

# Skills and Drills



**A**s your players are introduced to drills in practice, their experiences during these drills—and your subsequent discussions about their experiences—will help them develop the skills necessary to execute certain tactics and strategies successfully in game situations. Our method of developing the fundamental building blocks through simple drills, explaining why we do things a certain way, and creating a competitive or game atmosphere in which the skills can be tested, allows players to develop fundamental skills and understand their use in game situations.

In this chapter we provide information to help you teach your players team fundamentals, as well as individual offensive and defensive skills. We also include suggestions for identifying and correcting common errors. Remember to follow our approach to skill development through drills and contests.

## Offensive Skills

---

Offensive skills include hitting and baserunning. Hitting a baseball may be the most difficult skill to master in all of sports. The batter has a round bat and is trying to squarely hit a round ball being thrown at a high rate of speed by a pitcher who is trying to trick him or her. Combine this fact with your players' ages and inexperience, and you've got your work cut out for you. Helping your players improve their hitting fundamentals certainly will make their experience more rewarding.

Baserunning is just as vital to a successful offense. Unfortunately, many youth teams get runners on base and make inning-ending baserunning mistakes. You don't have to be fast to be a good baserunner. Speed helps on the basepaths, but many players at all levels have made themselves more valuable to their teams by learning how to run the bases correctly. These next two sections should help you coach your players to be better hitters and baserunners.

### Hitting

Good hitters perform the skill in one fluid motion. What makes hitting so difficult is that several key components must be combined to generate that one fluid motion. On top of that, these components must be executed properly just to have a chance to hit a baseball being thrown at varying speeds and with different types of movement. The key components to any good swing are proper grip; a balanced stance; weight shift; a short, soft stride; the swing; and the follow-through. Here are the key points to focus on when teaching your players how to be better hitters.

## The Ripken Way of Skill Development

- 1. Place your players in small groups to introduce the skill to them.** Be sure to use key buzzwords that can help them remember how to perform the skill. Demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill. Don't forget to explain why the skill should be performed that way. Describe and demonstrate the drill that will help them improve the skill you have introduced.
- 2. Observe your players.** Note what they are doing well and what they might need to improve.
- 3. Bring your players together to talk about how they've performed so far.** Ask them questions about the proper way to execute the skill and why it should be done that way. Answering basic questions such as "What is the goal of the drill?" and "What are the most important things to remember when executing the drills?" (buzzwords) allows players to understand the correct mechanics. Asking them to explain *why* convinces them that an important reason exists for performing the skill a certain way and helps them remember the proper techniques. If they don't come up with the answers on their own, guide them toward the correct responses or demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill without speaking.
- 4. Ask some or all of the players to demonstrate the proper technique and to repeat the key buzzwords for you.** Do it again at the end of the drill and then before you repeat the drill to reinforce the concepts.
- 5. Once the players get the hang of the drill, introduce a point system or some other method for them to perform the drill in a competitive setting.** If you aren't familiar with baseball skills, you may want to look into purchasing an instructional video or DVD such as the Ripken instructional series: *Pitching the Ripken Way*, *Playing Defense the Ripken Way*, and *Hitting the Ripken Way*. In these DVDs you can see the skills performed by big league players and taught to youth baseball players of various ages. You may find skills and team fundamentals that are mentioned in this text but not formally taught. Other Ripken instructional materials are available as references to help you understand anything that may be new or confusing to you.

We've only provided information about the basics of baseball in this program. As your players progress, you'll need to advance your knowledge as a coach. You can do so by learning from your experiences, watching and talking with more experienced coaches, and studying advanced resources. In the near future we will have more advanced training programs available for coaches, so we hope you will be able to progress right along with us.

**Grip**

- The bat should be gripped loosely in the fingers with the middle, or door-knocking, knuckles aligned (see figure 8.1). This allows the wrists to unlock, creating more bat speed (see figure 8.2).
- The grip tightens naturally as the bat moves through the hitting zone.



**Figure 8.1** The proper grip is loose and in the fingers; the door-knocking knuckles are lined up.



**Figure 8.2** An improper grip will not allow your wrists to unlock and will slow down your bat.

### Stance

- The stance is just a starting point. Hundreds of stances exist; the key is for the player to be comfortable.
- Any stance must provide good vision of the pitcher, balance, and plate coverage.
- Having the feet about shoulder-width apart with a slight bend in the knees should provide proper balance (see figure 8.3a).
- Make sure you can see the pitcher clearly with both eyes.
- Stand in a position that allows the bat head to reach the outside portion of home plate; this is called plate coverage (see figures 8.3b and 8.4).

