

Tactics and Strategies



It is important for players of all ages to learn the fundamental tactics and strategies of baseball. This goes along with our philosophy of explaining *why*. If you teach certain skills that are necessary to execute specific strategies but don't explain the strategies or the purposes for developing the skills, players are less likely to give the skills their full effort or attention because they won't understand why it is important to develop them.

Baseball tactics and strategies have evolved for more than 100 years and continue to evolve today. It is true that many of them are too advanced for young players. Some might say that teaching certain tactics and strategies, which are designed to help teams win games, promotes an atmosphere in which winning is overemphasized. Certainly a team that can successfully execute tactics and strategies on the baseball field is more likely to win than a team that can't, however learning about the tactics and strategies necessary to play the game correctly is an important part of developing players and teaching them the proper way to approach the game. So, you should not overlook this area.

Offensive Tactics and Strategies


The offensive tactics you teach should never exceed your players' ability to perform the necessary skills. However, if your players understand and can perform the required individual skills, you can teach them a variety of basic strategies and develop their sense of when to use those strategies. Here is a list of the offensive tactics and strategies that you might teach your team. (Note that leagues at certain levels may not allow all these tactics; check your league rules book for age-specific rules and guidelines.)

- **Steal**—when a baserunner takes off for the next base on the pitch and advances safely to the base; considerations include taking a lead (for leagues that permit leads), watching the delivery of the pitcher and understanding the difference between a pitch being delivered and a pickoff throw, getting a jump and executing a crossover step toward the next base, running hard, and sliding to avoid the tag.
- **Delayed steal**—similar to a straight steal, except the runner waits until the ball crosses home plate to break for the next base. The goal is to get the defense to relax and think the runner is not going and then break toward the next base. Often when the runner doesn't try to steal with the release of the pitch, the defense assumes the runner is not stealing and does not communicate to the catcher that a steal is being attempted. The middle infielders, caught flatfooted, may not be able to get to the base in time to receive a throw. Thus, the catcher either holds the ball because no one is there or throws the ball into centerfield because no one is covering second base. A good time to try a delayed steal is when your opponent's middle infielders don't move toward second base after each pitch.

- **Double steal**—like a straight steal, except two runners are involved. One version of the double steal calls for the trailing runner to break for the next base and draw a throw. The lead runner then breaks quickly for the next base. (This strategy is common when runners are on first and third.) Another version of a double steal is when runners are on first and second and both players try to steal on the pitch.
- **Hit and run**—when a runner takes off on the pitch as if stealing second and the batter does everything in his or her power to make contact with the ball. This helps eliminate the possibility of grounding into a double play and allows a team to more easily move runners to scoring position. Don't use this strategy if the opposing pitcher is wild (thus making it difficult for the batter to make contact) or if the hitter is not skilled enough to make frequent contact. The batter should swing to protect the runner no matter where the pitch is thrown.
- **Bunting for a hit**—requires slightly different footwork from the bunting technique described on page 176, but the basic difference between the two is that the player bunting for a hit waits longer to drop down from a hitting to a bunting position. This strategy is best used if the first baseman and/or third baseman are playing deep or if the batter is a fast runner with good bat control.
- **Sacrifice bunt**—a bunt where the batter's sole responsibility is to place the ball where the only play is at first base so that the runners can advance successfully. The batter gives him- or herself up so that the runner can be in a better position to score a run. We prefer that younger players be introduced to bunting and its purpose in practice but be allowed to develop as hitters in games. Remember, the number one goal is not to win but to develop complete baseball players.
- **Sacrifice fly**—when a batter hits a fly ball that scores a runner from third. Young hitters have difficulty doing this intentionally, so you should discourage hitters from trying to hit fly balls if you think it may cause them to drop the back shoulder habitually. More often than not, a sacrifice fly just happens in the course of trying for a hit rather than as a planned strategy. Whenever a runner is on third with fewer than 2 outs, the runner should get back to the base to tag up on any ball hit in the air, including line drives. One of the biggest and most costly mistakes a young baserunner can make is to break from third immediately when a line drive is hit toward the outfield. If this happens and the ball is caught, the runner has no opportunity to tag up and score.
- **Hitting to the opposite field**—generally used in two instances: when a coach wants the hitter to advance a runner by hitting behind him or her (to the right side of the infield when a runner is on second, for example) and when a hitter tries to pull every pitch or swings so hard that the front shoulder pulls away from the pitch. (A right-handed batter pulls the ball by hitting it to the left of second base, and a left-handed player pulls

the ball by hitting it to the right of second base.) By concentrating on hitting to the opposite field, the hitter lets the ball travel to home plate, which should force him or her to take the front shoulder in toward the pitch.

- **Automatic take on 3-0 count**—This strategy is common, and we don't necessarily approve of it at the youth levels. We'd rather see young hitters take every opportunity to hit rather than try to take a walk. This means no fake bunting on 3-0 counts. That strategy is designed to rattle the opposing pitcher into throwing ball four, which is something that we do not condone. Let the pitchers pitch and the hitter hit!

Note: See the figure on page  for a key to the diagrams used throughout this chapter.

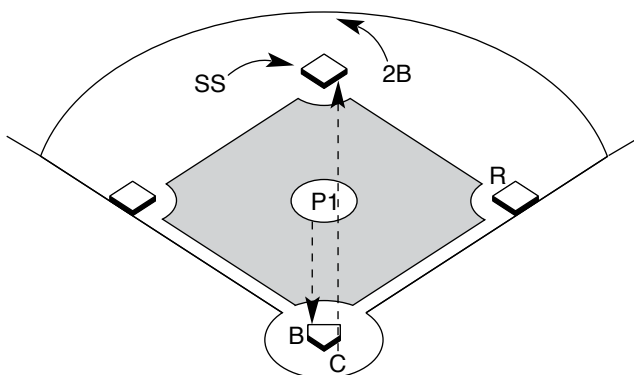
| | |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| Path of ball | -----➔ |
| Path of player (running) | ————➔ |
| CH | Coach |
| F | Fungo hitter |
| B | Batter |
| C | Catcher |
| P | Pitcher |
| R | Runner |
| X | Any player |
| 1B | First baseman |
| 2B | Second baseman |
| 3B | Third baseman |
| SS | Shortstop |
| CF | Centerfielder |
| RF | Right fielder |
| LF | Left fielder |
| IF | Infielder |
| △ | Cone |

Offensive Tactics and Strategies

Fast Feet Drill/Game

Goal: To steal a base

Description: The defense has a pitcher, catcher, first baseman, second baseman, and shortstop (see figure 9.1). The offense has a runner on first and a batter at the plate, but the batter does not swing. When the pitcher pitches, the runner on first takes off for second (adhere to your league rules in terms of taking leadoffs and leaving the bag; don't allow an excessive leadoff even though there is no first-base player). The catcher attempts to throw the runner out. Rotate runners until each runner gets three steal attempts, then rotate teams. Keep track of points—1 point for each stolen base for the offense and 1 point for each player thrown out on defense. Rotate in groups of baserunners and keep a team score for each group.



Note: Batter does not swing. 2B & SS should communicate before pitch and alternate coverage of base.

Figure 9.1 Setup for Fast Feet Drill/Game.

To make the game easier, do the following:

- Allow the runner a leadoff if none was granted earlier.
- Allow the runner to take off on the pitch if it was not allowed earlier.

To make the game harder, do the following:

- Don't allow leadoffs if they were allowed earlier.
- Don't allow the runner to take off on the pitch if that was allowed earlier. Instead, the runner must wait until the ball gets to the plate.

Multitasking: You can have players practice other team fundamentals with this drill. The pitcher can work on holding the runner on first base, and the middle infielders can practice communicating who covers (shortstop always determines), getting to the base as quickly as possible so that the catcher has a target to throw to, and straddling the bag properly to receive the throw.

Hit-and-Run Drill/Game

Goal: To execute the hit-and-run play.

Description: Set up an entire defense and place one runner on first base (see figure 9.2). A coach should pitch and control the velocity and location of pitches, asking the batters to attempt to hit toward the hole vacated by whomever is covering second in an attempt to advance the runner to the next base and avoid a double play. Remember to ask the batters to try to make contact no matter the location of the pitch. The runner should advance as far as possible without being thrown out. Let the group of offensive players have two at-bats each and then rotate in that many players from the defense. Award points to each hitting group this way:

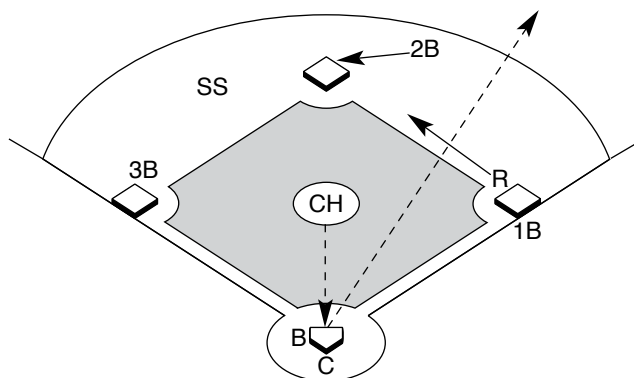
- Two points for a hit that advances a runner to third or home
- One point for a hit that advances a runner only to second
- Zero points for plays that do not advance the runner

To make the game easier, do the following:

- Have batters hit off a tee.
- Instruct infielders to let the ball go through to the outfield.
- Allow leadoffs.

To make the game harder, do the following:

- Pitch harder pitches.
- Allow no leadoffs.
- Throw pitches outside the strike zone to make the hitters protect the runner.



Note: Either 2B or SS can cover. Batter attempts to hit ball through vacated hole. OF optional. If you use OF, runner should try to go to third & defense should set up cutoff to third.

Figure 9.2 Setup for Hit-and-Run Drill/Game.

A point to remember for the defense is that games have certain hit-and-run situations. If there is a 3-2 count on a hitter who doesn't strike out much, teams are likely to hit and run. In these situations the middle infielders need to hold their ground as long as possible and not move toward second base so that they don't open up big holes in the infield. With a runner on first with 2 outs and a 3-2 count on the batter, the runner will always be going on the pitch. The middle infielders must stay in their positions on this play, because the end result will be a walk, a third strike, or a ball put in play. There will be no play at second base.

Signals to Players

Develop a simple system of hand signals to set plays in motion, and teach your players that a sign stays on until you signal that it no longer applies. Have your players watch the entire series of signs instead of pick up a sign and turn immediately to the batter's box, because you may still be giving additional decoy signs. However, don't overload your players. If they have trouble grasping a strategy or remembering a signal, simplify or drop it. Usually you should try to have one sign that is an indicator, such as touching the bill of the cap with the right index finger. The next sign given after the indicator is the play that you want to put on. This technique is designed to keep the other team from figuring out your signs. You might give some decoy signs that don't mean anything unless preceded by the indicator. If your players have trouble understanding this type of system, consider making the real sign the first sign you give. Players can't execute what they can't understand. Table 9.1 shows some hitting and baserunning signals you might use (see also figure 9.3).

Table 9.1 Coaches' Signs

| Sign | Message |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Right index finger to bill of cap | Indicator |
| Right hand to ear | Bunt |
| Right hand to chest | Steal |
| Right hand to top of head | Hit and run |
| Grab both ears | Take (not recommended in younger age groups; let them hit!) |
| Rub either arm | Wipe off sign |
| Delayed steal | One finger extended down and to the left of body |



a



b



c



d



e



f



g

Figure 9.3 Baserunning signals: (a) indicator that the sign that follows is the “live” sign; (b) sacrifice bunt; (c) wipes off any previous signs that have been given; (d) steal; (e) hit-and-run; (f) take; (g) delayed steal.

In addition, instruct your players to react to situations that allow them to take advantage of the defense, even when you haven't called a specific play. For example, if a catcher loses control of a pitch, your baserunners should be ready to take the next base without your telling them to do so. Many times if you have to tell your runner to go, it may be too late. The same can be said for when a runner should try to make it from first to third on a single or to turn a single into a double on a ball hit into one of the gaps. Runners also can't wait for a coach to say, "Go!" when tagging up on a fly ball.

You may also need to shout instructions to baserunners when a defensive player fails to track the flight of the ball. Think ahead each time a batter comes up to bat, keeping in mind

- the speed of your baserunners,
- the strength of the infielders' and outfielders' arms,
- playing conditions,
- the number of outs, and
- the score.

