

Player Development Via a Comprehensive “Minor League” System

By Dave Matuszak

When spring training begins I will step onto the diamond for my 33rd year as JV baseball coach at Yucaipa High School. During my tenure I have helped to develop a system of player development that may benefit your high school baseball program.

Far too often head coaches develop high school baseball programs that do not effectively develop the talent of their young players—particularly at the freshmen and JV levels. The lack of a comprehensive player development program is usually evident in the win-loss record at the varsity level. The solution is a complete player development program designed and implemented by the head coach and his staff. Implementation of the program relies on four key factors: communication, talent development, timely player promotion, and consistency among coaches. All of these best occur in a system modeled after professional baseball.

In order for the system to work effectively, coaches in the program must understand their role and work as a coaching team towards the ultimate goal of the program—to develop a winning varsity team. Much of our success at Yucaipa High School has been the direct result of the “minor league” player development system that we have employed for nearly three decades. We designed our program to be a high school version of a professional baseball franchise, complete with a major league team (the varsity team), a AAA team (the JV team) and an A team (the frosh team). Every player in our program understands the program’s concept and works to advance to the next level, just as they would if they were playing professional minor league baseball and working towards a career in “the show.”

The first step towards developing such a system is for the head coach to sell this concept to his coaching staff. He must convince his frosh and JV coaches that they are an integral part of the success of the varsity team. Frosh and JV coaches who are more concerned with their own win-loss records have no place in a quality program. The success of lower level coaches should be measured in only one way, the success of the varsity team. A JV coach who is more concerned about his own win-loss record than he is with developing the talent of his players is promoting himself, not the program. Frosh and JV coaching is not a proving ground for coaches with varsity aspirations. This is a difficult concept for some young coaches. To prevent that coaching behavior from surfacing, head coaches must go out of their way to share the success of the varsity team with the lower level coaches and make them feel that they are an essential and integral part of their program’s success.

Communication between the major league coach and his minor league coaches begins before tryouts and the opening of spring training. We conduct pre-season tryouts per our state association rules prior to the official start of the season. From that tryout our spring training rosters are developed for all three levels: varsity, JV, and Frosh. Players report to their respective fields for the first day of spring training where a second and final tryout period is conducted during the first two weeks of the season. Each player at all three levels is evaluated. At the end of our first two weeks (“spring training”) our coaching staff meets for a lengthy evening meeting. Each player is discussed and the minor league coaches review their evaluations with the rest of the staff. Final cuts are made at that time.

Players who are to be retained are discussed in detail and projections are made about their roles in the program for that year and in the future. In other words, a player development plan is informally made for each player and discussions about how to best implement that plan take place. For example, a sophomore first baseman is compared to other upper-classmen first basemen on the varsity level. We discuss where we project that player to play in the future and then determine at what level he should play this year in order to fully develop his talent by the time he is a senior. The overriding consideration is, "Where will that player see the most play-time this year."

Throughout the season players are further evaluated and adjustments to their placement are regularly made. Just as players are promoted mid-season from the minors to the majors in professional ball, our players are occasionally promoted from JV to varsity mid-season in order to best develop their talent or to fill a talent void at the varsity level. The process works in reverse as well. Sophomore and junior players who are slumping or who are not seeing enough play-time at the varsity level are regularly sent to the AAA (JVs) to start a game and gain back their confidence. It is important that the players feel that this move is not a demotion, but a temporary opportunity to play. Because of the nature of my JV system of coaching, our players wear their experience in AAA as a badge of honor. It is far more regimented than the varsity level, more like boot camp. My role is not only to develop fundamental skills, but also to develop sound work ethics. We have very few behavioral problems at the varsity level because I instill strong team work ethics in our JV players and weed out those who refuse to work towards their full potential. This process frees up the varsity staff to focus on teaching baseball and not wet-nursing primdonnas with little sense of team loyalty.

An essential component of high school minor league play is the development of an aggressive attitude and style of play. That can only be accomplished by eliminating the "fear to fail" in your players. Players who are afraid to fail do not push themselves to their limits and, consequently, rarely realize their true potential. When playing at lower levels, our minor league players must believe that skill development is far more important than winning. Players must not be afraid to try new things, experiment with new techniques, even if it results in temporary failure. The big picture must always be in our young players' sights—making it to the majors.

Teaching strong fundamental skills and outstanding work ethics best develops talent. These things must be instilled in our players in the lower levels so that the fine points of the game can be emphasized at the varsity level. Think of the process as a sculpture. Frosh coaches select and develop good building material and mold the outline of the object. Knocking off the rough edges, they give the object its initial shape. JV coaches chisel the rough shape into a recognizable form. Varsity coaches carve the fine lines and polish the object to its finished form—a successful varsity player. Each artist performs his role in producing the finished product.

Timely player promotion is an art-form at all levels of baseball. How often have we seen premature player promotion to the majors in professional baseball result in the player's confidence being destroyed and his career being set back for years? The same is true in high school. Great players play with confidence. Premature promotion to the varsity level often results in destroying confidence. On the other side of the coin, wait too long to promote a player and his talent does not mature as fast as his abilities will allow. There is no magic formula for knowing the right time to promote a player. It comes with coaching experience and a keen sense of timing. It is one of the best reasons for head coaches to assign their strongest coaches to their minor league teams.

There are other considerations regarding player selection and promotions. Juniors are never retained in our minor leagues (JVs). Any junior who cannot make the varsity club is cut and an underclassman is retained in his place. We prefer a sophomore to a junior with similar skills in order to allow an extra year of player development. We have an enrollment of nearly 3000 students. Smaller schools may not have sufficient players to allow that practice.

Just as major league teams promote minor league players during the late season expanded rosters, we expand our roster during the playoffs by rewarding a handful of AAA sophomores with a promotion to the majors. Not only does this offer young players valuable playoff experience, but we regularly benefit during playoff games from their specialty skills, i.e., base running, bunting, pinch hitting, etc.

Consistency among coaches is the final aspect of our player development system. All of our coaches are "on the same page." Head coach, Jeff Stout (BCA District 8 Coach of the year), makes what he wants clear and all of our assistant coaches at all levels implement his system. Like all good leaders, Jeff is open to feedback from all his coaches and he often implements the advice of his assistants. He relegates coaching responsibilities to his assistants and allows them the freedom to be creative resulting in significant contributions to the success of our program. This is particularly true in the cases of our specialty coaches. Our pitching coach, Andy Calbreath, our batting coach, Lou Sosa, and our catching coach, Joe Mead are all relied upon to develop consistency in our program. Minor league players are regularly sent to them for private specialized instruction. All coaches reinforce that instruction in order to further develop consistency.

In the end, our program is a well-oiled machine based on a professional baseball model. The success of our system can be best measured by the following varsity stats during the past three decades: 697 wins-289 losses, 17 league titles, 32 playoff appearances, 9 CIF-SS (southern California) Final-Four appearances, 5 CIF-SS Final appearances, 3 CIF-SS championships, more than 140 players went on to play college ball, 22 players drafted to the pros, and 3 former players played in the major leagues last season.

With spring training right around the corner, I hope that our model will generate some ideas worthy of your consideration. Best of luck to all of you on the diamond.

David Matuszak, Ed.D, is a veteran coach at Yucaipa High School in southern California. He has been a member of the BCA for nearly 30 years. After 18 seasons as head coach in three other sports, he remains active in coaching as a baseball assistant in order to experience the pure joy of coaching. He offers a unique perspective as both a former head coach and long-time assistant.