



1 PRACTICE PLANNING

1.1 THE STRUCTURE OF A PRACTICE

When designing a practice, a coach must consider many factors. Figure 1.0 – My Practice Plan outlines various questions a coach must ask themselves. Once these questions are answered, a coach must then consider how to structure a practice. A well-structured practice plan has the following parts:

PRACTICE LOGISTICS:

This section includes information about the practice including the date the practice was held, the location, the number of athletes who attended and who were absent, the total length of the practice, the support staff present and list of all team equipment required.

Coaching Tip

- Utilize parents to assist with drills. Parents can do soft toss, or place a ball on a batting tee for hitters. This will free coaches up to observe technique and provide feedback.

Note: For this coaches guide the assumption is that the team is comprised of 12 players (which includes 3 pitchers and 3 catchers). Some adjustments might need to be made to groupings if your team has more or less players.

This section also contains the overall objectives for the practice which should be discussed with players at the start of practice. This way the players know what will be done and why they are learning that skill or tactic.

Note: In the practice plans, the key teaching points have been left blank to allow each coach to select the most appropriate key teaching points for their players and team. Before the practice, the coach should review the Key Teaching Points (found in Appendix A) for the skills they will be covering that day and jot down 1-2 points that they wish to emphasize in that drill with their players.

The Introduction:

Prior to the arrival of players, the coach should survey the diamond and practice facility to ensure it is safe. Adjust the practice if needed a safety issue cannot be resolved. Make note of any issues and report them to the proper authorities. Prior to the start of practice the coach should meet with the assistant coaches or parent helpers to discuss the objectives of the day's practice and assign each person a role.

The coach will prepare the field and organize the equipment. The coaches should greet each player and talk to them about non-softball topics to relate to them as a person not just a player. This is also a good time to assess the general status of the players. (e.g. Have they recovered from the previous practice or game? What is their energy level like?)



Prior to the start of the warm-up the coach should gather the players together to quickly review the goals for the practice, what they will be learning and why it is important. The coach can also give safety instructions specific to the activities planned for the day.

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Coaching Tip

Safety considerations the coach should employ during practice:

- For any batting, bunting or baserunning drill, players should always wear a helmet.
- Coaches should institute a rule that before any player swings a bat, they must do a 360° turn before swinging to ensure no one will be hit if they swing.

The Warm-Up:

The coach plans activities or games that gradually activate the athletes and prepare them physically and mentally to effectively perform the main part of the practice. The warm-up consists of two parts: (1) general and (2) specific. The general warm-up aims to raise the body temperature until the player sweats and to allow for progressive muscle stretching (see Dynamic Warm-Up in Appendix B) to loosen muscles. The specific warm-up (designed specifically for softball), aims to prepare the warmed muscles for the types of movements the player will perform in the main part of the practice. The movements in the specific warm-up should mimic those of the main part, gradually building in intensity and range of motion.

Key components of the warm-up are:

- **Dynamic Warm-Up:** For the first 3 practices the coach will lead the warm-up to familiarize the players with the activities to be completed and the routines. Starting at Practice #4, players will be expected to arrive early prior to the actual start time of the practice and complete a dynamic warm-up (see Appendix B)). For example, if the practice was to start at 6:00 pm, players would arrive at 5:30 pm and complete a 20-minute dynamic warm-up.
- **CRASH Drills:** CRASH stands for Conditioning, Reaction, Agility, Speed and Hitting. These activities not only warm-up the players but they improve the players' physical capacities and are softball-specific to mimic actions used within the game. These activities reinforce key teaching points for various softball skills/tactics and provide another learning opportunity as well as provide for a higher number of repetitions of skills.
- **Everydays:** These are brief activities using a set routine that players learn at the beginning of the season and can be completed without a great deal of supervision by the coach. The activities mimic the movements of the main part (may even be the same activity, but at lower intensity). For example, the skills of throwing and fielding underpin all defensive skills. It is important to reinforce proper technique for these skills at every practice and during every warm-up.

A quick transition between the end of the warm-up, the explanations/instructions given for the first activities of the main part, and the activities themselves is encouraged.



The Main Part:

The coach links three or more activities together in a progressive order to teach a softball-specific skill or tactic that is appropriate for the LTPD stage, age, fitness, and ability levels of the players. The coach ensures a smooth flow of activities that are challenging for the players so that they can learn and improve while enjoying themselves. Activities and how they are organized can also help to improve players' fitness or physical capabilities. Coaches should organize activities so that players are active most of the time (i.e. not standing around or waiting in line). Players should be allowed lots of practice/repetitions for each activity.

