

Afterword

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Keeping It Simple

Our dad, Cal Ripken, Sr., used to say that baseball is a simple game played with bats, balls, and people. Okay, so we've beaten you over the head with that sentiment throughout this book, but that's because we don't want coaches to lose sight of this basic truth. To some, Dad's statement might sound like an oversimplification, but after years of playing the game at the highest level, we couldn't agree more.

If you take a walk to your local park or recreational facility and watch two youth baseball teams preparing for their games, we guarantee you that 99 percent of the time the team that plays catch the best before the game is the one that will win. The better we play catch, the better we play baseball. Even the most complicated plays in baseball, such as the double play, can be broken down into simple parts. When a ground ball is hit to the third baseman with a runner on first, the third baseman must catch the ground ball and then make an accurate throw to the second baseman. The second baseman must catch that throw and then make an accurate throw to the first baseman, who also must catch it. That's it. When broken down, a double play is five simple parts: a catch, a throw, a catch, a throw, and a catch. Five simple parts, but they must be precisely executed in combination to complete the more complicated play. This can't happen if the fundamental building blocks are not in place.

To play baseball effectively, a player must be able to throw the ball, catch the ball, and hit the ball. Sounds easy, right? Well, we all know it's *not* easy. However, from a developmental standpoint, improving should be simple. When it comes to teaching the game, we have developed a philosophy called the Ripken Way. The most important component of the Ripken Way is . . . you guessed it: Keep it simple.

Sometimes, when people spend money to send their children to one of our camps, that one statement, "Keep it simple," causes concern. So many parents these days look at their children, even kids as young as 4 or 5 years old, as future big leaguers. They see baseball as a ticket to fame and fortune, and they want to find that magic potion to make their kids better than everyone else's, whether it's by trying an unproven, gimmicky training aid or searching for some kind of secret approach to help their child hit .400. We live in a world of infomercials and quick fixes. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to becoming a better baseball player.

When we say "Keep it simple," all we're saying is that if your 8-year-old catches a ground ball correctly, he's doing it in the exact same way that his favorite professional player does it. The difference is that the pro has done it the right way thousands of times in his life, maybe hundreds of times every day. After your child fields the ball, he should move his feet and throw the ball to first base, just as his favorite player does, although not quite as well. Once again, the pro has made thousands of throws to first base, so his body responds naturally in that situation.

Your child might not stand at home plate the same way his favorite pro stands. The stance is just a starting point, and there are hundreds of acceptable stances in baseball. Certain components of the swing—weight shift, stride, level swing, follow-through—must work together for a hitter to be successful. The same hitting drills we do at camp—Tee Work, Soft Toss, Short Toss, and so on—have been performed by the professional player over and over every day for the better part of his life. He still does them every single day. Every big league hitter does, or he's not a big league hitter for very long.

Practicing the basic fundamentals over and over is the key to becoming a great baseball player. There are no magic shortcuts or products to enhance a player's chances of playing at the highest level. The only way to make it to the big leagues is through hard work and repetition of the fundamental building blocks until the routine plays become truly routine.

You don't learn to make great plays or handle bad hops by practicing diving stops or taking ground balls on a bad field. Similarly, you don't learn to hit breaking balls and off-speed pitches by hitting a steady diet of curveballs and change-ups. Once you have developed your muscle memory to the point that the fundamental movements become second nature—so that you don't have to think even for a split-second when catching a routine ground ball or hitting a fast-ball—your body will automatically learn to adapt to the nonroutine plays and the tricky pitches.

The game of baseball becomes complicated fast enough. There's no reason to complicate it more. If we give a young player too much to think about during a game, the result can be paralysis. Instead of reacting naturally to a batted or pitched ball, he or she thinks of all the possibilities and then can't function to the best of his or her ability.

Catch the ball and throw the ball. See the ball and hit the ball. When Dad coached third base for the Orioles, he would frequently yell, "See the ball come up to home plate and hit it." That was his way of trying to relax the hitter. Don't overcomplicate. See the ball and hit it.

The time to give a player advice about his swing is not during a game, when the pitcher is throwing as hard as he can and trying to trick the hitter by making the ball move all over the place. No, the time for advice is when players are performing hitting drills in practice. Each simple drill can help a hitter develop one part of his or her swing to the point that the body performs that portion of the swing automatically come game time.

For example, when players at our camps hit off a batting tee, all we want them to focus on is their weight shift. We tell them that to generate more power they have to "Go back to go forward." That's all we talk about when it comes to tee work. For soft toss, the catch phrase is "Loose hands, quick bat." Gripping the bat loosely in the fingers allows the wrists to unlock and creates more bat speed. When we do short toss from the front, we toss the ball to the outside part of the plate and direct players to "Use the big part of the field." We want them to keep the front shoulder in, stride toward the pitcher, and hit a hard line drive.

Players do drills at a pace much slower than game speed and with nothing on the line. This allows coaches to suggest corrections and adjustments that can be practiced and perfected without worrying about a game situation or a pitcher with a mystifying breaking ball. Once each individual drill is ingrained in a hitter, adjusting during a game becomes much easier. All of the simple, individual components fall into place and allow the hitter to develop an effective swing.

Hitting drills also can be used to troubleshoot. When a coach notices a player doing something wrong at the plate during a game, he can make a note of it and find a drill to correct the problem at the next practice.

When it comes to fielding, we rarely hit a ground ball during our camps. By rolling ground balls over flat surfaces to players, we can control the speed and the hops, allowing players to learn how to field properly without worrying about taking a ball off the lip or nose. Once players feel confident in fielding ground balls the right way, they'll

automatically do it in games. If a player gets in proper fielding position every time during a game, he's much more likely to be able to handle a bad hop or make an extraordinary play than a player who has not developed the proper fundamental base. We have used this teaching method with players of all age levels, including college players, and we've had great success. This is not to say that coaches should never hit ground balls to their players. But we suggest allowing players to become extremely comfortable fielding ground balls before you hit balls at them.

