

Making the Leap to AA

As you'll soon discover, there's a big difference between Rookie 8 and AA. In addition to the different rules, there are some different realities.

Here are some insights and practical tips to help make your season a greater success and a more enjoyable experience for all participants.

Planning For Your Game

AA rules allow for a game to last 6 innings. In reality, you might only squeeze in 4, especially at the beginning of the season when there tends to be a lot of walks. You'll want to take that into consideration when doing your line-up and assigning pitchers.

The Importance of Pitchers

Any position can be important at some point in a game, but pitching is *always* critical. Get a pitcher who can throw strikes and one of two things will happen: s/he will get you a strike out OR allow a hit which will give your fielders the opportunity to make an out.



Avoiding the Walk-a-thon

In the early part of the AA season, when many pitchers are still learning how to pitch, there can be an inordinate number of walks. That's why we've implemented a new rule for the 2007 season – a pitching machine will be used for the first 2 innings during the first half of the AA season. The result should be more hits and more opportunities for players to field the ball.

For the remaining innings, teams will use their pitchers. And since the better the pitchers, the fewer the walks and the more action for everyone it makes sense for coaches to develop their pitchers as quickly as possible.

Pitch Counts

Little League has introduced pitch counts beginning this year, i.e. a limit on how many pitches a pitcher can throw in a given period of time. You'll need to be totally familiar with these new rules because they'll have a huge impact on your game strategy.

Basically, the rules state that pitchers 10 years of age and under cannot pitch more than 75 pitches in one game. That may be enough for a pitcher. HOWEVER, the number of pitches a pitcher makes in a game has an impact on when they can next pitch.

To learn more, visit our web site www.eteamz.com/msll and click on "Pitch Count Methodology" in the News section. It's VERY important!

Build a Bullpen

Because pitchers are limited as to how many pitches they can throw during a game, you're likely going to need at least two or three pitchers .

Remember too that you can lose a pitcher if s/he hits two batters in a game. You will also lose your pitcher if s/he throws four walks in a row (but you'll probably want to retire such a pitcher anyway).

PLUS, once the Championship Round begins, you'll be using live pitchers throughout the game.

So develop *at least* 3 pitchers that you can rely on...4 or 5 is better yet.

Starter or Closer?

If the first pitcher you put into a game is your best, you're probably not going to have him/her available for the Open Inning when there's no limit to the number of runs that your opponent can score. But if you save him or her till the Open Inning, you'll have your best pitcher on the mound during the most critical part of the game.

What about the other innings? Even if you use the worst pitcher in the League, your opponent won't be allowed to rack up more than five runs per inning.

Should Every Player Be Allowed To Pitch?

After a game or two, when your players have seen how much action a pitcher gets, almost everyone on the team will want a turn on the mound. But there are four potential problems with allowing just anyone to pitch:

- 1) A wild pitcher is more likely to hit batters. That might injure the batter. It could spook both the hit batter and pitcher during future at-bats. And it will cost your team a walk.
- 2) A bad pitcher will generate walk after walk. That will not only cost your team bases, it will put your fielders to sleep from inaction and make the game boring for everyone.
- 3) Having a bad pitcher on the mound means that a good pitcher has to play another position or sit out. That can have a negative impact on the latter's enthusiasm. It can also send the message that there's no sense working to become a better pitcher.
- 4) When your best pitchers aren't pitching, they're not getting the playing time they need to become even better.

How to Select Pitchers

Give wannabe pitchers a turn during a game and you might discover too late that they don't have the stuff. Practices are a safer time to hold try-outs.

To avoid injuries and also drive home the message that the pitching position takes work, you might have prospects try to throw X number of strikes during the course of Y throws *when there's no batter at the plate...* at a practice. Anyone who succeeds could then be allowed to try pitching against a batter.

NOTE: many pitchers find there's a big difference between pitching with no one at the plate vs having a batter standing there. They can also find it different pitching in practice vs pitching in a real game. Some pitchers can make the transition; others can't.

Pitching Development

A less talented player who practices diligently can eventually outshine a naturally skilled pitcher who doesn't practice. So just because a player doesn't pitch well during one tryout, doesn't mean that s/he – with practice – won't do much better when given another opportunity. Keep the door open to prospects and you might find a late bloomer.

Facing A Live Pitcher

Because their previous experience on the diamond involved hitting the ball from a tee and then a pitching machine, AA batters facing a live pitcher for the first time have a tendency to either swing at every pitch or swing at none. Depending on what a particular player's tendency is, provide a little guidance.

Remind walk-seekers that the goal of a batter is to hit the ball, so they should take at least one swing each time at bat. Remind those who swing at every pitch that, unlike in R7 or R8, not every pitch is going to be a good one. You might want to instruct them that they're not allowed to swing at the first pitch no matter how good it looks.

Players coming out of Rookie 7 or 8 can be intimidated by only having 3 strikes before being called out. Many develop “two-strike-it is” – once they have two strikes against them, they sit on the bat hoping for balls. Tell these batters that there is no shame in going down swinging. And when they do strike out by swinging, congratulate them heartily for at least trying to hit the ball.

