

COACHING at MIRACLE LEAGUE

Being a coach at Miracle League is a unique opportunity to help provide special-needs youth a chance to play baseball.

The primary goal of Miracle League is to provide our players with a great baseball experience in a safe and secure environment.

As it is when coaching any youth baseball, good communication with players' parents is an essential and on-going task.

Unlike other youth baseball, Miracle League operates with a "Buddy" to assist each player. These important young volunteer Buddies are assigned to your team and they need your support, advice and encouragement.

And you have the Miracle League staff that is committed to assist you.

Following is a closer look at each of the critical elements of Miracle League.

- **Maintaining a safe environment**
- **Providing a great baseball experience**
- **Communicating with parents**
- **Communicating with buddies**
- **Communicating with the Miracle League staff**

Maintaining a Safe Environment

Everyone involved with Miracle League must be constantly vigilant of the safety of each and every player and Buddy.

As in any baseball game there is a lot of action...bats being swung, balls being hit, balls being thrown, runners circling the bases. Like most young people, Miracle League players can be easily distracted. As a coach your task is to help the ML on-field staff and Buddies remain constantly aware of what is happening or what may happen.

Some examples:

- The strength of batters varies and a few can hit the ball very hard. In those cases the staff and coaches need to warn Buddies to “protect your player”. That means the Buddies, field staff, and coaches need to insure every player – on the field or in the dugout -- has someone in a position in front of them and alert to deflect a batted ball.
- Most Miracle League players love to bat, get a hit, and score. They do that every inning of a ML game. And around home plate things can become hectic. Anxious batters could start practice swings while runners are scoring or while Buddies are still preparing the batters-box for them. Buddies need to be reminded to focus on their batter until everything is organized and safe. And Buddies should never stand behind hitters that can swing a bat.
- Prior to a game, players and buddies from both teams warm-up on the field. Players love to throw balls, swing bats, and run. It can result in a somewhat chaotic situation. Each team needs to be sure that a qualified assistant coach is on the field observing warm-ups and addressing unsafe situations.

These are only a few examples of potential safety issues. Be alert at all times. Be aware of what is happening, or about to happen, on the field and in the dugout. Never hesitate to talk to Buddies and players when you observe any potential unsafe situations.

Providing a Great Baseball Experience

As a coach you have the opportunity to help provide your players with a memorable baseball experience. Players may have watched baseball on TV or in-person. They are wearing their hat and jersey, and they are ready to play. What they now experience is what every major leaguer in baseball today loves to do. Move towards the batter's box with their name being called over the PA system and the crowd cheering. Then they get a hit, circle the bases, and score as their name is again announced and the crowd cheers them on. It is a special ML experience.

As a coach there are things you can add that can enhance a player's day at the field.

- Be at the park early...30 minutes before your game. Greet your players as they arrive. Be sure they get a Buddy and move to the field.

There will also be Miracle League volunteers in the area who are there to assist with player and buddy sign-ins, but your presence is needed. You need to speak with all parents. Building trust is a key component in coaching their child. It will also give you insight into how your player may perform differently on any given day.

- Consider a team-cheer before the start of the game. Gather your players and buddies in a huddle for a simple "one, two, three...go Pirates!"
- Be organized when you get to the park. Have a batting-order ready and positions to play on defense each inning. Sitting for long periods on the bench or standing on the field on defense are not most player's favorite things to do – so help keep things moving along.

We know there may be "no shows", late arrivals, batters who are not ready to hit, or other issues...but be flexible and keep the batting process moving even if, at times, you cannot follow your original line-up.

It is also very important to try to keep track of the last batter each inning. That player hits the inning-ending-home-run. Try to rotate players each inning and every game to provide all players an opportunity to enjoy being the last batter in an inning.

- Talk to your batters as they leave the dugout, encouraging them to "get a big hit" and welcome them back after they score with a high-five and a lot of well deserved praise.
- Encourage player and buddy participation in the mid-game singing of "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" and doing the "Chicken Dance".

- Finish the game with another team cheer. Tell your players what a great job they did. Then, in the spirit of good sportsmanship, take time to have your players meet along the base line to tell the players on the other team “good game”.
- If possible, consider a team-party after the final game of the season. Each season the league provides player trophies or medals...a good reason for a post season event. There may be a team parent(s) who would be willing to plan and organize a team-party.

As a coach you can set the stage with players and parents. And you have the opportunity to provide each Miracle League player a wonderful baseball experience. You will then also provide a player-parent with great memories of their child enjoying that experience. Use your imagination and enthusiasm.