Hitting Strategies

The batter, more than any other offensive player, dictates the offensive strategy. You will more likely tell baserunners to run with the pitch if you have a good contact hitter at the plate who has limited power than with a power hitter up who strikes out a lot. Why?

The contact hitter will probably get the bat on the ball, preventing a strike-'em-out, throw-'em-out double play (a strikeout and a caught stealing). Second, the batted ball may not travel beyond the infield, making it easier to get a force out or a double play if the lead runner is not moving on the pitch. In addition, if you have a hitter who hits a lot of ground balls, putting the runner in motion will open up some potential holes for those balls because either the second baseman or shortstop must cover second on the steal. On the other hand, with a power hitter up, you don't want to take the chance that the batter will swing and miss and leave the baserunner as an easy target for the catcher. And because the power hitter is likely to get the ball beyond the infield if contact is made, there is not a big advantage to sending the runner, because a force out is less likely. A more powerful hitter is also more likely to hit a line drive or fly ball, which could result in a double play if the runner is going on the pitch.

A good hitter should observe the pitcher during warm-ups and on pitches to teammates who bat earlier in the lineup. The hitter can also ask teammates for information about the speed, location, and type of pitches thrown.

Once in the batter's box, the hitter must always be aware of the count, the number of outs, and the coach's signal. A missed sign can result in an out that otherwise may not have occurred. In contrast, a sign that is received and executed can be the start of a big inning. So, it is important to review all of

your signals regularly during the season. Make corrections or simplify the signals when a sign is missed consistently.

Confidence and concentration are key factors to any hitter's performance. You can boost any player's hitting confidence by staying positive. If you're praying for a hitter to walk because you doubt he or she can get the bat on the ball, then what do you suppose the team is thinking? Be positive, even when your lineup is retired 1, 2, 3. Make sure you compliment a player for hitting a ball well or making contact, even if the result is an out. Finally, don't overload your players with too much technical information while they are hitting. Make notes of any aspects of hitting that they need to work on, and have them execute the appropriate hitting drills at the next practice.



Figure 9.4 Remember to stay positive with your young hitters.

Baserunning Strategies

For your players to be effective baserunners, they must know how, when, and why to remain at a base or try to advance. Here are a few simple rules about baserunning:

- **Watch the pitcher.** Instruct your players to watch the pitcher as he or she prepares to deliver the ball. Once the pitcher strides toward home

plate, he or she cannot make a pickoff throw to a base. At that point the baserunners can take a secondary lead (shuffle steps toward the next base) or execute a crossover step and try to steal. However, if the pitcher steps toward first base or moves his or her back foot off the rubber, all runners should quickly return to the bag.

- **Listen to and watch the base coach.** Explain that the base coach's job is to watch what's going on in the field and help players advance from base to base safely. Runners on first base should listen to instructions from the first-base coach; runners on second and third base should follow the instructions of the third-base coach. As we mentioned earlier, some baserunning decisions have to be made by the runner. If the runner waits for the coach to yell, "Go!" on a passed ball, that hesitation might be the difference between being safe and out. When trying to go from first to third on a single, if the ball is in centerfield or left field, the runner has the play in front of him or her and can make the decision about whether or not to advance. Again, if the runner hesitates or waits for the coach to give him the green light, it may be too late. Finally, when tagging up on a fly ball, the runner must read the play and leave on his or her own. If the runner waits for the coach to tell him or her to go, a moment's hesitation occurs that can prove to be critical.
- **Sometimes during games baserunners are forced to run, and other times they don't have to.** For example, if a runner is on first base and a fly ball is caught in the outfield, the runner is not forced to go to second base. He or she can stay at first base. The base coaches should tell the runners before each pitch how many outs there are and whether or not they are forced to run.
- **Explain the meaning of going halfway.** When a fly ball is hit that is too shallow to tag up on or in situations when tagging up is too much of a risk or not an option at all, the baserunners should go halfway. This simply means that the runners should move only as far off the base as he or she can go and still get back to the base safely if the ball is caught. The main reason for doing this is so that the baserunners can make sure that if the ball does drop, they will be able to advance to the next base without being forced or tagged out.

Baserunning Practice

First to Third Game/Drill

Goal: To help baserunners develop a sense of when they should try to advance from first to third on a base hit and provide an opportunity for the defense to work on cutoffs and relays.

Description: Put an entire defensive lineup in the field. The rest of the players on the team will serve as baserunners at first (see figure 9.5). Have a pitcher either throw a pitch or simulate a throwing motion to home. The coach hits balls out of his hand, re-creating singles, balls hit in the gap, fly balls that runners should go halfway on, and bloopers. The ultimate goal of the runner is to make it from first to third base on a ball that drops. However, the most important goal is to read the situation and run the bases correctly. Divide the runners up into teams, rotating them every so often with fielders to make sure that they get the same amount of chances on the bases. Award 1 point to a team when a runner handles a situation correctly and 2 points for runners who read the situation correctly and advance to third base.

To make the game easier for runners, do the following:

- Hit balls between the outfielders.

To make the game easier for fielders, do the following:

- Hit balls straight at the outfielders.

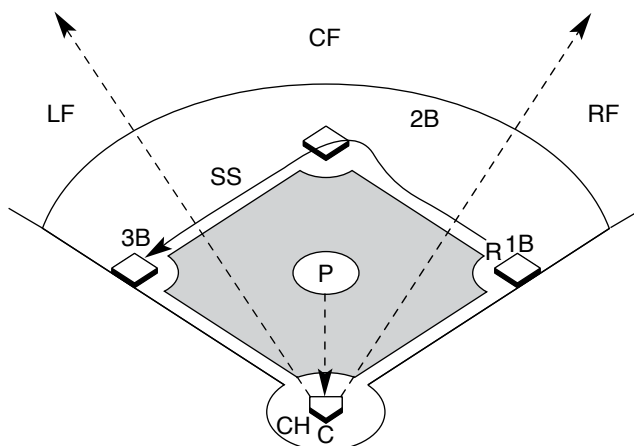
To make the game harder for runners, do the following:

- Bring the outfielders closer in, and hit balls more directly toward them.

To make the game harder for fielders, do the following:

- Add a runner at home plate who will act as the batter. Award a bonus point to the team whose runner starts at home if he or she advances to second base on the play.

Multitasking: Other team fundamentals can be practiced during this drill. Pitchers can work on holding runners close and making it harder for them to



Note: Coach can hit ball anywhere to simulate whatever situations he observes. First goal of this drill is to have OF try to cut off balls into gaps, for runners to try to get to third, and for defense to set up proper cutoff to get runner out at third.

Figure 9.5 Setup for First to Third Game/Drill.

take the extra base. Outfielders can practice fielding basic ground balls and fly balls, throwing after the catch, throwing quickly and accurately to the cutoff and relay people, and throwing to the proper base. Remember that a routine ball that is fielded or one that is cut off in the gap by an outfielder is thrown to a cutoff player to keep trailing runners from advancing extra bases. If a ball gets through an outfielder so that the fielder can't throw the ball all the way to the base where the lead runner is heading, a relay situation arises. The player who was the cutoff player needs to get out farther to assist the outfielder in getting the ball to the proper base. The other middle infielder should set up as a trailer, about 10 feet behind the relay person. If a throw is low or high to the relay, he or she should let it go to the trailer. The third baseman and catcher should communicate about where the final throw should go, and the first baseman should make sure that second base is covered.

Also remember that on defense there situations exist when a runner is on first and the throw should come into second base. For example, if the tying run is at bat with a runner on third and there is a base hit to the outfield, the cutoff should be set up to second instead of third. If the cutoff is set up for third and the throw is errant, the tying run can advance into scoring position. The defense would much rather prevent that runner from getting into scoring position and keep the double play in order.

Defensive Tactics and Strategies

Effective team defense starts with teaching players about correct straightaway positioning, how to provide backups, the difference between and proper execution of cutoffs and relays, and how to complete specific defensive plays. Remember that all of your players may not understand baseball terminology, so take extra time to explain exactly what you mean the first time.

Positioning

Positioning is a primary concern of any team defense. In baseball, it's not as simple as telling your players, "If your opponent does *this*, you do *that*." Instead, you'll have to base your positioning instructions on the hitter's preferred batting side, your pitcher's abilities, the game situation, and how the batter reacts to pitched balls.

It's safe to say that at the youth and travel levels and even up into high school, most coaches do not get much of a scouting report on the opposing teams. Sure, you might have seen the other team play once or twice, but that's not really enough information to come up with a complete plan about how to pitch or defend every player. For the most part you will have your players start out playing straight up or straightaway until you get a feel for how the pitcher versus batter match-up might play out (see figure 9.6).

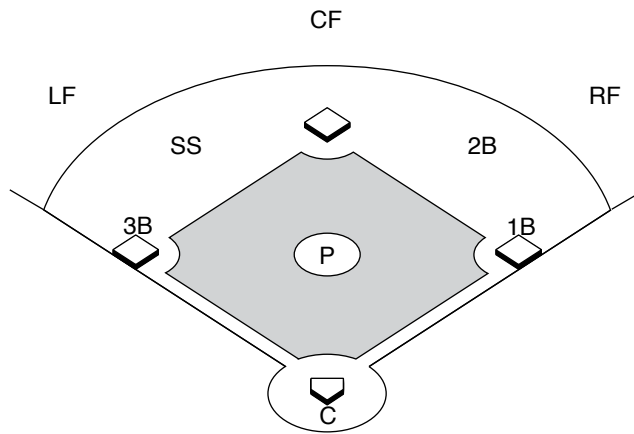


Figure 9.6 Straightaway positioning.

Most people take straightaway positioning for granted. They send the kids out there, tell them a general area in which to position themselves, and let the game happen. Straightaway positioning is a way of playing the percentages to maximize field coverage—to take away the areas where balls are most often hit during the course of a game. It is important that players be taught exactly where straightaway is so that you can make proper adjustments later in the game. If you assume your left fielder understands the concept of straightaway positioning but actually is playing a hitter 10 feet toward the left field line (10 feet to pull versus a right-handed batter), it can cause serious positioning problems.

Suppose the batter is way out in front on your pitcher's fastball and you, assuming that the left fielder is positioned correctly to start with, move the fielder 5 more feet toward the line (5 feet to pull). Now your left fielder is playing 15 feet to pull. On the next pitch the batter hits a line drive to straightaway left. Well, if the fielder had only 5 feet to pull, it may have been a pretty easy out. As it is now, the ball becomes a gapper, turning a potential out into a double, triple, or home run.

So, what is straightaway positioning? It depends on the position. For the third baseman it is two or three steps deeper than the baseline and as far off the line as he or she can play and still get to a solidly hit (not a bullet) ground ball down the line.

For the shortstop it is at least a few steps deeper than the baseline (depth increases as players get older) at a point about halfway between second and third.

For the left fielder straightaway is a depth where most well-hit fly balls can be run down and along an imaginary line from home plate right through the middle of the baseline between second and third.

For the centerfielder straightaway is the same depth as the left fielder on a straight line from home plate through second base (centerfielders might

want to shade one step toward left field for right-handers and one step toward right field for left-handers to get a better view of the ball approaching home plate).

The second baseman should position him- or herself at the same depth as the shortstop at a point about halfway between first and second base, and the right fielder should be at the same depth as the other outfielders on a straight line from home plate through the middle of the baseline running from first to second.

The first baseman plays similarly to the third baseman, but for first basemen at all levels the most important consideration when it comes to positioning is the player's ability to get to the bag quickly enough to be a stationary target on ground balls that are hit to the other infielders. So, if you want your first baseman to play deeper, he or she also should play closer to the line to remain the same distance away from the bag (see figure 9.7).