Batters Getting Hit

It’s a fact of baseball life – batters get hit by pitched balls. Beyond the risk of injury, there’s the likelihood that a hit batter will become afraid of the ball and refuse to get close to the plate in future.

The best way to combat that fear is to be up-front with batters before they face their first pitch. Let them know that, yes, batters sometimes get hit and, yes, it stings but that’s part of baseball.

You can increase batter safety and reduce their fear at the plate if you instruct your players how to properly turn away from a pitch that’s going to hit them. Practice it with them until they all feel confident that they can avoid serious injury.

NOTE: if you don’t know the avoidance technique, contact Colin Thompson: 604- 929-7939

Pitchers Hitting Batters

Most pitchers feel terrible after they’ve hit a batter with their pitch. Some refuse to throw again. So it’s best to tell pitchers the facts of life on the mound before they throw their first pitch – that accidents happen even with professional pitchers but they don’t let it keep them from throwing the next pitch.

Where to Place the Inattentive or Unskilled Player

Recognizing that players join MSLL to have fun and develop their skills, the League encourages equal opportunity when it comes to fielding positions. However, there are two exceptions:

- 1) If a player is inattentive and therefore at risk of being hit by a ball while daydreaming, s/he shouldn’t be put into a potentially dangerous position, e.g. playing 1st base or catcher. (See next section.)



It’s important to let such players know the reason why they’re being denied a certain position. That way they’ll either accept their lot without complaining or will become more attentive in future. You might also

want to tell their parents, to avoid any accusations that their son or daughter isn't being treated fairly.

- 2) If a player is atrocious at catching the ball, it's best not to set that player up for possible injury or embarrassment by putting him/her at a position like 1st base which involves a lot of critical catching situations.

But if you give the player extra attention at practice, he or she might soon develop the necessary catching skills.

The Second Most Critical Position

Almost as many players want to be catchers as want to be pitchers. Because it's such an important position, some coaches concentrate on developing only one or two catchers so they can become more skilled; other coaches prefer to give the opportunity to whichever players are interested.



Either way, it's a strategic decision you'll want to make in the early part of the season.

If you have a particularly inattentive player on the team, you might be surprised to find that s/he makes a terrific catcher. Often such players are inattentive because they become easily bored without something to do. But behind the plate, they're constantly involved in the play, which can make them remarkably attentive...and good at the position.

NOTE: Although one inattentive player can shine in the catcher's position, another might not pay adequate attention and put him/herself at risk of injury. The only way to find out for sure is to give the player a try-out during a practice when you can pitch the ball gently to start with. If s/he responds, put the catcher to the real test by having one of your pitchers replicate game conditions.

Because it can be a scary position for some players, it's best not to force a player to be a catcher.

Umpires Are Human Too

The umpires at your games will have varying degrees of experience and skill. Although they'll be trying their best, they won't always succeed in making the right call.

Some will be so unconfident that they will be vulnerable to reactions from fans, players



and coaches. For example, someone shouting “nice pitch!” might intimidate a home plate ump into calling a strike. In recognition of good sportsmanship, your players, staff and supporters should refrain from such acts.

The Rules of the Game

Some of our young umpires have only had a day’s formal umpire training in addition to their playing experience. They can’t be expected to know all the rules. But coaches should know them inside and out. Studying the Official Little League Rules thoroughly is an investment that will pay off for you time and again

Challenging the Umpire

Whether it’s right or wrong, the umpire’s call stands. However, most are receptive to input from coaches if it’s presented properly.

If an umpire invokes a rule that you know is wrong or if s/he appears uncertain, ask for a time-out and then, out of earshot of players and fans, point out the correct rule. Or talk with the ump between innings. Present your case calmly, then graciously accept whatever ruling the umpire makes.

Under no circumstances should a coach berate an umpire or publicly embarrass him or her in any way.

Remember...just as it’s an MSLL goal to develop players and coaches, the League is also intent on developing umpires.

Serious Coaching

Few coaches in R8 take the game very seriously. But in AA expect to encounter the odd coach who takes the game quite – sometimes overly – seriously.

Some R8 coaches don’t hold regular practices. AA coaches, however, are encouraged to hold at least one practice per week.

The League doesn’t keep track of team standings in R8*. In AA, game scores and standings are posted on the MSLL web site. And at the end of the regular season, only the best teams will take part in playoffs.

Counting on the Parents

AA is more demanding on a coach’s time and energy than R8, so it’s very important that parents offer help with things like diamond maintenance. If you don’t receive the help you need, remind parents that they agreed in writing, when they enrolled their child, that they would offer their time to help out with the team.

Final Words

While AA is a more competitive division than R8, the prime objectives are still for the players to develop their baseball skills and have fun while doing it...because that will have them coming back to baseball year after year.

HAVE A GREAT AA SEASON!

****Starting this year, Rookie 7 and Rookie 8 have been replace by Rookie Junior and Rookie Senior. In 2007, scores and standings will be kept in Rookie Senior.***