Coaching Tip

The coach should ensure players have access to water for hydration especially on hot, humid days:

- Players should have their water bottles with them at all times.
- When there is a change to a new drill or station, the players should take water as they move to the next station or drill.

Utilize parents to assist with drills. Parents can do soft toss or place a ball on a batting tee for hitters. This will free you up to observe technique and provide feedback.

Coaching Tip

- Utilize parents to assist with drills. Parents can do soft toss or place a ball on a batting tee for hitters. This will free coaches up to observe technique and provide feedback to players.
- If you have helpers and enough equipment, set up multiple drill stations so players aren't standing around waiting their turn. Keep every player as active as possible for the entire time of the practice. This will also increase the number of repetitions each player gets during the time allocated for that drill.

Order of Activities in the Main Part of the Practice

Practices often feature several activities aimed at developing a variety of abilities. Paying attention to the order in which activities take place in the main part of the practice may increase the probability of achieving the desired goal. Below are a few general guidelines about the optimal order of activities.

- Early in the Main Part of the Practice players are not tired, so try to plan for:
 - Activities to acquire new techniques, skills, or motor patterns.
 - Activities that develop or require coordination or balance.
 - Activities that develop or require speed.
 - Then consider the following:
 - Activities to develop or require speed-endurance
 - Activities that develop or require strength
 - Activities that develop or require strength-endurance
- Later in the Main Part of the Practice players may be tired, so try to plan for:
 - Activities to consolidate skills already acquired
 - Activities that develop or require aerobic endurance
 - Activities to develop flexibility



Coaches should avoid activities and games that eliminate people because the players who need the most practice will probably get bumped first. When you plan an activity that involves opposition, pair up players with similar ability levels so that they can challenge each other, and each has a fair chance of success. This may also reduce the risk of injuries. Always make sure that athletes have mastered the fundamental skills before teaching more advanced techniques. However, it is a good idea to start developing tactical and decision-making skills early on. To do this, put your players in quite complex softball-specific situations that require them to use their observation skills, analyze the situation, and come up with possible solutions.

Game Simulations

Near the end of the Main Part, the coach should include activities that simulate game situations. This can be accomplished by using drills that have a competitive component to it or playing a modified softball game. These activities should reinforce the skills or tactics being taught in the practice. By adding a competitive aspect, players will be learning to perform with game pressure as well as having fun.

The Cool-Down & Conclusion (Debrief):

During the Cool-Down, give players some time to reflect on the practice while going through a series of static stretches and movements designed to increase flexibility and aid in the recovery (see Cool-Down in Appendix C). While players are stretching, the coach can provide some comments on the practice and give players an opportunity to provide feedback. The coach can discuss the following information with the players:

- Ask players guided questions to draw from them the key teaching points for the skills covered that day, what they learned and why the skill is important. When the coach asks questions, athletes must find an answer, which in turn increases their awareness, knowledge and understanding of the purpose of particular skills or tactics in the context of competition. Questioning creates independent athletes, by providing them with a chance to take responsibility for their own interpretations and understandings and make decisions. Questioning creates athlete curiosity as long as the coach is non-judgmental. It is also an extremely powerful means to inspire in athletes, an intrinsic motivation to learn.
- Ask what players liked and disliked about the practice and what could make the practice better for next time. Make note of players' comments and write them in the Practice Evaluation section of the practice plan to assist with practice planning in the future (see Practice Evaluation below).
- Discuss logistics for the next time the team is together:
 - Date, time, and location of next practice or game
 - Any special instructions for the next practice (wear pants for sliding practice, etc.)
- The coach should ensure that the practice ends on a positive and friendly note. Tell the players what they did well!
- The coach should try to speak with each player before he or she leaves to connect on a personal level.

