

## 2021 Santa Cruz Little League Coaching Handbook

Thank you for volunteering to manage or coach a team this season! We truly appreciate the time and effort you are investing to make Santa Cruz Little League an amazing experience for everyone involved.

As the league's Coaching Coordinator, my role is to help support all managers and coaches in the league. I will serve as your contact person for any coaching questions.

In this Coaching Handbook, you'll find important information about coaching Little League Baseball. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need any clarification or support.

Sincerely,

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*The Little League® manager and coach must be leaders. All must recognize that they hold a position of trust and responsibility in a program that deals with a sensitive and formative period of a child's development. It is required that the manager and coach have understanding, patience and the capacity to work with children. The manager and coach should be able to inspire respect. Above all else, managers and coaches must realize that they are helping to shape the physical, mental and emotional development of young people. The heart of Little League is what happens between the adult manager/coach and player. It is the manager more than any other individual who controls the situation in which the players may be benefited. Children often idolize their managers and coaches, not because the adult is the most successful coach or mentor, but because the manager and coach are sources of inspiration. Managers and coaches must be adults who are sensitive to the mental and physical limitations of children of Little League age and who recognize that the game is a vehicle of training and enjoyment, not an end in itself. It has been stated many times that the program of Little League can only be as good as the quality of leadership in the managing and coaching personnel. (Excerpt from the Manager / Coach section of the Little League website)*

## Coach Training Clinics

Please make arrangements to attend both of the meetings below. We encourage you to invite your coaches and team parent/s as well. At the very least, please make sure your team has one representative at each of these meetings.

### **Manager Rules and Safety Meeting - Mandatory**

Date: Tuesday, March 16th

Time: 7pm

Location: Zoom. [Please join here.](#)

### **Positive Coaching Alliance Training - Mandatory**

Date: Saturday, March 20th

Time: 9AM

Location: Zoom. [Please register here](#) as soon as possible.

## Other Important Dates

**Field Day:** Sunday, March 21st at 9:00am at Harvey West. Your help would be greatly appreciated as we prepare the fields for the upcoming season. Many hands make fast work.

**Practices begin:** March 22nd

**Games begin:** April 10th (give-or-take a few days as we navigate these uncharted waters)

## Beginning of the season to-do's

- **MOST IMPORTANT:** Anyone planning to set foot on the baseball field or help with the team in any capacity must be cleared as a volunteer. Please make sure all volunteers (managers, coaches, team parents, scorekeepers, game coordinators, and parents who help frequently or rarely) have volunteer clearance before taking part in any practice or game. All volunteers must send an email to our Volunteer Coordinator, Jacob Bolotin at [jjbolotin@yahoo.com](mailto:jjbolotin@yahoo.com) in order to receive a personalized link to complete the volunteer background check. Please have your volunteers email Jacob individually, or you can send Jacob an email with a list of your volunteer email addresses. It's a great idea to try and get all the adults affiliated with your team to complete the volunteer application. You never know when you might need someone to step up and help!
- Make sure all the proper paperwork is filled out by the parents and put in your binder (Parent Code of Conduct and Concussion Form). This is a great job for the team parent.
- Go to the SCLL website and print Bio Sheets with contact info for each player and put in your binder. Add parent phone numbers into your phone so you can pull up their number quickly in case of an emergency.

- **Appoint 1-2 Team Parents.** Make it clear to them what you need from them (help coordinating scorekeeping duties, snacks, phone trees for rain-outs or emergencies, etc.).
- **Appoint 2-3 (at least) Scorekeepers/Pitch counters.** Try to find one person who can attend all/most home games and is able to train backup scorekeepers.
- **Hold a parent meeting.** It's a great idea to communicate your expectations to all parents before the season begins. The most convenient option is to do this before or after your first practice. Share your philosophies on playing time, winning, communicating with umpires, providing a safe, fun environment, and more. Share why you are coaching and how the parents can help you create a positive experience for everyone. While you are the coach of the team, it takes a village to make it through an entire Little League season.
- **Have a team-building activity during the first practice.** Set a goal of knowing each of your players by name by the end of your first practice. Let the kids practice identifying all their teammates.