**a****b**

**Figure 8.3** A proper stance provides balance, vision, and plate coverage.





**Figure 8.4** Another method of checking a player's plate coverage.

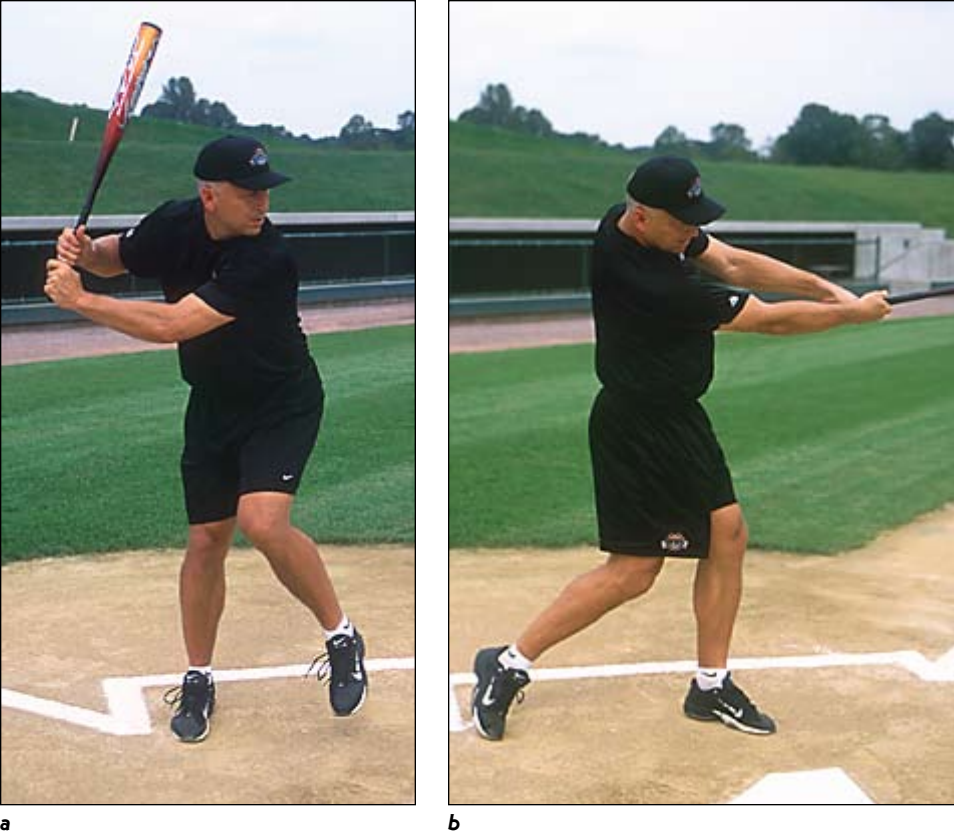
- A good starting point for the hands is about even with the back shoulder.
- Many parents and coaches tell young players to get their back elbow up; this is incorrect and leads to improper grip and extra muscle tension.

### ***Weight Shift***

- Every good swing incorporates some sort of a weight shift: *You have to go back to go forward.*
- Weight shift can be used as a timing mechanism; the weight is shifted to the backside as the pitcher prepares to deliver the pitch, allowing the energy to gather and be taken forward as the pitch approaches.

### *Stride*

- A short, soft stride allows your head and eyes to stay on the same plane, providing better vision (see figure 8.5).
- The stride should be toward the pitcher, keeping the front shoulder from pulling off the pitch too soon (taking the energy away from the ball toward third or first base instead of toward the ball).



**Figure 8.5** The best stride is one that is short and soft.

### *Swing*

- The ideal swing is short and quick, using the hands, wrists, and fore-arms.
- A level swing is best. With the hands starting at the top of the shoulder, this will seem like a slightly downward swing to the ball.

### *Follow-Through*

- The follow-through can be one-handed or two-handed (see figure 8.6).
- If the other aspects of the swing are in place, the follow-through occurs automatically.
- If the follow-through is not complete, the bat slows down as it enters the hitting zone.



**Figure 8.6** The follow-through takes care of itself if all of the other swing elements are in place; either one or two hands is okay.



## Error Detection and Correction for Hitting

### **ERROR**

A hitter overstrides and lunges at the ball (see figure 8.7)

### **CORRECTION**

Have the player widen his or her stance and reduce or eliminate the stride.

### **ERROR**

A hitter doesn't get his or her hips into the swing properly.

### **CORRECTION**

Tell the hitter to open the front toe a little bit, pointing it slightly toward the pitcher and to possibly open the stance a bit. The back toe also can be turned slightly toward the pitcher to keep the hips from getting locked up.



**Figure 8.7** Overstriding is a common error young hitters make.

### **ERROR**

A hitter pulls his or her head and front shoulder away from the pitch.

### **CORRECTION**

Work on having the batter step directly toward the pitcher when hitting off of a tee and toss balls to the outside of the plate from a short distance, having the hitter attempt to hit the ball up the middle or the opposite way. The batter needs to develop the ability to adjust the stride based on pitch location when necessary.

### **ERROR**

A hitter swings late.

### **CORRECTION**

This error may be a product of a bat that is too big or a swing that is too long. Try having the hitter remove the top hand from the bat while attempting to hit balls tossed by you from a short distance. Then have the hitter swing with two hands and see whether he or she gets the bat to the ball in a more direct path

and starts getting to the pitch a bit more quickly. Trying a smaller or lighter bat is a good idea, too.

***ERROR***

A hitter takes good cuts but always misses the ball.

