

In The ZONE: 2016 In Review

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Another baseball season has quickly come and gone. Baseball Sask provincial competitions, Baseball Canada Cup, Westerns, Nationals and a thrilling MLB Playoff are all in the books. As we begin to reflect on the 2016 baseball season, there are many positive developments and encouraging trends we have seen both at the ballpark, and in the clinic.

The Game is Growing

2016 witnessed a significant increase in player registrations. It is great to see the local diamonds buzzing on sunny spring and summer evenings. Several factors are likely at play, but I suspect the two most significant contributions were a deep playoff run in October 2015 by the *Blue Jays* and the dedicated work by local volunteers at the grassroots level. The *Baseball Canada Rally Cap* program has grown tremendously, providing coaches with innovative resources, and young players with an opportunity to develop as athletes while learning the game of baseball in a fun environment. And, for the first time in quite some time, young athletes indicated at the clinic that their recreational play time included playing baseball at recess at school!... soccer players, hockey players, basketball players... girls, boys... kids. Good stuff.

Player Health is a Priority

Player, coach and parent education regarding injury prevention is impacting the manner in which players prepare and recover. Coaches, in particular are proactively seeking information and resources so they can provide an optimal experience for their players. I have been encouraged by the number of emails, texts and phone calls received at the clinic, inquiring regarding injury prevention strategies. It is great to observe more teams complete a thorough *dynamic warm-up* as part of their pre-game routine, as well as pitchers performing *dynamic cool-down* activities post-game. It is also encouraging to see more players make *healthy*



nutrition and hydration choices, both pre and post-game, as well as recognizing that *proper sleep habits* are a critical component of optimal health and performance... both physical and mental. Given the startling increase in elbow injuries in baseball athletes over the past decade, there has been a dedicated attempt by baseball organizations and stakeholders at all levels to determine an effective framework in which to both develop players, and limit injuries. Pitch count may not be a perfect solution, however it is a starting point, with *Baseball Canada pitching regulations* providing parameters to avoid overuse and promote graduated progression of workload as athletes grow and mature. Further sports science research and investigation will help develop further refinements of the existing framework moving forward.

Focus on Development

After the pendulum swung significantly to year-round sport specialization for younger and younger kids in the past couple decades, we are seeing a return to the development of athletic ability via a multitude of sports and activities, ultimately forming the foundation on which to build outstanding baseball athletes at the high school and collegiate levels. This *Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD)* model is a framework for kids to develop a variety of movement skills (*physical literacy*); youth to develop a variety of sports skills (*multi-sport participation*); and maturing athletes to develop and refine both training and skills for optimal performance at local, provincial, national or international levels. As mentioned earlier, the *Baseball Canada Rally Cap* program is a great example of establishing physical literacy in the context of a specific sport, teaching kids athletic *FUNDamentals*. Given that increased baseball registration and participation is largely in the Rally Cap, Mosquito, and PeeWee age divisions, the future looks bright for baseball in Saskatchewan. Beyond youth sport, the LTAD model is also a vehicle for developing athletes for life... healthy adults that continue to play sports (baseball and others) and remain active as part of their ongoing healthy lifestyle choices.

The Future is Bright

Cap tip to the Baseball Sask Canada Cup squad. Building on a bronze medal game appearance in 2014, and a silver medal in 2015, the 2016 edition of the Baseball Sask team captured the gold medal at the Baseball Canada Cup in Fort McMurray, AB. This result ultimately reflects the focus on the process of player development, a theme emphasized via the province's club teams, academies and provincial programs. Sustaining a strong player development program moving forward is an objective that can only



be achieved via collaborative effort with Baseball Canada, Baseball Sask, and the tremendous efforts of coaches at all ages and levels of play.

Bucket List...

If you didn't visit your local ballpark this past season to enjoy an exciting evening of Rally Cap, Mosquito, PeeWee, Bantam or Midget baseball, I encourage you to do so in 2017... If you haven't grabbed your glove and played catch in the backyard lately, I encourage you to do so in 2017... both are good for the soul.

Good News... MLB Opening day is only 115 sleeps away!