### **Team Parent:**

- Helps the manager communicate with the team as requested/needed by you (rainouts, changes to the schedule, meetings, etc.).
- Manages snack shack schedule (should your team decide to provide after-game snacks).
- Collects money and organizes the end-of-year party (if applicable).
- Collects money for Little League Day Events (if applicable).
- Collects money for Little League fundraisers (if applicable).
- Orders sweatshirts (or other extra items) for players (if applicable).

### **Scorekeeper:**

- Responsible for scorekeeping when you are the Home team.
- Appoints a pitch-counter to help out (the pitch-counter should be a separate individual from the scorekeeper).
- Arrives early to the game to receive and enter lineups for both teams.
- Picks up scorebooks and pitch count sheets in the score booth above the snack shack before each game, and returns them after the game.

## **Coaching Philosophy**

### **Tips for Successful Managing:**

Learn from other managers and coaches. Don't be afraid to ask a lot of questions. Nobody has all the answers. All coaches add and receive value from each other when communication lines are open. Use the SCLL board to assist you where needed. They are there to support you.

Put in the time and effort to be prepared and organized — show up to every practice with a plan. Clearly communicate with parents at the very first practice. Let them know what they can expect from you and what you expect from them.

Know the rules. It is your responsibility to know the Little League Rules (green book) and the applicable Santa Cruz Little League Local Rules.

Create a team tradition — game balls, baseball cards, celebrations, brush-off mistakes, nicknames, etc. Emphasize fundamentals — over and over and over.

Make the purpose of drills clear to players.

Find something that **every** player is good at, and can contribute to the team.

Communicate **your** team's priorities to your players — for example:

**RESPECT** — Listen to your coaches. They are here to help you have fun, keep you safe, and help you get better at baseball. No negative talk about teammates, players on the other team, or umpires, will be tolerated. Thank your coaches and parent volunteers at the end of every practice.

**EFFORT** — Give your best effort on every play. There are a lot of things in baseball that are out of your control. Your effort is completely in your control. Hustle everywhere on the baseball field at all times.

**POSITIVE** — Playing on a team of players with positive attitudes is more fun. Find something that one of your teammates does well and acknowledge it. Try to be specific.

**SAFETY** — Baseballs and bats can hurt you. Do not pick up a bat unless you have a helmet on and are in a coach-supervised hitting drill. Be aware of your surroundings at all times.

Reflect on the following questions in developing your own coaching philosophy:

- Why are you coaching Little League baseball?
- How do you want your players and families to remember you in the future?
- As you think back to when you were a player, what positive experiences do you want to try to recreate, and what negative experiences do you want to try to prevent?

You have an opportunity to connect with kids and impact lives around the great game of baseball.

## Essentials of Positive Coaching

**Redefine winner:** Praise the effort instead of emphasizing the score. Concentrate on individual and team improvement, not comparing with others. Encourage taking the risk of making a mistake as an important part of the learning process. Don't dwell on mistakes. Shake them off and move on.

**Fill emotional tanks:** Use praise, not criticism. Listen, don't ignore. Use positive body language such as smiling, cheering, clapping. Try to come up with five positive words or actions for every correction. Be sensitive to kids who exhibit attention problems that are not their fault. This can include endless talking or restless action, initial resistance to tasks or daydreaming. The ADHD Affected Athlete says these kids do much better in an action position like pitcher, catcher, shortstop or second base than in the outfield being bored.

**Discipline:** Use calmness, consequences and consistency. For managers, the most acceptable extreme consequence is an explanation with a timeout in a practice or benching in a game. This avoids arguments that can lead to words that you may seriously regret.

**Keep it fun:** Kids have a lot of pressures at school and at home. They are full of anxiety even if they don't show it. Keep baseball fun so that they learn to love it and want to come back next season. Experienced coaches understand that at the end of the season, the record doesn't matter to the kids. What matters to them is whether they had fun. They will remember this when it's time to register for next season.

**Model your behavior:** Coaches are more associated with play time than teachers and many parents, so the kids are very interested in seeing how you play. Do you follow the rules? Are you fair? How do you respond in tough situations? Do you keep your composure? Do you use appropriate encouraging language? Positive coaching instructs us to ignore people who are being negative as an effective coping technique. The lack of attention deflates the negativity.

**Teachable moments:** Character is tested constantly in sports. Look for the teachable moments to encourage composure, team play, sportsmanship and self-control.

**Show respect:** Show respect to opposing coaches, players and officials. Make it known that you expect your players to do the same. Talking to opposing team managers, players or officials should be positive and cordial.