Communicating With Parents

All youth baseball coaches need to understand the challenges their players face. A Miracle League coach has a bit more information to process for each of his/her ML players.

We do not expect nor do we want coaches to position themselves as medical experts.

But, prior to the season coaches do need to talk to parents and, in laymen's terms, gather information about any limitations with which we must deal. Understand that this can include emotional challenges as well as physical challenges.

Prior to each game coaches again need to talk to parents about their player. Player's emotions can fluctuate from week-to-week and also during the game. Talking to parents can provide you with important insight to how your players are feeling on a given day.

Also remember that within the ML organization there are people with extensive backgrounds with special-needs children. If you feel you need more details, these people can discuss with you any technical issues.

As a minimum your parent communications should include the following:

- As soon as you receive the list of your team's player call their parents. Welcome them to/back to the team. Ask if they have any questions. Ask them to explain to you in layman's terms their child's condition and any limitations you should know. *If you need more detailed explanations, help, or advice -- talk to the Player Coordinator.*
- Be at the field 30 minutes before your game in order to greet your players and their parents. Check with the parents for any additional information that might affect the player's activity in today's game and be sure the player's Buddy is also aware of these issues.
- If a player has any unexpected issues that occur during a game, talk to the parents and discuss the issue. (If the issue caused any danger or potential danger to other players or Buddies be sure to immediately relay that information to Patty Saragusa or to the Miracle League staff.)
- After the season you need to seek input and suggestions from every parent. Pass along any pertinent information to the Miracle League staff.

Make your communications with parents frequent, open and two-way.

Communicating With Your Buddies

Buddies play an important role in ML baseball. They range in age from middle school students to graduating high school seniors. Some have been with ML for eight or more seasons and others are first season “rookies”.

These Buddies are great kids and we are lucky to have them, but their abilities and experience can vary widely. Your vigilance is needed to spot those who could use a little assistance with their player. Your support and assistance will mean a lot to a Buddy.

Some things that will help:

- When you receive the list of your team’s buddies contact them and welcome them on-board for the season.
- At games, visit with your buddies both before and as the players are arriving at the field. By example, show the Buddies how to seek information about player game-day status from parents.
- During a game make sure all Buddies know how to “protect your player” when a hard-hitting batter is at bat. There are a range of sizes and physical abilities. Some may have never played sports and will need a little more help when “protecting” their player.
- Watch for any of your Buddies who are struggling with their player. Get involved and make suggestions. If necessary, ask a On Field Board Member for suggestions.
- Take every opportunity to encourage and thank Buddies for their effort...especially following each game.
- As a coach you can be of more help if you understand what is expected of each buddy. Try attending one of our one-hour pre-season orientation meetings for all Buddies. It will permit you as a coach to more clearly understand ML’s expectations for all Buddies in the coming season.

Our Buddies are just as important to Miracle League as our players. Understand what Buddies are expected to do. And also remember that Buddy involvement in Miracle League often changes the lives of Buddies in very positive ways. Help them enjoy the experience by communicating with and encouraging them.

Communicating With the Miracle League Staff

The ML staff is at the games to help stage the games and support you, your players and your Buddies. The members of the staff have a passion for ML. Most have many seasons of experience. They will be willing to help you with any questions, issues, or ideas that you have about your team or ML in general.

All of these people have been involved in this undertaking since Miracle League's "Day One". Your success as a part of the ML team is important to each of them.

Don't hesitate to ask for their help or their input.

What Does It Take To Be A Miracle League Coach?

- A desire to work with outstanding young people...ML players and Buddies...to provide some special kids a great baseball experience.
- A commitment of your time each season (two seasons per year) to:
 - Register on-line (each season). *An automatic background check is performed by ML each year for all of our volunteers over 18 years old.*
 - Contact all 12 to 15 of your parents prior to the season and talk about their child.
 - Communicate with your group of team Buddies prior to the season and before each game.
 - Attend one Buddy meeting or one Coaches meeting each year. New coaches must attend a “New Coaches Meeting” prior to their first season.
 - Be actively involved in each of your games for 30 minutes before game-time, 60 minutes to play the game, and for about 15 minutes after the game...a total of 1:45 on seven Saturdays. (If you must miss a game, communicate with the Board Member in charge.
 - At every game wear your ML name tag/lanyard which indicates you are approved to be on the field with the ML players.
 - When necessary, after games, contact parents about issues that occurred in the game.

Being a Miracle League Coach is not hard work. But it is truly rewarding. It is an opportunity to be a part of a great organization, doing great things for great kids.

And be prepared to receive the heart-felt thanks of a group of player-parents and the sincere appreciation of the Miracle League Board of Directors.