

# Why Fundamentals Matter At All Levels

**By Cal Ripken, Jr.**

Every time an athlete steps up to a higher level - whether it's going from a recreational team to a travel team or from 60- or 70-foot bases to a regulation-sized diamond - he or she must leave behind some skills and replace them with new ones in order to compete successfully.

Kids who play baseball year-round might play in 70 or more games during a calendar year. When young athletes play one sport that much, they naturally learn what it takes to be successful at their particular level of play.



Because of this, they may develop shortcuts or methods that will not be effective when they move up to the next level, and these habits may become so ingrained that they are hard to break.

Let's look at the backhand as an example. Young players who compete on smaller fields can eliminate the backhand by learning how to round and charge a groundball. They perfect this skill, and it can help them succeed on the smaller diamonds.

However, because they have done this so often and had success with it, when they move up to a bigger field they often are unwilling or unable to let go of that skill and learn the backhand.

It is imperative for players to use the backhand on regulation-sized fields for balls that are hit in the hole between third and short, because doing so allows them to get rid of the ball more quickly, which can be the difference between an out and a hit when such a long throw is required.

Another example is hitting. A pitcher who throws 80 miles per hour from 46 or 50 feet can get the pitch to home plate even more quickly than the hardest-throwing big league pitchers can.

Young hitters learn to cheat and stride before the ball is even released. They shift their weight forward early and learn how to hit with a short, flick swing.

Hitters who do this over and over really struggle when they move to the bigger diamond. They tend to shift their weight too soon and are susceptible to off-speed and breaking pitches.

Good hitters are able to let the ball travel before deciding how to attack the pitch. Players who have played hundreds of games as front-foot hitters really struggle to make this adjustment.

---



# Why Fundamentals Matter At All Levels

Keep an eye out for bad habits. You may not notice them at first because a player is doing a great job hitting the ball or getting outs on defense, but if you watch closely, you may discover that some of your players are practicing bad habits that might work at their current level, but may also inhibit their ability to continue playing successfully at the next level.

Say your shortstop makes a great play in the hole, but avoids going to the backhand by rounding and charging the ball like the above example. Even though he might get the out your team needs, you should take note and bring that play up as a coachable moment during your next practice. Explain that he did a great job making a tough play and getting the out, but demonstrate how a great backhand will make him even quicker.

As a coach, it's your responsibility to think about the overall development of your players and how best to prepare them for the next level.

The fundamentals aren't just a starting point for players, they're the foundation that supports long-term success.

---