

A stylized illustration of a softball player in a batting stance, wearing a helmet and holding a bat. The player is rendered in a dark red color with white highlights on the uniform and shoes. The background is a light red circle.

GAME SENSE COACHING - Age Specific

Key tips to help coaches understand the characteristics and needs of players in certain age groups and applying this to a Game Sense style of Coaching.

What is Game Sense Coaching?

We all know we have to learn the basic skill set for each sport we partake in, but are we actually learning it correctly if we aren't applying any of the demands a game would put on us?

Coaching styles that focus on a more skill-centered approach where techniques are often taught in isolation, don't require players to think about its relevance to game situations and sometimes bear little resemblance to the skill required in an actual game.

In a nut shell, Game Sense Coaching is the use of games or match play situations that trigger technique and pressure = skill. In other words "practice like you play".

Skill Centered Approach Example: Throw and catch a ball back and forth in a straight line to your partner, does focus on the basis of the skill.

Now let's add some pressure....

Game Sense Approach Example: Receive a ground ball at 3rd base or shortstop, throw to 2nd base for a force out, using correct footwork, change the angle to make an accurate throw to first base for a possible double play.

Another Game Sense Approach Example: When in hitting training, the batter is allowed "10 strikes" before rotating out. The strike zone needs to be called and if a player chooses to swing at balls or leave the strikes, they simply have less quality time in the batter's box.

With the Game Sense Approach, the coaches' role is to create situations where problems need to be solved and decisions need to be made. The important key here is to develop a player's ability to make decisions.

What could I include in my coaching session under Game Sense?

- Think of small sided games that mimic aspects of your softball game
- Alter the dimensions of the playing area
- Alter the number of players in defence
- Alter the time of the game
- Add or remove rules to make it more complex
- Make sure all individuals are being utilised and are kept involved at all times

Game Sense Coaching encourages players to become more tactically aware and make better decisions during the game, as well as beginning to think strategically about the game.

Middle Childhood: 6 – 8 years

Encourage fun and learning together.

- **Key = fundamental movement paired with play, fun, participation and interaction with others.**
- Be a positive coach. Provide positive feedback to the individuals and to the group as a whole and encourage fairness. The players at this age group are seeking a coaches approval and thrive on feedback and praise so make sure you reinforce good skill and ask easy 'athlete centered questions' to encourage players to complete a movement or series of movements differently (allow player to think) rather than you instruct them that they have done something wrong.
- Run game sense drills that you can demonstrate simply with limited verbal instructions. Visual cues are important in all age groups. This particular age group has a lack of spatial awareness and time so be patient and make games simple.
- Make sure your game sense activities are easy to understand and fun as these young players can get distracted easily. Make sure everyone can achieve some kind of success in the activity. While players are easily distracted they are also easily motivated and the players will like trying out new simple fun ideas
- Rotate the roles as specialization is not yet crucial – give everyone the opportunity to play and give players the variety and opportunity to try out all the positions, especially in softball/teeball as this allows them to be more involved and interested. Remember at this age group this isn't much difference between boys and girls level of ability and they enjoy playing together. This is where the 6 aside tee ball with a rotation policy comes in good use
- Make sure your session incorporates a variety of different softball situations.
- Because this age group has short bursts of high energy allow for frequent short rests (or water breaks to encourage them early on to keep hydrated during physical activity). This age group has the tendency to recover quickly so make sure you have lots of small game sense games or even stop an activity half way through and ask some 'athlete centered questions' allowing them that recovery time
- Don't underestimate your players. They will learn best if the skills you want to teach them are mixed into the drill – which is the whole reason behind game sense coaching. Less standing around and talking about a scenario and more hands on action and decision making in an exercise. The players will learn the skills you are trying to teach them in a fun, social environment and due to the nature of game sense will also increase their decision making skills without being aware of it.
- Because this age group is still developing and mastering their fundamental gross motor skills, make sure your lessons incorporate general skill development such as agility, balance, coordination, speed, running, jumping, throwing, striking, catching etc.
- Vary the playing size, you may find an activity that isn't working well, will do excellent by modifying the playing size

The big 'no no's'

- Do not fitness test
- Do not have a training session that is run over a prolonged period of time (1 hour is a decent amount of time)
- Do not provide negative feedback to a player
- Do not leave out any player
- Do not make game sense activities difficult

Late Childhood: 9 – 12 years

Encourage fun and learning together.

This age group sees some players reaching puberty; they are becoming more independent, sometimes moody and are capable of developing leadership skills. They react badly to being compared to others in their group as this is a form of failure, but they are easily motivated and will happily take risks and try to adapt or find ways around rules to achieve success.

