

## Forest Grove Rookies League Guide

Welcome to Rookies League!!! While most parents are excited to see their child advancing from TBall to a more competitive form of baseball, I hope this letter not only helps you coach your players, but also keep things in perspective.

For Baseball Traditionalists, some of the ideas mentioned below might seem far-fetched or just downright dumb!! As someone who played baseball through college, I would at least ask you to consider them. The number of kids playing baseball continues to decline. With more and more options now available in the spring like soccer, lacrosse, even spring basketball, it's very important to do our best as coaches to keep the kids interested and enjoying baseball. Let's be honest, there are a lot of boring parts of baseball, especially for kids who are 6 through 8 years old.

### **Repetition – THE MOST IMPORTANT KEY to SUCCESS**

Start with the basics. Fielding, hitting, baserunning etc. Then....repetition, repetition, repetition. Did I mention Repetition? Keep the kids as busy as possible. This cannot be done without parent participation. I would recommend you tell all your parents that there is a good chance they will all be needed at some point during practice. Even parents with no baseball experience can shag balls in the field or set the ball on a tee. By keeping the practice moving at a good pace, you will not only get in more repetitions, but also be able to keep the players focused for longer intervals (which means you can practice longer).

- Examples:
  - Ground Balls – instead of one line of twelve kids, have three or four lines of lesser numbers to maximize the repetitions. If possible, have a parent hitting or rolling the ground balls so the coach can be closer to the fielder giving instruction.
  - Hitting Groups – minimize the amount of kids shagging baseballs and waiting in line to hit. Have stations for live hitting, tees, soft toss, etc.

For the kids, games are the fun part, but they get considerably less repetitions in games than from practice. After games begin, I encourage you to practice at least one day per week.

## Measuring Success

The reality of youth sports, especially at these younger ages, is that the older/bigger kid is going to be more successful (i.e. 'win') the majority of the time. Older/larger kids will hit the ball further or throw harder, not because they have better baseball fundamentals, but because they are simply bigger. Worry about teaching fundamentals and getting better. You can't control the age/size of your players. The success of a coach at this level is not measured by wins and losses, but by the development and continued interest of the kids. I would argue that one of the biggest measures of success at this level is judged by whether or not a child chooses to willingly play baseball the following season. At the Rookies Level, we recommend you rotate defensive positions so all players get exposure at each position. We are all tempted to put our best players at the most important positions and get as many outs as possible. But how are we developing the younger/smaller/less experienced kids if they are stuck in left field? Is this the best way to keep them interested in baseball so they continue playing? I'm all for 'Playing to Win' and 'having your best players at the most important positions' when kids get a little older, but that is not the goal of this League. If you are of the nature that 'Winning' is the most important thing for a 7 year-old, I would be happy to get you your own 'personalized' league championship trophy at the end of the year.

## Know Your Age Group:

Again, while the biggest key to success at this age group is repetition, teaching and practicing fundamentals can be boring. After teaching fundamentals or doing drills, let the kids play a game or have a competition. It breaks up the practice and helps them refocus. Sometimes the games may not even be baseball related.

Examples:

- Two lines for ground balls. If a player cleanly fields and throws the ball back to the coach, they stay in the line. Fumble the ball or make a bad throw and they are out. Find a way to reward the winners in each line.
- Throwing/Catching – Two players playing catch make up a team. If there is a bad throw or dropped ball, that team is out. It might surprise you how much better they play catch when there is something on the line.
- Live Hitting – Batter gets to keep hitting until he misses. Whoever has the most hits in a row is the winner.
- Wiffle Ball Home Run Derby – no better way to get a player to start swinging harder. You can even let the parents play, but if the kids catch the fly ball, even if it's over the home run line, the parent is out. Good for the end of practice.
- Sharks vs. Minnows (baseball style) – Three sharks with a baseball in their glove. They have to tag the minnows to get them out. Teaches the kids to squeeze the ball in their gloves while applying a tag. If the ball is dropped the minnow gets to stay in the game. Good for the end of practice.

## Baseball Knowledge

Start with the assumption the kids have no knowledge of even the most basic rules and find ways throughout practice to teach by incorporating into your practice schedule.