**After game circle:** An after-game circle for positive comments from the players and coaches helps the players practice being positive towards their teammates and put aside dugout arguments. It can relieve anxiety about mistakes that were made in the game.

## Practice Plans

### The Importance of Having a Plan

*It is important for a coach to spend at least some time in advance putting the day's practice on paper. It is even better if this plan can be emailed to all of the players and parents the night before practice. If the coach comes to practice with a plan and can communicate and organize the plan effectively while the team stretches, the confidence level of the players and parents will increase. They will understand that the coach is taking his or her responsibilities seriously and is attempting to make the experience as rewarding as possible for all involved. Players are more likely to give maximum effort and attention to a coach who is organized, and parents are less likely to question an organized, dedicated coach. (Cal Ripken)*

Most practices vary little from one to the next. Often, preparing a new practice plan is as simple as pulling out a couple activities and replacing them with new ones. All Practice Plans should be in writing and have time designations for each activity as well as assignments for each volunteer who is assisting. Running a structured and disciplined practice is a skill that takes time, repetition, and learning from our mistakes. Practice plans should always be flexible and you should have backup plans in mind for unforeseen circumstances.

### Practice Content

Be early — start on time! (Even if you only have 1 player)

Utilize all 60, 90, or 120 minutes — maximize each minute you have with your players.

All practices should include the basics of warm-up, team-talk, throwing, fielding, base running, hitting, and a short end-of-practice fun activity.

Practices should routinely incorporate new skills. Make a goal to teach one new thing to your players every practice.

Drills should have clearly defined objectives and objectives should be communicated to the players.

Go slow — don't rush through drills.

The more *quality* repetitions, the better.

Practice must be structured to minimize standing around and maximize playing. A lot of practice should be devoted to stations — groups of 3 or 4 players working with a coach or parent volunteer on a particular skill for a set period of time. Practices should end with a high-energy, fun, team building activity.

## **Recommended Practice Structure**

The most important thing is to have a plan that incorporates the following elements, and to execute it consistently. The time will be determined by the length of your practice and your team's proficiency at a particular skill.

### **WARM - UP** (5-10 minutes)

Warm-up consists of light running/movement patterns and easy stretching (not throwing).

Players who arrive early should be discouraged from playing catch on their own. Playing catch should be a coach-supervised instructional drill (not a warm-up activity). Please see *Playing Catch Practice* later in this manual for more info.

There are also many activities that can warm up our players bodies while developing baseball skills (examples: fielding ground balls and using underhand toss to the player covering the base, fielding fly balls without throwing).

### **TEAM – TALK** (3-5 minutes)

Communicate and review your expectations.

Game recap (if applicable) — Ask players what went well at the previous game and what the team needs to work on. Review your observations.

Review today's practice plan (have copies for your coaches and post a team copy in the dugout). Discuss an inspirational quote (write it on the top of the practice plan). For example: *It doesn't take any talent to play hard.* (Derek Jeter)

### **BASE RUNNING DRILLS** (5-15 minutes)

Traditionally, coaches put base running towards the end of practice following hitting. This is fine. Consider putting base running at the beginning because it's often underemphasized, and putting it first is a way of stating its importance.

### **PLAYING CATCH PRACTICE (5-10 minutes)**

Playing Catch is arguably the most important segment of a practice. Instead of a sloppy activity used for warming up it should be the most focused, intense, and disciplined part of the practice. As coaches, we need to make sure each player is using proper catching and throwing techniques during Playing Catch Practice. See *Playing Catch Practice* later in this manual.

### **FIELDING DRILLS (10-15 minutes)**

Full-team drill – try to include at least one (examples: cut-relays, 18 outs, crossfire).  
Skill Stations - 3 or 4 stations (combination of ground ball, fly ball, and pitcher-catcher drills).

### **NEW SKILLS (5-10 minutes)**

Make it your goal to teach something new at every practice. These new skills and drills will become part of your “practice menu” as the season progresses (examples: bunting, calling fly-balls, defensive positional responsibilities, applying tags, etc.).

### **HITTING DRILLS (20-30 minutes)**

Batting practice is a 12-player drill. You can plan and structure a full-team BP where everyone is active, engaged, and developing skills throughout the activity. It’s important to communicate to your team that full-team Batting Practice is also Fielding Practice and Base Running Practice. It is critical to minimize standing around. See *Batting Practice Notes* later in this manual.

