

## Thoughts of a 12u Coach

*The below thoughts were contributed by a coach who started coaching at the 6u level. Now entering into his 5<sup>th</sup> year coaching, he is working with 12u rec team and a club team. The below are his thoughts about what 12u level ball should look like as well as some thoughts on his journey as a coach. This is a great read.*

These are high level points as there are a lot of little “keys” or techniques that influence these how these are executed. Everything I mention has a ton of drills that reinforce proper technique.

**Base Running:** Regardless of natural speed most girls have very little understanding of how to read a play and take an extra base. Even the slowest runner can be a very effective base runner but usually they lack confidence (they’ve been TOLD they are slow so they have an excuse, right?) We spend a great deal of time instructing this now. At the 12 level we expect the players to be able to anticipate how a defense will react to a play and take bases, decoy, retreat accordingly. We also instruct them on how to use base running as a way to confuse/influence defensive responses to aid the hitter.

### **Most common deficiencies:**

1. Sliding. Amazed at how few players know how to slide well if at all. Hook slides, pop up slides, etc. all missing.
2. Understanding primary vs. secondary leads and how to take them. I could spend an hour describing how poorly this is being instructed now.
3. Tagging up. Couldn’t be more basic but the majority of players in 12’s have no clue what this rule is let alone how to do this effectively.

**Hitting:** This topic could be a novel. Hitting is the most technically dependent activity most players will execute. Very few coaches of young players understand those technical areas well enough to correct even the most basic issue. This is usually because they are so focused on “just making contact” that when a player accidentally makes contact they lose sight of the fact that they did so with horrible technique. This temporary success reinforces poor mechanics which then become imbedded behaviors. Unlocking these areas when they are older is VERY difficult and frankly, most players do not have the ability to reinvent their swings later so their success is limited. I am not in any way advocating for “one size fits all” mechanics! But there are certain things that are just fundamental and have to be taught and drilled at the earliest age. Many coaches spend hours in hitting cages or pitching to players on the field giving them “reps” because everyone KNOWS the secret to improvement is reps. Truth is reps using bad technique is the worst thing you can do for a player and while we give them reps I’ve rarely seen coaches providing technical instruction at these times to make the NEXT rep better than the LAST rep. We now try to have one coach pitch while another sits in front of the hitter and provides tips and encouragement on small improvements that build over time. You can’t pitch and train easily at the same time.

### **Most common deficiencies:**

1. Casting a bat rather than swinging
2. Closed stances bad posture
3. Swinging at bad pitches; know your strike zone
4. Inability to bunt (one of the 3 easiest actions a player is asked to execute)

Throwing: Shot putting. For some reason I've found that many players have a tendency to shot put a throw while few players seem to grasp using trunk rotation and shoulder turn to generate velocity better. Also, oddly, most players don't have a warm up routine that makes any sense. progressing from short throws to long toss is rare for most teams. This is a basic coaching issue and one we have to fix. Also, position specific techniques should be taught by 10's. I don't think we should be set into positions in 8's yet so 8's all should develop throwing skills together but at 12's I want outfielders warming up together and infielders warming up together because they have to throw similarly. I want catchers warming up together but they have to throw similarly. A catcher and a first baseman don't have the same demand for throws so why ask them to warm up together? Want to see a big "tell" for throwing skills? Where is the first step after throwing a ball? If it toward the target? If not, you have something to fix!

### **Most common deficiencies:**

1. Wrist not behind the ball so no "flip" to accelerate and control the ball which leads to weak throws
2. Elbow in front of the shoulder which leads to weak throws, sore shoulders
3. Base is not positioned prior to the throw
4. Knowing which base you should be throwing to ahead of time!

Fielding: break this down into two categories: in fielding and out fielding. In fielding requires a good base and soft hands. At the youngsters if you teach them these two things you have them well on the right track. Cement hands is the most common problem and it's difficult to teach later. out fielding requires getting over a fear of the ball. After all, if you miss a pop fly you are standing under it hits you in the head. So in response we see catches made outside their trunk and below their head. Both bad form. Using the lite flight machine as a training tool for youngsters is a great way to get this done well early. Also, teaching first step and hit rotation is where we spend a ton of time now.

### **Most common deficiencies**

1. Fear of the ball leads to fielding outside the framework of their shoulders
2. Weight is back on their heels rather than moving forward
3. Cement hands!
4. Making the fielding, transition and throwing mechanics 3 activities instead of one (this is kind of an advanced concept)

I learned how to coach the game by playing the game. Not everyone who volunteers has this experience so mentoring is key. If you haven't played through the development of these techniques it's really hard to help someone else do it. Mentoring can help coaches understand the concepts better even if they have never had to do it. When I started coaching in AVGS, similar to most others I assume, I was just helping out the head coach and saw some really basic, fundamental mistakes being made and not addressed so I asked if I could help some of the girls in some drills. With so many new coaches coming into the league, which is a good thing, spending enough time to coach the coaches should be a priority. Much like learning to hit can't be done by reading a book coaching someone to become a better coach is a field activity. I think time, pride and process prevent us from doing this enough. I had a U8 coach ask if he could stop by and watch one of our practices... I told him not only could he watch but I'll get him involved so he can SEE what we are building towards. If he takes that back to his players they all benefit.