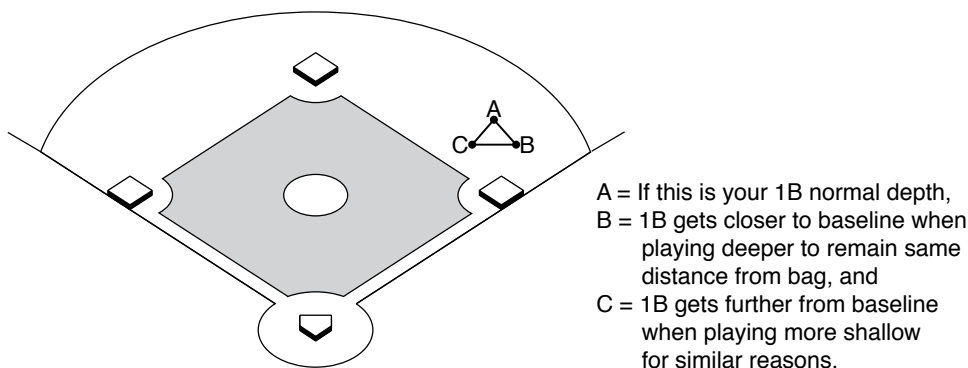
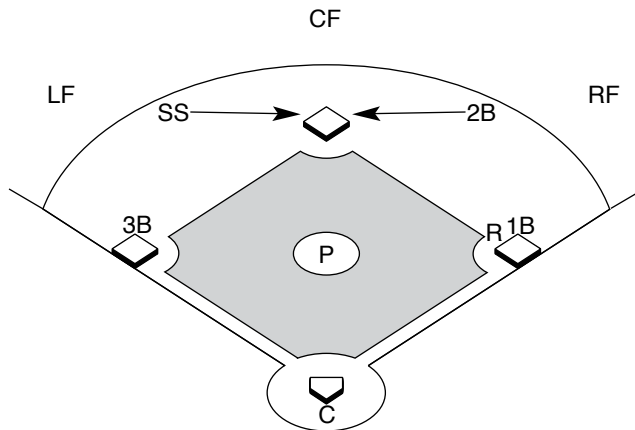


Figure 9.7 First baseman depth changes.

Of course many situations during a game will dictate that you move your players around. But, if every player on your team knows what straightaway means and begins the game positioned that way, it gives both you and the players a frame of reference for in-game adjustments.

One example of a positioning change occurs if there is a runner on first base and fewer than two outs. The first baseman holds the runner on, and the middle infielders play at double play depth—shallow enough and close enough to the bag that they can get there quickly to cover for a force out or double play if a hard ground ball is hit to another infielder (see figure 9.8).

Another example would be if the tying or winning run is on third base and you want to move your infielders inside the baselines to cut down the runner at home (see figure 9.9). Other positioning changes could occur if your pitcher throws really hard or soft or if he is going to throw an off-speed pitch at a particular time. Still another example would be if the other team's hitter had pulled a hard-hit double (see figures 9.10 and 9.11) off of your pitcher's best fastball the last time up.



Note: Players' need to move up and over from straightaway (closer to bag) when it is a double play situation. Each players depth is different. Middle infielders should play wherever they have to in order to be able to get to the bag and be a stationary target on a hard-hit grand ball to another infielder.

Figure 9.8 Double play depth.

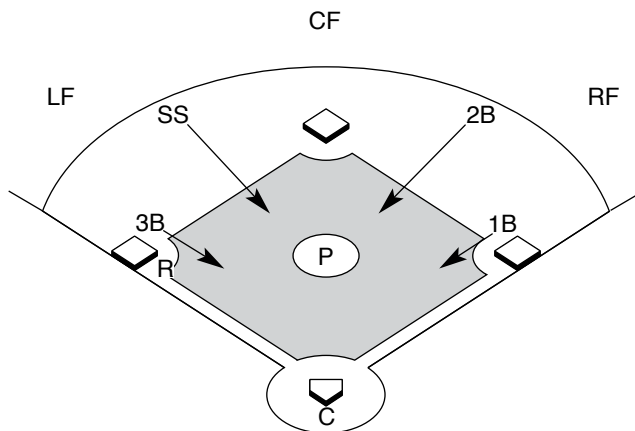


Figure 9.9 Infield in.

Ultimately the game situation and the pitcher versus batter match-up will have the biggest impact on how you position your players. But, if you have a common starting point that you and your players understand, moving them around during the game will become much easier.

Other critical aspects of good team defense include players backing each other up on thrown and batted balls as well as handling cutoffs and relays effectively.

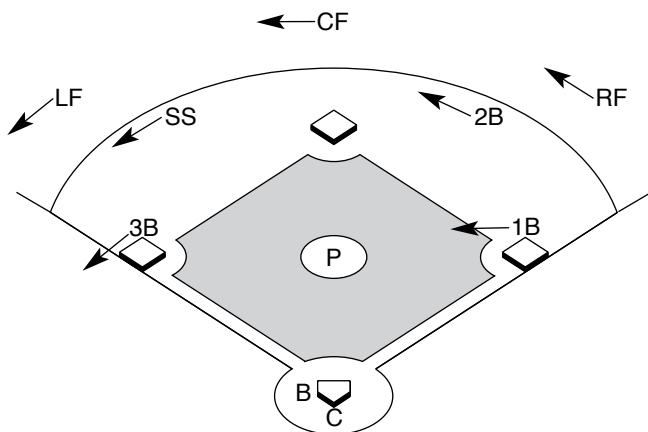


Figure 9.10 Playing to pull for right-handed batter.

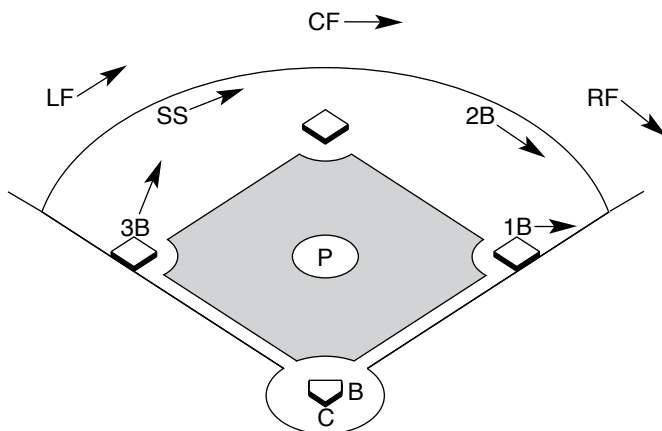


Figure 9.11 Playing to pull for left-handed batter.

Backups

In most games and practices, a few throws and batted balls inevitably get by the fielders (or more than a few!). That's why every fielder has backup responsibilities (see figures 9.12 and 9.13).

It isn't so much the initial mistake that hurts, but rather the series of mistakes that follow if a backup isn't in place. In other words, a bad throw to third isn't critical unless no one is there to back up the play and the ball rolls all the way to the fence or out of play. What should have been either an out at third or a runner safe at third turns into a run and possibly other runners advancing.

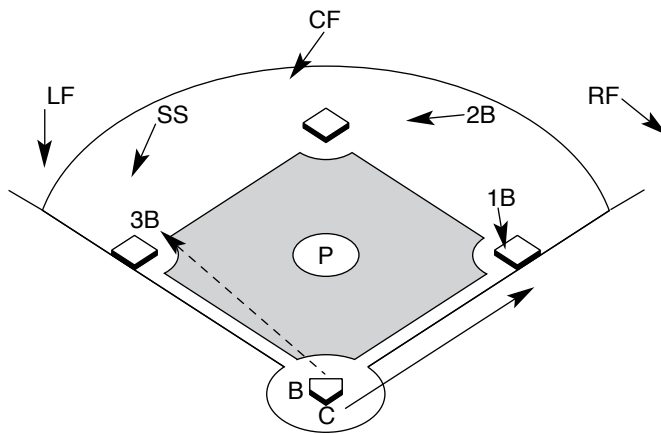


Figure 9.12 Backup responsibilities on ground ball to left side with no one on base.

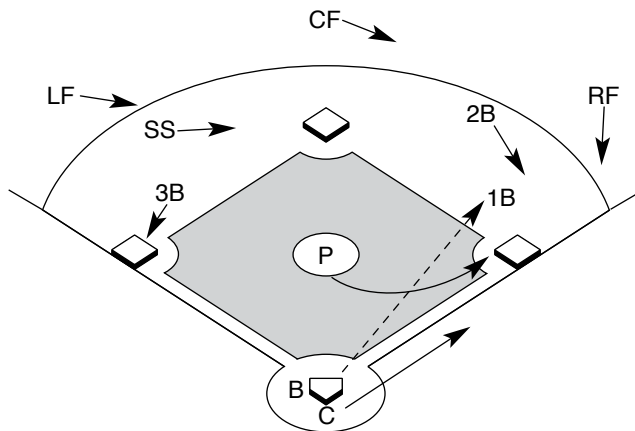


Figure 9.13 Backup responsibilities on ground ball to right side with no one on base.

A safe rule of thumb to teach your players is that each defensive player has a responsibility on every play—even on balls hit to someone else. If a ball is hit to third base, for instance, the shortstop should move into a position backing up the play. The second baseman should move toward second base if a runner is on first and toward a position backing up the throw to first if no one is on base. The first baseman covers first, the right fielder moves in to back up the throw from third and the left, and centerfielders move toward short and third, respectively, in case the ball gets through. Even the pitcher and catcher have responsibilities. The catcher runs down to back up first base if no one is on base and stays to cover home if there are baserunners. The pitcher moves toward third base in case there is a bad throw to first that stays in play and neither the third baseman nor the shortstop can get to the bag.

Every play that occurs during a baseball game has a scenario similar to this where each defensive player should be moving.

Error Detection and Correction for Backups

ERROR

Players stand around when the ball is not hit to them.

CORRECTION

Make sure all players know where to move on any given play. Walk them through their repositioning for a variety of plays. Set up game situations that require players to react quickly. Make it a fun game by calling out situations and seeing who can get to their proper positions the fastest. Situations can be set up with entire defenses in place and actual baserunners to help simulate game play and allow players to understand their responsibilities at game speed. The best way to do this is to have a pitcher throw or simulate a pitch with the coach hitting a fungo. This type of a drill or game allows baserunners to understand various situations that arise for them as well. To keep the drill realistic make sure the runners don't cheat and leave before the ball is hit.

Cutoffs and Relays

Cutoffs and relays are a very important part of team defense. Unfortunately, these two separate aspects of defense often are misunderstood and lumped together. A cutoff is set up on every ball hit to the outfield and is designed to manage the throw from an outfielder on a routine ball. The cutoff person is in place to stop throws that are errant or when there is no play at the base where the throw is heading and to keep trailing baserunners from advancing to the next base with no consequence. A relay situation occurs on a ball that gets by the outfielders when there is no way that the outfielder can throw the ball all the way to the base where the lead runner is heading. In this situation the batter is guaranteed to have at least a double and there might be a play at home (if there were a runner on first when the ball was hit) or third (if the batter is trying to stretch the hit into a triple).

On most batted balls, when the throws from the outfield will be coming into second or third base, the shortstop and second baseman are responsible for serving as the cutoffs.

Cutoffs to Second Base

On balls hit to left field and centerfield with no one on base, the shortstop serves as the cutoff person to second (if no one is on base) with the second baseman covering (figure 9.14). It is the second baseman's job to direct the shortstop so that he or she is in a direct line between the fielder and the base. On balls hit to centerfield and right field, the second baseman is the cutoff and the shortstop directs (figure 9.15). The cutoff person needs to know the fielder's arm strength and stand far enough away from the base so that the

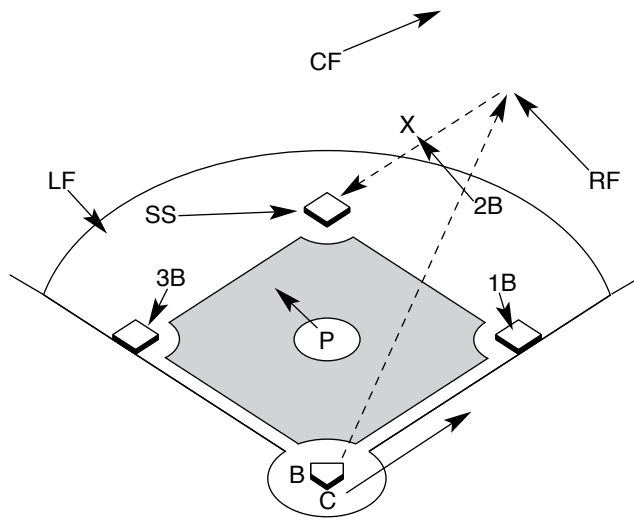


Figure 9.14 Cutoff positioning for base hit to right fielder.

