

# **Good Teams Are Never an Accident**

*"Individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."*

—Vince Lombardi

This chapter will take you through the fundamentals of getting started as a coach, from the draft to your first practice and parents meeting. The processes outlined in this chapter should not be taken lightly—mistakes made in the early pre-season can be difficult to correct as the season progresses.

## **The Draft**

As a new coach, the first challenge will be the annual draft of players. Procedures on how leagues draft their teams vary from league to league. Whether your league requires you to redraft your team each year or allows you to freeze players and only draft to fill the holes left by players moving on, the following techniques and tips will apply.

Drafting a team can be a daunting experience. The process often begins by taking a clipboard to the field and judging all the prospective players. Tryout methods will vary, but generally, you are asked to assign a numerical evaluation to each player's hitting, fielding, throwing, and (in the older-age groups) pitching abilities.

Rating players is highly subjective. Nevertheless, at the end of the day all the numbers are crunched, and the players are sorted in descending order from who received the highest rating at tryouts to who received the lowest rating. That list is sensitive for obvious reasons, and it is usually collected from the coaches following the

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draft. In addition to how the players were rated in hitting, fielding, throwing, pitching, and an overall rating, the list includes information about the age and prior experience of the player.

Along with the objective criteria that show up on the report, you should be aware of subjective issues as well. Knowledge of the players' families, whether they have older siblings, etc. can be used for this analysis. You should use caution since players with bad attitudes can try out and score very high. As you continue coaching, the names of players to avoid will become familiar. Until you gather the experience, you have to rely on your knowledge of the community. If your league allows your assistant coach to participate, use him. The more collective knowledge about the players you have, the better off you will be. Your assistant may know things, good or bad, about some of the players that you do not know. More knowledge is always better—especially in the subjective arena.

Leagues usually provide time for you and your assistant coach to review the list prior to beginning the draft. During that time, review the list thoroughly, and highlight the names of players you would like to have on your team. Look for the diamonds in the rough. Strong players may not always do well during tryouts. Tryouts usually take place in the early spring when the weather is typically cold, and many of the players may not have touched their bats or gloves since the previous summer. Look for the gems who did not perform well at tryouts. Use knowledge that you or your assistant may have regarding the player's athletic skills in other sports. In the early age groups, a boy who is good in one sport will typically be good in other sports. Birth order is also important—players who have older brothers tend to be advanced in sports for their age.

As you coach more, you will begin to recognize the names of players you had previously or ones who played well against you in prior seasons. Pick those players as soon as possible—don't wait simply because they are down lower in the draft. Other coaches may have made the same observations, and an observant coach might snag a player long before what his draft rating would warrant. Do not waste a first or second-round choice, but always try to draft the hidden gems prior to the round in which they would normally be selected.

Do not simply look at the overall rating—look for a well-rounded player. For example, the overall rating of a player who lacks fielding skills may be skewed due to his talent as a hitter. These situations are rare, but they can hurt you in the draft if you are not careful. Pay particular attention to the pitching rating. Pitchers are extremely important to youth baseball teams. It is difficult to win a lot of games with only one pitcher. All youth leagues have restrictions to protect overzealous coaches from overpitching young players. Make sure you draft two or three players who scored high in the pitching evaluations.

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When it gets down to drafting players that you and your assistant don't know anything about (beyond what is on the paper), you should rely on two factors: their parents and the age of the player. Another option, if permitted, would be to ask one of your own children about unknown players. It's surprising how much insight you can gain from your children in these situations. The athletes and well-behaved kids are known by their classmates.

If you know the parents and think they would be strong supporters of your team, 9 times out of 10 their child will be an asset to your team. It is important to consider who the parents of the players are when drafting your team. Parents who will strongly support your program are worth their weight in gold.

The age factor may seem like a given, but it's surprising how often coaches fail to pay attention to the age column on the draft sheets. Generally, youth baseball is divided into age brackets of two years each. Depending on the age group, a substantial difference exists between the lower and upper ages. This discrepancy is especially apparent when you get into the 11- to 12-year-old age group. If everything else is equal, go with the older player.

Once the draft is behind you, pull your team together as soon as possible and start practicing. You have the players that have been dealt to you—it's time to start forming this ragtag group of draftees into a cohesive baseball team.

