

Best Practices for Running Player Tryouts: Youth Sports Organization

The typical local youth sports organization, such as a Little League Baseball or Softball charter, holds tryouts to help determine which players join which “house league” team. With some variations based on local traditions, league rules, and how many players are available to assign to teams, here are guidelines for conducting tryouts.

- 1. Consider the best way to refer to “tryouts.”** Recognize that especially at younger ages, players may be nervous. Even the word “tryout” has overtones that may strike fear in the heart of a young athlete. Some leagues instead conduct a “skills assessment.” After all, if every player will be able to join one team or another, and nobody will be cut, why not ease fears?
- 2. Introduce the tryout procedures to all players and parents assembled at once.** It will help put everyone’s mind at ease to know that league management is organized and has put forethought into the tryout process. Having everyone hear the same message reduces potential concerns of favoritism or other issues that can creep into the eventual player draft or other method of assigning players to teams.

While introducing the tryout procedure, use welcoming, encouraging language that helps relax players, so they can perform their best. For example, “Thank you all for turning out for Anytown Sports. I can see that we have a lot of eager young athletes, who are ready to perform their best and have a lot of fun. Our coaches and other volunteers are here to help, so don’t be shy about asking any questions along the way.”

- 3. Do your best to be perceived as treating the players equally.** This might mean giving all of the players nametags (maybe even one for their front and one for their back!). Then do your best to refer to all players by name (not just the ones you know already). Some people prefer to have the players wear numbers during the tryouts, and if you go this route, make sure to refer to all of the players by their numbers, as players and parents will certainly notice if you are referring to some of the athletes by name (and others by number). Finally, do your best to have each athlete get about the same number of repetitions/playing time during the tryout.
- 4. Make the tryout procedure as simple as possible.** While players and parents are still assembled, point to various stations where players’ skills will be assessed. Each station should be clearly labeled with numbered signs or color coding. So, the assembly leader might say: “If you are in the A group, start at station A. Coach John will demonstrate the skill we want to see, and when all of Group A is finished, Coach John will direct you to station B.”
- 5. Clearly explain the process that occurs at each station.** Again, doing all you can to relax players, explain exactly what you want them to do. Give specific instruction in fundamentals of the skill you want to see demonstrated, and then explain how you want them to get back in line or move off to the side after completing their turn. It helps to run a demonstration using players of about the same age (maybe one year older) who already are familiar with how that station runs.

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Best Practices for Running Player Tryouts: Youth Sports Organization, continued

- 6. Reassemble to explain what's next.** When all players have completed all stations, reassemble players and parents, thank them again for participating, congratulate the players on their efforts, and let them all know what to expect next, such as a web site posting or phone call telling them of their team assignment.