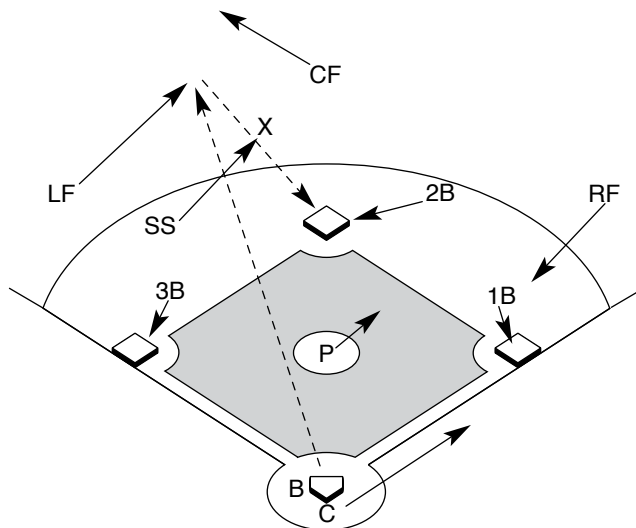


Figure 9.15 Cutoff positioning for base hit to left fielder.

throw can either be cut off or make it to the base on no more than one hop. The player covering the base can see the runner coming. If the runner is staying at first, the player covering should simply tell the cutoff to “cut!” If the runner is trying for second and the throw needs help to get to the base, the player covering should yell, “cut, second!” or, “cut, two!” If the throw is on target and the runner is coming, the player covering should say nothing and the cutoff should let the ball travel all the way to the base.

Cutoffs to Third Base

With a runner on first, the shortstop always is the cutoff player for base hits to the outfield. The third baseman covers the base and directs the shortstop so that he or she is in a direct line between the fielder and the bag (figure 9.16). The shortstop should set up at a spot where the outfielder can throw the ball on a line and hit him or her in the head. As with the player covering second base, the third baseman tells the shortstop whether to cut off the throw and which base (if any) to throw it to.

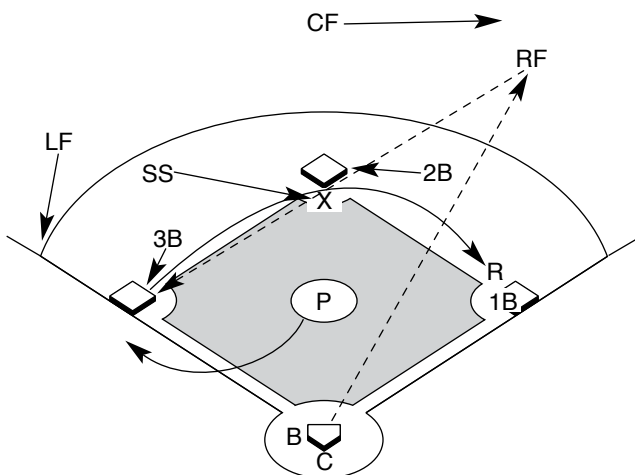


Figure 9.16 Cutoff positioning for base hit with a runner on first base.

Cutoffs to Home

The catcher directs traffic on this one. For base hits to left field with a runner on second or fly balls to left with a runner on third, the catcher lines up the third baseman in a direct line between the left fielder and home plate (figure 9.17). The third baseman should be far enough out that the left fielder can throw the ball on a line and hit him in the head. It is the catcher's job to tell the third baseman whether to cut off the throw and which base (if any) to throw it to. For balls hit to center- and right field the catcher directs the first baseman in a similar manner (figure 9.18). For throws coming in from centerfield, unless the ball is in very short center, most youth first basemen will want to set up on the second-base side of the pitcher's mound to avoid tripping over the mound when trying to cut off the throw or having the throw hit the mound and take a crazy hop (see figure 9.19).

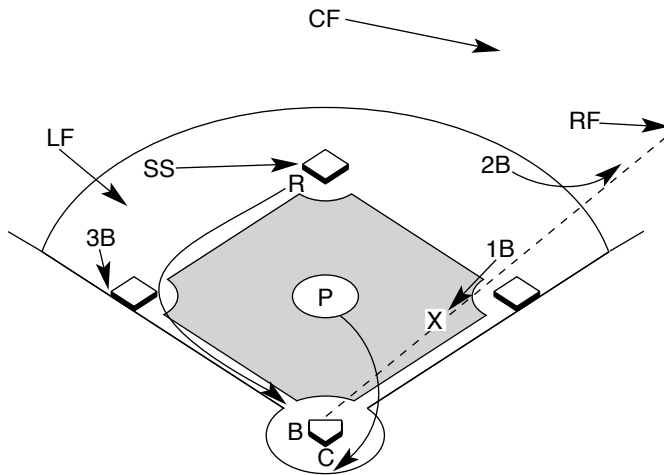


Figure 9.17 Positioning for cutoff to home on ball hit to right field.

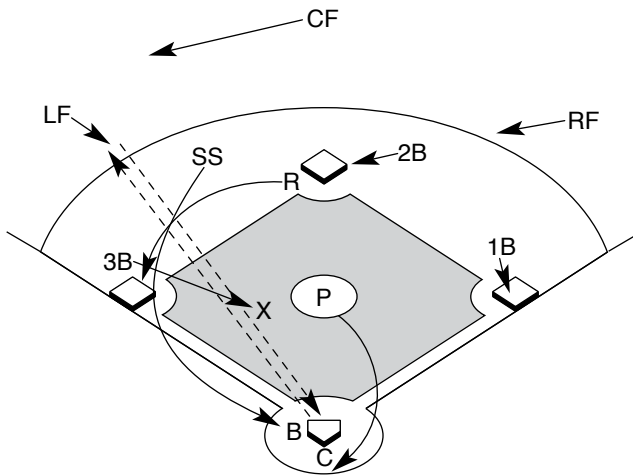


Figure 9.18 Positioning for cutoff to home on ball hit to left field.

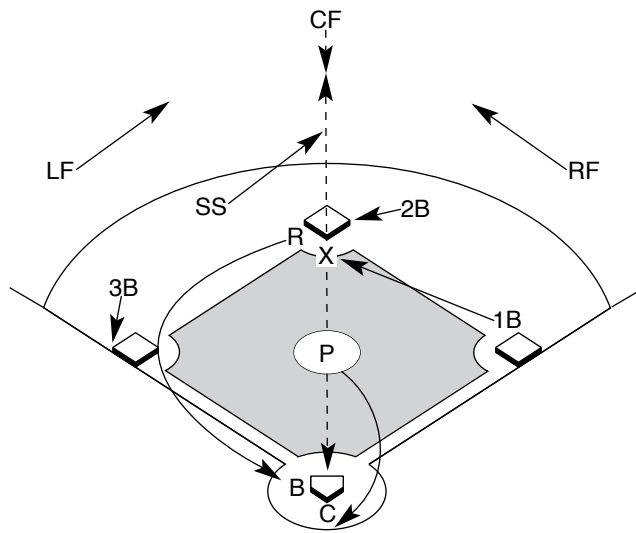


Figure 9.19 Positioning for cutoff to home on ball hit to centerfield.

Relay Basics

If a ball gets through an outfielder so that the fielder can't throw the ball all the way to the base where the lead runner is heading, a relay situation arises. This ball is going to be a double no matter how fast the outfielder gets to the ball and throws it into the infield. So, there is no play at second, but if the player tries to stretch the double into a triple or there was a runner on first who is trying to score, a throw may need to be made to one of those locations. The player who was the cutoff player needs to get out farther to assist the outfielder in getting the ball to the proper base. The other middle infielder should set up as a trailer, about 10 feet behind the relay person. If a throw is low or high to the relay, he or she should let it go to the trailer. The third baseman and catcher should communicate about where the final throw should go, and the first baseman should make sure that second base is covered in case the runner makes a hard turn and gets caught too far off the base (figure 9.20). For younger teams, the first baseman (ball hit to right field or centerfield) or third baseman (balls hit to left field) might need to get involved in the relay to help the ball get to home if there is a play at the plate.

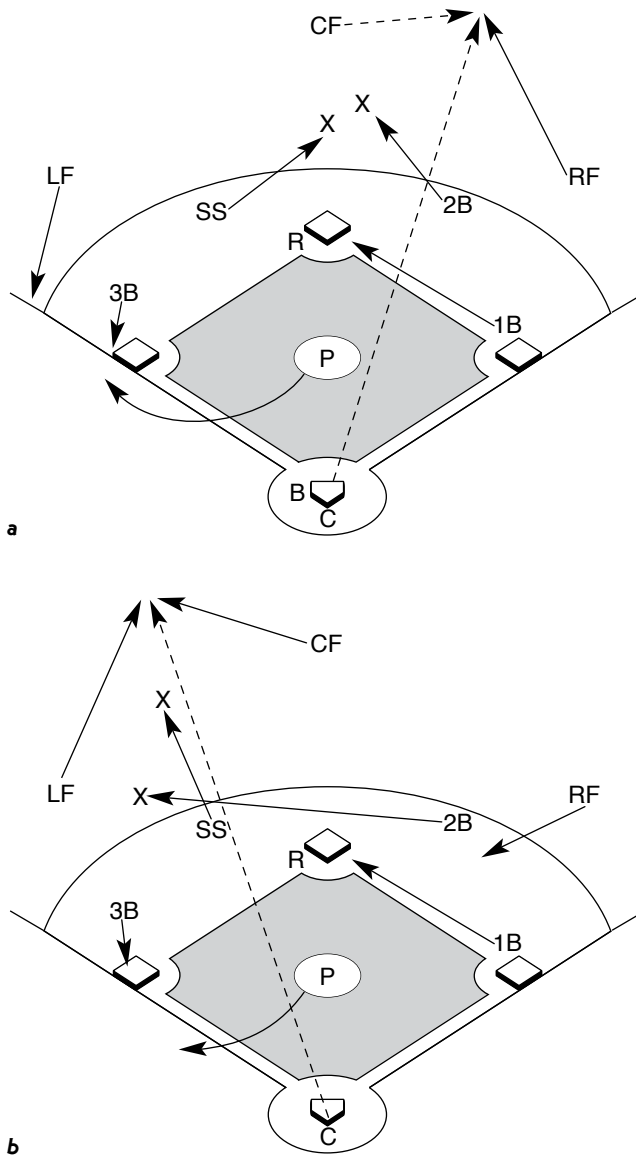


Figure 9.20 (a) Relay with trailer to right centerfield. (b) Relay with trailer to left centerfield.

Mechanics of the Cutoff or Relay Throw

If the cutoff or relay person is receiving a throw, turning and throwing to a base in an attempt to cut down a runner, it is important for that player to be able to make the throw as quickly as possible. To do this, the throw should be caught with two hands for a quick transfer. As the ball approaches, the player receiving the throw should turn his or her body and start moving toward the base where the he or she will be throwing the ball. This will allow the player to generate momentum toward the target before the ball actually arrives, making it possible for the quick transfer and throw (see figure 9.21).



a



b



c



d

Figure 9.21 When making the relay, make sure your player has the hands up and starts to turn as the throw approaches, allowing him or her to generate momentum toward the next target while the ball is in flight.

Relay Race Drill

Goal: To execute efficient relay throws.

Description: Two four-player teams compete (younger teams can add players as necessary). One group of four lines up spaced evenly apart from the outfield fence to near home plate extending along the third-base line. The other group of four lines up similarly along the first-base line (see figure 9.22). A ball is dropped next to the outfield fence near each foul line, about 10 feet away from the player nearest the fence. A coach yells, “Go;” and the first player picks up the ball with the bare hand, turns, and throws to the first relay person. That person uses correct mechanics, turning the body as the ball approaches and moving toward the next target, to relay the throw down the line. The team that gets the ball to home first gets a point. You can have more than two teams. Rotate teams and keep a total score for each group. More than two teams can compete at once if you prefer. (See figure 9.23.)

