

## **Grand Forks Youth Baseball Association Coaching Philosophy**

It is important to keep your teaching methods simple. Kids will quickly get overwhelmed if we try and teach more than 2-3 key points for each fundamental. Throughout the year, stick to the 2-3 key points listed for each fundamental. These 2-3 key points for each fundamental are the foundation, and kids need to have a strong foundation before learning new skills. We want the kids to be able to do the 2-3 key points for each fundamental consistently and as a habit (without thinking) before working on any details or specific mechanics.

Note on Skill Levels: There will be some advanced kids that you can teach additional skills. This is encouraged as long as they can do the base fundamentals consistently every time.

### **Hitting:**

Hands: Hands should start about ear height. Have the kids place the bat on their shoulder, and raise their hands up a couple inches for proper placement of hands to start the swing.

Note on the back elbow: Don't make the kids have a high back elbow. Let kids do what is most comfortable for them. If you think about the swing, the elbow comes down anyway, so a high back elbow is really just a wasted motion. However, if a high back elbow is comfortable and working, it is fine to do, just don't force kids to have a high back elbow before starting their swing.

Stance: At this age, it is probably best to teach kids a square stance (not open or closed). Make sure both toes are pointed in the same direction, and feet about shoulder width apart. Kids should be relaxed (a little bend in the knee).

Front Foot: "Step on Glass" – Use this saying to reinforce that the front foot starts and ends in roughly the same location, and not too hard as it comes back down. Make sure front foot starts and ends in roughly the same location. A lot of kids will step out with their front foot, so be sure to watch for that and correct as soon as possible. Tailor your drills to reinforce this fundamental. You may need to have some kids not move their front foot at all for much of the season.

Back Foot: "Squish the Bug" or "Skip the Toe" - The swing needs to start with the bottom half of the body (hips start the swing). As such, we must make sure the hips start before the hands/bat start in motion. You can use one of the two terms to re-enforce this concept. A lot of kids hands will be out in front of their body when they make contact with the ball. We want kids to be 'driving the ball', and this will only happen if we constantly reinforce hips start the swing.

### **Throwing:**

Throwing drills are very important...from youth through college! Most college teams do these throwing drills every day! Concentrate on:

- Hand on top of ball
- Down, around, and up
- High elbow (ear height)
- Follow Through

1. Start out on one knee at close distance and cup elbow of throwing arm in glove. Use only upper arm and wrist to throw ball to partner – 10 feet apart or so.
2. One knee toss – to isolate upper body and check throwing mechanics of arm. Throwing knee down on ground. Bring arm back and up – stop to check that ball is back, fingers on top, and elbow above shoulder then throw and follow through.

3. Stand with feet spread facing partner and use same mechanics and follow through – feet shouldn't move (to isolate upper body).
4. Begin throwing – we make sure that everyone does a right-left-throw (L-R-T for lefties) when they play catch. This forces them to work on their footwork and it makes the transition into fielding a lot easier and more natural.
5. Be sure that they are practicing taking the ball out of their glove and finding the cross-seam grip. Again, makes the transition easier later.
6. Be sure both partners are catching the ball with two hands and moving to the ball rather than reaching for it. Step into the ball when catching it. Catch the ball in front of the body.
7. Be sure that they are aiming for a small target (chest or head). It's a good idea to have the partners hold up their glove and try to hit it – keeps them focused.
8. Throw long-toss – as they get spread out, have them use a throw-hop (crow hop) to get some momentum behind the throw. That is, instead of just a R-L-throw, they hop off their left foot into the right-left-throw. This is the best time to practice it and it makes a world of difference if it comes naturally to them later.

### **Fly Balls:**

Catch ball at highest Point with two hands. While throwing the ball have the kids crow hop and make a good throw.

### **Ground Balls:**

Get Ready Before the Pitch: Make sure kids are in the athletic position, with glove in front and palm up. Kids should be taking a small step forward as ball is pitched.