The Practice Evaluation Section

After each practice review and evaluate your practice plan. Use the Practice Evaluation Section of your practice plan to record the following information:



- Drills that didn't work or were too easy/hard for your players
- Any safety issues with drills and how to counteract these issues
- If the skill was too difficult or the players were not ready to learn it yet
- If the athletes were active for at least 65% of the time allotted for each activity or was there too much standing around
- If a teaching technique did not work or worked well
- What modifications are needed for next time that drill or practice plan is used
- If the time lines were too short or too long
- What the players liked and disliked about the practice
- What to work on during the next practice

Review this information occasionally for trends and modify your practices as needed. (Also see Appendix 4.7 Practice Planning Check-list)

Total Practice Time

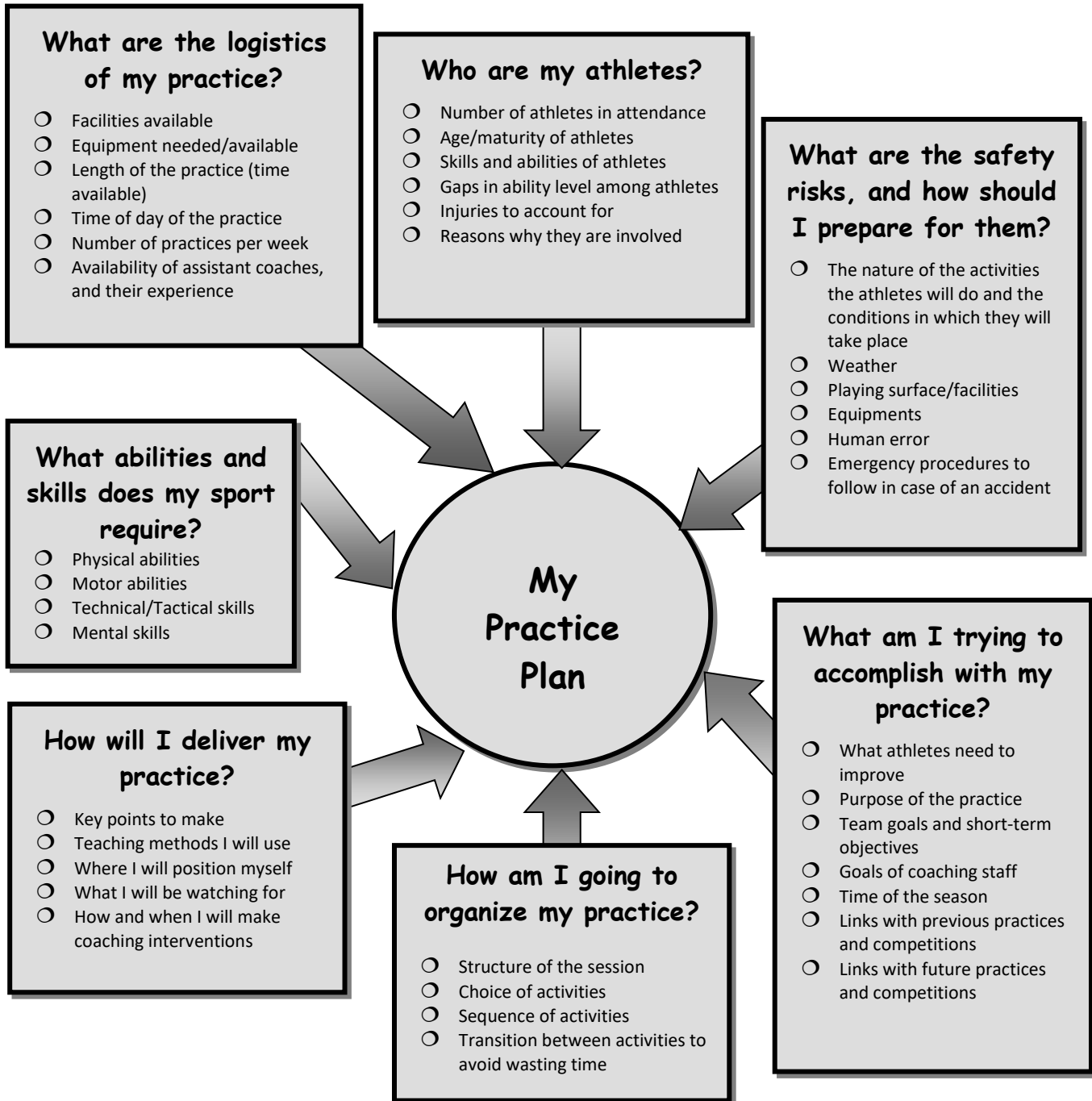
The practice plans have been created with a total time of 90 minutes (not including either the dynamic warm-up that should be completed prior to the start of the practice or the cool down and debrief which should take about 10 minutes each).