**BULLPENS:** Pitchers and Catchers can work at a separate station during Fielding and Hitting Drills.

### **END OF PRACTICE ACTIVITY (5-10 minutes)**

It’s important to end practice with something high energy and fun. Examples: relay races, coach/player wiffle ball game, run down games (pickle), etc.

## **Parent Participation at Practices**

Many youth baseball players leave the sport each year because they say the game is not fun. The game is not the issue, it’s the experience that kids have participating in the game. A large part of participation is practice. The primary reason practice isn’t always fun for kids is that a lot of their time is spent standing around instead of playing. Coaches must structure practices to minimize standing around and maximize playing.

Getting more adults involved in practices is a simple solution to boring practices. The parents of our players can help make practices more active and fun.

Parent helpers do not need great baseball knowledge to be helpful on the practice field. The only requirement is a willingness to jump in and participate. Many will do so when they receive a sincere and enthusiastic invitation from the Manager.

Coaches want to be sure their teaching message remains consistent and clear, while many parents feel they don't know enough to be helpful. Therefore, assign parent helpers to basic activities. The more complex teaching areas are still directed by coaches. The key is to utilize parents to help run activities where repetition is the primary goal. Also, there are many non-teaching activities to which they can be assigned that will help a practice run more efficiently.

## **Non-Teaching Activities for Parent Helpers**

### **Backing up Throws During Throwing Practice and Drills**

Maximize each minute in practice by having kids constantly active and working on skill development. Arguably the biggest time-waster in practice is kids chasing after poor or misplayed throws.

Kids miss dozens of throws every practice. Incorporate a couple of parent helpers whose primary job is to position themselves behind any area of a drill where a ball getting past a player will take away from the flow of the activity. Those helpers carry a handful of balls with them at all times. When a ball gets past a player, their job is to immediately get a new ball in the player's hands, so the activity continues with minimal delay. As time permits those parents retrieve balls to maintain their supply.

### **Catching Throws**

There are many activities that run much more efficiently when there is an extra person to catch throws. This can be at a base or assisting next to a coach who is running a drill. Having a parent helper to relieve a coach from the need to manage balls coming back in at the end of each drill repetition, frees up the coach to focus on teaching and keeping the drill moving.

### **Shagging During Batting Practice**

Any balls that kids aren't playing directly off the bat can be collected by a parent helper. Position players shagging balls during batting practice is not an efficient use of practice time.

### **Parents Helping Run Simple Drills**

There are many basic skill activities where the primary objective is repetition. One of the most basic formats of an effective practice is having small groups rotating through a series of drill stations. When working in these basic skill activities **it is important to emphasize to parents that you only want them to perform the very basic task you assign them.** It is also important to be clear that they should not do or say more than what you ask. Occasionally a parent gets over-eager in their desire to help. **Remind them that the messaging originates from you and the parent helper is simply reiterating the message.** Don't be overly concerned if parents don't do things exactly right. Keep giving them pointers throughout the year based on your observations. They will learn, improve, and become more valuable to the team over time.

Getting parents involved and prepped will take some time during the first few weeks of practices. Investing the time and effort early on will pay off in skill development and the level of fun experienced by the kids over the course of the season.

## Safety

All players should be required to hold the bat by the BARREL when moving from place to place. The only time a player should hold a bat by the handle is when they are preparing to swing at a ball.

There are only TWO instances players are allowed to swing a bat:

1. When standing at a spot that is designated by a coach for working on the swing.
2. When standing at home plate during batting practice, a scrimmage, or a game.

When multiple batters are swinging a bat (wiffle ball batting, tee work, etc.), no batter is allowed to move from their designated swinging spot until all participants have set their bats down.

No player is allowed to toss a ball up in order to swing at it, play golf with a bat, or any other such bat swinging activity not clearly defined by a coach.

**Please review the 2021 SCLL Safety Manual and concussion info. These can be found on the forms and fliers section of the league website.**

## Pitching

Please review the 2021 SCLL Local Rules for pitch count information for each division. Be aware that SCLL may be more restrictive than Little League Baseball International. Know your counts. Make parents aware of the required rest days and the importance of them for the safety of their child.