Feet Apart/Butt Down – When fielding the ball, feet shoulder width apart and butt down. We want the chest square to the ball and kids not bending over. Tell kids that if the ball takes a bad hop and hits the top of their head (beanie on the hat) they can get very hurt. If ball hits them in face at least they will live.

Field the Ball in Front of Body: Fielding a ground ball in front of body and not underneath the body.

Good Drill: Place a ball on the ground, have kids take off their gloves and field through the ball. Kids should not touch the ball but go through the motion of fielding the ball. Next, roll the ball to the kids (still no gloves). Finally, roll the ball to the kids with glove on. Make sure to field the ball straight on, and side to side (kids need to get into position to field a ball not right at them...get in front of the ball).

### **Baserunning:**

Home to 1<sup>st</sup> after hitting a ground ball: Any drill should incorporate the 3 main steps of going home to 1<sup>st</sup>.

1) Get out of the box, take 3 steps running hard with head down, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> step look for the ball (Have the kids yell "one" when looking for the ball).

2) When looking for the ball, the runner determines that the ground ball didn't get through and must beat out the throw from the infielder. The runner should now look at 1<sup>st</sup> base the rest of the way, then hit the front edge of first base while continuing past the base at full speed (Have the kid yell "two" while hitting the front edge of first base).

3) The runner gets a few steps past first base, and then 'breaks down' and stops, looking over his right shoulder to see if the ball got by the first basemen (Have the kid yell "three" while looking over right shoulder). Make sure runner comes back to first base on the foul side of the fair/foul line.

Home to 1<sup>st</sup> on a single: This is a situation where the hitter hits a ground ball that the runner determines gets past the infield while looking during step 1 above, or a line drive that is a sure single. Either way, we want the runner to make a question mark like route to first base so that they can push off on the inside

edge of 1<sup>st</sup> base. The quickest route to any point is a straight line, and we want to go in a straight line from base to base. On a single, we want kids to break off first base hard to make it look like they are going to second base, then quickly stop and get back to 1<sup>st</sup> base.

Also make sure at some point in the season to work on base to base (always hit the inside part of the base). Work on picking up the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach after rounding 2<sup>nd</sup> base. Note: for a runner approaching and rounding 2<sup>nd</sup> base determining if they should advance to 3<sup>rd</sup>, we want kids making the decision on their own if the ball is in front of them (i.e. the ball is hit to left or center field. We only want the kid picking up the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach before rounding 2<sup>nd</sup> if the ball is behind them where they cannot see the ball (i.e. right field).

Tagging up from 3<sup>rd</sup>. We don't want the coach yelling go. There is too much that could go wrong (i.e. someone from the crowd yells go and the runner leaves early). We want the kid on 3<sup>rd</sup> to have his body open to the field after he gets back to 3<sup>rd</sup> base, watch the ball get caught, and then take off on his own.

Secondary lead: A secondary lead is the movement you make toward the next base once the pitcher has committed to pitch the ball home. Our objective is to create some momentum and cut down the distance to the next base in case of a batted ball or a pitch that gets away from the catcher. Work on this drill, and incorporate passed balls.

### **Pitching:**

Kids will have the most success pitching out of the stretch when first learning, but should advance to the wind-up as soon as possible.

Make sure kids have a relatively high leg kick to get to their balance point.

Make sure that kids have their foot in front of the rubber (a lot of kids will want to put their foot on top of the rubber).

From the several pitching philosophies and drills that you research, many are complicated and don't build a foundation. The following philosophy and related drills make the most sense, are simple enough for kids to understand, and offers the capability for kids to work by themselves at home. The following teaching philosophy builds a foundation for pitching success. Once this fundamental foundation for pitching is set in place, we want then build upon it with other drills (long toss, etc.).