Examples:

- Baserunning
  - Use as your practice warmup. Things to teach...
    - Running 'through' first base. Don't stop on the base!!
    - Stopping at other bases.
    - When you 'have to run' vs. when you 'do not have to run' when a ball is hit
  
- Ball/Base/Backup
  - Teach this simple terminology for when your Team is in the field. There are 9 positions on the field and only 1 baseball. There is a pretty good chance the fielder IS NOT going to get the ball. However, they need to be taught there is always something to do or a place to go once a ball is hit in play.
    - BALL – the first thing the fielder is looking for is the ball. He isn't to move until he sees where the ball has been hit.
    - BASE – Once the ball is hit and the fielder sees the ball is not coming their direction, know which base to cover (learning forceouts/tagouts can also be discussed here).
    - BACKUP – Once the ball is hit and the fielder sees the ball is not coming his direction and he does not have a base to cover, know where the throw could be going so they can back up for an overthrow.
  
- Force Outs / Tag Outs / Where to Throw the Ball
  - Spend a portion of a practice or two explaining the differences then constantly reinforce throughout the year.
  
  - Suggestion – when your team is on the field, you will have several players on the bench. Have a coach sitting on the bench talking with the players throughout the inning asking them “where would you throw the ball if.....” or “at what base is there a force out?” or “what would you do if the ball was hit to \_\_\_\_\_”. Make it a game. If they get enough correct, reward them with something (i.e., candy). Yes, I know it seems ridiculous, but at this age group try and remember the most motivating factors. If you were seven, would you really care about what base can be tagged for a force out? A seven year-old's interest is going to increase dramatically if there's something in it for them. You will be surprised at the focus and results. There were several kids last year who said that 'BENCH' was one of their favorite positions to play.
  
  - In the Rookies league, coaches for the defensive team are allowed to be on the field. Use this!!! Constantly ask the players what they are going to do if they get the ball.

Also, if a player makes a mistake, walk over and tell them what they should have done. There's a lot better chance the player will retain the information by being talked to as compared to a coach yelling from the dugout at a player who is already embarrassed because they know they made a mistake.

### **Understanding Failure**

- As anyone who knows baseball will tell you, there is a lot of failure in baseball. **TEACH THIS!!!** It's part of the game. The best players in the world strike out and make errors. Once a child learns that it's OK to fail (i.e., get out, swing and miss, make a bad throw, etc.) they can start to improve. One of the largest problems I have noticed in this age group is the fear of swinging and missing. This fear translates to weak swings and soft contact. I'm not telling the child to swing as hard as they can, but come on, swing hard! Mike Trout is one of the best players in Major League Baseball. Last year he struck out 158 times in 159 games. Do you think he's afraid to swing and miss? Now, I'm not telling you those strikeout rates would be acceptable in youth baseball, but hopefully you get my point.

### **What's Next After Rookies?**

Forest Grove Youth Baseball is a member of the Junior Baseball Organization (JBO). After Rookies, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Graders compete in the Midget Division of JBO. The intent of JBO is to match players and teams of the same ability in the same division. The divisions are set up in an A, B, C format, with the highest level of skill playing at the Federal Level, the middle American Level, followed by the National Level.

All 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Graders go through an evaluation process where they are evaluated and scored. The level at which a player is assigned is determined by his score, relative to the other players being evaluated. Attached is the evaluation form which is used to evaluate the players.

These teams then compete in the Westside Division of the Oregon JBO which consists of teams from other local cities (Sherwood, Banks, Hillsboro, McMinnville, etc.). While the rules vary slightly, all three divisions (Federal, American, National) play a competitive level of baseball. Score is kept, player pitching only, base stealing is allowed, etc. Teams with the best win/loss records compete in a district tournament with the top teams from district then competing in the state tournament.

### **Conclusion**

As you have likely noticed, I have not spent much time going over individual drills. Please feel free to contact me directly if you would like discussions of drills to incorporate into your practice plan. The league website also has several good links for baseball drills. Also see the handout "The Swing Sequence" which is the hitting philosophy used at Forest Grove High School.

Good Luck!! Here is to a successful 2016 Season!!!

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