

14 Ways to Involve Your Bench Players in the Game

It's easy for athletes, especially young ones, to become distracted and unfocused when they're in the dugout. Help them stay focused and ready to play by assigning game-time duties. When you give players a chance to contribute, it helps them feel valued, it boosts team camaraderie and morale, and it leads to a better dugout environment.

Game-time duties for bench players

- 1. Play catch with outfielders between innings.** Assign a bench athlete to play catch with the outfielder nearest your dugout. This allows the outfielder to warm up her arm and provides the bench player an opportunity to get in a few reps. Start with long throws and add in a few grounders if time allows.
- 2. Chase foul balls.** Appoint one bench player to retrieve balls that are hit into foul territory. This ensures you won't run out of balls mid-game.
- 3. Organize the dugout.** Bats and helmets can get disorganized in the on deck area when your team is batting. Make it a bench player's responsibility to stow these items in an orderly manner so batters don't trip over them.
- 4. Coach first base.** If your league allows it, let a bench player serve as first base coach. This helps her stay involved in the game while learning strategies used in base running.
- 5. Count pitches.** Get a bench player to track the number of throws your pitcher makes. This is especially important for youth pitchers who could injure their arms if they throw too many pitches in a single game.
- 6. Chart the opposing pitcher.** Ask a bench player to chart the opponent's pitching patterns. This important task helps to identify the opposing pitcher's tendencies and favorite pitches in specific scenarios and pitch counts, giving your hitters insight about what pitches to expect.

- 7. Run to stay loose.** Pinch runners on the bench need to be ready for action, especially late in the game. Instruct them to keep their muscles loose by sprinting to the foul pole or fence between innings.
- 8. Practice lead-offs.** Get your pinch runners to practice their base running skills in between innings. By watching the opposing pitcher as she throws warm-up pitches, they can work on their lead-off timing.
- 9. Read pitching and coaching signals.** Keep your relief pitchers tuned into the game by asking them to identify the opposing pitcher's pitches or the coach's signs to the catcher. This information can help your team anticipate the next play.
- 10. Watch the opponent's at bats.** Task your relief pitcher with studying the other team while they bat. As she watches your starting pitcher, ask her to think about what pitch she would throw to each batter.
- 11. Dissect plays.** After specific plays, urge bench players to analyze the action: "Where was the second baseman during that play?" or "Who's covering the steal?"
- 12. Identify the opponent's defense.** Ask your bench athletes to identify the defense the opponent is using. This helps them build their softball I.Q. while helping your offense find holes they can exploit.
- 13. Share observations.** Challenge bench players to locate the weaknesses in the opposing team's defense and find patterns in how the opponent reacts to specific plays. Then encourage players to share their observations with a coach or teammate to see if they picked up on the same information.
- 14. Chart team goals.** Create a list of goals you'd like your team to achieve during your next game. Assign a bench player to track the goals inning by inning. If a goal is met, have the player announce it to the team and encourage them to celebrate.