***CORRECTION***

Have the hitter exaggerate watching the ball until the point of contact in all hitting drills. Start with the Tee Drill, in which the ball is stationary. If a batter is swinging over top of the ball, ask him or her to try to hit the bottom half of the ball during drills and vice versa for a hitter who consistently swings below the pitch.

---

## **Hitting Drills**

Each of the following hitting drills allows a hitter to concentrate on one or two specific components of the swing. The drills should be performed over and over in the following progression to develop the muscle memory that the players will need to react quickly without thinking when they actually hit. These drills also help provide checkpoints for you to use when a player is hitting in the batting cage or in a game. For example, after reviewing the following drills, you'll understand that if a player is not shifting his or her weight properly you should have that player work on the Tee Drill at your next practice.

## Tee Drill

**Goal:** To introduce the importance of developing a swing that has the proper weight shift.

**Catch Phrase:** *You have to go back to go forward.*

**Setup:** 8 to 10 balls (or more), a bat, a batting tee, and a hitting backdrop (net, screen, or fence—with softer balls only).

**Description:** Players adjust the batting tee to a height where they need to swing down slightly to get the barrel of the bat to the ball. Hit into a screen, net, or fence (with softer balls only) that has a target. Work strictly on weight shift (*Go back to go forward*). Take all the weight to the back side before exploding forward. Keep the head down, eyes on ball. Take the front foot and front shoulder directly toward the pitcher (shoulders should remain level; no “home run” swings in which the back shoulder drops and the swing is an upper cut). Try to hit the ball into target each time (see figure 8.9).



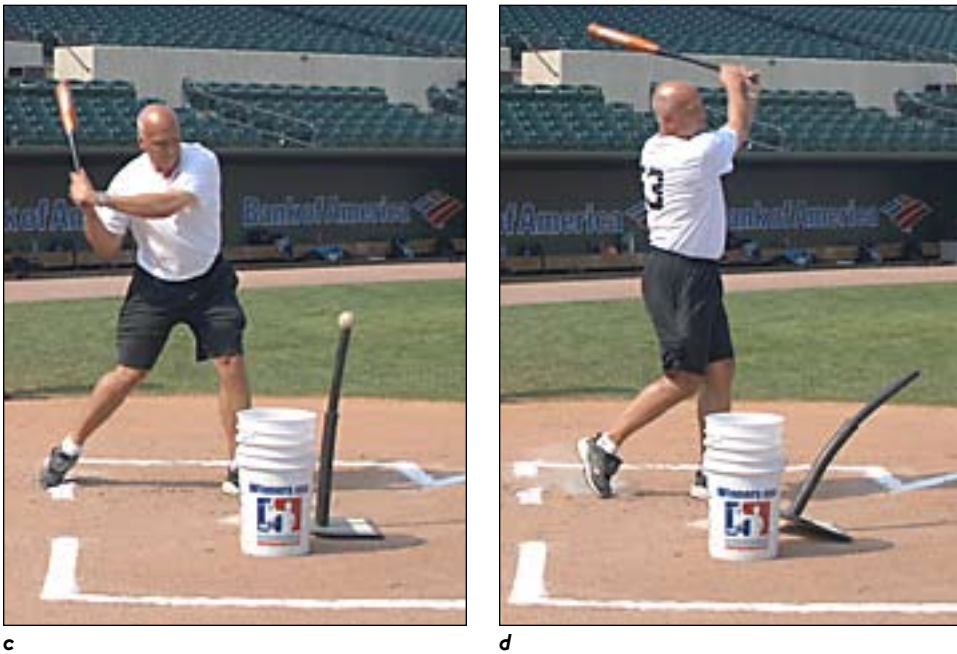
a



b

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.9** Use the batting tee to help players develop their weight shift.



**Figure 8.9** (continued)

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of swings and creating a scoring system. You can have two small groups compete against each other or have players keep score individually. Have the players hit toward a smaller square or circular target (some nets and screens come with these, but you can create one with tape, markers, or paint). Give each player a point for a hard-hit ball in which the proper approach is taken (*must go back to go forward*). Give each player a bonus point for each ball that is hit into the actual target. Deduct a point for balls hit over the net or screen. No points awarded if there is no weight shift or if back shoulder drops and swings is an upper cut.

## Soft Toss

**Goal:** To use the proper grip (holding the bat loosely in the fingers with the middle, or door-knocking, knuckles lined up) to generate bat speed.

**Catch Phrase:** *Loose hands, quick bat.*

**Setup:** Bucket of balls, a bat, one person to toss or a toss machine, and a hitting backdrop (net, screen, or fence—with softer balls only).

*Note:* Never hit real baseballs into a fence.

**Description:** Batter takes his or her stance and the tosser kneels across from hitter, slightly in front of home plate (in foul ground, not in the direction that the ball will be hit). Balls are tossed underhand so that the batter can hit them out in front of the plate. The hitter should concentrate on having a loose grip in the fingers with the door-knocking knuckles lined up. This allows the wrists to unlock, promoting a quicker swing using the hands, wrists, and forearms. Think, *Loose hands, quick bat.* The drill is best if done into a screen with a target, but also can be done into a fence using plastic balls, tennis balls, or rubber balls. This is not a race. Do not toss the next ball until the batter is comfortably back in his or her normal stance (see figure 8.8).

