

## **AYRA International League Minimum Skills**

The International League should continue to work on all previous teachings and build upon these skills. This is a good age to start introducing more advanced skills, while continuing to stress the fundamentals through repetition. Remember, some kids start playing baseball at this age and may not have mastered the Pioneer I and Pioneer II skills. Be sure to evaluate each player and bring him up to speed on the skills for which he is lacking. Also make sure all of your players understand the rules of baseball.

### **Throwing a Baseball**

Continue stressing proper throwing technique. Work on strengthening arms and improving accuracy through the long toss drill. Concentrate on having players throw the ball "on a line" rather than high arcs.

### **Hitting**

#### The Strike Zone

Ensure the players know what the strike zone is since they are now playing kid pitch with an umpire. The strike zone is from the top of the knees to the bottom of the armpits. It extends from one edge of home plate to the other. This includes the black part of the plate. If any part of the ball touches the strike zone, it is a strike; the entire ball does not have to travel through the strike zone. Also, umpires tend to call a more liberal strike zone at this age because the pitchers are just beginning to learn how to pitch.

#### The Stance

Introduce the concept of the open and closed stance. Make sure the players understand the advantages and disadvantages of both and when they should consider modifying their stance. Introduce the concept of standing in the front of the batter's box, neutrally (in the middle) in the batter's box, and deep in the batter's box. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of each location.

#### The Swing

Stress weight transition, hip rotation, arm extension, and follow through. Reinforce the "squashing the bug" technique. This age group it is vitally important to hone these techniques because now they are facing real pitching rather than coach pitching.

Introduce the concept of "loading up the swing." Once the pitcher begins his movement forward with the pitch, the batter should then "load". This involves a slight movement inward and backward (about 2 inches) of the batter's hands, shoulders, hips and knees. During the load it is important to not move the head and to keep the eyes on the ball.

Loading the swing helps improve how consistently and solidly the batter contacts the ball. A nice way to remind the players of the importance of loading is to tell them they have to go back to go forward.

Introduce the concept of being "short to it and long through it." This means the batter's hands should cut across the chest in a circular motion and around the body to produce a short swing to contact ("short to it") and then fully extend through the hit and follow through ("and long through it"). The striding leg should be locked at the knee at the time of contact with the baseball. Introduce the concept of how to go with a pitch based on its location in the strike zone. Lastly, make sure the batters are swinging the bat quick and hard. Eliminate tentativeness in the swing.

## Bunting

Introduce bunting. Teach the proper way to hold a bat for bunting, especially protecting the top hand's fingers. Teach the proper way to pivot around for a bunt. Completely squaring around leaves the batter in a vulnerable position if a wild pitch comes in. Do not step on the plate while bunting. Hold the bat at the top of the strike zone with the bat head above the hands. Arms should be extended with a slight bend in the elbows. Since the bat is already at the top of the strike zone, any pitch higher than the bat head is a ball. If the pitch is lower, bend at the knees to bunt the ball and try to avoid dipping the bat head as that increases the chance of a popup. Let the bat meet the pitch, do not slap at the ball. The best bunts are down either base line.

## Fielding

### The Stance

Introduce the concept of "creeping." Just as the pitcher begins his delivery, the fielders should creep in a few small steps to get the momentum of their body moving. This allows for quicker reaction times since the body is already moving. The weight should be forward and on the balls of their feet; they should never be flat-footed. The glove foot should also be slightly ahead of the other foot.

### The Mental Game

This is the age where the Mental Game becomes a factor. Teach the player to ask himself before every pitch is thrown, "If the ball is hit to me, what will I do with it?" This allows the player to react more effectively to the ball. Instead of thinking what to do with the ball after it's fielded, the player already knows what needs to be done and must simply execute.

### Glove Positioning

Continue stressing to field the ball out in front, not between the feet. Introduce the concept of backhanding a ground ball. The ball is still caught out front, not behind the

body. The backhand can be successfully performed with either the right foot out or the left foot out. The left foot out is typically for balls hit further from the player.