## **The First Practice**

Never set out to accomplish much from a skills point of view at your first practice. In fact, do not spend any time at all *teaching* the players anything. The things you should hope to accomplish are: getting to know the players, having the players meet each other, getting a rough idea of their fielding skills, and most important, having a formal meeting with the parents.

A spreadsheet should be developed to track your players through spring training (Figure 1-1\*). Keep track of the players' pre-season attendance as well as their desires and progress made during the practices. When your players arrive at that first practice, introduce yourself and pair them with another player or two to play catch. Have one player stand near the first or third base line and have their partner in right or left field. This positioning allows the players to loosen up their arms and begin to warm up. Get them in the habit of getting in this formation as it will be the way you begin each practice and game.

\*To add a degree of professionalism to all reports and handouts, include a logo of your team mascot or your sponsor. To illustrate this concept, the figures in this book feature a logo for the fictional sponsor ABC Records & Publishing.



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As the team is warming up, walk around and have a “meeting” with each player. Introduce yourself and tell the player what you prefer to be called (i.e., Coach Smith or Coach Bob). During these meetings, get down on a knee and talk eye-to-eye with the younger players (as you coach in the teenage years, you’ll find yourself having to look up to your players). This point may seem insignificant, but it’s important that a coach does not look down on his players. By taking the eye-to-eye approach, you relieve some of the anxiety of your first meeting, and you can accomplish much more from the start.

During these first meetings, try to find out more about the players than what you were able to learn from the draft sheets. Ask them questions like, “If you could play any position, what would it be?” Note their answers on the sheets and keep them with you during the entire pre-season. Of course, it’s not always possible to put a player in his favorite position. However, you will find that players who do get the opportunity to play in their desired positions—at least occasionally throughout the year—have a much more positive experience. If a coach doesn’t ask that question, he may never know the player’s desires.

Use your one-on-one time to find out more information about the player, such as the size of his family, where he attends school, how many years he has played the game, etc. This time is valuable—never underestimate its value in laying the foundation of your team.

To find out the speed of your base runners, it is important to time each player’s run from home plate to first base and first base to second base. This exercise doesn’t necessarily have to take place during the first practice, but it should be done no later than the second practice. Log the times on your pre-season chart. Make a game out of timing their base running and do it often throughout the pre-season. Be sure to inform the players when they improve their times. Players appreciate this feedback and they make it a competition among the other players and, more important, with themselves in an effort to improve their times.

Conclude your first practice by hitting grounders. Have the entire team line up at shortstop and second base, and rotate the players who expressed an interest in playing first base to that position. The purpose of this exercise is to get a rough idea of the fielding and throwing abilities of the team. It also gives you a general feel of which players need remedial help with some of the basics.

Ask the parents to show up approximately 15 minutes prior to the conclusion of practice for a meeting. While you are meeting with the parents, ask your assistant coach to continue to hit grounders, and conclude with a team meeting to see if any of the players can name everyone else on the team. Reward anyone who can name all the players with a pack of baseball cards.

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Baseball cards are great motivators, and you will see as you read on how you can use them throughout the season. During the pre-season, you can play games such as the familiar egg toss, and the two players left would receive cards, or you can run races around the outfield with the winner getting a pack of cards, etc. Details of these and other ideas can be found in Chapter 2.

The first practice is concluded with the players getting the handout “How to Look Like a Baseball Player” (Figure 1-2)—the first in a series of handouts. Stress the importance of this handout and remind them throughout the season of the importance of appearance in relation to the way they play the game. The traditions of baseball are strong. Set standards based on this handout early on. Once left unchecked, it’s difficult to get the horse back in the barn, so to speak. Things like wearing hats backward and leaving shirttails out should not be tolerated once practice begins. As the season progresses, you may see players showing up at practices and games wearing something other than a team hat—do not allow this habit to form. If you do, your team will quickly look unkempt, which contributes to a team that is undisciplined. *Team* means that everyone looks alike, including headwear and socks. Make sure your league provides a few extras of those items for situations when a player loses a piece of his uniform.

## **The Parents Meeting**

The most important part of your first practice should be the time you spend in your parents meeting. In most cases, you will be meeting the parents of your players for the first time. As the saying goes, you only have one chance to make a first impression. Remember that concept as you prepare for the meeting—take the necessary time in preparation, and know what you hope to accomplish. You will have time as the season progresses to learn about each of your parents, so use this time to present yourself to them.