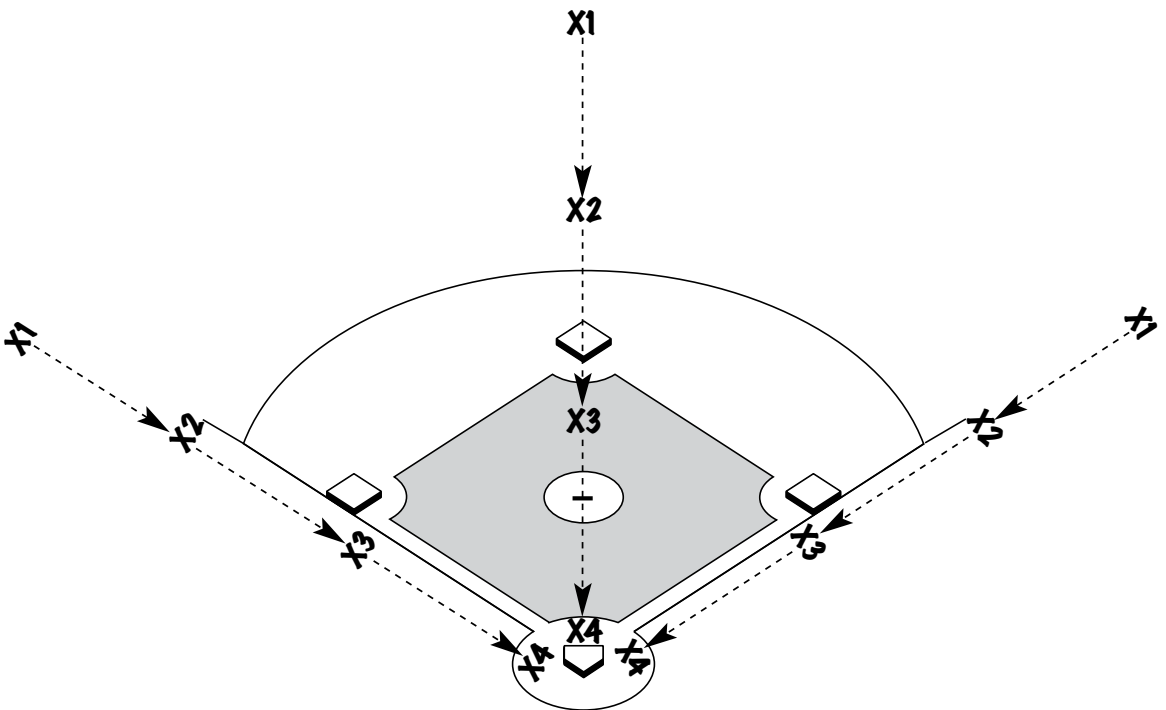


Figure 9.22 Setup for Relay Race Drill.



a



b



c

Figure 9.23 Players hone their skills and have fun during the Relay Race Drill.

Force Plays

A force play occurs when a baserunner must go to the next base on a ground ball because a ball is hit and there is a runner running toward the base he or she previously occupied. For example, if a runner is on first and the batter hits a ground ball, the batter is running toward first base and the runner who was on first must go to second. Similarly, if runners are on first and second, the runner on first is forced to go to second when the batter hits a ground ball, and because the runner on first is running to second, the player who started on second must go to third. Runners are not forced to advance to the next base on balls caught in the air. Runners who are forced to advance, however, are put out when the defense gets the ball to a player who touches the base (with any body part) before the runner gets there (see figure 9.24).

A force play can be made at all three bases and home plate, depending on where the runners are located when the ball is pitched. The basic techniques generally are the same, regardless of the base. The player throwing the ball should make the throw about as high as the chest. The player covering the base should get to the side of the base nearest the player making the throw as quickly as possible and provide a target with two hands out in front of the body (see figure 9.25). This shortens the throw's length and, thus, the time it takes to arrive, making it more likely that an out will be made. The player receiving the throw should place the heel of his or her throwing-side foot on the base and step toward the throw as it approaches with the glove and



Figure 9.24 A force out at second.



Figure 9.25 The proper setup for a force play at second.

glove-side foot. (The only place where this is not true is when the second baseman is covering for a force; in that case he or she puts the left foot on the bag and takes the right foot toward the throw in case there is a double play opportunity; see figure 9.26). If the play is going to be close, the player should stretch as far as she or he can and catch the ball in the glove hand only. If the play is not going to be close, the player should stretch a comfortable distance and catch the ball with both hands. The player catching the ball should always try to shorten the distance and time of the throw so the throw will get there before the runner does.



Figure 9.26 The second baseman stretches for the throw to complete a force out.

Underhand Flip

One of the most overlooked, but important defensive skills in baseball is the underhand flip. The underhand flip often is used to start double plays at the highest levels, but many times it is ignored at the younger age groups because double plays rarely are executed. This is unfortunate, because the underhand flip is a great way to eliminate errors and secure force outs at that level. How many times do you see a ground ball to the shortstop with a runner on first, and the shortstop stands straight up and fires a rocket right past the second baseman, allowing runners to circle the bases? A simple underhand flip can help eliminate this problem. The mechanics of the underhand flip are discussed in the section about double plays on page 206.

Force Play Drill; 6-4/4-6 Drill

Goal: To work on using the underhand flip to get force outs at second base.

Description: The group lines up at shortstop. Another group lines up at second. Coach rolls ground ball to first player in shortstop line. First player in second base line runs to bag, puts left foot on the bag and holds up both hands at chest level as a target. Shortstop fields ball and executes underhand flip to second baseman, who takes right foot to the ball and catches it. Second baseman returns ball to coach and players go to end of opposite lines. After

each player goes several times, switch and work on the 4-6 double play feed. Drill is reversed. Difference is that shortstop puts right foot on bag and takes left foot toward ball. As players get comfortable they can throw to a coach or teammates at first base to complete the double play. Stress the underhand flip and that the players covering second base should get there early and be stationary targets for their teammates.

Multitasking: For players 9 years old and up, add the first baseman to the drill and complete the double play. Start with first base at a shortened distance, and then try to move it back as the players get more comfortable.

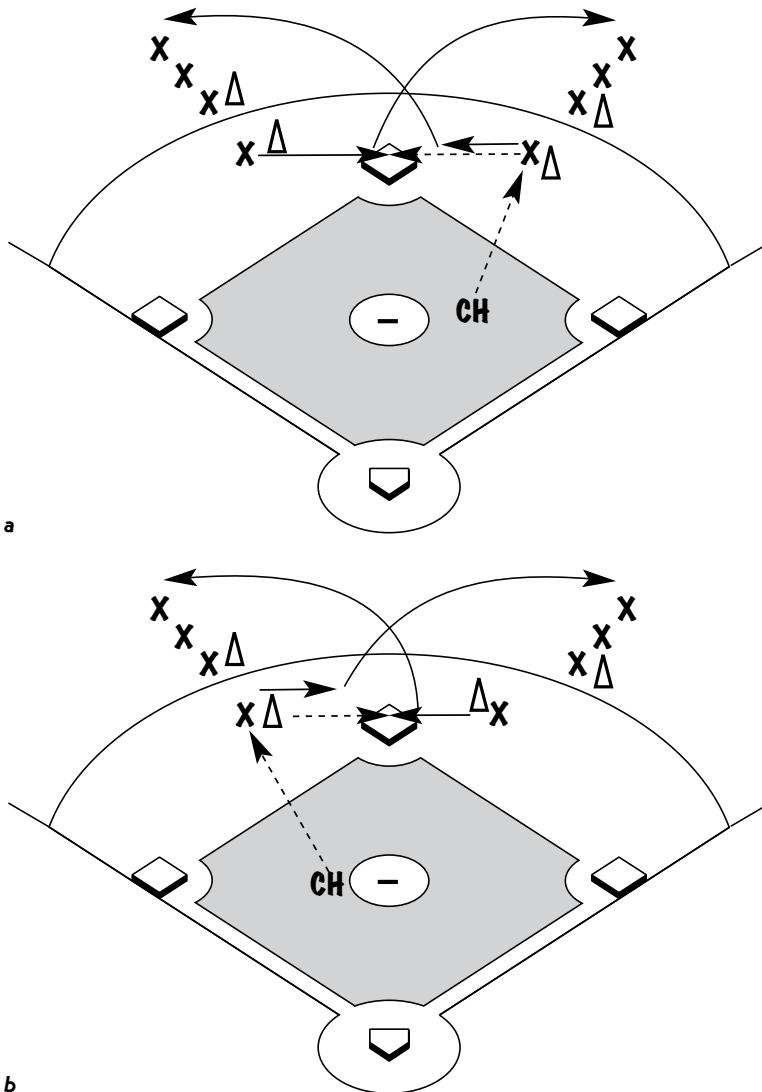


Figure 9.27 Set-up for the 6-4/4-6 Drill.

Lead Runner Drill

Goal: To execute force plays at second base.

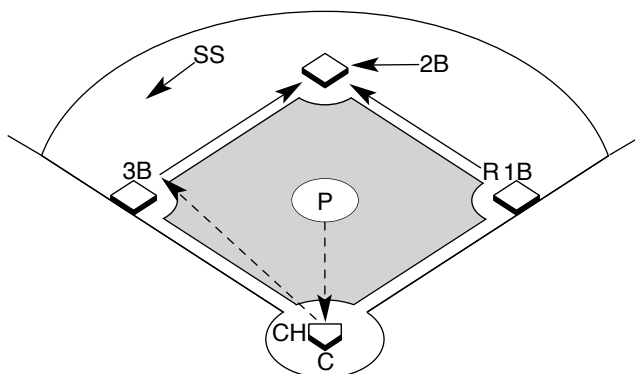
Description: Field an entire infield. The offense begins with a runner on first (see figure 9.28). Pitch balls that are easy to hit, or have a pitcher simulate throwing a pitch or actually throw a pitch. Batters hit or you hit balls fungo-style. The defense tries to make force plays at second. Each batter hits until he or she hits a ground ball. Each play begins with a runner on first. All six batters for the offense take one turn hitting, then they go through their rotation and hit one more ground ball each (so that they hit 12 ground balls in all). If you are hitting fungo-style, let each baserunner take the same number of turns going from first to second. At that point, switch the offense and defense, and repeat the game. Score 1 point for the defense for every force made at second; score 2 points if they turn a double play.

Stress that the player receiving the throw at second get to the bag as quickly as possible to be a stationary target. The second baseman should place the left foot on the bag and take the right foot to the ball. The shortstop should do the opposite.

Multitasking: If your players are hitting, have your baserunners work on their fundamentals, too. Shuffle to a good secondary lead (if is allowed), go hard on ground balls and go halfway on balls in the air. Runners also should practice a bent-leg slide into second base.

To make the game easier, do the following:

- Hit ground balls fungo-style.
- Roll ground balls to the defense.
- Don't allow leadoffs.
- Don't allow the runner to take off on the pitch. Instead, the runner must wait until the ball gets to the plate.
- Have batters hit off a tee or hit soft toss



Note: Ball can be hit to any infielder. Can be done with runners on 1st and 2nd or bases loaded.

Figure 9.28 Setup for Lead Runner Drill.

To make the game harder

- Allow leadoffs.
- Allow the runner to take off on the pitch.
- Hit or roll ground balls to locations that will make the play difficult.

Tag Plays

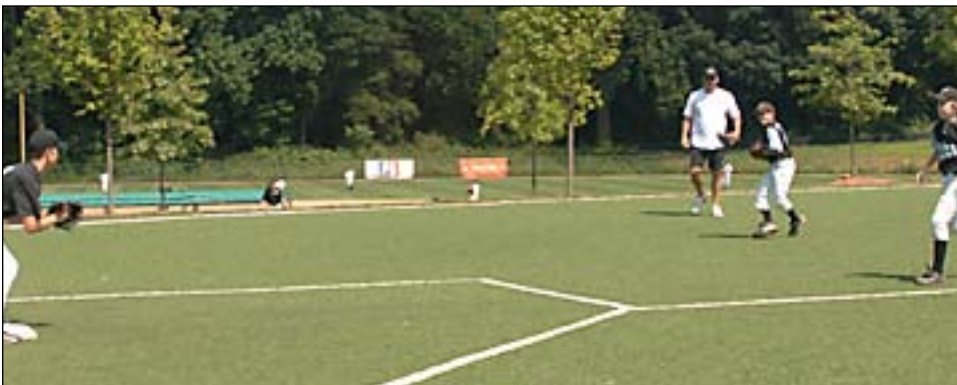
The tag play is another fundamental defensive concept. A potential tag play situation occurs any time a runner is not in contact with a base and time is not out. For example, a runner overrunning second base can return safely to second by retouching the base before being tagged. To put out a baserunner with a tag play, the defensive player must tag or touch the runner with the ball, or with the glove holding the ball, when the runner is off the base (see figure 9.29).