**M** - move forward first

**E** - line up front side elbow

**G** - get to your glove

### **Move Forward First**

If you watch any major league pitcher, as they are bringing up their front leg to get to their balance point, they are actually slightly moving forward (watch this [video](#) of Justin Verlander. Notice as he is coming to his 'balance point', pay attention to his head and some reference point behind his head). This forward movement is only a few inches as they lift their front leg, but is vitally important to the pitching process. We need to have forward momentum throughout the entire pitching process for maximum velocity and proper arm movement/pitching mechanics. Those pitchers that do not move forward first tend to have the most arm troubles and injuries.

This 'move forward first' needs to be a controlled movement forward. A pitcher can't just thrust forward or leap out as this will cause the front foot to come down too fast. If a pitcher does not 'move forward first', (stays back too much), the front foot will come down closed. Either of these two outcomes will lead to arm troubles, loss of control, etc.

### Line Up Front Side Elbow

We are wasting time if we are focusing on the throwing arm because the arm path of the throwing arm is genetic. We can try to fix a kid's throwing arm motion (i.e. high cocked position, point ball toward second base), but the arm path will always go back to what is genetic/natural. We actually want to focus on the front side elbow. If the front side elbow is correct, the throwing arm will take care of itself.

We want the front side elbow lined up with the the throwing arm elbow as the front foot is about to touch the ground. Basically, we want a straight line from elbow to elbow with equal angles on each arm. Ideally, we want elbows to be the same height, but one might be slightly higher than the other. At any rate, we must have that balance. This will put the pitcher in a balanced position on each side just before front foot reaches the ground. If we are balanced as the front foot hits the ground, this balance of energy from the front side to the back side puts least amount of stress on the body/throwing arm. This balance also allows the energy system to continue forward movement.

If you look at any longer term healthy pitcher, they all line up the front side elbow, even though all pitchers have slightly different throwing arm paths.

Here are some examples of what some past successful pitchers have looked like just before their front foot reaches the ground. Notice all have their front side elbow lined up with their throwing arm elbow, even though arm slots are all slightly different.



The best part is, this is how everybody throws the ball anyway. For example, here is a 3B throwing the ball to first.



### Get to your glove

We don't want pitchers pulling their glove back to the body/hip or driving the glove back. We want pitchers to bring their body to the glove. This is because the energy system is loaded when the front foot hits. This energy moves really quick up the body (in 10th of a second). As energy is moving, we want all energy to flow up into the baseball. If we pull the glove to body, we are pushing energy away and not allowing the arm to propel forward. Again, look at the Justin Verlander video. Watch the glove to some reference point in the background. Although it appears his glove is moving toward his body, the body is actually moving toward the glove.

**These should be the only 3 things pitcher needs to focus on. The rest is natural.**

### **At bats:**

Kids will want to watch a bunch of pitches, and it will be a struggle getting kids to swing the bat. Reinforce we want them swinging the bat. It will also be a struggle getting kids to recognize strikes and balls. In practice, while doing batting practice, make sure that kids are swinging at strikes and not swinging at balls.

### **Hitting Struggles:**

Hitting – How can we get kids to make (hard) contact in games? Kids hit the ball hard in practice, but struggle in games.

### Issues:

- 1) Part of the problem is that kids have not seen this level of competition (pitching speed) or peer to peer pitching, and it will take natural time to adjust.
- 2) Kids have no clue on how to approach an at-bat.
- 3) Kids don't have the correct mental mindset, and furthermore don't know where to make contact with the ball (in relation to their body).
- 4) Some kids don't have the proper mechanics (Start hand in the proper area, quiet with front foot, hips through the zone first).
- 5) Afraid of getting hit by a pitch – some kids are scared of getting hit by the ball. We need to show

kids how to get hit by a ball so that they can defend themselves and thus feel more secure.

Points to re-enforce (without these two points kids will never make contact):

1) Kids need a YES YES YES mindset – This means that they need to make up their mind before each pitch that they will swing the bat. Kids will be able to adjust and lay off bad pitches eventually. **If kids swing at a bad pitch, coaches cannot get on the kids about swinging at a bad pitch.** Kids know that they swung at a bad pitch, a coach telling them will only discourage from swinging at future pitches.

