and he will love you for it.

## 2. Do You Support Your Teammates?

We are a team. We are a family. Ridiculing a struggling player cannot be tolerated.

Every kid will find himself in a slump at some point. They suddenly can't hit. When they do hit the ball, it finds a glove. They aren't making the plays in the field. Their confidence is as low as it can get. One of the primary ways of turning these kids around is providing them the support they need. Their teammates need to be there to reassure them that they are a good player and they'll be okay.

Much of the chemistry of a team has its foundation in the bad times. A good team needs leaders to help their teammates get through it.

### 3. Do You Communicate Well with Teammates?

- When you're in the field at shortstop, do you talk with your second baseman about responsibilities?
- When something goes wrong, do you communicate constructively with your teammates to make sure it doesn't happen again?
- Do you lead or do you follow, waiting for someone to tell you what to do?

Every team needs a vocal leader who is a player and not a coach. The vocal leader is the one who players are most likely to follow.

### 4. Do You Focus Only on Yourself?

As a team, we win and lose as a team. The primary focus should be reflection on that team accomplishment.

- After a big win, a good team player isn't found pouting in the dugout about three strikeouts.
- After a tough loss, a good team player isn't smiling and joking around, bragging about his four hits.
- A player focused on the team is most worried about team results. If he hits into a hard out that scores a run, he understands that this helped the team. The focus isn't on his out.

Kids are immature, and it's expected that there will be some level of selfishness. But the more selfless a player is, the more aware he is of his actions and the bigger contribution he makes to the team.

## 5. Do You Freak Out After Making Mistakes?

Players who struggle to control their emotions can provide major distractions from the team focus. We need to limit overreactions after individual mistakes are made. Throwing equipment, feet stomping, and pouting cannot be tolerated.

These are kids, but we want them to become baseball players. And if they lose control and react emotionally, they won't learn from their mistakes.

Freaking out is not only counterproductive for the player, but it also sets a bad example for the team. It warns teammates that something is terribly wrong. It sets a tone of panic instead of confidence.

## 6. Do You Learn from Your Mistakes?

Mistakes happen all the time. It doesn't matter what level you play at. But the question is whether a player learns from those mistakes. A kid who loses control rarely has the awareness to learn from that mistake. They are focused instead on how angry or embarrassed they are.

- You made an error, but what will you do to make sure it doesn't happen again? Will you be prepared next time?

- The umpire called a high strike, sending you to the dugout. Will you learn from this and be prepared to swing at it next time?
- You missed a sign. Will you get clarifications on signs so you don't miss it again?

The kid who learns from mistakes is the player who gets better. The kid who is stubborn and refuses to learn from his mistakes will be stuck in a perpetual holding pattern.

## 7. Do You Keep a Positive Attitude?

When the team is down by five, a coach needs the kids with the positive attitudes to step up. A team of players who mope in the corner can quickly spread the signal that it's time to quit.

Players often don't realize this, but their reactions impact teammates. Your decision to fight or quit is contagious.

This also applies to individual performance. Sometimes a player will get upset about a hard-hit ball that results in an out, due to an amazing play by the other team. By getting upset, the player is focused on the result rather than the process. He should feel good about the hit and give the opposing player credit for the play.

Hard hit balls become outs sometimes. Soft hit balls become hits sometimes. It all evens out. We don't call timeout after a soft bloop falls in for a hit and say, "Hey, Blue! That was a bad hit. I'll take an out!", do we? Of course not.

By focusing on the process, we can remain positive about the result — good or bad — as long as we did what we were supposed to do. If not, we learn from it!

No one wants to be around a negative person. It's easy to be positive when things are going well. It's the kid who remains positive during tough times who makes a special contribution to the team.

## 8. Do You Complain About Your Role?

As a coach, I can tell you first hand that one of my biggest pet peeves is players who complain when the lineup is announced, and they aren't where they want to be.

- If you're playing in right field, you become the best darn right fielder you can be. If you do that, your role will increase. If you complain about it, expect more of the same or the bench.
- By moping and complaining, players are simply providing support for why their role shouldn't be expanded. It's selfish and shows a lack of self-awareness.
- Someone has to fill that role. If you don't, someone else will. So by saying that you should be playing another position (one you haven't earned) and a teammate should take your role, a player shows his selfishness.

Instead of complaining, pull your coach aside after a practice or game. Tell him how much you'd love to play that position. Ask what you can do to make yourself good enough to play there. And remind the coach that you'll play wherever he and the team need you.

## 9. Do You Stay Focused?

These are kids, so our expectations need to be reasonable depending on the age. But a player who remains focused is the player every coach wants.

- While in the dugout, are you talking about things unrelated to baseball while the game is going on?
- While in the field, are you set and ready when the pitch is being delivered?
- Not only can a lack of focus set a bad example, but it is also a safety issue. A kid not paying attention is a magnet for accidents. And I can't put such a player in harm's way.

## 10. Do You Follow Instructions?

Coaches love players who can follow instructions. Those who don't — particularly when repeated — create unnecessary frustration.

The example that comes up for me repeatedly, is this situation...

- The opposing pitcher is struggling to throw strikes. Maybe he just walked the last batter on four pitches. Maybe the bases are loaded. The kid in question has shown an inability to understand game situations or the strike zone.
- In such a situation, I will often require the player to take until he gets a strike. It's a simple request. But I can't tell you how many times a kid will swing in that situation.
- After it happens, I'll pull the player aside. I'll ask if he remembers my instructions. He'll say he does. I'll ask why he

swung anyway. He'll either shrug or say it's because it looked like a good pitch.

Granted, this can sometimes be attributed to coaching. They need to understand what the instructions mean. They also need to understand why they were asked to do what they were instructed to do.

But eventually, a coach learns who he can trust and who is going to do whatever he wants to do.

## 11. Do You Fulfill Your Responsibilities?

It doesn't matter what position you play, they all have responsibilities. Lots of them!

So, whether you're the catcher, shortstop or right fielder, you should know what your responsibilities are inside and out. You should know who covers second and when. You should know when you're the cutoff man.

A coach's job is to prepare the players and educate them on these responsibilities. But a player's job is also to accept this education and apply it.

When a runner is on first and we're in the field, I'm bound to yell out, "First or second, easiest base! Second and short, talk about your responsibilities!" I've yelled that more times than I can count (I can count high!).

But sometimes I decide not to say anything. Will the players know their responsibilities without being told what to do?

The kid who does what he is supposed to do without being constantly reminded is a hugely valuable member of the team.

## 12. Do Your Actions Reflect the Situation?

A coach can talk and talk until he loses his voice, trying to help the players understand their roles, what they need to do and why. But eventually, something needs to click within the players. They need to start putting two-and-two together to understand **why** they should do things in certain situations.

- If your team is down by one in the last inning and you're the leadoff batter, it's more important than ever that you are selective at the plate. We need you on base. If you swing at a bad pitch with a 3-1 count, you show you aren't aware of the situation.
- With a runner on second and a two-run lead, a clean single is hit to the outfield. An outfielder aware of the situation will throw the ball to the cutoff man, understanding they need to keep the hitter from second.
- Again, it's the coach's responsibility to prepare and educate his players the best he can. But the coach's voice will eventually become noise during a game situation if he is constantly reminding the players of every scenario.

A player who is thinking in the field about the situation and what they need to do — without the coach saying a thing — is the coach's best friend!