### Playing First Base

When getting ready to receive a throw at first for an attempted out, the first baseman should start by standing upright with his glove hand foot close to the bag and his throwing hand foot touching the inside edge of the bag. The first baseman should **NEVER** stand on the middle of the bag. This will dramatically reduce the number of collisions and injuries at first base. Once the first baseman knows where the throw is going to end up, he or she should stride **WITH HIS GLOVE FOOT** toward the throw to reduce the distance the ball has to travel to the glove. Striding with the glove foot allows for easily changing body position to field a wide variety of throws. A first baseman should come off the bag to catch a poorly thrown ball to avoid an overthrow and possible extra bases. The first baseman must remember to treat every bad throw as if it was a ground ball and do everything he or she can do to stop the ball from getting past.

### Fly Balls

Continue stressing the fundamentals for catching a fly ball. Introduce the skills for catching a fly ball while moving. Introduce throwing into the infield using the "crow hop." Teach the technique of shielding the sun with the glove if the fly ball is lost in the sun.

### Bunt Defense

Introduce the proper positioning for first and third baseman when they see a batter squaring to bunt. Teach other players the proper base to cover when they see a batter squaring to bunt.

### Cutoffs

Introduce cutoffs to all the bases. Make sure every player knows which infielder is the cutoff based on where the ball is hit in the outfield.

### Advanced Skills

Concentrate on teaching them the proper technique to tag a player: tag low and always cover up so the ball does not pop out of the glove. Introduce the run down and its proper execution. Stress to the players to try and force the runner back to an earlier base. Introduce other types of double plays. Teach the technique for turning a double play when the force has been broken and the lead runner must be tagged.

### Base Running

Stress running through first base at full speed to beat the throw. The base runner should always know how many outs there when on base. Teach the concept of going about

halfway on a fly ball and to return quickly to the bag if the ball is caught. Teach players how to tag up on a fly ball. Always tag up on foul balls because the only way a runner can advance on a foul ball is if the ball is caught and he or she tags up.

Reinforce to the players the proper way to slide: the Figure 4. The right leg is the vertical portion of the 4 and the left leg is bent underneath the right leg. The player should slide with most of the weight on the left buttock. Players should not slide on their side, on both buttocks, or with both feet out. Teach the players when to start their slide. If it's too early, they will not make it to the bag. If it's too late they risk injury by colliding with the bag. They should also be taught to not use their hands; this will help avoid injuring the palms and wrists. AYRA does not permit sliding head first.

Teach players how to steal a base. In International they cannot leave the bag until the pitch has crossed home plate. Also, there is no leading off until after the ball has crossed home plate. Teach players how to watch for signs from the third base coach before every pitch. Players should run hard and look at the base when stealing, not at the pitcher.

## **Catcher**

Introduce the runner on base stance where the glove hand foot is slightly ahead of the throwing hand foot. The bare hand is directly behind the glove with runners on base. Teach the "bow and arrow" throwing motion for throwing out base stealers which means bringing the throwing hand back on a direct line to the launch position. No arm circles, even small ones; just straight back with the fingers on top and the thumb under the ball. Instill the mindset that nothing gets past the catcher. The gear is there to protect the catcher, so use it to block the ball.

## **Pitching**

Start from scratch. Teach the stretch first. Make sure the pitcher can achieve balance and solid technique before pitching from the windup. Teach proper leg lift, torquing the core slightly toward second base, bending the back, bending the knee slightly, pushing off the rubber, pointing at the target with the glove or glove side elbow, getting the hand back and up with the fingers on top of the ball and the thumb underneath, and striding toward home plate. When delivering the pitch, the elbow should be above the shoulder and then the throwing arm should come across the body. Always have the pitcher keep his or her eyes on the catcher's mitt.

After the pitch is delivered, the pitcher becomes an infielder. A good follow through automatically gets the pitcher into the ready position prepared to field a comeback ball. Work on proper grips. Stress changing speeds and pitch placement. Breaking balls are NOT permitted at this age. Work both sides of the plate. At this age control is more important than speed. Show pitchers how to hold runners on base even though there is no leading so they are prepared for National League. Lastly, teach pitchers to back up throws from the outfield.