Share your coaching philosophy so they know what to expect as the season goes on. If you are new to coaching or you have not yet developed your own coaching philosophy, this book may help you to do so. Prepare a formal agenda to help the parents follow along during the meeting and to insure that you do not miss anything important that you had planned to discuss (Figure 1-3). You should also write a letter that summarizes your discussion for any parents who cannot make the meeting and so the parents that were present will have a reminder of what you discussed (Figure 1-4). You will learn that you cannot overcommunicate. No matter how many times you say something or provide handouts, certain players or parents will always claim they never got the message.

Attempt to make your handouts and communications that go to the parents look as professional as possible. This point will be readdressed in Chapter 6. Things such as creating your handouts on a computer or adding a logo from your sponsor or team to



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### **How to Look Like a Baseball Player**

- ◇ Never sit down on the field or on a base.
- ◇ Always hustle on every play.
- ◇ Always run on and off the field between innings.
- ◇ Do not play in the dirt.
- ◇ Never show your anger or frustration.
- ◇ Keep track of the score, how many runners are on base, and how many outs there are at all times.
- ◇ Do not wear your hat backward in a non-rally-cap situation.
- ◇ Always wear your hat and shirt when you are on the field.
- ◇ Do not ignore the game when you're on the bench.
- ◇ Always look neat with shirttail tucked in.
- ◇ Never let striking out or making an error distract you so that you make more mistakes.
- ◇ Never argue with the umpire, your coach, or another player.

Figure 1-2. How to look like a baseball player



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## PARENTS' MEETING AGENDA

March 3, 2008

- ◇ Introductions
- ◇ Coaching Philosophy
  - Skill Goals
  - Statistics
  - Positive Interactions
  - Game Balls
  - Punctuality/Missed Games
  - Having Fun Is #1
- ◇ Parental Involvement/Volunteers
- ◇ Team Roster
- ◇ Schedule
- ◇ Important Phone Numbers
  - Field **Rain Hotline 555-8310**
  - Coach Rod 555-4340 (H) 555-6806 (O)
  - Coach Glenn 555-7741 (H) 555-8550 (O)
  - Coach Chuck 555-3125 (H) 555-1088 (O)
- ◇ Questions and Answers

Figure 1-3. Parents' meeting agenda

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your handouts are all things that parents are probably not used to seeing from volunteer coaches, and it adds an element of credibility and professionalism from the start.

Consider the things that you want the parents to buy into and present them at this meeting. For example, some coaches make it a practice to pray before each game. Being sensitive to our politically-correct society, let the parents know if you prefer to do something of this nature, and ask that they talk with you if they have any objections. Promote discussions on these topics so the parents do not feel like they have been railroaded into anything.

This meeting is the ideal time to present opportunities for parents to get involved in your season and lay out the general job descriptions for each position. Some positions are essential for your team's success while others are simply important. Every job needs to be taken seriously by the individual who steps up. Job requirements and even the jobs need to be changed as your players get older. The following jobs are generally what you should attempt to fill during the early part of the pre-season.

*Assistant Coach:* A good assistant coach should complement you in many ways. Therefore, it is important to identify your strengths and weaknesses before you recruit for this position. For instance, if you are not administratively gifted, look for an assistant who has administrative skills. Or perhaps you know a parent in the league who played baseball in college and would be strong in the skills department. Search out the right person for this position. Most leagues allow you to pair up before the season starts, which gives you more of a pool to draw from than simply having to choose from the parents of the players you drafted. Selecting your assistant before the draft also guarantees that his son will be protected in the draft. You will be working very closely with this person for the entire season, so make sure that your personalities do not collide. The spirit of team must be a top priority and having a pair of coaches who are compatible makes the job of forming a team much easier.

*Second Assistant Coach:* Most leagues allow for one head coach and two assistants. The job description of the second assistant should be patterned based on your skills and the skills of your assistant. For instance, if neither you nor your assistant coach are skilled in the pitching area, you should try to find a parent with pitching skills—not always possible, but always a good thought. Having an official second assistant position keeps the question of who will be in the dugout clear to some zealous dads on game day. However, at practice, you should always welcome any dad or mom who is observing to take an active role if they are interested. Five or six coaches doing different drills is not too many, especially in the early pre-season practices.



