

GAME THEORY

Austin Prep's Fall IQ League focuses on development, situational awareness

By Dan Guttman

Tommy Whalen stepped to the plate with the bases loaded on Opening Day of the Austin Prep Fall IQ League, primed for first-inning heroics.

The Chelmsford, Mass., 12-year-old crushed a grand slam to the pull side in left field, only to be met with indifference from coaches and teammates. The grand slam would not be scored, as that week's point of emphasis was hitting to the opposite field. An infield groundout would have earned one point, an opposite-field single three. A grand slam to left field? Zero.

"It's all about execution," said Austin Prep coach Jonathan Pollard (JP), who runs the league for fifth- and sixth-graders. "It's almost like we're doing a psychological study to see if we can change the mentality of what matters. You'll see traditional runs scored in our games, and you can hear a pin drop. Then we'll have dads going crazy over a sacrifice bunt."

This fall marked the inaugural season of the Austin Prep IQ League. Pollard and his staff started the eight-week developmental league to combat a trend of youth athletes playing more games and focusing more attention to metrics like exit velocity and launch angle.

Players receive instruction in fundamental skills, situational execution, and

baseball knowledge during two midweek practices. A weekend game is scored based on that week's theme — opposite-field hitting, first-pitch strikes, executing double-plays, sacrifice bunts, and the like. A typical final score is 130-120.

Former UMass Lowell standout Brad Laurin coaches with Pollard in the Nor'Easters system. His son, Nolan, joined IQ in its inaugural season.

ing their kids up from the U8 level. He recently started Carter Baseball in New Hampshire to shift the focus to fundamentals, development, and situational awareness.

"We've gotten away from what JP's teaching because of the business side of travel programs," Carter said. "That's why I'm adamant about bringing back that piece of the game."

"Anybody can do soft toss and (batting practice) for an hour and call it a practice. What we're doing is between the ears. It feels like JP's program is doing what I'm trying to achieve with my own program, and everything he touches turns to gold lately."

Pollard is certainly riding a hot streak, establishing himself as one of New England's top coaches since taking over AP in 2020. His overall record of 117-11 includes an MIAA state championship in 2022, a successful transition to the NEPSAC, and then a 73-9 record as a newly anointed prep program.

None of the IQ League players are currently enrolled at

Austin Prep. Pollard hopes that the experience provides inroads for high school.

"These are outside students with an interest in playing here in the future," Pollard said. "It's the varsity coaching staff and our players running it. We're focused on three elements — offense, defense, and pitching. We train that during the week and execute it on Saturdays. I think everyone is blown away by what we're seeing on the field."



Nolan Laurin (Dracut, Mass.) takes part in a recent Fall IQ League game.

"We're always talking about things the game is missing right now, especially at the 11-12 level since our kids are that age," Laurin said. "Most games, you see a grip-it-and-rip-it mentality with 10 home runs. The nuances of the game are completely overlooked. There's a metric tied to every swing in the game, and we're officially the old guys yelling at the clouds."

Ryan Carter also has coached with Pollard in the Nor'Easters system, follow-

■ YOUTH



Bruno Palumbo
(Lynnfield, Mass.)

Carter and his son, Bradley, make the drive from Amherst, N.H., three times a week. The father is open to increasing that cadence in the future if his son has an opportunity to play for Pollard.

"I'm lucky that (Bradley) is a part of it," Carter said. "I'm enjoying it from afar. It's less about who can hit a home run with a UTRIP bat than who can execute the game plan.

Can you hit a ground ball to the right side to get a runner over? Who has fly-ball priority? Those things get immediate reactions from coaches and additional points."

After a recent game, Brad Laurin began his carpool back to Dracut, Mass., with Nolan and his teammate, Colin Lynch. As the boys processed a game that included 250 total points, the former UMass Lowell pitcher took their collective temperature.

"I said, 'Out of curiosity, if you could go back to scoring regular runs, would you prefer to do that? Or, would you want to play in a game like that, when runs don't matter, and it ends up 130-120?'" Laurin said. "They both said, 'This is way more fun than any league I've ever played in.'"

"It's resonating with the younger crew. JP created something that's got legs. Kids are loving it and learning a ton. For a first-year program, it's been a tremendous success." ■

■ TRAVEL BALL

Brendan Akashian, a four-year player at Holy Cross who played three seasons of pro ball, founded Lowell, Mass., based Boomer Baseball in 2020.

Don't be afraid to rebuild your swing

As we sit so close to the spookiest day of the year, here's a message for developing hitters. This is the time of year to have no fear.

Late October and November mark a unique stretch in the baseball calendar.

It's often one of the quietest periods of the year for players. The games are over, the fields are getting colder, and the next season still feels a long way off.

But that quieter stretch brings a valuable opportunity: time to make changes.

There may be no better time to experiment with your swing. When games are being played, it's natural to focus on competing and getting results. In the offseason, you can slow things down, try different approaches, and figure out what helps you feel more confident and athletic at the plate.

Sometimes the best plan is to keep refining the swing you already have. A small adjustment to your timing, balance, or hand position may be all you need.

But sometimes a hitter reaches a point where little changes aren't getting the job done. If you feel like your swing has more potential — or you're simply not comfortable in the batter's box — it may be time to consider a bigger change.



**BRENDAN
AKASHIAN**

Don't be afraid to test something new. Stand a little taller. Try a slight crouch. Spread your hands on the bat or bring them closer together. Open your stance, then try closing it. Move closer to the plate or give yourself more room. Set your hands lower or higher. Widen your feet or narrow your base. Try a leg kick, then try a no-stride approach. Use a heavier bat or a lighter one. Experiment with a longer bat or a shorter one.

Don't make every change at once. These are merely ideas to explore, one at a time, with a purpose.

Pay attention to how each adjustment feels. Does it help you stay balanced? Can you see the ball better? Are you getting into a strong position to swing? Do you feel quicker and more confident? Give each change enough time to learn

something from it before moving on.

A swing that feels different at first isn't automatically a bad swing. New movements can feel awkward because they're unfamiliar. That doesn't mean the change is right for you, either.

The point is to experiment, pay attention, and keep what helps. Work with a coach who can give you honest feedback, and don't judge simply by whether you crush balls on your first few swings.

This is the time of year to work through those experiments. Take a few swings, make an adjustment, and try again without worrying about the next at-bat or the scoreboard. When the season returns, you want to have a clearer idea of what works for you and enough practice with it to trust your swing.

So, don't let the thought of changing your approach scare you. A swing doesn't have to stay the same just because it's the one you've always used. Sometimes a small tweak is the answer. Sometimes you need to tear down a few old habits and build something better. This offseason, step into the batter's box, try something new, and be willing to find out what your swing can become. ■