The tag play is required when a runner is not forced to advance to the next base. Examples of tag play situations include

- a runner on second base (with no runner on first base) who runs on a ground ball (see figure 9.29),



a



b

(continued)

Figure 9.29 A tag play at third base.



c



d



e

Figure 9.29 (continued)

- a runner on second base who attempts to score on a base hit,
- a runner tagging up on a fly ball who attempts to advance to the next base, or
- any time a runner attempts to steal a base or is picked off.

Note that in the first example, if there had been a runner on first as well as second, it would have been a force play, because the runners would have been forced to advance on a ground ball.

The throw for a tag play should arrive at belt level (see figure 9.29). Many times coaches say that the perfect throw arrives right on the bag, but it is actually much harder to catch a throw at that level with a runner bearing down on you than it is to handle a ball that is waist high and drop a tag straight down. The runner will probably be sliding into the base, so the player receiving the throw should catch the ball and take the glove straight down and straight up. Players covering on tag plays should straddle the base (see figure 9.30) and let the ball travel all the way to their glove without reaching out. The ball travels much faster than the player can move his or her glove.

Players should never place a leg between the base and the incoming runner. They should, however, remember that when receiving a throw for a tag play, they need to move from the base to keep throws that are off-line or in the dirt from getting through and allowing baserunners to advance. If the runner is sliding, the tag should be applied with just the glove (the ball must be in the glove). If the runner comes into the bag standing up, the player applying the tag might want to use two hands to execute the tag.

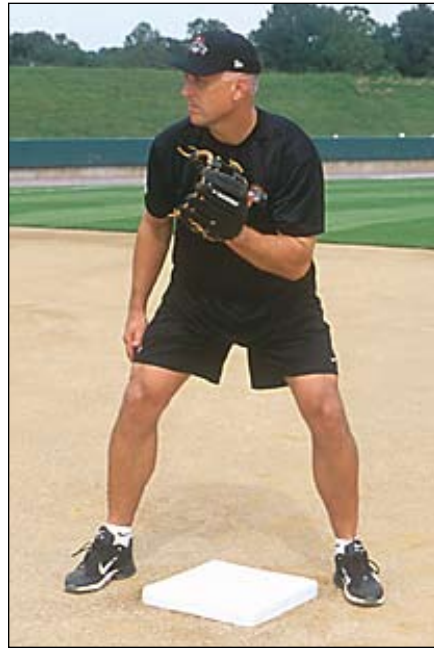
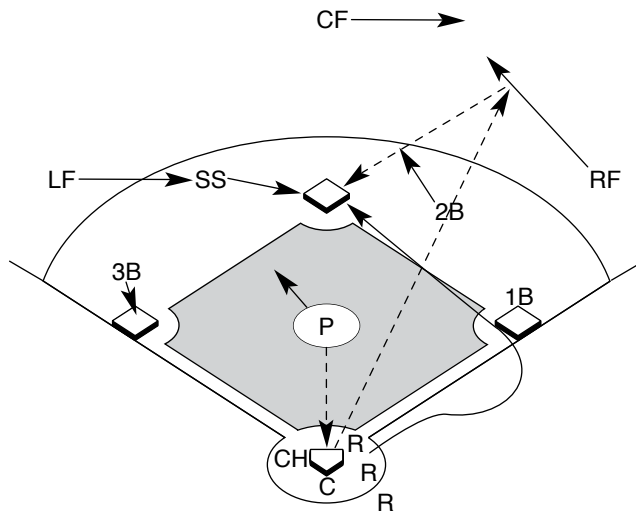


Figure 9.30 Covering the base for a tag play by straddling the base.

Tag-Out Drill

Goal: To make good throws to bases, set up properly to receive throws in tag-out situations, and apply the tag.

Description: Place a complete defensive lineup in the field (minus the pitcher) and set up situations where there could be tag outs (see figure 9.31). Start with no one on base and hit a ball in one of the outfield gaps but not past the outfielders. Make it short enough so that the throw can be made all the way to the base without a cutoff person. The running group is attempting to get to second place no matter what. The outfielder's job is to cut off the ball and make the throw all the way to the bag. The proper middle infielder should straddle the bag, receive the throw, and attempt to make the tag. Keep score. The running group gets a point for making it to second, and the defense gets a point for recording the out.



Note: Ball can be hit to any OF. Also can be done with runner on first going to third or runner going from second to home. Can be done with IF with runners going from second to third or 3rd to home (with infield in).

Figure 9.31 Setup for Tag-Out Drill.

Change the situations: Have the runners attempt to go from first to third and from second to home. Also bring the infield up and have players try to score from third on ground balls to the infield. This also can be done in leagues that permit stealing by having the runners try to steal. You will need a pitcher to do this.

To make the game easier, do the following:

- Don't use an outfielder.
- Don't allow leadoffs.

To make the game harder, do the following:

- Allow leadoffs.
- Hit the ball to spots that make the play difficult.

Multitasking: You can work on many facets of offense and defense during this drill. Baserunners can practice making proper turns, sliding to avoid tags, and getting jumps on stolen base attempts. You also can mix in some fly balls, ground balls to the left side, and so on to simulate certain tricky baserunning situations. Balls can be hit a little deeper to allow the defense to work on cutoffs and relays. Pitchers can be incorporated and taught how to back up throws to the bases.

Double Plays

Double plays occur any time two runners are put out during continuous action. Examples include a fly out in which the baserunner is put out after failing to tag up or is tagged out at the next base after correctly tagging up; a strikeout and a runner thrown out on the same play trying to steal; a line drive that is caught in which the baserunner can't get back to the original base before the ball is thrown there and the base is tagged; and a ground ball with a runner on first in which force outs are made at second and first bases. Double plays are rally killers for the offense and morale boosters for the defense. They are also more difficult to execute, because usually more players handle the ball, more throws are made, it takes longer to get the ball to first base. However, if you break the double play down into its fundamental parts and work on those components one at a time, you'll see that in reality a double play is nothing more than a catch, a throw, a catch, a throw, and a catch.

With fewer than two outs and a runner or runners in force situations, the first option usually is to cut down the lead runner, especially at the younger age levels. This is not always the case, however. When there is ground ball hit to the first or second baseman with runners on first and second, it can be a difficult and extremely risky play for those players to make the long throw to force the runner at third. In this situation you might have the first baseman try to force the runner at second if the ground ball is right at him or takes him toward second base. If the ball is hit toward first, he or she would get the out at first. The second baseman should always try to force the runner at second in this situation unless the ball takes him or her toward first base. As players get older, the middle infielders almost always try to complete a double play or at least to force the runner at second in a similar situation. One exception would be on a play in which the ball pulls the shortstop far enough toward third base that making the throw to third is the only realistic chance of getting an out.

With runners on first and second and fewer than two outs at the youngest age groups, getting the out at third is the ideal play if a ball is hit to the pitcher or third baseman. As players get older, the pitcher almost always throw to the shortstop covering second in hopes of starting a double play. An older third baseman will go whichever way the ball takes him or her. If the ball is hit right at the player or toward the bag, he or she will tag third and throw to first in hopes of completing the double play. On a ground ball hit toward second base, he or she will make the throw to second in hopes of starting a 5-4-3 twin killing.

Decisions on where to throw the ball when the bases are loaded and there are fewer than two outs depend on the age group and the game situation. Most times, at the youngest levels, the play should be made at the closest base to ensure that one out is recorded. As players advance in age, middle infielders will almost always try to turn the double play up the middle. The first and third basemen will throw home if they are playing up. If they are playing back

they will make the play in whichever direction the ball takes them. Pitchers almost always will try to complete the home-to-first double play. If the infield is playing in, the first option for each infielder is to cut down the lead runner at home.

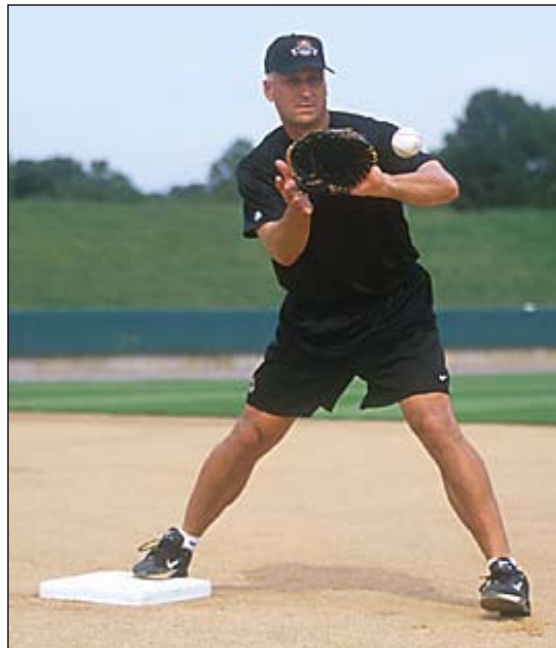
Double-Play Depth

When a force situation at second base and there are fewer than 2 outs, the middle infielders will want to position themselves at double-play depth (figure 9.8). Each person's double-play depth is different. The second baseman and shortstop should play closer to second base and slightly more shallow than usual. They need to be close enough to the bag that they can get there and be a stationary target when receiving a throw if a hard, one-hopper is hit to one of the other infielders. That's the sole determining factor: How close does the player need to be to get to second base in time to be stationary as the infielder attempts to make the first throw?

Shortstop Turn

On ground balls hit to the right side of second base and most ground balls hit to the pitcher, the shortstop will cover second base; that is, the shortstop will take the throw from the fielder fielding the ball and make the relay throw to first base to complete the double play. The keys to covering the base when throws are made by the first- or second-base player from the outfield side of the baseline between first and second base are these:

1. Get to the bag as quickly as possible in an attempt to be a stationary target.
2. Put the right foot on the bag, and present a target with the glove and throwing hand at chest level.
3. Wait to see exactly where the throw is heading before taking the left foot toward the ball (figure 9.32a).
4. Catch the ball with two hands out in front of the body for a quick transfer (figure 9.32a).
5. Move out of the base-runner's path, turn the



a

(continued)

Figure 9.32 The standard shortstop double-play turn.

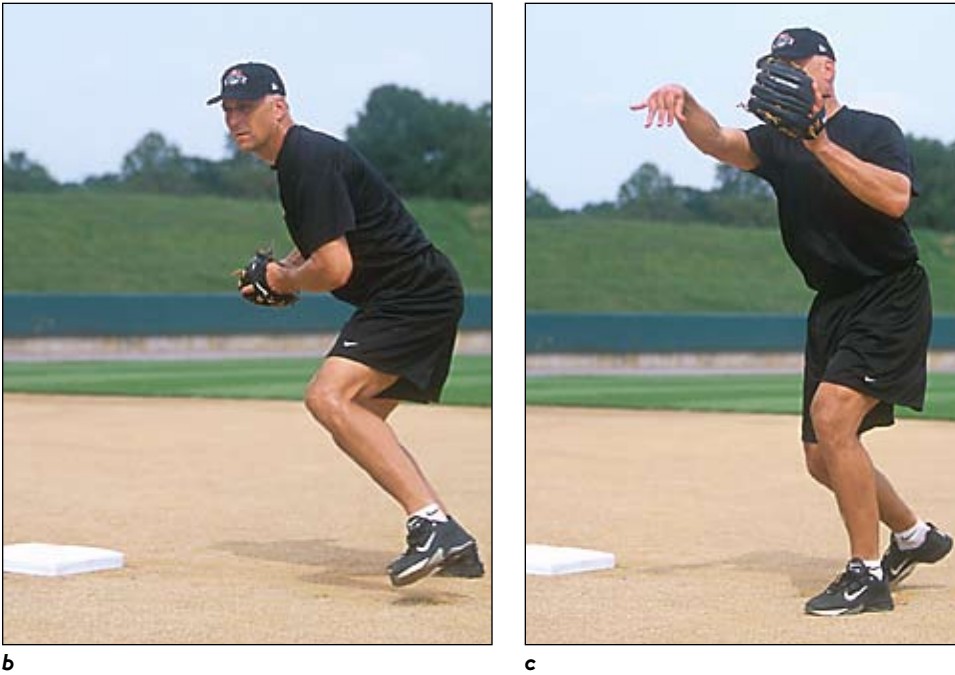


Figure 9.32 (continued)

body so that the front shoulder points toward first base, and make a quick throw to the first baseman (figure 9.32*b*).

