

During and After the Game

The three-step tactical triangle approach to analyzing a game situation detailed earlier in this book creates a blueprint for you and your players to follow in making decisions during a game. While the game is in progress, you must accurately read the cues presented, apply technical and tactical knowledge on the spot, adjust the game plan accordingly and make decisions immediately. Baseball writer Roger Kahn justifiably compares baseball to “playing chess at 90 miles per hour” (*The Head Game: Baseball Seen From the Pitcher’s Mound*, 2000). The logical format of the triangle helps you slow the speed of the game and apply organized, logical thinking to any situation.

During the Game

Coaches make dozens of tactical decisions during a game. For example, suppose that your game plan calls for stealing rather than bunting. The game has reached the sixth inning, and the score is 1-1. The first batter has reached base, and the opposing pitcher has done a great job all day holding runners close. Here you should be willing to discard the game plan and bunt, and then maybe steal third as a surprise move. The ability to adjust and read the game as it develops is a critical application of the tactical triangle. The following sections show how to apply the tactical triangle to several key situations that commonly occur in games.

Removing Pitchers

One of the more difficult decisions for a coach is determining when to go out and talk to a pitcher. All baseball rules limit the number of visits to the mound by a coach during a game, so you should be judicious in making a trip. If a pitcher is obviously struggling or if you notice a major technical problem, do not hesitate to call time and go out to talk with the pitcher. Usually, you will want the catcher to join the conversation. You should not add any undue pressure here by criticizing the pitcher, especially if he is struggling. A good method of communicating during a mound visit is to start with something completely irrelevant to the situation by asking the player something innocuous like, “What did you eat for lunch today?” Although outwardly ridiculous, this question or a similar one serves the purpose of throwing the pitcher off balance and relaxing him. After the pitcher answers, you can turn the conversation over to a discussion of mechanics or tactics, but nothing that would add pressure. Focus the pitcher on the game plan—on or out in three—or on some technical skill that he may be omitting. Telling the pitcher to focus on his front shoulder or where he breaks the ball out of his glove takes his attention away from other things, like the necessity to throw strikes.

Besides knowing when to call productive time-outs, you need to plan for substitutions. Pitches need to be charted and counted throughout a game, and you should know how many pitches you are going to let a player throw before removing him. But more important than pitch count is what you see. For example, a pitcher who drops his elbow below his shoulder in his throwing motion or does not lift his leg as high as he normally does may be fatigued, and you need to recognize those signs and get a relief pitcher warming up.

Substituting Players

You must also be prepared to substitute players. If a pitcher overmatches a hitter, you should not hesitate to pinch hit for that player. If a player is in the lineup for his hitting ability but reaches base in a situation in which you need speed, you should be willing to pull that player for a pinch runner. If you lay the groundwork daily in practice and communicate the idea that players must play roles, then substitution will not cause an ego crisis.

Another way that you can eliminate substitution problems is to have all players learn a second position. Players should practice this second position often during the week. Doing this creates the belief that other players can play every position and that the team will not suffer when the “normal” defense is not in place. By working hard in word and action to make each player feel valuable, you can overcome the “me” attitude prevalent in sport today. You will know that you have been successful when the player taken out of the game becomes the biggest cheerleader for the sub. Working to make every player adept at a second position creates team depth and versatility and contributes to the team-building process.

When planning substitutions, bear in mind the talents of each player. Who is good at going to the opposite field? Hitting curveballs? Who is a better hitter or better fielder? Then when a situation presents itself in a game—when a bunt might be needed, for example—you will have predetermined which player to use to accomplish the task if the starting player is not as adept at doing so. You will want to consider several variables before substituting. What is the score? How many outs does the team have left? Is it worth exchanging an out to advance a base runner? If a runner gets on base, are the hitters that follow capable of driving

SIGNS AND SIGNALS

As we learned in chapter 9, proper communication is vital. Catchers have to communicate with pitchers. Infielders and outfielders must communicate on fly balls. Coaches have to be able to communicate with hitters and base runners without the other team knowing what they are “talking” about. A simple signal method called the touch system is easy to incorporate, undemanding to read, simple to alter on the fly yet hard for opponents to pick up.

In the touch system, different parts of the uniform are assigned to different baseball tactics. For example, touching the left arm might be the bunt sign. If a coach touches this part of the uniform, the player should try to bunt if the next pitch is a strike. The higher the level of play, the more complex the sign system, but no more than six or seven body touches should occur in a sign sequence.

An indicator sign starts the sign sequence. The coach flashes the indicator to alert the player that the real sign will follow. If the indicator is the nose, the coach will touch the nose and follow with the series of signs.