\*\*Please make sure that your pitchers are ready to pitch the maximum pitch limits before you have them do it. Some will be ready and some will not be. A gradual increase is what is best. So just because the maximum pitches allowed increases for players at league-age 11-12 doesn't mean your oldest pitchers should be jumping from 50 to 85 pitches. This can be quite harmful to their arm. A suggested interval would be:

Week 1 - 40 pitches

Week 2 - 45 pitches

Week 3 - 50 pitches

Week 4 - 65 pitches

Week 5 - 75 pitches

Week 6 - 85 pitches

## Risk Factors

**(adapted from Pitch Smart USA and Contemporary Pediatrics Guide)**

**Pitching while fatigued** – Pitchers should not pitch through fatigue. Watch for signs of fatigue during a game and season. Decreased ball velocity, ball control and/or ball command are all

signs of fatigue. Pitchers demonstrating these signs should be removed from pitching. The American Sports Medicine Institute (ASMI) found that adolescent pitchers who undergo elbow or shoulder surgery are 36 times more likely to have routinely pitched with arm fatigue.

**Pitching through pain** - Joint pain in the elbow or shoulder is one of the first signs of injury. Pitchers should be removed from pitching if they are feeling or showing any signs of pain. Rest is required to allow time for the injured area to heal. If pain does not resolve after 3-4 days of rest, a physician should be consulted. The sooner an injury is identified, the sooner proper treatment can begin. The result is shorter healing time and faster return to pitching.

**Throwing too many innings over the course of the year** – ASMI found that players who pitched more than 100 innings in at least one year were 3.5 times more likely to be injured than those who did not exceed 100 innings pitched. Every inning – whether it be during a game or showcase event – should count toward that threshold.

**Not taking enough time off from baseball every year** – ASMI also found that pitchers who competed more than 8 months per year were 5 times as likely to suffer an injury requiring surgery. Pitchers should refrain from throwing for at least 2-3 months per year and avoid competitive pitching for at least 4 months per year.

**Throwing too many pitches and not getting enough rest** – Daily, weekly and annual overuse is the greatest risk to a youth pitcher's health. Numerous studies have shown that pitchers who throw more pitches per game and those who do not adequately rest between appearances are at an elevated risk of injury. While medical research does not identify optimal pitch counts, pitch counts programs have been shown to reduce the risk of shoulder injury in Little League Baseball by as much as 50% (Little League, 2011). The most important thing is to set limits for a pitcher and stick with them throughout the season.

**Pitching on consecutive days** – Pitchers should avoid pitching on consecutive days, if possible, irrespective of pitch count. According to Yang et al., pitchers who pitched on consecutive days had more than 2.5 times greater risk of experiencing arm pain, compared with pitchers who did not pitch on consecutive days.

**Excessive throwing when not pitching** – A pitcher should not also be a catcher for his team as it is the next most throwing-intensive position and resulting in far more throws than players at other positions. ASMI found that amateurs who played catcher while not pitching were 2.7 times more likely to suffer a major arm injury.

**Playing for multiple teams at the same time** – Players who participate on multiple teams at the same time are at an increased risk of injury as it makes it more difficult to monitor pitch limits and results in reduced rest. This includes other overhead sports such as football (quarterback), volleyball and swimming.

**Pitching with injuries to other body regions** – Players should be cautious about returning to play after any injury. A sprained ankle or oblique strain can imperceptibly affect the player's biomechanics, changing the way he throws and putting more stress on his arm.

**Not warming-up properly before all practices and games.**

**Not learning and practicing proper pitching mechanics.**

**Not following proper strength and conditioning routines** – While often overlooked, any strength and conditioning program should include a shoulder and elbow component. Numerous studies have shown that deficits in upper extremity strength and mobility are strongly correlated to serious arm injuries.

**Throwing curveballs and sliders at a young age** – While existing research has not consistently shown a strong connection between the curveball and injuries, Yang et al., found that amateur pitchers who threw curveballs were 1.6 times more likely to experience arm pain while pitching and Lyman et al, found that youth pitchers who throw sliders are 86% more likely to experience elbow pain than those who do not (Lyman et al., 2002).

## **Coach Kittle's Tips for SCLL**

### **Basic Fielding/Throwing:**

Body alignment is key - front shoulder toward the target; elbows level at shoulder height and back elbow in an L position, ball separated from the head.