- Make sure you include a high level of activity in your game sense activities along with rotation of positions– give everyone the opportunity to play and give players the variety and opportunity to try out all the positions, as this allows them to be more involved and interested.
- In your activities you can start to take a step away from skills that are purely fundamental based and start incorporating activities or situations that are more sport specific
- Continue with modified versions of the game, but modify the playing size to make the activity harder or easier
- Make sure that your activities will mimic situations in game play and allows players to have the opportunity to increase their decision making.
- Competition becomes more important at this age group, but make sure that you encourage the way to win is via improvement not luck. This age group understands that if they work hard or try harder there is the likely hood that they will improve which means success
- Players at this age group like to have a coaching environment that is consistent and fair and is safe emotionally; environmentally and physically. Make sure you don't compare players to each other and allow a lot of positive feedback to all individuals. Remember to acknowledge not only the more able players, but the players that are showing some kind of improvement for their own level of ability. You can start to incorporate role models (if you have some available) to motivate players,
- Make sure your sessions have a big variety keeping them mentally and physically stimulated
- This age group starts to show leadership characteristics, so incorporate leadership into your game sense activities and make sure you change the leader allowing all the opportunity to take on this role and feel accomplishment
- Encourage your athlete centered questioning and get the players to learn through mistakes they have made and giving them the opportunity to take on challenges
- Remember to make your drills/activities/games one where players need to cooperate with each other and reinforces the enjoyment with playing with others. This age group likes group activities and to feel included in a group.

The big 'no no's'

- Don't allow players to feel isolated and bored
- Do not provide negative criticism or compare players abilities
- Don't take away any decision making opportunities

Remember

- Players will start to identify or want to be in groups with their friends or those of the same gender

Early Teenage: 13 – 16 years

We can Start to incorporate **Technique + Pressure = skill.**

- Emphasis on Game Sense related activities or Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) where you have game situations that directly mimic situations in normal game play
- Because they are having large growth spurts, body shapes are changing, motor skills are becoming more refined and they are capable of anaerobic and aerobic activity, your coaching sessions should include injury prevention, skill development and work on their physical fitness and strength
- As a coach you must be aware of burnout – so make sure your sessions include breaks and do not extend for prolonged amounts of time.
- This age group are capable of complex problem solving so include tactics in your modified games
- modify the playing size to make the activity harder or easier
- Allow for a high degree of decision making under a physical environment. Start to apply the pressure that they would face in a real game situation in your game sense activities, making them take on informed decisions
- Because there becomes the issue of differences in maturity among the genders, and players are finding a sense of 'who they are' (personal identity), and are seeking acceptance, make sure that your sessions are structured, praise often and make sure you are firm but fair
- You can start to express and set goals in terms of success to the group
- If certain individuals are talented, keep them in the group so you don't isolate them, but increase the challenges they face.
- Allow players to take ownership and responsibility for their playing actions and decisions. Start to explain the importance how decisions players make affect the game and those players around them directly.
- Start to increase the amount of 'athlete centered coaching' questions you ask. Ask questions of the players to promote thinking and developing ways to counteract problems. These questions need to be open ended (how, what, which, who, when, explain) and not ones that would create a yes/no answer.
- Encourage players to self analyse and self reflect
- Provide encouragement. Remember that at this age group they might not be aware of their ability or talent.
- Provide role models if you are able to do so locally, or if not, look up suitable regional or national role models and provide information to players via video clips, articles, websites, or if possible get them in to chat.

With this age group, your session might run like this;

Warm up, → game sense game, → athlete centered questions (what are we trying to achieve), → play practice (more games maybe a full styled game), → cool down

Late Teenage: 17 – 19 years

Essential to incorporate **Technique + Pressure = skill.**

Provide the players the opportunity to evaluate what they are doing while actively participating in a modified game situation which is fun and relevant and specific to the sport, through a number of tools such as internal feedback, observation, trial and error, and encourage them to have the attitude that they can change their performance on their own.

- Teaching Games for Understanding or Game Sense related activities are still important for this age group but they need to mimic the pressure and direct situations they might face in games. Technique + pressure = skill
- This age group can start to achieve advanced levels of complex skills and movements so it's important to start allowing for an increase in precision in a players performance.
- In your coaching sessions practice strategic approaches such as taking ownership and responsibility and high amounts of decision making. Encourage players to self analyse and self reflect. Self evaluation, self correction and motivation can be strong tools that you can use in your sessions.
- As players have advanced through the ranks they will now have specific training (fitness/ position etc) to the position they are taking up in the game. It is still important that they encompass training for other positions as well but focus will be put on what they are required to do specifically in a individual situation as well as in a group situation.
- You can start to incorporate strength, speed and endurance components to the training activities you run.
- Because they are able to learn new skills and concepts and can relate to their past experiences, you can give them clear expectations of what you would like to see them achieve both individually and as a team.
- They are able to assume major responsibility and leadership roles, encourage this in your training sessions
- You can put both short and long term goals into your season, and obtainable targets can be made collectively with the team (as a coach don't dictate the desired outcomes, engage the team and individual)
- Make modified games challenging, exciting and increase the amount of 'athlete centered coaching' questions you use and put a focus on tactical and outcomes. Ask questions of the players to promote thinking and developing ways to counteract problems. These questions need to be open ended (how, what, which, who, when, explain) and not ones that would create a yes/no answer.
- Encouragement is still a high priority for you as a coach.
- Modify the playing size to make the activity harder or easier. Add technical components to the activities you do and encourage trying new skills – if they fail it doesn't matter, but if they try it in a game situation (or a modified game situation) you will see that they are taking their game further and increasing their options and decision making.

With this age group, your session might run like this;

Game related warm up (incorporating fitness and skills you will need in a game), → game sense game, → athlete centered questions (what are we trying to achieve, why etc), → play practice (more games maybe a full styled game or focus on a certain aspect of a game in a modified game situations), → athlete centered questions → effective cool down → debrief & homework