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of swings and creating a scoring system. You can have two small groups compete against each



a



b

**Figure 8.8** The Soft Toss Drill emphasizes that players have a loose grip and a quick bat.

other or have players keep score individually. Have the players hit toward a smaller square or circular target (some nets and screens come with these, or you can create one with tape, markers, or paint). Give each player a point for a hard-hit ball in which the proper approach is taken. Give each player a bonus point for each ball that is hit into the actual target. Deduct a point for balls hit over the net or screen.

**Make It Fun, Part 2:** Another way to make soft toss more fun and interactive is to play a soft toss game. Have one player man each position in the field and the remaining players ready to bat. A coach should serve as the tosser at home plate. Hitters come to the plate one at a time. The coach tosses the ball just as in the drill, with the fielders and hitters reacting as they would in a normal game situation. Play regular baseball rules. No pitcher should be used on defense for safety reasons (except for the youngest age groups). You can rotate three or four groups of players at a time from defense to offense and keep track of which small group scores the most runs. This game provides game action on each pitch, keeps everyone involved, allows the defense to face real game situations, and allows the hitters to do soft toss and run the bases. Don't be afraid to stop the game to go over positioning, strategy, and situations. This type of game is much more conducive to teaching than a real game or a scrimmage.



## Short Toss From the Front

**Goal:** To teach players to keep the front shoulder in when striding by tossing balls softly to the outside part of home plate.

**Catch Phrase:** *Use the big part of the field.*

**Setup:** A bucket of balls, a bat, an L-screen, a stool or chair for tosser to sit on, an open area or baseball field to hit toward.

**Description:** Coach sits on a bucket or chair behind a screen about 10 to 12 feet in front of home plate. Tosses pitch as underhand, but firmly, to the outside part of plate. Batter tries to keep the front shoulder in and drive ball up the middle or the other way. Some batters naturally will pull the pitches, which is okay if that is their natural swing, they take their front shoulder toward the pitcher and they hit line drives. Players should be trying to avoid weakly pulled ground balls. Most young hitters take their front shoulders and energy away from the pitcher, which causes them to pull off the ball and also causes their head and eyes to come off the ball (see figure 8.10).

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of swings and creating a scoring system. You can have two small groups compete against each other or have players keep score individually. Award a point for a hard ground ball hit up the middle or the opposite way. Give two points for a line drive off the L-screen. And award three points for a line drive over the L-screen or to the opposite side.



a



b

**Figure 8.10** Short Toss From the Front teaches players to keep the front shoulder in when striding.

## One-Arm Drill

**Goal:** To develop a short, quick swing that takes the bat head on a direct path down to the baseball.

**Catch Phrase:** *The ideal swing is short and quick.*

**Setup:** A bucket of balls, a bat, one person to toss, and an L-screen.

**Description:** Can be done by players of all ages once they can make contact consistently with pitched balls. Coach stands or sits about 8 to 10 feet in front of the batter behind a screen and tosses pitches overhand or underhand. Batter hits the first five pitches with two hands, then takes the top hand off bat for the next five pitches, using a normal game bat. Try not to choke up if possible. Batter can choke up or tuck the elbow into the side for more leverage if necessary to complete the drill successfully. After hitting five with one hand, the hitter finishes up by hitting five more with two hands. The one-hand reps should be difficult. This drill should help the batter take the bat on a more direct path to the ball. Batter should feel a difference when hitting the final set of 5 (see figure 8.11).

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of swings and creating a scoring system. You can have two small groups compete against each other or have players keep score individually. Award points for one-arm swings: one point for contact, two points for a ground ball, three points for a line drive.



a



b

**Figure 8.11** The One-Arm Drill helps develop a short, quick swing that takes a direct path to the baseball.

## Free Hitting

**Goal:** To let the players use all of the skills that they have developed in the hitting drills without coaching. This can be live batting practice on the field or in a batting cage. A coach can pitch or a pitching machine can be used (see figure 8.12).

**Catch Phrase:** *Observe first before teaching.*

**Setup:** A bucket of balls, a bat, an L-screen, a coach to pitch, and a batting cage or field for hitting.

**Description:** Coach pitches or feeds a pitching machine, allowing the players to hit without instructing them. Mental notes are made about mechanical flaws and which drills can be used to correct them. Don't give the kids too much to think about when facing live pitching, because it can cause them to think too much and hinder their ability to react properly to the pitches.

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of swings and creating a scoring system. You can have two small groups compete against each other or have players keep score individually. Award points for hard ground balls, hard-hit balls and line drives that travel a certain distance. Split your team into groups and crown a group champion, or keep individual scores.