You must make it clear where in the order of the signs the real sign will be given. The real sign may be the first sign after the indicator, the second or the third. The advantage of this system is that you can change the order if you think that opponents are stealing the signs. You simply change from the first sign after the indicator to the second or third. A more complicated method is to use the first sign after the indicator in the first inning, the second sign in the second inning and so forth. When the indicator is not given, players know that no real sign will be given. On those occasions, however, players must continue to watch the coach until the sequence ends.

To cancel a sign, use an easily visible rub-off sign, usually a deliberate rubbing motion over some part of the body, normally the chest or legs.

Following is a sample set of signs using the touch system:



Hit and run.



**Take the
next pitch.**



Sacrifice bunt.



Steal.



**Suicide
squeeze.**

Several other methods of sign-giving can be used. You should not be afraid to ask knowledgeable coaches about how to convey signs. There are several good books on the market that cover the art of sign-giving, as well.

him home? You should adhere to the season plan when considering subbing. Is it time to play the percentages or throw caution to the wind and be aggressive?

You must remain flexible in making substitutions. A pitcher may be breezing along and suddenly hit a wall or lose his control. If the player scheduled for first relief would be overmatched, you will have to adjust and use someone not listed in the game plan. In these cases, you should explain to the player who was scheduled to pitch in relief why you changed the original plan. Make players aware that fluctuating game situations may force you to alter the game plan on the fly, adversely affecting their playing time. Again, openness of communication can soothe feelings.

Batting Order

Another game management issue is the batting order. You should structure the batting order so that it fits your game plan and then communicate the reasons to the players. The leadoff hitter should have a good batter's eye, not strike out often and have some speed. The second hitter should be a good contact hitter and good bunter. A left-hander in this spot is a plus. The number 3 hitter should be the team's best hitter and combine power and speed. The number 4 and 5 hitters should possess some power and be able to drive in runs; speed is not a major consideration. The number 6 hitter is the team's second leadoff hitter. He should have a good eye and some speed. The number 7, 8 and 9 hitters are usually the team's weakest hitters.

When putting together a batting order, consider these points. First, the leadoff hitter usually bats leadoff only once a game. Second, a good fastball hitter in the number 8 or 9 spot can be effective because opposing teams look at these players as weak hitters and don't want to walk them, so they throw "meat" balls. Third, rather than go with the conventional batting order, put players who can go with the pitch behind guys who get on base often.

After the Game

Although postgame activities should follow a familiar routine, your management job is not over. The time immediately after the game offers the best opportunity to teach your team good sportsmanship. This task will not be difficult if you have instructed your players all season long about what makes good character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness and caring. Win or lose, you and the captains should thank the umpires for their work. If the umpires have not done an effective job, a simple thank you without elaboration is all that is necessary. You can evaluate the ump later. Nothing positive ever comes from an angry postgame encounter.

Players should line up at home plate to shake hands with the opposing team. Coaches should shake hands with the opposing coaches. Even after an emotional game, you should remain calm and say a kind word to the opposing coach, win or lose. If a problem occurred during the game, you can handle it later with a meeting.

Immediately after shaking hands, players should assemble in the outfield behind the base nearest their team dugout for the postgame meeting with coaches. Holding this meeting at some distance from the dugout avoids the distraction of fans or parents. Before meeting with the team, you and your staff should confer

about what you will say about the game just completed. A good rule is to keep all comments positive, even in a loss. You can address the negative points in the prepractice meeting the following day.

After the postgame talk, you should make plans for the treatment of any injury. If a player should be taken to a doctor for a checkup, inform his parents. If a trainer is on site, injured players should report to the trainer or make an appointment to see the trainer before practice the next day. Only after all the preceding items are covered should you allow the media to talk to the players. Letting them interview players before completion of postgame rituals detracts from the team-first atmosphere that should prevail.

You should evaluate the game with your assistants while traveling home on the team bus or while the players are grooming the field. Because the game is fresh, this is a good time for the coaching staff to go over the evaluation rubrics presented earlier, look for specific items that need to be covered and plan the next day's practice.

Long ago, the medieval Japanese poet Basho said, "Every day is a journey and the journey itself is home." In Japan, these words strike deeply into the heart of the baseball experience. There, as here, coaches lead their teams on a daily journey toward their goals—improving, winning, excelling, making the playoffs and so on. But reaching the goal is not the end. If you accomplish all that is set out in these chapters, you will have conveyed to your players that playing the game, playing it well and playing it as a team is more important than all the wins or losses. Yes, victory can be sweet and should be savored, but that sweetness can be fleeting and turn sour if you haven't communicated the other things that matter. The journey itself stands at the heart of coaching. The journey to knowledge is the essence of the game.