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Hit a decent infield

Coach and Athletic Director, March, 1999 by John Herbold

Let the world know your team is well-coached and knows what it's doing

Why don't beginning baseball coaches go to a professional or a good college game or prep game and learn how to hit a proper infield" says veteran Houston Astro Scout Doug Deutsch.

Exactly my sentiments. There is a right way - and a wrong way. As Yogi says, "You can observe a lot by watching."

Baseball is so much "Monkey see, monkey do," that it pays to watch the smart monkeys. See what they do and then do it yourself. That's what I did when I started out and knew nothing about how to handle a fungo bat or where and how to hit the ball.

Deutsch, whose father, Jack, was NCAA Coach of the Year in 1977 at L.. A. State, believes that "it's all right to have a few of your own wrinkles, but that infield should be pretty standard."

He sometimes got so disgusted with his team's infield performances that he had his players do it WITHOUT a baseball! His famed "phantom" infield royally entertained visitors at the College World Series.

The Diablos were so good at their pantomime that the NCAA had to recant its prohibition of the act when 15,000 fans at the CWS in Omaha began stamping their feet and screaming, "We want the Phantom! We want the Phantom!"

Our own personal opinion of infield is based on "observation" down through the past 40-something years.

CHOOSING A FUNGO BAT

DON'T just go on the field with a regular baseball bat to hit your pre-game infield practice. Nothing will give you away quicker as a rank amateur!

DO find a fungo bat you like and can handle. Some like metal, some wood. For hitting to the outfield, a longer "outfield" fungo is usually best and also works well in the infield. The shorter infield model has limited leverage.

Louisville Slugger made two different fungo types which I like, both of which had their origins in Japan. One is the "Billy Hunter" model and the other the K-100, but only if you can find the willow model. The current one, made out of ash, is very heavy.

The Hunter has a rather thin handle that tapers into a 10-inch bulge at the hitting end, giving it great balance and added centrifugal force. I call the BH-model a "piece of furniture" because it's so well-made.

The willow K-100 (if you can find one) looks almost like a regular bat, but is much lighter. With its large hitting surface, it makes the average fungo hitter look "good" and the good one "great," especially on pop flies.

Incidentally, on windy days when the ball is difficult to catch or at twilight when baseballs are hard to see, it's a good idea to deviate from your regular infield practice and hit some infield pop-ups to all areas.

PRACTICE

DO seek some help from experienced fungoers. (The late Jimmy Reese was so good that he could pitch batting practice with his fungo! Now go out alone, free from distractions, and teach yourself.

As the traffic cop replied when asked by someone how to get to Carnegie Hall; "Practice, practice, practice."

DON'T hit cross-handed if you can avoid it. It will limit your leverage, although some coaches have become very proficient hitting this way. But it's a hard habit to break.

DO toss the ball about an arm's length away so that you don't get jammed. It takes a while to realize that most fungo bats are longer than regular bats.

DON'T wander out on the diamond hatless, in shorts, with a string of keys dangling from your belt. You're a coach, look the part.

TIME LIMITS

DO get a stop-watch and run mock infields to see how much time it takes you to accomplish what you wish to do within the allotted time limits. Some leagues allow only five minutes, some ten, even 12 or 15. But find out.

You don't want to be embarrassed by having the opposing coach, the umpires, or the P.A. announcer order you off the field. The less time you are allowed, the more you have to condense everything or eliminate some things; i.e., you may have time only for infield - letting another coach hit the outfield elsewhere.

DO time your double-plays also. Note: To be realistic, you must complete the DP in 4.4 seconds or less. Too many coaches hit nice, easy, slow bouncers that look pretty, except that they are taking 4.5 to 5.5 seconds to complete, which won't double many runners.

We tell our outfielders that if they can't throw home on one bounce from 300 feet, then they can't throw.

Remember, make your practices look like games and your games look like practices.

NUMB OF PARTICIPANTS

This is up to you, as well as the time allotted.

Coach Rod Dedeaux of USC always had multiple players at all outfield positions while working in two or three catchers, an extra infielder "swing-man," plus alternating first-sackers. They were all part of "the team." (It's tough enough being a sub without being left out of pregame.)

I remember at college when our #4 outfielder trotted out for pregame outfield only to have our coach yell, "Where do you think you're going?"

Solution: Let the starters in the infielder session take two rounds of "one" and a single session of "two," with the reserve infielders backing them up. Then have the subs take a single round of "one" and ditto for a solo round of "two."

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