**Figure 8.12** Players apply their skills in a fun setting when Free Hitting.

## Bunting

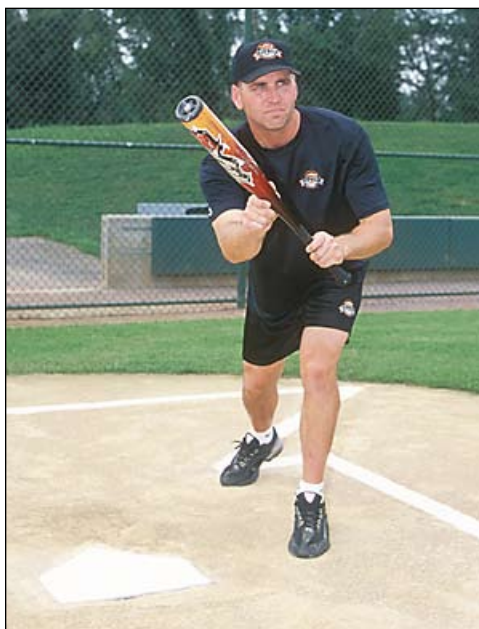
Hitting isn't the only offensive skill players should master. The key to a good offense is to maximize your at-bats and advance your runners. Bunting can accomplish both. It can also provide players with another way to get on base. Teach each of your players the fundamentals of bunting, and allow plenty of practice time for each player to master the skill. Learning how to bunt and understanding the strategy behind bunting are important for developing ball-players to learn, but for the youngest age groups it is more important to let players develop their hitting skills during games.

The main purpose of the bunt is to advance baserunners, but bunting also provides players with another way to get on base. As players get older and games become more competitive, bunting can be used to help create scoring opportunities in low-scoring or close contests. Players who master the skill of bunting for a hit can increase their batting average and value to the team's offense substantially.

When runners are on first or second base, a successful sacrifice bunt advances the runners into scoring position. To execute the sacrifice bunt, as the pitcher starts his or her delivery, the batter pivots on both feet so that the toes point forward. This puts the batter in an athletic position, allowing him or her to avoid getting hit with an inside pitch, and it provides adequate vision. The feet should be about shoulder-width apart, with more of the weight on the front foot. The back foot stays where it is. We do not advocate squaring around, because that type of approach makes it almost impossible for a player to avoid getting hit by an inside pitch. After pivoting, the hitter slides the top hand up so it is just below the bat's midpoint, holding the bat between the thumb and index finger so that the bat protects the fingers (see figure 8.13).

The bat should start at the top of the strike zone to reduce the chance of fouling off pitches or popping up. The bat should be out in front of home plate to provide the best possible angle for keeping the ball fair. Players should bunt low pitches by bending the knees instead of dropping the bat head below the hands. Dropping the bat head makes it more likely to pop up or foul off a pitch. The bat head should be above the hands as the ball makes contact with the bat. Let the ball hit the bat and give with the pitch slightly. Use the bottom hand to guide the bat and push the ball in the desired direction. It's okay to show bunt early in a sacrifice situation.

The fundamentals to bunt successfully for a hit are essentially the same as they are for the sacrifice bunt except that the player shows bunt much later.



**Figure 8.13** Bunting is a skill that should be practiced at a young age but not implemented until players get older and the games become more serious.



---

## Error Detection and Correction for Bunting

### **ERROR**

Players pop up when they bunt (see figure 8.14)



**Figure 8.14** A batter who drops the head of the bat below the hands likely will pop up the bunt.

### **CORRECTION**

Make sure the bat head stays above the hands and that the hitter bends the knees to bunt low pitches and does not drop the head of the bat.

---

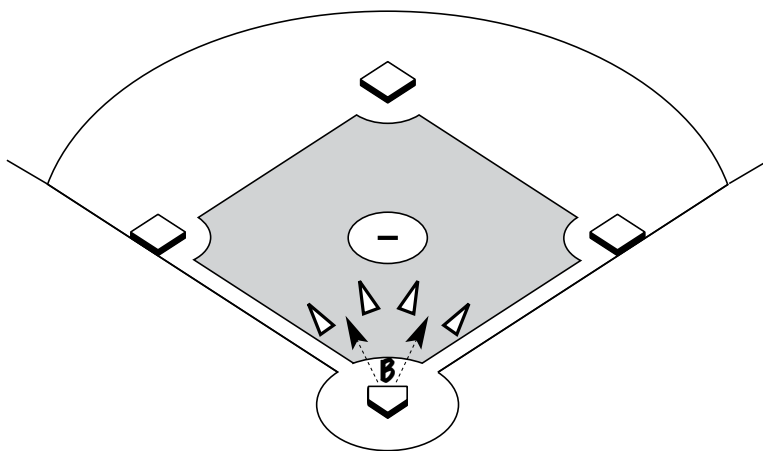
## Bunting Drill

**Goal:** To practice sacrifice bunting or bunting for a base hit to specific areas of the field.

**Catch Phrase:** *Catch the ball on your bat.*

**Setup:** A bucket of balls, a bat, a pitcher, and four cones.

**Description:** Set up two cones down the first-base line about halfway between home plate and the mound. One should be about 3 feet inside the baseline, the other about 8 to 10 feet inside the line toward the mound. The same thing should be done on the third base line. A coach can throw from a shortened distance with players taking turns bunting. The idea is to stop or push the ball between the cones (see figure 8.15). Try not to make the bunts too perfect. Make the pitcher come off the mound to field the ball. Stress that players pivot instead of squaring to bunt. Have them start with the bat at the top of the strike zone with the barrel of the bat above the hands in an angle, bending their knees for lower pitches and leaving pitches above hands alone. Players should give with the pitch to deaden the ball and use the bottom hand to guide the bat and push the ball in the desired direction. Once the players master the sacrifice bunt, this drill can be used for suicide squeeze bunts (batter must make contact) and bunting for a hit.