Coaching Tip

- Keep a binder filled with information about your team from your current season including copies of all practice plans.
- This will assist you next year in planning for the season. Instead of starting with a blank page, you will have a resource that you simply have to update or modify to suit your current team.
- You never know when you won't have time to prepare a practice plan, so you can always use an old one.
- It helps when teaching or reinforcing the same skill. All the work is already done as far as teaching technique, cue cards, drills, etc.
- You never know when you may be coaching that level again.
- You can pass along a copy of your binder to a beginner coach to help them learn and be a better coach.

Key Questions to Consider When Planning a Practice

Figure 1.0 – My Practice Plan (Modified from Coaching Association of Canada (2007) – Competition – Introduction Practice Planning Module)

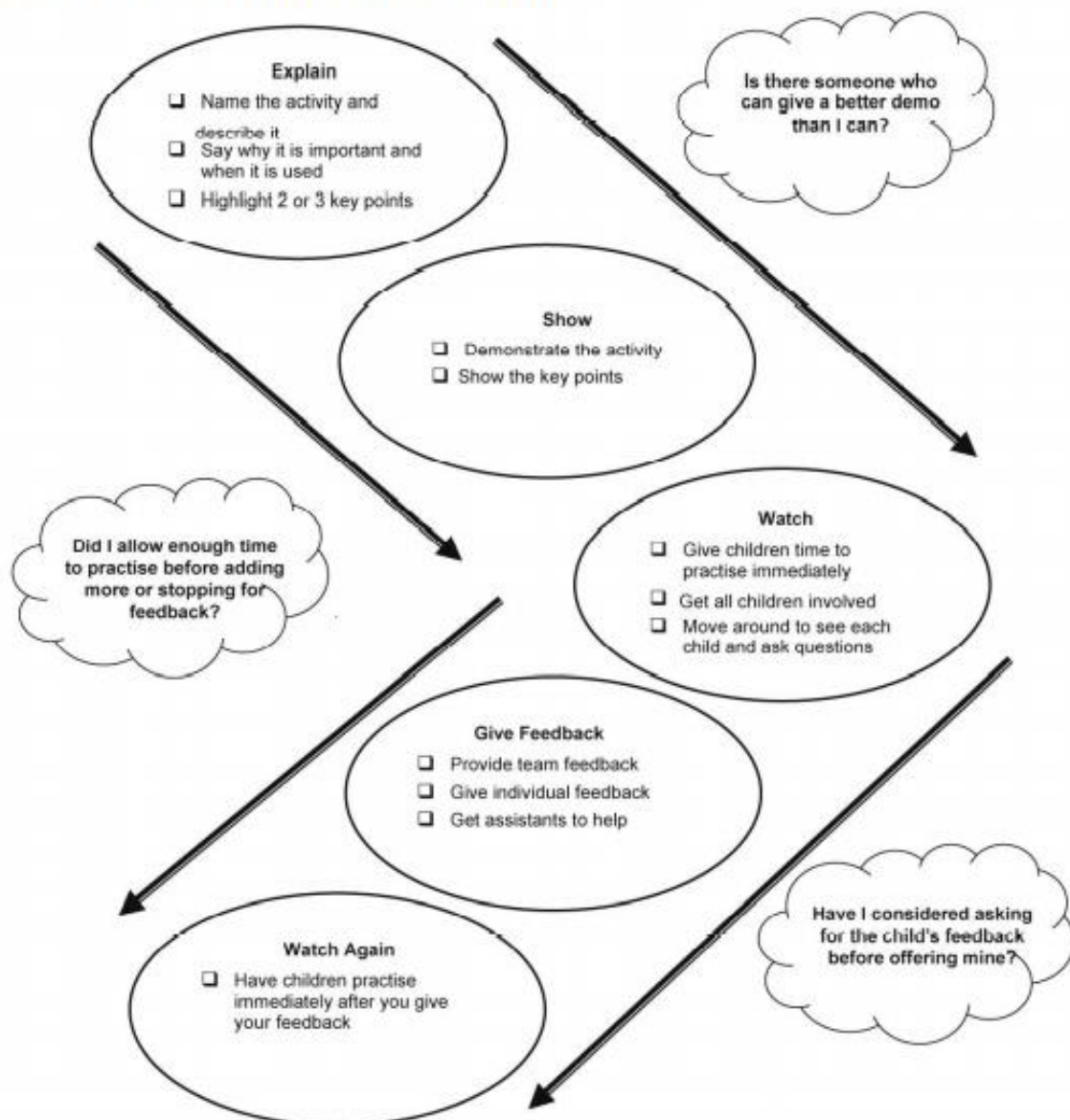


1.2 EXPLAINING AND DEMONSTRATING SPORT SKILLS

Teaching is one of the primary functions of a coach. The more effective you are as a teacher, the quicker your players will acquire new skills and knowledge, and consequently, the better your team will perform.