2) Make contact with the ball in front of their body – Inside pitches need to make contact about a foot in front of their body (ahead of their front foot). Pitches down the middle need to make contact even with front foot. Outside pitches need to make contact even with middle of the body.

At bat Approach:

1) On Deck – Determine the pitchers release point. This is the spot to focus on as the pitcher starts to bring his arm forward.

2) Stepping into the box – Right before stepping into the box take a deep breath in, and then release the breath out. Take a few half swings and then get in your hitters stance as the pitcher is about ready.

3) For the at-bat – As the pitcher loads, you load, start the quiet first step

4) As the pitcher releases the ball, hips start

5) In between pitches, stay loose (half swings, etc.)

→ We care about making (hard) contact, not base hits

→ A good hitter only gets a hit 30% of the time

→ Can't think and hit at the same time – trust all of the drills we do in practice to translate to the game

How can we practice and institute the above philosophies?:

1) Drills Drills Drills: Kids cannot think about hitting during a game, they need to trust that the drills will translate to the games. As coaches do drills with the boys, continue to reinforce the 3 key fundamentals (proper starting hand placement, quiet with front foot, hips start the swing).

2) Tee work to show them where to hit the ball in relation to their body

3) Soft toss drills - instead of the traditional soft toss from the side, soft toss from out front of the player. Toss inside, middle, outside having kids make contact in the proper area (with relation to their body)

4) Teach kids how to take a pitch – while doing soft toss drills, fake a throw every now and again and see if kids start their hips. Incorporate this into live Batting Practice (i.e. throw a non-strike every now and again to make sure their hips are started)

5) Throw wiffle balls at the kids to show them its ok to be hit by a ball. In this drill, the proper way to get hit by a ball is to turn the body away and duck a bit so that the ball 'rolls' off the body.

6) Live batting practice – Most kids already hit the ball. Will start throwing the ball harder and mixing up speeds a bit for the more advanced kids. With that said, main emphasis in live BP will be how to approach an at-bat (pick up release point, deep breath before stepping into box, load as the pitcher loads, start bottom half of body as pitcher releases ball, make contact in the proper spot, etc.)

7) During Drills and/or Batting Practice, tell the kids to pull the ball. This should get their swings started earlier if they are trying to pull every pitch. Once a kid is making contact in a game

consistently, then we can work on hitting the ball where it is pitched.

*Additional Drills to re-enforce some concepts above:*

Softtoss/Tee – Bat on Shoulder to start (teaches proper hand placement to start swing) Softtoss /Tee –

No front step while swinging (teaches quiet with front foot)

Softtoss – Fake throw (teaches to start hips before swing)

Softtoss - ball from behind the hitter (teaches getting hips through the swing)

Teach them the strike Zone

**Game Situations:**

Reinforce that we want the kids thinking about where to throw the ball before the ball is pitched.

Most kids will not know the force out. You will need to incorporate game situations into your practice plans.

**Cutoffs and Relays:**

Keep it simple. Ball hit to the left side of the field, SS is the cutoff. Ball hit to the right side of the field, 2B is the cutoff.

Cutoff man should have both hands in the air, as the ball comes the player adjusts his body to catch the ball on their glove side so that they are in throwing position as they catch the ball (follow the glove when they throw) and can get rid of the ball quickly. Make sure outfielder is throwing the ball to be catchable. A good drill is to divide the kids into 2 groups, and spread the kids out (25 feet apart). Each kid in the middle will be a cutoff man and work on hands in the air, catch ball on glove side and follow glove while throwing, and then make a good throw to next kid.

Starting at the 11/12 level, we should start to incorporate the 3B/1B as cutoff men when the play is at home plate.

**Practice Plans:**

Have kids play catch with similar skill levels. Find a way to make practice fun. We want kids always moving and doing something. Baseball is a tough sport to keep kids engaged and active for an entire practice, but it is possible with some effort.