**Figure 8.15** Bunting Drill/Game.

**Make It Fun:** Turn this drill into a game or contest by giving each player a set number of bunts and creating a scoring system. A bunt that is fair and not popped up is awarded one point. A bunt that gets to the infield grass (if there is any) and is in between the cones gets 2 points. A player can try for a 5-pointer by calling where the bunt will go (first or third base) and then pushing the bunt between the cones in that direction.



**Multitasking:** You can have your pitchers work on fielding bunts by letting them pitch to the batters who are bunting. Reading a bunt as a baserunner also is an important concept to understand. You can have a group running on first base. They take their secondary lead when the ball is delivered (or when it crosses the plate, depending on the age group) and they break hard for second only when they are positive that the bunt is on the ground and is not popped up.

## Baserunning

Baserunning should be stressed at every practice (see figure 8.16). The last thing that you want to do on the bases is to make mistakes that squander potential scoring opportunities. Baserunners must always know where the ball is, how many outs there are, and what they will do when the ball is hit. They also must pick up signals given by coaches. Teach your players to be heads-up, aggressive baserunners. This will make your team difficult to defend and help make your players more valuable to their teams as they progress up the youth baseball ranks into high school and college.



**Figure 8.16** Incorporate baserunning into each practice.

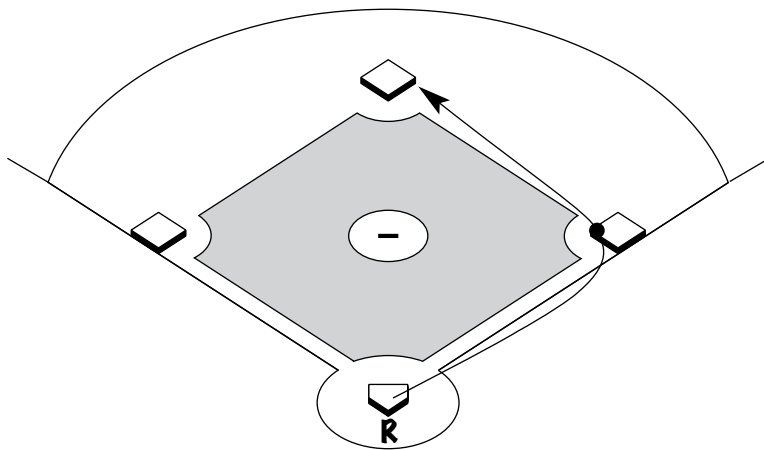
Before you can teach players how to run the bases, however, they first must know how to run. Teach them proper sprinting form: head up, body leaning forward, on the toes, high-knee lift, and arms pumping front to back (opposite arm with opposite knee and not across the body).

## Running to First Base

When a hitter makes contact, he or she should drop the bat at the end of the swing, moving as quickly as possible out of the batter's box. The player turns so that his or her shoulders are square to first base, stays low, drives out of the box, and starts down the line by stepping forward with the back foot.

On ground balls to the infield the batter should run full speed all the way through the bag, touching the front of the base without lunging. A long lunge to the base actually can slow the runner and make the difference between being safe or out. If the player truly runs through the bag, he or she will not be able to stop until well past the base. At this point the runner should listen for instructions from the coach and check over his or her right shoulder to see whether there may have been an errant throw. Players never should slide into first base unless they are trying to avoid a tag on a throw that has pulled the first baseman up the line toward home plate.

When a player hits a ball that is a definite base hit to the outfield, he or she should immediately think *double*, taking a gradual line toward the first base coaching box and not making a last-second question-mark turn. The runner doesn't have to move out of the baseline too early, but waiting until the last second to bow out can slow the runner down. The path of the runner making a turn at first base is gradual, resembling a sickle more than a question mark (see figure 8.17). The runner should not break stride when making the turn. It is okay to touch the base with either foot. Instead of attempting to step on the corner of the base, the runner should aim for the inside part of the base and use it as a starting block to help propel him or her toward second (see figure 8.18). Trying to step on the corner can cause the runner to trip or may result in the runner missing the base altogether. The runner should find the ball in the outfield as soon as the turn is made and should run hard until the defense makes him or her stop.



**Figure 8.17** The proper turn at first base.



a



b

**Figure 8.18** When making a turn at first base the runner should use the inside of the bag as a starting block to push off toward second base.

### ***Taking a Lead***

Once on base, in leagues where leads and steals are permitted, a runner needs to know how to take a lead. When taking a lead, a good rule of thumb is to slowly shuffle 2-1/2 steps off the base without crossing the feet. At this point the runner should be in an athletic position; the knees are slightly bent with the feet about shoulder-width apart (see figure 8.19). A runner taking a lead never should rest the hands on the knees, because the first move he or she would have to make would be to remove the hands.