Take the ball “off the shelf”, this means don't point the ball toward the sky. Instead, get two fingers over the top of the ball with the ball pointed in the general direction away from the target, such as generally toward second base when pitching.

Extend the backside of the glove toward your target as you prepare to throw. Don't let it flop down to the side on the throw. Instead, bring the opening of the glove to your chest during the throw. This uses both sets of chest muscles for power, balance and accuracy.

Keep your head steady to maintain vision on the target. Get your weight over your front leg as you throw.

**For pitchers**, all of the above. Learning to pitch first from a stretch position will keep things simple and prevent getting off balance. If you do a windup, don't rock too much and keep your shoulders level.

Don't rush through the balance position. Keep your timing consistent. Bring your lifted knee back away from the catcher. This pulls your back knee tight for good balance and sets up a smooth momentum of the front leg to be directed towards the catcher.

Bring the glove down with the ball to “crack the egg on the knee” as you separate the hands over the knee. Separate with thumbs towards the body to get the wrists in the correct position, then around in a smooth motion into the throwing position. Don't just pull the ball out of the glove at chest height.

Don't bring the ball behind the arm (on the backside of the pitcher toward first base) as this opens and strains the throwing shoulder. Don't bring the held ball in next to the ear. A slight sidearm throw is natural. But too much sidearm can reduce accuracy. At the time of releasing

the ball, the wrist bends downwards to put fingertip pressure on the seams to create spin. No twisting of the wrist.

Bring in that extended glove hand as you throw as described above. Make this a habit for accuracy and power.

Encourage pitchers to maintain a consistent speed. Rotate body over a firm front leg to transmit body weight into the throw. Let that back leg fly up. Keep that head up. If the glove is brought into the chest and inside/outside accuracy is still a problem, consider a higher release point (less sidearm).

## **Teaching Players How to Receive a Throw at 1B — Positioning and Footwork**

We do not want players at the Little League level to straddle the base and place a higher priority on being at/on the base than on catching the ball. Throws to a base at the Little League level (especially with kids 10 and under) are off the mark quite often. In order for kids to consistently catch throws at a base, they will need to leave the base a fair amount of the time in order to catch the ball. The problem is the base serves as a “magnet” and kids are resistant to moving away from the base.

Before we can teach kids how to receive a throw at a base, we need to understand what is going on in their minds. Young players' exposure to this play is dominated by seeing the game at high-levels and seeing most plays being made at first base where the majority of thrown balls are on target. The result is kids develop two misconceptions about what is involved in receiving a throw at a base which leads to kids not being able to adjust to, and catch, off-line throws:

1. One foot is anchored to the base before their teammate makes a throw.
2. The other foot is extended out towards their teammate making the throw. They think the player at the base is supposed to stand in a 'Stretch' position (even on tag plays).

### **Solution**

At this level of play, instruct players to stand on the side of the base the ball is coming from (if the balls are coming straight to the base in line with the baseline, they stand on the side of the base that places their glove between them and the base).

Once they understand where to position their feet, they follow this sequence when receiving a throw:

1. Move Your Feet to Catch
2. Ball First, Base Second
3. After making the play at the base, move feet towards the middle of the infield in a Power Position prepared to throw and look for other runners.

## **Batting Practice Notes**

Live batting is not a time for in depth instruction. This is a chance for kids to get reps and to adapt timing to their swing. Ideally, some instructional understanding has been established between the coach and batter prior to hitting live pitches. The talk during the live session is limited to quick simple reminders of fundamental parts of the swing.

In depth batting instruction is done in an organized group situation where the focus of every player is learning the swing or when working with one or two players and there is time to really work on what is being taught.

### **Structure: Three Groups of Four Players**

Group 1: Offense. Live Batter, On Deck Batter(s) hitting off tee(s) into net, and Base Runners.

Group 2: Defense. Playing each ball off the bat like it's a game. Communicate that this is NOT shagging balls, **this is defensive practice**. Every player should be in a ready position on each pitch, working on fielding technique, throwing, backing up, and covering bases.

Group 3: Skills Station. Wiffle Ball Batting, Tee Drills, Soft Toss, and/or Bullpen session (extra work with pitchers and catchers).

### **Time**

7-8 minutes per station. Allow 60-90 seconds for rotation. Eight swings per live batter. "One more pitch" is a time killer. If the last swing is a miss, praise the effort and then rotate.