March 3, 2008

Dear Parents,

Thanks for allowing your son to participate with our team in this year's Babe Ruth Baseball League. Our team is sponsored by ABC Records & Publishing, a contemporary Christian music company with headquarters here in Brentwood. Our biggest goal for the year will be that your son has a fun and rewarding experience. In doing so, we hope to create an environment in which your son will increase his knowledge of the basics and fundamentals of baseball with a heavy emphasis on sportsmanship, attitude, and integrity.

As adults, we all need to set an example that will assist the other coaches and me in accomplishing our goals. The umpires will be professional TSSAA umpires, but they will most likely make mistakes in their calls—please refrain from making issues of their mistakes. We all want to win games, but we also want to ensure that we set good examples and role models for our players while having as much fun as possible.

This year, Brentwood Babe Ruth Baseball is trying something new. For the first time ever, last year's 14 year olds who played for ABC are returning to ABC. In years past, new drafts took place each year. Prior to this year, teams were broken up and rebuilt with new players annually. We have eight players who played on the team last year as 14 year olds. I want to reassure all new members of the team that there will not be preferential treatment to the boys who played last year and that **no position** has been assigned and/or guaranteed to anyone. The coaching staff will make those determinations throughout our pre-season practices and games.

In regard to our season, our first game will be **Monday, April 21** vs. Team #3. Following spring break, we will try to practice three times each week. In addition to fields #2 and #3 at Granny White Park, we will have the use of the field at Cumberland Presbyterian Church on Franklin Road in Brentwood. Since the church field is actually a softball diamond, we will use that time to run drills. Our season will consist of three games against each of the other six teams.

Every season, it seems that our teams really come together as we come down the home stretch in June. If at all possible, I encourage you not to schedule vacations prior to the July 4 holiday. This will ensure that our team will stay together through the tournament. There's nothing worse for a team than to be broken up prior to the tournament due to a trip to "Gram and Pap's" by one of our key players. Thanks in advance for considering this as you make your summer plans.

During the course of the season, you may at times become overwhelmed with the amount of handouts your son brings home. At nearly every practice or game, I attempt to

Figure 1-4. Parents letter

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give him the next two or three scheduled events. Knowing 14- to 15-year-old boys, I realize that they do not always give their parents what they're supposed to. Ask them to make sure they relay all handouts on to you. This is how we will communicate with you throughout the season. I will always attempt to copy these handouts on a very bright paper stock so that when they get crumpled at the bottoms of the players' baseball bags, you can spot them more easily.

As we begin our games, the boys will receive complete stats. I will put a three-hole punch in these, and I suggest that you get a notebook to save them. The boys usually treasure their stats and like to keep them. I use them to establish my lineups and generally manage the team. I've also found that the boys are motivated to improve on their statistics. Please encourage this practice, and ask them how they're doing from time to time.

Glenn and I have been coaching the Birds together now for eight years, and Chuck has been a part of our team for four years. We do have winning seasons with a winning percentage of over 70%. We will be attempting to have win number 100 this season. Winning, however, has never been our primary focus. Our first wish is that the boys have a fun environment to learn baseball skills and to give them the opportunity to excel. You will hear your son talk about a team goal that we will have this year, challenging every member of the team to get to and win the championship game of the league. Over the past nine years, the Birds have won five league championships and have been runner-up in another three seasons. There was only one year that we were not either champion or runner-up. The boys refer to that as the "purple year," since that was the only year we switched from our traditional teal jerseys to purple. I'm not the superstitious type but...this year, we're taking purple out of our uniforms altogether. Winning the championship will be our major goal, but along the way we will have many other goals—some individual and some team-oriented. I ask for your encouragement in this process.

We have been blessed over the years with a tremendous amount of parental support during the games and as volunteers. We have the following opportunities for assistance:

**Scorekeeper:** This person will assist in the coaching duties during practices and pre-game warm-ups. This is a key member of the team and critical to my ability to deliver statistics to the boys. You are not required to be at practices or even every game. I do ask that this person assume responsibility for finding someone who can keep the score book for us if he/she can not be at a game.