Can repetition of the basic fundamentals become boring for kids? Sure. That's where a coach's creativity comes into play. Turn simple drills into contests. Encourage players on your team to compete against one another. Have players shoot for "world record" scores in every drill. Competition increases focus and maintains interest. If you put your mind to it, you can make your drills so much fun that you have to force your players to stop practicing.

"Keep it simple" doesn't mean that our method of teaching is too elementary for advanced players. It only means that by practicing the fundamental skills over and over, players will naturally develop the comfort level, ability, and muscle memory they need to make difficult and complicated plays. If this method is good enough for the pros, it's good enough for the kids on your travel team or in your high school program, too.

Remember what Dad used to say: "Practice doesn't make perfect. *Perfect* practice makes perfect." It's human nature to complicate things. Coaches often want to combine two or three drills into one. They want to come up with flashy ways to warm up in hopes of intimidating the opposing team. Keep in mind that the more complicated you make things, the more likely you are to confuse your players or create situations they can't handle. A complicated drill with several parts that incorporates multiple fundamentals might make it difficult for your players to execute any one part of the drill effectively. This means they're not developing any specific fundamental skill to the fullest. Breaking the complicated play down into its fundamental elements and working hard to perfect each element before combining them into one complete action is the best way to facilitate "perfect" practice.

Coaches who are unable to explain why their players should do something a certain way are less likely to get their message across. You don't know how many times I hear at camp, "My dad says I should do it this way." Well, if I can show players the *proper* way to perform a skill and then tell them why they should do it that way, they are much more likely to attempt the proper method. If I just shoot back

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a knee-jerk reply like “Do it my way because I said so,” those kids are likely to revert back to their father’s way as soon as they’re out of my sight.

The last two elements of our philosophy—“celebrate the individual” and “make it fun”—are aimed at keeping young players interested in the game. If you look around the sporting landscape, other sports promote the individual styles that players bring to the contests. This is attractive to young people. The Major League baseball season is 162 games long, so some of the enthusiasm you see on the field early in the season or during the postseason isn’t always present during the dog days of August. Maintaining an even keel mentally is important for big league players, but unfortunately that sometimes makes the game seem dull to some people. We want our kids to let their personalities and excitement show on the baseball field.

Many baseball instructors are set in their ways. They teach that their way of approaching the game or a specific skill is the only way, almost as if they’re trying to clone young players. Baseball is very much a mental game and a game of adjustments. There are deceptive pitches, bad-hop ground balls, and wind-blown fly balls. Baseball is also an individual team game in which each player must execute his or her



Make it fun to keep kids interested in the game.

individual assignment for the good of the team as a whole. Every time a pitcher throws a pitch, every time a batter stands in the box, and every time a ball is hit at a fielder, the player involved in the play is under pressure to perform. A player must be relaxed and comfortable enough to make the necessary adjustments and handle the pressure. Players who aren't comfortable with a particular approach and are simply trying to please their coaches are going to be less successful than players who are relaxed and familiar with what they're trying to do.

Yes, certain fundamental approaches are necessary in the game of baseball, but there's a lot of room to let players be themselves and stay within their comfort zones while playing the game. Every player doesn't have to stand the same way at home plate. Every ready position doesn't have to be exactly the same. Every throwing motion cannot be identical. One of the most important aspects of coaching is the ability to observe a player's results before tinkering with his or her approach. Let players be themselves.

Finally, making the game fun is extremely important to the health of the sport. Kids love to play games. That's a fact. As long as they are getting the opportunity to play, they're going to be happy to a point. But a group of kids can play 100 games, and if they lose all of them or aren't competitive in most of them, that's not going to make for a fun season. The happiness they felt in game 1 is going to disappear by game 10. Kids are sponges. They have a thirst for learning and improving. Getting better is fun. But kids won't get better if they don't practice.

As we've shown you in this book, practice can be as much fun as real games. If your league plays only games, with no practices, please approach the commissioner or board of directors and explain the importance of practice. If you are told that kids won't have as much fun practicing as they do playing games, suggest that you can prove them all wrong. If they won't change their minds, find an open field and hold practice there. We've given you enough options to run a practice almost anywhere.

You have seen the reasons behind our instructional philosophy, but, once again, everything starts with keeping it simple. Let common sense prevail. On the field, design simple practices that are fast paced, that keep your players moving, and that can be done in small groups. Provide a safe, comfortable environment. If kids get bored, turn a drill into a contest. Teach simple fundamental building blocks that once perfected can be combined to execute complicated plays. Speak to the kids in simple terms; demonstrate skills so they understand them. Don't try to do too much teaching during games or while players

are in the process of hitting or pitching. Use practice time to dissect mistakes or problem areas that you've noticed during games. Keep the five simple goals for your age group in mind, and if your team accomplishes them, consider yourself a successful coach.

Off the field, the formula for being a successful coach is just as simple. Be a positive role model. Explain your methods and philosophies. Be organized. Keep the lines of communication open throughout the season. Be polite, professional, and courteous. Maintain an even temperament during games and practices and when dealing with players or parents. Make sure that you enjoy yourself and that everyone involved with the team feels your excitement and enthusiasm for the game.

Nothing is more rewarding than seeing a group of young people you have coached improve and enjoy themselves. Too many coaches are frustrated by a lack of knowledge and a lack of resources. We hope that the methods and the information presented in this book help make your coaching experience rewarding. We hope you can develop in your players the passion we share for the game of baseball, because the future of our game depends on our ability to excite the young people of today about this wonderful sport.