### **Defensive Alignments**

1. Four infielders
2. Three infielders and a center fielder or corner outfielder
3. Two infielders and two outfielders

Have a coach or parent helper at 1B or 2B taking throws from infielders. Put players in positions where the batter is most likely to hit the ball. Positions are adjusted for each new hitter. Also be sure kids switch with each other and play multiple defensive positions.

## **Notes about Pitching a Wiffle Ball**

Do not pitch a wiffle ball while standing. Wiffle balls should be pitched from a knee at a distance of 15'-20' from the batter (up to 25' when throwing to 12-year-olds).

The primary reason for throwing from a short distance is that our pitching accuracy will increase significantly. The most important thing for a player working on their swing is to see a high percentage of strikes.

We do not want to use a full long circle motion with the arm as if we were actually pitching. The throw, from shorter distances is very similar to throwing a dart. If a little more arm is needed to get the ball to the batter, the elbow and hand can be brought back to the shoulder/ear/head area. Good wiffle ball pitching technique relies a great deal on the wrist snapping through the ball at release. The wrist snap supplies a lot of force and is the key to accuracy.

Do not lob the ball and/or throw it in an arc. Often with younger players and players still developing their swinging skills the tendency is to throw the ball slower with a big arc. This type of pitch, in most cases, is more difficult to hit than a ball thrown a bit firmer and more on a line to the strike zone.

Note: When pitching to two batters, position them about 10' apart, so they are safe from the swing of the other batter. Position yourself 12'-18" away, centered between the batters; envision a tall triangle. Whenever there are multiple batters, they must always wear a helmet. The helmet is to protect them, not from the ball, but in case they get hit by a bat

## Using the Mini Diamond

One of the most valuable tools a coach can use is the Mini Diamond. Almost any drill where the focus is on teaching something other than full throwing technique can be run on a Mini Diamond. Any time we compact the teaching and learning environment we reduce distractions, improve communication, and the players get more reps during a drill.

The Mini Diamond is also useful for teaching how a drill is supposed to run before going to the full-size diamond. It works well to walk-through a drill on the Mini Diamond before implementing it on the full field.

A Mini Diamond is 20'-25' square, but can be modified larger or smaller depending on the activity. It is constructed using cones, throw down bases, etc. Examples of drills that can be run using a Mini Diamond include cut-relays, backing-up, and base coverage responsibilities.

## Playing Catch PRACTICE

*“Hey kids, grab a ball out of the bucket and go loosen up your arms. We start practice in 10 minutes.”*

When we say this to our team we are effectively saying, “Hey kids, go spend some time on the most important skill in the game, unsupervised, with no structure and then we’ll practice.”

Because playing catch is often not valued at the level that it should be, many teams miss this opportunity to improve their ability to play the game well.

Some coaches say that playing catch is the most important ten minutes spent at the ballpark, and should be the most focused, most disciplined, and hardest working part of a practice; not just for the kids, but for coaches.

*“I can walk into a Little League ballpark, watch both teams playing catch before a game and from that simple observation tell you who is going to win the game.” (Cal Ripken)*

Playing Catch **Practice** elevates the traditional playing catch routine to “drill” status. Instead of sending kids out to toss the ball back and forth to get loose before practice, organize a structured activity that has specific points of focus throughout.

### Warm-Up

After players have run and stretched and/or gone through their warm-up routine, have them warm up their arms with one of the following throwing routines (5-10 minutes).

First, choose a throwing partner for your players. Do not allow any player to have a ball until after they are all in position to start the activity. Making them get set up to throw before they get a ball will motivate them to get organized quickly.

Throwing routines are to be done prior to Playing Catch Practice. Both throwing routines begin with two rows of six players, arm's length apart, 10 feet from their throwing partner, on one knee. Complete 10 throws each. Then, stand up and complete 10 throws from the same distance.

### **Throwing Routine 1**

5 throws each at 15 feet, back up 5 steps. 5 more throws each, back up 5 steps. Continue this until the players reach 60 feet apart (base distance). Then, reverse the routine. 5 throws each at 60 feet, in 5 steps. Repeat until players are back to 15 feet.

### **Throwing Routine 2**

Position players 40-60 feet away from their throwing partner. Then, have all groups complete 20 throws each. Drops do not count. The first group to 20 wins, and the warm-up continues until all groups have completed 20 throws. It's important for coaches to choose throwing partners for this routine to make sure teams are even.

