

# IF YOU'RE NOT IN THE GAME ARE YOU IN THE GAME?



I wish I had a dime for every time I heard someone tell me a player is not going to learn anything by sitting on the bench or NO college coach will recruit a player if she sits on the bench. So, I want to ask a simple question. If players are not a starter in the game are they in the game or are they just taking up dugout space?

As a coach I believe every role on the team has a valuable contribution to the process of a successful team. Let's face it...you can only bat nine players and at some point, someone will sit. The old saying is

"you're only as strong as your weakest link."

As a coach, I want to try to create an environment where starters and non starters feel their roles are equally important. I want to create an environment where all players can learn and grow. Over the years, I can say I remember games that were won because of a bench player taking their role seriously...and games lost for bench players that did not stay prepared during the game.

Most college coaches, when recruiting a player, look at many dynamic players. It is NOT just about physical skills. How does the player interact with her teammates, coaches, and parents? If the player is coming off the bench has she keep herself loose and ready to play? How are the players' parents acting when the player is in a back up role?

During a game or a tournament our coaching staff has expectations of our players. We have a pre-game protocol, in game protocol and after game protocol. Here is a look at some of the expectations we have for our players during the game to keep them in the game even if they are coming in off the bench.

## STAY LOOSE AND READY TO GO:

Most important when coming off the bench is staying warmed up and ready to go in at any time....especially the pitcher. We let our pitchers know ahead of time the rotation and expectations during the game. It is the responsibility of the backup catcher (if she is not in the game) to warm up the relief pitcher(s). They normally report back to me every inning to let me know the status. When our team goes out on defense the bench players are throwing and catching with the players on the field. When the team comes in on offense the bench player is running and stretching to stay loose.

## DUGOUT DUTY:

Nothing like being in a dugout and tripping over equipment or trash. Better yet nothing like being in a messy dugout when a starter can't find her glove and delays the game or even better nothing like the game being held up because no one goes after the foul balls. A perfect solution to help the dugout stay organized and the game flow not to be interrupted is to have a dugout captain (we rotate every inning). The dugout captain is in charge of making sure trash is picked up, equipment is hung up and stored properly, foul balls are gotten to quickly and all starters' gloves are stacked on the bench ready to go for defense. If you have a sloppy dugout it can limit a players warm up time, focus on the game and over all positive behavior to the game. A clean dugout is a happy dugout....a happy dugout is a winning dugout.

## SUPPORT YOUR TEAMMATES:

It is important to cheer and support your team all the time. It is real easy to be a to stay positive when your team is winning but winning or losing it is important to stay positive and cheer your team on. Nothing like an intense focused bench at all times to let the other team no you are not going to quit at any time during the game!

## KNOW THE SITUATION AND HELP YOUR DEFENSE:

No the outs and the situation. For example: Runner on first with no outs is a potential bunt or steal situation. Pick up the batter and the baserunner and verbally communicate their actions to your defense. This is a good time for the bench player to see all positions on the field in action and also to pick up the opposing teams tendencies in certain situations.

## STUDY OPPOSING PITCHERS:

I like my hitters to go to the plate with a plan. While you are warming up pre-game or on the bench during the game this is a perfect time to pick up the pitcher's tendencies. Maybe she is a low ball pitcher or she presents her change up different than her fastball. Also, what is her "waste pitch"...what is her go to pitch....does she come inside with two strikes...is she effectively wild. These are just some of the things you would be picking up on. You can communicate this to your teammates and if you get the opportunity to go into the game you have a plan.

## STUDY OPPOSING HITTERS:

Much like watching the pitcher a bench player should pick up hitters tendencies. Does the player have good speed? Does the player bunt a lot or is she a free swinger? Where did the player hit her last at bat? You get the idea...

## STUDY OPPOSING COACHES:

Can you pick up the bunt sign when your team is on defense? Can you pick up the change up when your team is on offense? Make it a game and see how many defensive and offensive signals you can pick off.

## PAY ATTENTION TO SIGNALS:

When you are on offense make sure you know your teams' signals. When you are on defense make sure you know your teams' signals. There is nothing worse than a player not knowing a signal and totally messing up the play. Again, stay mentally checked in by reviewing the signals before, during and after games to make sure you are checked into the game.

## BETWEEN GAMES OR DURING TOURNAMENTS:

It is always a dynamic that we try to make sure our players understand. When you're done with a game and you are still playing another game there is only a certain amount of time in between. We have a policy where parents are hands off until the end of the day. Use the restroom quickly....and get hydrated and some food as quick as possible to start mentally preparing for the next game. There is nothing worse than the team playing awesome the first game then not being prepared for the next game(s). It is the coach's job to enforce a structure that will help the flow of focus and preparation.

These are just a few helpful tips to help the bench players be prepared to come into the game. Remember the next time you have the opportunity to come off the bench you will want to be ready to go for anything the coach has you do. Make sure you ask yourself....if you're not in the game.....are you in the game?