This section presents the information that you as a community coach need to know to explain and demonstrate sport skills to the players you coach.

THE STEPS IN COACHING AN ACTIVITY





KEY POINTS FOR EACH STEP OF COACHING AN ACTIVITY

All five steps in coaching an activity – **Explain, Show, Watch, Give Feedback** and **Watch Again** – should take place in an environment that supports learning (ie: is respectful and enthusiastic).

EXPLAIN

- Position yourself so that everyone can see and hear you. Here are a few ideas for positioning a group while you are explaining an activity.
 - If you are outdoors, make sure the sun isn't in the player's eyes.
 - Position players so that distractions are behind them.
 - Check that you can see each player's eyes before beginning.
- Be prepared (written practice plan), Speak enthusiastically, loud enough and at a pace that everyone can follow.
- Use words that the players understand.
- Start your explaining by:
 - Naming the activity.
 - Stating the purpose of the activity.
 - Listing two to three key points about performing the activity for the players to focus on
- Give brief, clear and complete explanations; avoid long explanations for things you can demonstrate. Keep the explanation brief so players can get moving quickly. Spend less than 10% of the time explaining the skill or drill.
- Ask questions to verify that the players understand what to do.

SHOW

- The main purpose of a demonstration is to create a mental picture of a movement. To promote learning, this picture must be accurate, because what you show is what you usually get!
- In a good demonstration, movements are executed correctly.
Decide who should demonstrate and what view (front, side, back or a combination of these) the players will see.
- Consider using players who can do the activity as demonstrators.
- Use the Whole – Part – Whole method of demonstration:
 - A whole demonstration of the activity. During this demonstration, direct children's focus to the key points.
 - A Part demonstration. The demonstration breaks the activity into key points, and you provide verbal cues to reinforce the key teaching points (ie: extend here, rotate, shift weight, etc).
 - Another Whole demonstration. The demonstration presents the whole activity again to reinforce the start to finish of the skill/activity.
- After the Whole – Part – Whole Demonstration ask for questions of clarification.



WATCH

- Maximize the activity time. Make sure ALL your players are active. If you have sufficient equipment and supervision, create extra stations so players are active. Avoid line ups or players standing around.
- Use formations that ensure safety and effective/efficient drills.
- Use proper progressions or drill variations to minimize fear of failure and ensuring success most of the time.
- Key points in the watching process:
 - Move around to view performances from different point of view.
 - Choose observation spots that are safe for both coaches and players.
 - Know what to look for:
 - If there are safety issues, intervene immediately.
 - If players are not on task, intervene immediate and ensure that they understand the task.
 - If players are on task but are not immediately successful, let the keep practicing and trying to succeed – encourage skill discovery.

GIVE FEEDBACK

The way feedback is delivered can have a profound impact on self-esteem. Here are some tips on how to give feedback that will help players improve their skills.

- Remember feedback comes in many forms, so your words, tone of voice, body language and facial expressions all can convey feedback – focus on the positive and with a smile.
 - Be positive and constructive, not destructive or negative.
- Use the “compliment sandwich” approach for feedback. Start with a positive, add what and how to improve (constructive negative), then finish with a positive.
- Keep it short and simple. Use simple and easy to understand language.
- Be specific when correcting a skill (i.e. “You rotated you hips well”, not just “good job”).
- More is not always better as it can lead to information overload for young learners. Avoid too many interruptions or too much feedback. The more you talk, the less they can practice.
- Don’t rush your feedback:
 - Give the learners time to figure thing out. Giving feedback too quickly can interfere with learners processing their own feedback that occurs with all learning.
 - Before giving feedback at times, ask the players to describe their own errors if they can as this will help learners get better at evaluating their own performance.
- Give feedback on only 1 thing at a time and then give more time to practice it

WATCH AGAIN

- Ensure that you move around and see everyone.
- Provide positive reinforcement to players who successfully made corrections.
- Encourage those still working on the corrections.