

DEVELOPING COMPLETE PLAYERS

**By Bill Ripken
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Sometimes people say that big league players are so far removed from the lower levels of baseball that they cannot relate to youth, high school or college players. While this may be true of some of so-called “superstars” – the high draft choices who advanced quickly to the top of the game – most professional players have to work hard to progress up the ladder.

Because of the money that is thrown around these days, people often lose sight of the fact that for most players it’s a long, hard road to the big leagues. The majority of professional baseball players do not have the natural tools that some of the “can’t miss” prospects do, but all pro ballplayers are extremely talented. The ones who succeed are those who are willing to work the hardest to develop their talent and adapt to their surroundings while being observed enough to absorb the numerous lessons that are presented to them and their teammates on a daily basis.

Probably the most valuable lesson that I learned was the need for me to develop all aspects of my game as much as possible. In this day and age of specialization, versatility and an overall knowledge of the game often is underestimated. The ability to understand and play more than one position can mean the difference between being the last player picked and looking for another team to join.

At the highest level, everyone is a former All-American, All-Metro or All-State player. Everyone can play and play well. When baseball is your job, you can’t take any days off. A seized opportunity can vault one player into elite status and send another player packing. Remember what I said before: every player has talent, but not every player is a “superstar.” When teams are spending an average of more than \$1 million a year on players, don’t you think at some point there is a high value placed on those who can play more than one position?

I would like to think that versatility is even more important to high school coaches. Many times in high school the top position players also pitch. So what happens when your shortstop or center fielder is on the mound? You need to have someone you have confidence in to move over and fill in capably.

Let me illustrate how I came to this conclusion. I went through high school as an all-star shortstop and pitcher. At one point I seriously considered attending college so that I could possibly continue to do both. However, once I was drafted, the lure of professional baseball was too strong. As it turns out, I made the right decision, but not without a few twists and turns.

I progressed up to the ranks of the Baltimore Oriole’ organization as a shortstop, climbing from rookie ball through Single A and into Double A. In 1986, while playing Double a ball in Charlotte, NC. I got a lucky break. Fortunately, I was prepared for it.

Our second baseman left the team, and I was the only one capable of playing there. Although I hadn’t played a lot of second base, I had developed all of my fundamental skills and my overall knowledge of the game to the point that the transition was a smooth one. About a year later I found myself playing alongside my brother as a big league second baseman. Because I was able to adapt, I stayed in the big leagues for about the next eight years.

Toward the end of my career I realized even more how important that it was to be versatile. One year with the Texas Rangers I played every single infield position. I'm convinced that had I not been able to do that my career might have ended at that point. I also realized that I had gained an entirely different perspective on the game. When you play just one position you tend to get locked in on what is required to perform that job at the highest level. By playing so many positions I felt like I really had developed a complete knowledge of the game. On top of that, when I looked back after I had retired in 1998, I realized, to my amazement, that I had played 12 seasons in the big leagues. Sure, it took a little luck, but it never would have happened if I hadn't been prepared.

The point that I am getting at, albeit in a roundabout way, is that it is important for kids of all levels to develop all aspects of their game. Maybe important is not the right word. Let's say that it is extremely beneficial.

When a kid attends one of our summer camps at the Ripken Academy in Aberdeen, MD, that player is going to get fundamental instruction on a daily basis in all of the game's fundamentals – pitching, hitting, infield and outfield. We often are questioned by parents who say, "My child's a shortstop, why does he need to go to the pitching station?"

I hope that after reading through this article you can see why it is a good idea for the kids to go through each station, but here is the answer in a nutshell. In our pitching station we go over proper throwing mechanics and throwing drills. Throwing and catching are the two main components of defense, so all players need to learn to throw correctly. In our outfield station we discuss how to catch a fly ball properly, communication, fielding ground balls, etc. Everyone on a baseball field needs to understand and develop those skills. Most players on a team are infielders, but even outfielders can benefit from working more on the proper way to field a ground ball and throwing after a catch. Pitchers also have to field their positions, and a pitcher who can hit and play other positions is infinitely more valuable to a team than one who just pitches.

It also is questionable as to whether a kid who comes to camp as a "shortstop" is a shortstop because that's the position he likes best or because that's the one his mom or dad thinks he should play. It is possible that a kid could show a knack for playing another position or fall in love with a position he has never tried. A kid who is having fun is more likely to fall in love with the game and continue to be involved in the sport at some level. That's one of the main goals of our camps. We're not going to create too many big league players, but developing life-long baseball participants, future coaches and lifetime fans is important to us as well as to the future of the game.

So, to sum it all up, for players looking to advance up the ladder from recreational programs to travel teams to high school and college programs, developing an ability to play more than one position and forming a complete understanding of the game will help them achieve their goals. In addition, players who aren't as concerned about playing at higher levels are more likely to find a niche within the game that adds to their enjoyment if they can perform more of baseball's fundamental skills.

Not everyone can make it to the big leagues, but there's no reason that the majority of youth baseball players can't grow to love the game and understand it to the point that they can participate in the sport one way or another throughout their lives. As coaches it is our responsibility to develop baseball players, and the best way to do this as completely as possible is to expose kids to all aspects of the game.