6. Step toward first base, and complete the throw (figure 9.32*c*).

Shortstop Inside Pivot

Balls that are hit to the first baseman when he or she is holding a runner on first base call for an inside pivot. In this situation the first baseman actually fields the ball inside the baseline.

1. Get to the bag as quickly as possible in hopes of being a stationary target when the throw is made (see figure 9.33*a*).
2. Place the left foot on the bag and the right foot toward the pitcher's mound, squaring the shoulders to the first baseman (see figure 9.33*b*).
3. Present a target with the glove and throwing hand at chest level.
4. Catch the ball with two hands in front of the body (see figure 9.33*b*).
5. Move the left foot from the baserunner's path, and turn the front shoulder so that it is pointed toward first base before making the throw (see figure 9.33*c*).
6. Step toward first base, and complete the throw (see figure 9.33*c*).

On balls hit to the pitcher the shortstop can use whichever method is most comfortable based on how quickly the play develops and how far the pitcher has to throw the ball.



Figure 9.33 The shortstop's inside double play turn is used on some balls hit to the first baseman.

Second-Base Pivots

On ground balls hit to the left side of second base, the second baseman will receive the initial throw and execute the double-play pivot. In general, the approach is opposite to that of the shortstop.

1. Get to the bag as quickly as possible in an attempt to be a stationary target (see figure 9.34a).
2. Put the left foot on the bag, and present a target with the glove and throwing hands at chest level (see figure 9.34a).
3. Wait to see exactly where the throw is heading before taking the right foot toward the ball.
4. Catch the ball with two hands out in front of the body for a quick transfer (see figure 9.34b).
5. Move out of the baserunner's path, turn the body so that the front shoulder points toward first base, and make a quick throw to the first baseman.
6. Step toward first base, and complete the throw.



Figure 9.34 Option number one for a second baseman turning a double play: Take the left foot to the bag and the left foot toward the ball.

By getting to the bag quickly, the second baseman gives him- or herself three options. For younger players with weaker arms, the best method is to step across the bag with the right foot as described previously. As players get older, however, they might feel more comfortable with one of the following two methods.

1. Set up square to the fielder making the throw with the left foot on the bag and the right foot toward the outfield. After receiving the throw the second baseman actually pushes off with the left foot, moving the right foot toward left field before stepping back toward first, and making the throw (see figure 9.35). This allows the fielder to use second base as protection from the runner.
2. Let the ball travel all the way to the base, catching it with two hands out in front of the body before stepping back out of the baserunner's path with the right foot and making the throw to first (see figure 9.36).

Whenever attempting to turn a double play, the most important consideration is to make sure you get the lead runner out. If your players try to rush the play to get two outs, they might not get any. Teams can't afford to give their opponents extra outs to work with. If your opponent hits a routine ground



a



b

Figure 9.35 Option number two for a second baseman turning a double play: Take the right foot away from second base, and use the bag as protection.



a

(continued)

Figure 9.36 Option number three for a second baseman turning a double play: Step back with the right foot, and clear the baseline before throwing to first.

**b****c**

Figure 9.36 (continued)

ball and you don't get at least one out on the play, the other team is in a great position to have a big inning.

The key to executing the double play is for the middle infielders to understand their proper double-play depth and to get to the bag as quickly as possible. It's much easier for a player to throw accurately to a stationary target instead of someone who is still moving when the ball is released. It also is a

lot easier for the player executing the pivot to catch the ball and make sure of the first out if he or she is not running across the bag, trying to catch the ball, step on the base, and avoid the runner all at once. Middle infielders never should try to time the throw. They should get to the bag quickly and set up properly to make sure of the first out. Once the lead out is secured they can focus on turning the double play.

The Underhand Flip

The underhand flip often is taken for granted, but it is an important tool that is used by most, if not all, infielders. It is most commonly used by the shortstop and second baseman to start double plays, but it also is used by first basemen on ground balls in which the pitcher covers first, by pitchers on bunts and short ground balls in which the play is at home, and by catchers on passed balls or wild pitches when the pitcher is covering home. Because of this, all infielders and pitchers should master the underhand flip.

At the younger ages, the underhand flip might not start too many double plays, but using it will make recording the lead out at second a lot easier. How many times when watching youth baseball do you see a routine ground ball to the shortstop or second baseman with a runner on first in which the ball gets thrown into the outfield and the runners circle the bases? It happens a lot, and it shouldn't. Usually in these instances the player fielding the ball stands straight up and makes a hard throw that is not catchable to the player covering the base. These errors can be eliminated and more outs recorded if your players can perfect the underhand flip. In most games, more outs means fewer runs for your opponent.

The underhand flip should be used to start a double play or force a runner at second on balls hit directly at the middle infielder or balls hit to the second base side of the middle infielder. After the ball is fielded, the mechanics of the flip are as follows:

1. Stay low and take your momentum toward the target by shuffling the feet or using a crossover step (see figure 9.37a).
2. Get the glove out of the way so that the player receiving the throw can see the ball (see figure 9.37b).
3. Keep the wrist stiff and the hand behind the ball (see figure 9.37c).
4. Don't wind up and swing the arm too much; let the body's momentum carry the ball to the target.
5. Release the ball, leaving the hand high at the target's face level (see figure 9.37d).
6. Follow the flip toward the target.

The shortstop has an advantage over the second baseman when using the underhand flip to record the out at second since the shortstop is more open toward the bag. This makes the flip from short to second feel more natural.

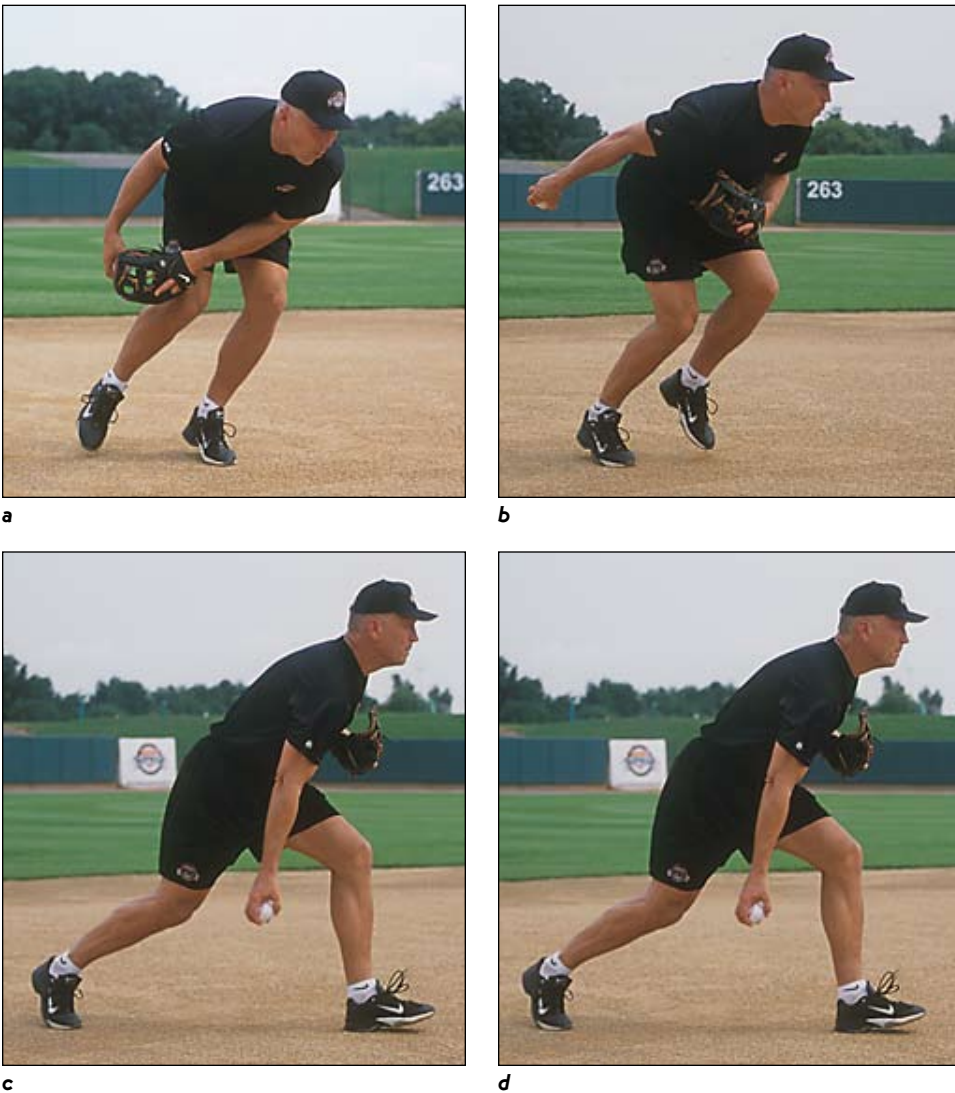


Figure 9.37 The underhand flip from the shortstop's perspective.

For the second baseman, the natural movement is to take the ball that is caught in front of the body to a point behind the body, turning the entire body in the process, before flipping the ball. Because the second baseman catches the ball out in front, he or she should flip it to the shortstop from out in front. Momentum still should be taken toward the target with a shuffle or crossover, the wrist still should stay stiff without winding up, the hand should be left at face level after the ball is released, and the flip should be followed (see figure 9.38).



a



b



c

Figure 9.38 The underhand flip as executed by the second baseman.

The underhand flip is an uphill feed. It should travel on a line from low to high without an arc so that it can be caught at the chest or face level for an easy transfer and throw.

Double Play Drills

See 6-4/4-6 Drill in the Force Outs section on pages 🍏.

High-Five Drill

Goal: To introduce mechanics of the underhand flip.

Description: The underhand flip is used by virtually all infielders at some point, so it should be introduced at a young age and practiced. Players line up opposite coach, 10 to 12 feet away from him or her. Assume basic ground ball position (wide base, rear end down, hands in front). Ball is rolled to player. Player catches ball first, generates momentum toward target, uses an underhand flip, and finishes by following the flip toward the coach with the hand held high at head level. When the player gets to the coach he gives him a high five (hand should not drop below head level until high five is completed). Use body's momentum to carry toss to the target. Wrist remains stiff. Also avoid letting ball roll off fingers (see figure 9.39).



a



b

Figure 9.39 The High-Five Drill teaches players to leave their hands high after executing the underhand flip.

Explain why: For some reason players don't want to leave their hands up at the receiver's head or chest level after flipping the ball. Failure to do this will cause the ball to stay low and be difficult to handle. By making the kids give you a high five you will force them to leave the hand at the proper level, which should become a habit.

Box Drill—Short to Second

Goal: To simulate the underhand flip from second to short.

Description: Create a box with four players standing up to 25 feet apart from each other (closer for younger players). Fifth player stands behind any player at any corner. First toss comes from corner where there are two players. To increase concentration, do not use gloves. Each player faces corner to his right. Tossers shuffle feet or crosses over, flips the ball to player at corner to his left, leaves hand high, and follows flip to that corner. After arriving at next corner, turn to face corner to the right, and have two hands out in front ready to receive toss as it comes around (see figure 9.40). Catch the ball first, generate momentum, toss, and follow to next corner. Stress stiff wrist, no extra arm motion, leaving hand high and following flip. This can be done with players of any age. For youngest players you may want to use gloves and something other than a hard ball. Count to see which group of five can catch the most in a row without missing one.

Variation: Can be done with as many players as you like. Just have the players take turns receiving and flipping at each corner of the box. Next player at each corner steps up after the previous player receives, flips, and follows.