Once the lead is taken and the runner is in the ready position, his or her attention should be on the pitcher. The key is to watch the front leg of a left-hander and both of the right-hander's feet. Once the left-hander's leg is beyond





a



b



c

**Figure 8.19** A baserunner should take at least a 2-1/2-step lead and be ready to break for second base or take a secondary lead when the pitch is delivered.

a position 45 degrees to first base and moving toward home, the runner can move off the base safely. As soon as the right-hander lifts the front leg, the runner can move off the base safely.

### ***Getting Up With the Pitch (Secondary Lead)***

Once the pitcher delivers the pitch, if the runner is not stealing, he or she should take a couple of hard shuffle steps toward the next base. This is known as getting up with the pitch or taking a secondary lead. As the ball crosses home plate, the runner's weight should be on the right leg so that he or she is ready to break for the next base in the event of a wild pitch or passed ball. If the catcher handles the ball, the runner should begin moving back toward the bag. When taking a secondary lead off of third base, the baserunner always should remain in foul territory (if he or she gets hit with a batted ball in fair territory, it is an out) and return to the base in fair ground so that the catcher has to throw through him or her to the bag in the event of an attempted pickoff.

### ***Stealing***

The most efficient way to move laterally on a baseball field is by using a crossover step. This goes for baserunners, infielders, and outfielders. When attempting a steal, once the pitcher is committed to home, the first step toward the next base should be a crossover step. To execute the crossover step the runner pivots the lead leg while at the same time crossing the trail leg over the lead leg and toward the base (see figure 8.20). Runners who break on a hit-and-run play should locate the ball as it crosses home plate to see whether the batter makes contact. If the batter hits a line drive, the runner freezes immediately. If it is a pop-up, the runner should return to the original base as quickly as possible.



a



b

**Figure 8.20** Once the pitcher commits to home plate, a baserunner attempting to steal should use a crossover step toward second base.

## Sliding

When approaching a base, a player must decide in an instant whether or not to slide. If it appears that the play at the base will be close, or if a coach or teammate is telling the player to get down, the player should slide. Once that decision is made, it should be carried out. Players often change their minds at the last second, increasing the chance of injury. However, most injuries result from poor sliding technique. Teach your players how to slide safely and correctly, and give them plenty of opportunities to practice so that they become comfortable with the actual correct execution. Make sure you practice sliding in a safe, soft environment to avoid injuries. Players should avoid headfirst slides except when returning to a base on a pickoff attempt or when a line drive is caught.

The bent-leg slide is the most common and effective method. It should be taught to all players (see figure 8.21):

- Start the slide 10 to 12 feet from the bag.
- Slide straight to the bag.
- Extend one leg toward the bag, and bend the other leg under the extended knee.
- Slide on your rear end, not your side.
- Tuck your chin to your chest.
- Bend the extended leg as it reaches the base to give and prevent injury.
- Keep your hands up.
- Use the base to pop-up if the throw is bad.



a



b

**Figure 8.21** The bent-leg slide is the safest and most efficient way to slide into a base.



---

## Error Detection and Correction for Sliding

### **ERROR**

Players keep jamming their ankles into the bag.

### **CORRECTION**

Designate a spot at which players should start their slide—about 10 to 12 feet before the bag. Teach players to run hard and try to lift their leg up slightly as they approach the bag to avoid jamming the ankle or knee.

---

### **Tagging Up**

When a ball is hit in the air, the runner must decide whether to go halfway toward the next base or to tag up (remain in contact with the base during the fly ball with the intention of advancing to the next base after the ball is caught). The first- or third-base coach can help make the call. There's no decision to make on foul fly balls; the runner should always tag up. Outfield flies are tougher, requiring a quick assessment of how deep the ball is hit, the positioning of the outfield, the number of outs, the inning and score, and the throwing arm of the outfielder who is likely to make the catch. Tell your runners that, in most situations, they should play it safe and not try to advance unless a coach tells them to do so (though it doesn't hurt to force a hard throw to the next base by bluffing a tag-up; the hurried throw could be errant or allow another runner to advance). If a runner is going to tag up, he or she needs to stay low, keep the knees bent, and push hard off the bag on the coach's command to "Go!" The runner should watch the ball to the outfielder's glove and leave the base as soon as it is caught. If the runner relies strictly on the coach's command, the slight delay in the reaction may make the difference between being safe or out.

### **Going Halfway**

On most fly balls and pop-ups, especially when a runner is on first or second base and there are fewer than two outs, a coach will instruct a runner to "go halfway." This term can be a confusing for young baserunners, so it warrants a better explanation. If a ball is popped up to the second baseman and the runner on first truly goes halfway to second, chances are that he or she will be doubled off of first after the catch is made. The definition of "halfway" is very simple and depends on each individual runner. Going halfway simply means that the runner moves as far off of the base as he or she can and still get back to the bag safely if the ball is caught. The reason players go halfway is to be in a position to advance to the next base or to advance two bases if a ball ends up being a hit or is dropped or misplayed.