**Team Mom/Dad/Couple:** This person will be responsible for coordinating various activities throughout the season, such as team parties, trophies (if we do not finish in a position that we will win trophies—only division winners, tournament winners, and runners-up win trophies provided by Brentwood Baseball), etc. This is a key position and critical to the formation of the team.

Each of these positions will have the responsibility throughout the season, which begins April 21 and runs until the end of June. I'd like to try to have a team sleepover if some brave parent is willing to step up to the challenge prior to our first game.

Please contact me if you are interested in helping us out. You can reach me, Rod Huff, at 555-4340, or during working hours, my office number is 555-6806, or I always have a cell phone with me 555-7233. My assistant coaches are Glenn Hill, who can be reached at 555-7741, and Chuck Webb at 555-3125.

**PLAY BALL!**

Figure 1-4. cont.

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*Dugout Coach:* This position is no longer needed after the 12-year-old season, and the person who steps up is often referred to as the bravest volunteer on your staff. They help keep the batting order flowing, keep gloves and hats matched to kids and, in general, act as the disciplinarian of the dugout. You should refer to them as Coach, and reinforce whatever action they deem appropriate to keep order in the dugout. They are a key member of your coaching staff.

*Team Mom or Dad:* This position is delegated the responsibility for all nongame activities such as: coordinating team parties, organizing game snacks, etc. When recruiting for what may seem like a mundane position, you should establish how important this position is—it is a key element in pulling a group of kids who don't all know each other together as a cohesive team by the conclusion of the season. A weak team mom or dad can make for a long season for the players and the coaches. You do not want to have to worry about details such as parties and snacks as they distract from your main focus of molding and shaping baseball players.

*Scorekeeper:* As you will see as you dig deeper into the coaching philosophy presented in this book, a great deal of importance is placed on this position. Statistics are *the key* to successfully managing your team and the major differentiator between you and the coach in the opposing dugout. A fairly decent knowledge of baseball is required for this job. Actual scorekeeping shorthand can be taught, but the intricacies of the game must be well understood. You should also attach another important element to this position. It is this person's responsibility to keep the official score book at every game, and if he cannot make it to a game, it is *his* responsibility to find a substitute.

Always stress in your meeting that the most important thing for the season is that everyone, including the parents, have a fun, rewarding experience. This pre-season meeting sets the tone and creates a respect level for you as head coach that must be established early in the process. You are the coach and they are the parents—each has a role in a successful season on and off the field.

Communication is a major key to the coach receiving parental support. This meeting should be the first—not the only—communication that you have with your parents. Communication is so important that much of Chapter 6 will be dedicated to the topic.

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## Wrap-Up

Your first job as a coach will be to draft your team. Remember to carefully review the information your league gives you from the tryouts. Do not look at just the players' rating totals on the sheet—players may be gifted in one aspect of the game and weak in others. A high total could easily be skewed.

When in doubt, draft the older boys in a league that spans a two-year window. Draft for parents as well as players. If you are aware of a supportive parent, you will tend to find their children easier to coach. Children with athletic older brothers are a fairly safe bet.

Be careful, take your time, and solicit all the information that is available to you, including asking your own children for input if allowed by your league. You will be surprised by how much they can help in the process.

Take extra time in preparing for your first practice—you have only one chance to make that first impression. Have a well-organized, professional meeting with the parents toward the end of your first practice. Share your philosophy, and leave them with a letter that restates everything you discussed with them. This step is the first, and possibly the most important, step in setting up good lines of communication with your parents. Managed properly, your parents will be a big support to you during the season. Examine Chapter 6 for more information regarding keeping your parents on your side.

Now, you have drafted a team that runs the gamut from gifted athletes to first-year players. Your work is cut out for you as you take this ragtag group of players and mold them into a team—ideally a team that they are proud to be a part of. Teams that are good are not created by accident. Creating a strong team takes the *seven Ps of team building*: planning, preparation, persistence, patience, perspiration, practice, and principle (Figure 1-5). The following chapters will touch on all seven of the *Ps*. Following the steps outlined in this book will result in the formation of a team that your players and parents will recall with fond memories.