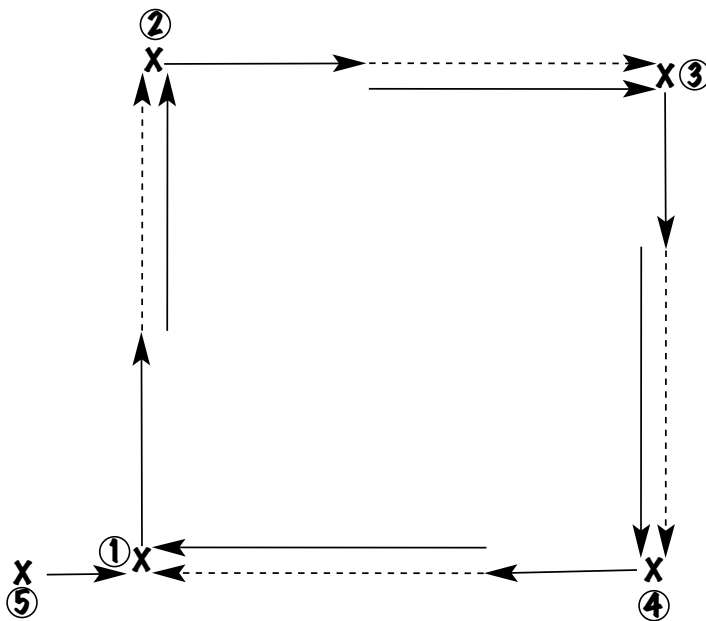


Figure 9.40 Box Drill (shortstop to second base).

Box Drill—Second to Short

Goal: To simulate the underhand flip from second to short.

Description: Create a box with four players standing up to 25 feet apart from each other (closer for younger players). Fifth player stands behind any player at any one of the corners. The first toss comes from corner where there are two players. To increase concentration, do not use gloves. Each player faces corner to his left. Tosser shuffles feet or crosses over, keeps hand with the ball in front of the body, flips the ball to player at corner to his right without turning the body, leaves hand high, and follows flip to that corner. After arriving at the next corner, turn to face corner to the left and have two hands out in front ready to receive toss as it comes around (see figure 9.41). Catch the ball first, generate momentum, flip, and follow to next corner. This is more awkward because the hand stays in front of the body at all times. It is important to keep the wrist stiff and avoid turning body completely toward target so that the hand is no longer in front. For youngest players you may want to use gloves something other than a hard ball. Count to see which group of five can catch the most in a row without missing one.

Variation: Can be done with as many players as you like. Just have the players take turns receiving and flipping at each corner of the box. Next player at each corner steps up after the previous player receives, flips, and follows (see figures 9.42 and 9.43).

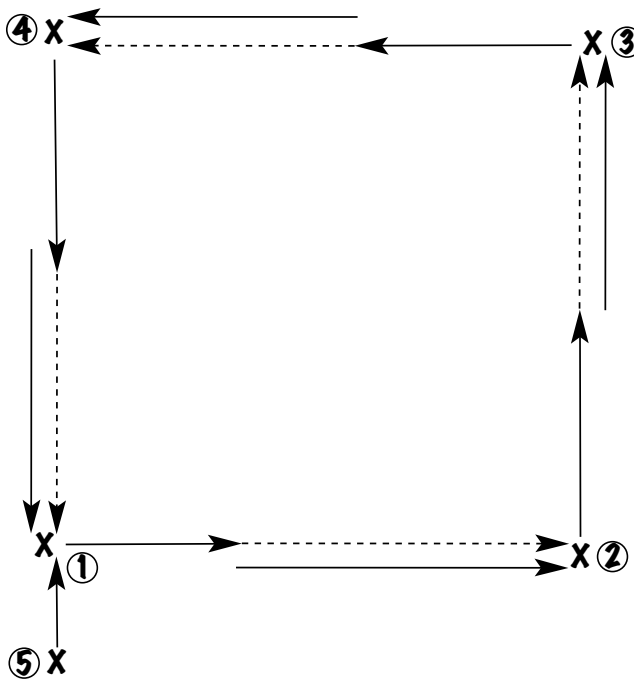


Figure 9.41 Box Drill (second base to shortstop).



Figure 9.42 This variation of the Box Drill develops the flip from short to second.



Figure 9.43 The Box Drill also can be set up to work on the flip from second to short.

Rundowns

Rundown situations occur when a runner is caught between bases by the defense. The goal in a rundown is to get the baserunner moving full speed in one direction before making the throw. When one runner is in a rundown and another runner is on third base, the defense needs to keep an eye on the runner on third, who may try to score. Fielders must be ready to throw the ball home to cut down the runner trying to score. The only time this might not be the case would be with 2 outs during a game in which the team in the field is up by several runs. In this instance, getting the out might be the most important concern.

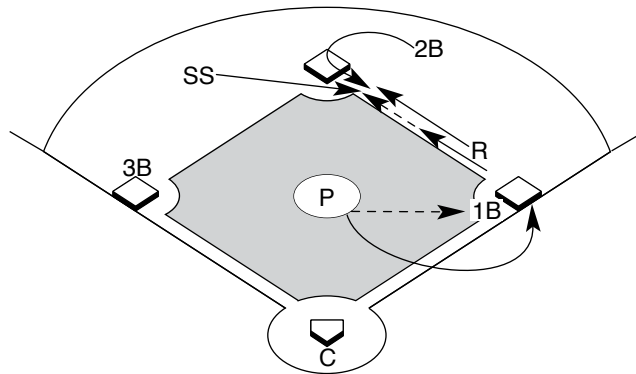


Figure 9.44 44 Rundown.

The two defenders closest to the bases between which the runner is caught are the primary defenders; the two fielders next closest to these bases are backup fielders in the rundown. Backup fielders should stay at least 10 feet behind the primary fielders unless the play has moved close to a base. If a primary fielder throws the ball to a teammate, the player who threw the ball keeps running outside of the baseline and becomes a backup fielder, while the player who was backing him or her up assumes a primary fielding role (see figure 9.44). Here are keys to executing a rundown:

1. The rundown starts with the infielder who has the ball taking it out of the glove and holding it high in a position to throw (see figure 9.45a).
 - The ball is always held in the throwing hand, and fake throws should not be made; this just fakes out the player waiting for the throw.
2. The fielder runs directly at the runner, forcing him or her to commit one way or the other at full speed (see figure 9.45b).
 - It is important to run as fast as possible while still staying under control so that an accurate throw can be made.
3. When the runner gets to full speed, the infielder at the next base calls, "Now!" and steps forward to receive the throw with both hands held at chest level (see figure 9.45c).
 - One throw is ideal, because the more throws that are made, the greater the chance of error.
 - The fielder making the throw gets out of the baseline and runs to the next base to receive another throw if necessary.
 - The ball should be caught first, out in front of the body with two hands, before the tag is applied.



a



b



c

Figure 9.45 The key to a successful rundown is to get the runner moving in full speed and to limit the number of throws.

Pickle

Goal: To execute effective rundowns.

Description: Set up four stations placed about 30 feet apart. Each station consists of two bases placed 30 feet apart (see figure 9.46). Designate one base to be second base and one to be third. Assign three players to each station, two fielders, and one runner. The runner starts in a rundown and then tries to reach a base safely.

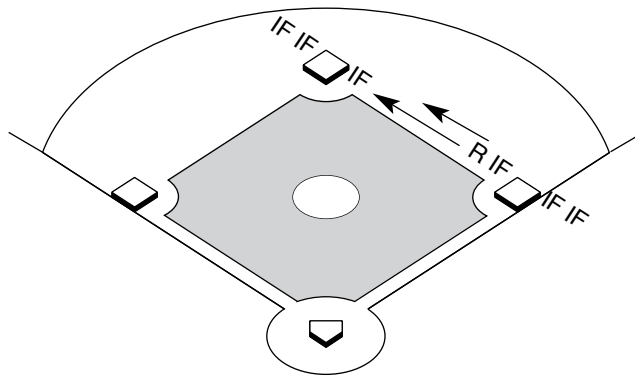


Figure 9.46 Setup for the Pickle game.

Award points to the defense using the following system:

- Two points for getting the runner out on the first throw
- One point for getting the runner out on the second throw
- Zero points if the runner reaches second base safely
- Minus one point if the runner reaches third base safely

When a rundown is completed, restart by having the runner begin part of the way between the bases again. Players rotate whenever the defensive players at that station score 4 points.

Note that it is important for players to understand the goal of a rundown and the actual execution before introducing the positioning and rotation of players. Make sure that all of your infielders, pitchers and catchers understand the concept of getting the player moving at full speed before making the throw and are able to execute before complicating the play and introducing the other aspects.

Other Defensive Plays

In addition to the plays we've already talked about, your players need to know other plays to execute well defensively. Consider introducing the following defensive tactics to your team:

- **Getting the lead runner.** The lead runner is the one on the base paths who is the closest to home plate. The defense's objective is to stop this player by throwing the ball to the base ahead of the lead runner. Remember that as players get older and double plays become part of the equation, there are situations when it is better to attempt to turn the double play than to simply try for the lead runner. Second basemen and first basemen never should make the long throw to third to get the lead runner when an opportunity exists for a force out there.
- **Looking the runner back.** On ground balls in certain situations, a fielder can look a runner back to the base before throwing to first for the out, thus keeping the runner from advancing. For example, when a runner is on second and a ground ball is hit to the third baseman, that fielder should catch the ball (focusing entirely on fielding it first!), and as he or she begins the throwing motion, look quickly at the runner to keep the runner from advancing. Unless the runner tries to advance, the fielder should not stop or slow the throwing motion. If the runner does try to advance, the fielder is ready to make a play on the runner. If the fielder doesn't pay attention to the runner, the runner likely will be able to advance. This also can occur when a runner is on second or third and there is a ground ball hit to the pitcher with fewer than two outs.
- **Backing up throws.** Every player not directly involved in a play should back up throws to different parts of the field. The pitcher backs up the base that the lead runner is moving toward, especially if it's home plate or third base. Infielders back up each other when a throw is coming from the catcher. Remember that every player has a responsibility and should be moving on every play.
- **Backing up batted balls.** Outfielders not directly involved in a play should back up each other. If the ball gets away from one outfielder, the backup can make the play and prevent the runners from taking an extra base. The number one job of an outfielder is to keep runners from advancing extra bases on balls that are hit to them (see figures 9.12 and 9.13 on page 228).
- **Giving up a run.** Sometimes you'll decide to give up a run in exchange for an out because you have a comfortable lead or it is early in a game. This may keep your opponent from going on to score several runs. In this case you might let a runner on third score on a ground ball to get the easier out at first.
- **Making sure of the first out.** In a double-play situation, the top priority is to get the lead runner out. If infielders retire the lead runner, they can attempt to complete the double play. Rushing to get the double play instead of making sure of the first out can lead to a situation where no outs are recorded, which can set your opponent up for a big inning (see figures 9.22 and 9.23 on page 230).

- **Fly ball priorities.** Simply put, the middle infielders have priority over the corner infielders and pitchers on pop-ups, the corner infielders have priority over the pitcher and catcher on pop-ups, and the shortstop has priority over all other infielders on pop-ups. Outfielders coming in for fly balls have priority over infielders; infielders should get out of the way as soon as an outfielder calls for the ball. The centerfielder has priority over the left and right fielders on fly balls.

Again, keep your defensive strategies simple and the number manageable. Defense requires quick reactions. If you overload players with too much information or it's too complicated, they won't be able to respond quickly and properly when the ball is hit.

Pitching Strategies

You've probably heard the distinction between a pitcher and a thrower. A pitcher has a plan, changing speeds and locations of pitches in an attempt to expose each hitter's weaknesses. (Every hitter has at least one.) The pitcher has good control no matter what the count is and rarely throws the ball far from the strike zone.

In contrast, a thrower simply rears back and fires the ball at the catcher's mitt, figuring the velocity of the pitch will prevent the hitter from making contact. Throwers tend to walk more hitters because they are more concerned about velocity than control.

Teach your pitchers how to pitch, not just throw. Help them to understand why it is important to use all parts of the plate and why they shouldn't just lob the ball right over the plate when the count is 3-1. Along with a pitching mind-set, help pitchers develop their mechanics early; they'll have more success and fewer arm problems.

The best pitch in baseball is strike one. Pitchers who work ahead in the count have a distinct advantage over pitchers who are constantly behind in the count. Once a pitcher is ahead in the count he or she has less pressure to throw strikes on every pitch and can have more confidence changing speeds and trying to hit specific spots within the strike zone. Pitchers who are frequently behind in the count are more predictable and can't be as fine with their pitches or change speeds as easily. A hitter who knows that a pitcher has to throw a fastball and can't afford to paint the corners has a distinct advantage over the pitcher. Another important pitching strategy is to work quickly. Pitchers who work fast will help their teammates stay focused and should find that they get better defensive support behind them.