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5447 E.Lafayette Blvd. Phoenix, AZ 85018 602-725-2134



The Baseball Pyramid Climb it with Success

Jerry Stitt
Former Head Coach,
University of Arizona

As young people grow up in baseball, they find that preparation for a season is different and more demanding at each higher level. Preparation for T-ball, Little League, Pony League, and junior high school baseball do not have heavy demands in the way of conditioning or skill development. For the most part, the player was chosen or "drafted" onto the team, he or she practiced individually and with the team, and the season was played. Some make All-Star teams, most do not.

This is part of what is known as the "Baseball Pyramid." The Baseball Pyramid is a three-sided pyramid with a very thick base and steep sides. The sides are Ability, Aptitude, and Attitude. The thick base is made up of millions of young aspiring major leaguers. Using Tucson as an example, there are almost one thousand "All-Stars" on the lower levels of baseball each year. Tucson is not a large city. Think of how many "All-Stars" there must be on the lower levels of baseball in cities like New York, Chicago, Miami, or Los Angeles!

As one works his/her way up the pyramid, the stiffer the competition becomes and more and more players fall off the pyramid. Some fall off for no reason other than a lack of interest. At the ages of thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, it is easy to be distracted by things that are more important to an individual than baseball. Some fall off because their Ability is just not good enough to keep pace with the rapidly increasing speed of the game. As the sides of the baseball pyramid get steeper, and only the best, most dedicated players remain, conditioning and skill development become very important. As a young player advances to the next higher level, competition for a spot on the team and for individual positions becomes exceptionally fierce. Young players begin to ask themselves how to survive and keep moving up the pyramid? Here are some helpful tips.

1. TUNE INTO BASEBALL

One of the three sides of the baseball pyramid is "Aptitude." Aptitude means one's ability to learn. Far too many players fall off the pyramid because of their lack of understanding of the game, or their inability to master new techniques as they advance up the pyramid.

In sports, aptitude might be called "coachability." Can you be coached? How fast do you pick up on basic baseball fundamentals? How fast do you learn and put into practice new techniques? How fast can you learn and teach your teammates team defenses, offenses, signs, and situations? These questions are very important in the minds of coaches. Sometimes simply figuring out how best to do a drill and how that drill relates to playing the game right can demonstrate a good baseball aptitude.

To stretch your aptitude for baseball, learn as much as you can about the inside game. That is, know why situations develop the way they do, and be able to think along with your coach as situations develop and the game unfolds. But also learn to relax, think for yourself, focus, and then do what is right in each given situation.

A good tip to remember to improve your aptitude in any situation is to be a great listener. Make eye contact with whatever authority figure is speaking to you. Focus only upon what is being conveyed to you, not upon your reaction to the information conveyed. Wait until the individual is finished speaking before forming and asking questions.

2. IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS

The second of the three sides of the baseball pyramid is "Ability." Some fall off the pyramid because their ability simply is not good enough to stay up as the speed of the game increases. Others fall off the pyramid because they do not do what is necessary to take their ability to the highest possible level.

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Taking ability to the highest possible level comes down to improving your skills to the point that each new level demands. Beyond working hard on improving your basic fielding, throwing, and hitting skills, have you done what is necessary to be as physically strong or stronger than your competition? The body's core muscles must be strong to handle the intense physical effort needed to advance ability to the highest possible level. If the body is not strong enough, the muscles and joints may become injured from the hard work necessary to move up a level. An injured player loses time on the field and will rapidly fall behind his/her competition.

Have you worked hard on the most basic skill coaches look for in a player: speed? This does not necessarily mean foot speed, although that is an important skill to possess. (And, yes, it is possible to improve your speed. A good way to improve speed is with a better forward body lean, which will increase stride length. If stride length is increased without sacrificing leg speed, foot speed will improve immediately.) Because we know that baseball is a game of time and distance, speed is often defined in a coach's mind as "quickness." Do you have quick feet, quick hands, a quick bat, a quick release? If not, then basic agility training can quicken the feet, plyometrics will make you more explosive, quicken your feet and hands. Strengthening the muscles used in hitting and working on explosiveness (previous article) will quicken your bat. See some footwork and throwing drills in the previous article that will quicken your feet and your release. An old coach's saying is, "If you want to improve quickness, do quick exercises and do exercises quick!"

Aptitude is a very important ingredient in taking your ability to the highest possible level. A good aptitude can help improve quickness. Quickness can be improved simply by understanding angles and the footwork required in how best to get to a ball, how to slide into or round a bag, how to shorten a throw, or how to more efficiently get a ball out of your glove in preparation for a throw. Improving your skills takes time, requires patience, but most of all it takes concentrated, consistent hard work. To be able to accomplish this you must:

3.BRING A GOOD ATTITUDE WITH YOU EVERY DAY

Of the three sides of the baseball pyramid, this third side, attitude is by far the most important. The lack of this most vital ingredient in every good player is the one that causes the most people to fall off the pyramid. An athlete with good ability is just an athlete. An athlete with good ability and great aptitude for the game will most likely be a very good athlete. But an athlete with good ability, great aptitude, and a great attitude has the best chance of developing into a great athlete. If we look at the very best players in baseball, those at the very top of the pyramid, each and every one of them has good ability. You notice I said good ability and not great ability. Many of our best major league players today and some in the Baseball Hall of Fame are players with good rather than great ability. But each and every one of them has a great aptitude for the game and a great attitude toward the game.

A great attitude for the game of baseball involves: a deep and abiding respect for the game; a love of the game; a burning desire to improve to the limit of one's ability; always putting team success ahead of personal success; and a positive mental approach to all the game has to offer, the ups as well as the downs!

We all know players with great ability who never advanced beyond a certain level of baseball. Every coach I know can name a player or two of their own that were "can't miss" prospects that never made it. These players generally were the ones that could never quite "figure out" baseball (a lack of aptitude) and/or did not have the proper attitude to advance beyond a certain level.

Every player brings something to the field every day. In your bag are your shoes, glove, batting gloves, bat, jacket, and many other assorted items. But the most important thing you bring to the field every day is not in your bag, but in your mind. It is your attitude! For you and for your coaches, there is nothing more important than a great attitude. Do not allow yourself to fall off the baseball pyramid before your time. Bring a great attitude to the field every day and you have an outstanding chance of prospering in the game of baseball and staying on the Baseball Pyramid.