With your first practice and your first parents meeting under your belt, it's time to get started. You are off on the right foot, but your work has only begun. The next chapter takes a look at the basic structure of your pre-season plan and practice structure as you prepare for that all-important first game.

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## The Seven Ps of Team Building

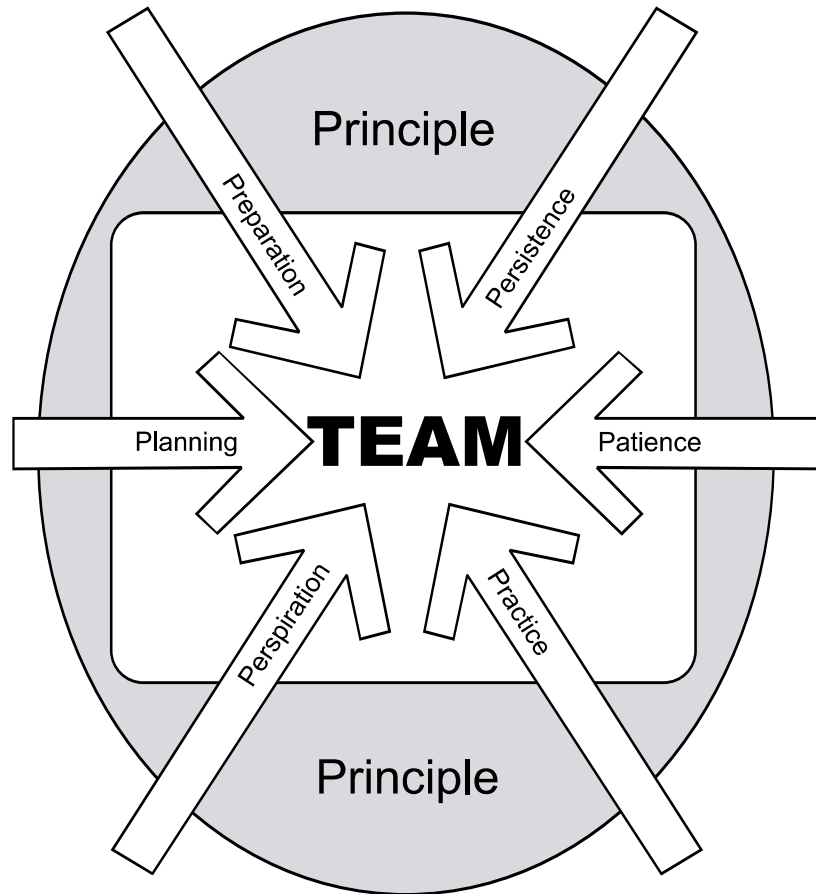


Figure 1-5. The seven *Ps* of team building

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## A Draft Accomplishment

As you start a new season, you never know exactly what is in store for you and your team. I'll never forget one season when we had come down to the final draft choice, and we were in a position to have the last pick. In other words, we were *stuck* with what was left. The better players had been chosen and it came down to our last selection. We had a choice to make between a player who had a reputation as being a troublemaker and a player who was entering into his first season at an age when other players had six to eight years of experience playing baseball.

It appeared to be trouble either way for me—a troublemaker or a player who would require a lot of extra work. The coach before me drafted “trouble,” leaving me faced with the challenge of teaching baseball basics, including the fundamental rules, to a 14-year-old young man.

I was concerned about the extra burden of working with a player who was starting his baseball career so late compared to the other players. Our coaches and even the other players accepted the challenge and welcomed Paul (a fictitious name, as are all names in this book) with open arms. What had concerned me as a possible detriment to our team turned out to be a rallying point around which our whole team focused. As the season got under way, the parents joined our efforts by cheering for Paul as he came to the plate. It took several games, but Paul finally made contact at the plate and reached first base on a bloop single to right field. The team and the crowd went crazy—you would have thought we had just won the league title. Spectators from other games at the park were looking over to our field to see what happened.

One of the fondest memories from my coaching experience is seeing the expression on Paul's face as he hustled down the first base line. He was beaming from ear to ear—a moment I still hold precious. Always try to make the best of any situation that comes your way. Paul turned into a reliable hitter in our lineup and was a wonderful addition to our team. It took patience and the assistance of all the coaches and the players to chip in and help Paul. However, the time paid off and Paul became a welcomed addition to the Birds that year.