

HOW TO MAKE THE HIGH SCHOOL TEAM

Article # 1

This is the first article in our series that focuses on helping the young player make his high school baseball team. These articles were put together using ideas and suggestions from high school coaches, from around the country.

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Every year, thousands of youth leaguers try out for high school baseball teams across the country. If you want to make the team, you must display the advanced skills and knowledge demanded by the high school brand of baseball. Described below are eight (8) skills that prep coaches evaluate when selecting their freshman squads.

Hitting

1) Bat control. By the time you reach high school, you should be able to drive a pitch on the outer half of the plate to the opposite field. Prep coaches emphasize hitting "behind" a runner at first or second base in order to move him over into better scoring position

2) Bunting. Major league teams can rely on power hitters to generate runs. Most high school teams, however, must manufacture runs with well-placed singles and sacrifices. Be able to lay down a sacrifice bunt, and be willing to give yourself up for the sake of the team. Know the difference between a sacrifice and a drag bunt, and the appropriate game situations for using each technique.

3) Selective Swings. Hitters must be patient enough to wait for a quality pitch to swing at, and be ready to "pull the trigger" when one comes their way. Know when to take a pitch, e.g., late in the game when your team is behind. Be just as skilled at taking bad pitches as you are at hitting good pitches!

Pitching

4) Location, Location, Location. What do coaches and scouts rank as the most important tools of a successful pitcher?

- a) Location
- b) Movement
- c) Change of speeds
- d) Velocity
- e) Mental Toughness

High school coaches look for hurlers who spot their pitches and force batters to hit the ball to certain parts of the field. Consider the example of an opposing team who has a runner on

second-base and a right handed batter at the plate intending to hit "behind" the runner into right field. In this situation, pitchers should be able to jam the batter low and inside so he'll ground out to the left side and prohibit the runner from advancing.

5) Straight Change -Up. A good change-up will disrupt a hitter's timing and make him more tentative about taking a strong cut at any pitch. A pitcher with only a decent fast-ball can still excel at the high school level if he has a straight change that is 8 - 12 mph slower than his fast ball. But, he's got to be able to throw it for strikes.

6) Pick Off Moves. Most prep teams have at least a couple of players who run fast and aggressively try to steal bases. Of all the defenders, the pitcher has the primary responsibility for shutting down the other team's running game. High school pitchers should be able to shorten the leads of base runners and stop walking leads by sporting an effective pick off move to all three bases.

Defense

7) Cuts & Relays. With runners on base, outfielders must be able to hit their cut-off men, infielders must be able to turn a quick relay, pitchers must be able back up third base or home, and catchers must be very vocal about what to do with the ball.

Beyond being able to master the mechanics of cuts and relays, position players also need to demonstrate good judgment about which base to throw to.

8) Throwing Accuracy. Pitchers are not the only players who must throw strikes. From a distance of ninety feet or more, be able to throw the ball within a couple of feet of any target. Generally, throws need to arrive about chest high so the receiver can see the ball clearly.

Use the following drills to increase your chances of making the high school team. As you practice, recreate actual game conditions as much as possible

Hitting:

Take batting practice off live pitching or a machine, hit balls off a batting tee into a net or on the ball field, play soft toss, pepper, etc. During each hitting drill, focus your efforts on developing three specific skills:

- a) Swing only at strikes
- b) Hit every pitch either back up the middle or to the opposite field
- c) Hit line drives

Play ball games where you close off half the field. In other words, if you pull the ball it's an automatic out. Hit to the opposite field and it's a fair ball. Improve your ability to hit line drives by incorporating smaller balls and thinner bats into your hitting drills. For example, hit tennis ball or, better yet, golf ball sized wiffle balls using a Tesca "SwiftStik" or a "ThunderStick".

Bunt for points.

Place four cones on the infield. Divide your squad into groups and score a point for each bunt you lay down between the cones.

Tracking Pitches:

Stand in the batter's box against live pitching and watch the ball all the way into the catcher's glove. Don't swing! Just practice picking up the ball out of the pitcher's hand. Simulate real game conditions; catcher wears protective gear, you hold a bat, wear a helmet, get into your proper batting stance. Watch fast balls, change-ups, compete against yourself to see how quickly you can predict whether the pitch will be a ball or a strike.

Pitching:

Pitchers should deliver pick-off throws down near the bag about knee high. To practice accuracy of your picks, throw into a trash barrel laying on the ground at each base. Most runners are picked off before the ball is even thrown. Quick feet and getting your arm into throwing position are the real keys to a good pick move. Perform "dry" picks (without a ball) in your basement or backyard. Concentrate on your foot speed. Start in the set position and move into a throwing stance as fast as you can. Hold the throwing position for one second each time. Repeat this drill five minutes a day. Pitch to a target. Draw a strike zone with chalk on a brick wall make a portable strike zone out of plastic pipe, or hang an old tire. Once you are proficient at throwing inside the target, work on hitting the edges and throwing barely outside the target.

Defense:

During games, utilize the seconds between each pitch to complete the following sentence, "If the ball comes to me, I will" Formulate a pre-pitch plan on where to throw. Then picture yourself carrying out your plan with a positive result.

Every time you throw a ball, throw to a specific spot on your partner's body. Assign point values to different spots, for example, three points for the head and one point for the chest. First player to reach 21 points wins. Draw a red line around the center of a ball and across the four seams. Place the tip of your middle finger on the center line. Play catch and try to make the red line spin straight up and down. Create a perfect "6 to 12" backspin with your middle finger coming down through the center of the ball.

Play long toss. Give yourself two points every time your partner can catch the ball without moving his feet.

The bottom line for improving any baseball skill is to repeat the proper mechanics over and over until they become habit.

Whether you're pumping weights, fielding grounders, or rehearsing mental concentration drills, there is no substitute for quality repetitions.

Good Luck!