### **Underhand Toss**

This is a Major League Skill. In the average MLB game, the underhand toss is utilized almost 10 times.

Most of us are familiar with the scene where the player with the ball is not far from the player they want to throw to and we see uncertainty: "How hard do I throw the ball when my teammate is so close?"

Educating our kids that an underhand toss is an alternative option and then drilling them daily in this skill results in kids successfully completing many of these 'simple' plays, which in fact are very difficult when throwing the ball overhand is the only option in the mind of the player holding the ball.

### **Playing Catch Practice**

All the players in one row have a ball and throw at their coach's command.

Have each player complete up to 20 throws.

This is a Throwing, Receiving, and Footwork Drill - *Move your feet to catch, move your feet to throw.*

Proper throwing technique as a position player is preceded by a skip, shuffle, or crow hop movement of the feet. Position players always move their feet to throw. In Playing Catch Practice, the players are required to move their feet to throw on every throw. We need to make it clear that footwork is a key part of this drill. The fact that they are throwing the ball is not the only focus.

The players receiving the throws also have specific focus points relating to moving their feet. Most throws do not go exactly to the spot the receiving player is standing. In most cases, for the receiving player to have the best chance to catch a throw, they need to move their feet and "take their hands to the ball."

The three requirements for the receiving player on every throw: 1. "Ready Position" \* (prior to every throw) 2. "Move Your Feet to Catch" 3. "Reach Forward to Catch"

\*Ready Position: Same stance as a basketball player playing defense – feet wider than the shoulders; hands reaching out in front of the body. The receiving player needs to be ready to move the moment the ball leaves the throwing player's hand, in order to "beat the ball to the spot" where it will be caught.

Rule: The throwing player is not allowed to throw the ball until their partner is in a ready position. Simply stating this rule will not result in the rule being followed; this needs to be monitored and enforced throughout the season. This is a good rule for discipline and solid technique, and also increases safety during the activity.

## **Game Day Planning Example**

### **Post a Game Admin Sheet in Dugout:**

- Starting Lineup / Batting Order
- Pre-planned Substitutions
- Starting Pitcher
- First Relief Pitcher
- Additional Players Who Might Pitch

### **Pre-game Practice Routine EXAMPLE:**

1. 0:60 - 0:50 Run and stretch
2. 0:50 - 0:40 Throw
3. 0:40 - 0:30 Hitting (soft toss or wiffle balls)
4. 0:25 - 0:15 Team Drill - Ground Balls / Fly Balls
5. 0:15 - 0:05 Starting Pitcher/Catcher prep / Team Talk
6. 0:05 - 0:00 Water, Bathroom, Final Game Plan Review

### **Dugout / Game Management**

Have specific roles for the Manager and 2 Coaches.

Example: Manager manages lineup and on-field activities

Coach #1 manages pitchers & catchers

Coach #2 manages dugout and players

Give the scorekeeper your lineup card. Make sure it includes the player's full name, batting order, (fielding position by number in Majors), and uniform number. Also provide pitching information that affects the game like league age of pitchers/possible pitchers. Starting catcher should also be designated.

\*\*Make sure you review the batting order rules for your division.

## **Coaching Resources**

**(This list will also be emailed so you can click directly to the resources)**

[santacruzlittleleague.org](http://santacruzlittleleague.org)

[littleleague.org](http://littleleague.org)

[positivecoach.org](http://positivecoach.org) (Positive Coaching Alliance)

[abca.org](http://abca.org) (American Baseball Coaches Association website)

[coachdeck.com](http://coachdeck.com)

[Little League Pitch Smart Program](#)

[Little League University](#)

[Cal Ripken Virtual Academy](#) (excellent resource for training videos)

[Big Al Baseball](#)

[Paradigm Sport](#)

[Baseball Factory](#)

[Jugs Sports](#) (an archive of over 120 practice drills and articles)

[Gym Science](#) (Pitching and arm health)

Coaches Eye (app)

Game Changer (app)

MLB Digital Academy

The Matheny Manifesto (book)

Coaching Youth Baseball (book)

The Mental Game of Baseball (book)

Watching Baseball (book)

**\*If you have other resources that you would like to share with Santa Cruz Little League coaches, please let us know and we can push them out.**