

Academic Learning Time and Baseball

On summer evenings, I used to umpire baseball games in a league for children 8-10 years old. Over the years I marveled at the large amount of learning that took place, as disorganized groups of romping children turn into the two teams that would put on an excellent display in our annual "world series." I also noticed that by observing the practice patterns of the teams I could predict early in the season who the winners would be. Difference in final performance could be predicted almost completely on the basis of "Baseball Learning Time" (BLT) – an athletic equivalent of Academic Learning Time (ALT).

Imagine that two teams have managers who can practice for only an hour a day twice a week. Imagine that the coach of the *Giants* lets the players run around, throw rocks, and push one another around for 10 minutes after the scheduled start of practice and also spends ten minutes at the end of practice nagging the players to put away the equipment. The manager of the *Cardinals*, on the other hand, arrives on time, starts practice promptly, and cleans up at the end of the practice within one minute by assigning each player a specific responsibility. Both teams have equal scheduled time, but the *Cardinals* have allocated considerably more time to baseball than the *Giants*. If the teams are roughly equal in other respects, such as player achievement and managerial skill, the *Cardinals* will beat the *Giants* by the end of the season.

Now imagine that the *A's* practice for an hour five days a week. If they start and end their practices efficiently, their greater BLT should enable them to surpass the *Giants* and *Cardinals* by the end of the season. However, the coach of the *A's* is a nice fellow who doesn't know much about baseball. When his players bat wrong or throw incorrectly, he offers no corrective advice. At each practice he pitches batting practice to each player for five minutes. The fielders practice fielding only if the ball is hit to them, and when this happens, they simply throw the ball back to the coach. The players on the *A's* have very little engaged time (since they are just standing around for 55 minutes out of each hour) and are often performing at a low rate of success (since the coach is incapable of correcting them), and they will probably squander their opportunity to surpass the *Giants* or the *Cardinals*.

Now imagine the *Reds*—the ideal baseball team. They practice efficiently five times a week. The coach arranges events so that everyone is almost constantly involved in an activity related to practicing or improving baseball skills. When a player makes a mistake, the coach quickly explains the nature of the problem and gives the player a chance to perform the skill correctly. In addition, he gives the players specific strategies for practicing their skills between practices. The *Reds* are making excellent use of the BLT, and they will very likely surpass all three of the other teams by the end of the season.