## Defensive Skills

---

When you boil it down, defense is two parts: throwing and catching. Examined a little more closely, individual defensive skills include throwing, pitching, and catching (including catching pitches and throws, fielding ground balls, and catching fly balls). A team with a strong defense and good pitching always has a chance. If you can scratch out a run and hold a team scoreless, you can win the game. A team that puts up big offensive numbers, but can't make a routine play or get the other team's hitters out, always teeters on the brink of disaster. It's a lot easier to play good defense and have an opportunity to win than to feel the pressure of having to score in double digits every time out just to have a chance.

### Throwing

Throwing is one of the most important skills in baseball. Stress to your players that accuracy and good footwork are more important than velocity. Many players throw inconsistently because they get their footwork crossed up or try to throw the ball too hard without using proper mechanics.

Teach your players to throw over the top (overhand) and not sidearm. Throwing the ball over the top provides greater control and accuracy. When combined with a four-seam grip, an overhand throw also carries farther than a sidearm throw. In addition, throwing sidearm can lead to wildness and undue strain on young elbows.

### *Overhand Throw*

Watch any baseball game and you will see a variety of throwing mechanics. However, to throw a baseball correctly, every defensive player must use a four-seam grip, keep the elbow above the shoulder through the release point, step toward the target, point the front shoulder toward the target, and follow the throw or follow through.

**Grip** Players should grip the ball in the throwing hand using a four-seam grip (see figures 8.22 and 8.23) with the index and middle fingers next to the “horse-shoe” and across the four seams, spaced slightly apart with the thumb under the ball. The ball is gripped lightly in the fingers, not in the palm, as if holding an egg. Younger players with smaller hands can use three fingers. The hand (fingers) stays on top of the ball from the time it is taken out of the glove through the point when the throwing hand is back, holding the ball so that it actually points away from the intended target.



**Figure 8.22** All defensive players should throw using a four-seam grip.



**a**



**b**

**Figure 8.23** Incorrect four-seam grips: In photo *a* the fingertips are not contacting the seams. In photo *b* the thumb is not below the ball.

**Release and Delivery** After bringing the throwing hand out of the glove, down, out, and up with the hand on top of the ball, the player turns so that the front shoulder points toward the target and the weight is on the back foot. The glove hand also can point toward the target. The player makes a small, circular motion when taking the ball down, out, and up. The elbow is above the shoulder as the hand starts to come forward, and the front foot begins to move toward the target as the weight shifts forward (see figure 8.24). At this point arm comes forward and the hand shifts from a position on top of the ball to a position behind the ball. The player steps toward the target, releases the throw, and follows through, taking a step or two toward the target after the throw (see figure 8.25). Players always should look at the target when throwing.



**Figure 8.24** The elbow should be above the shoulder as the ball nears the release point.



**Figure 8.25** The follow-through completes the throwing motion.

## Error Detection and Correction for Overhand Throws

### **ERROR**

Players rush their throws after fielding the ball, causing them to miss their targets.

### **CORRECTION**

Remind players that they must first field the ball properly, then find the four-seam grip and transfer the ball from their glove, set their feet, point their front shoulder toward the target, step toward the target, release the ball, and follow through or follow the throw.

The four-seam grip always should be used when throwing to defensive teammates. Pitchers use a two-seam grip to make their fastballs move and to trick batters. When we play defense we don't want to trick our teammates, so it makes sense to use the four-seam grip and to throw over the top as much as possible to get maximum carry and accuracy.

### **Sidearm and Three-Quarter Throws**

Although you may teach the proper overhand throwing technique to all your players, count on having to correct some of them for dropping the elbow below shoulder level. Many infielders use a three-quarter or sidearm delivery. This is acceptable if the player is consistently accurate and the elbow remains above the shoulder. Improper throwing technique at an early age can lead to injury later in a player's career (see figure 8.26). Outfielders always should strive to throw over the top with a four-seam grip for maximum carry and accuracy.

The best way to monitor throwing technique is to watch players during their warm-up. If you see them using improper mechanics or lapsing into an improper three-quarter or sidearm delivery, immediately remind them of the proper throwing mechanics. We believe that you can watch two youth teams warm up before a game and determine the winner 99 percent of the time from watching the two teams play catch. Remember that defense is throwing and catching. We can't catch it if we don't throw it accurately.



**Figure 8.26** An incorrect throwing motion in which the elbow is below the shoulder.

## 21

---

**Goals:** To make players concentrate on making accurate throws that arrive at their target's face or chest level. The players receiving the throws should strive to catch the ball out in front of the body and to follow the throw all the way to the glove with the eyes.

**Setup:** Two players and a baseball.

**Description:** A game played by baseball players at all levels. Players play catch. One point is awarded to the thrower for a ball caught at chest level. Two points are awarded for a ball caught at head level. First player to 21 wins. Coaches should stress proper mechanics while the drill is going on. Set up a team competition in which winners move on and losers are eliminated. Play to 15 instead of 21 to speed things up.



## Long-Toss Golf

**Goal:** To help players build arm strength through long tossing while developing the proper mechanics necessary to throw accurately (see figure 8.27).

**Setup:** A bucket of balls, some cones, and paint or tape.

**Description:** Place a cone or some other target in the outfield, far enough away to challenge the players' arm strength. Draw, paint, or tape a circle around the target to represent a green. Each player tosses a ball toward the target. Points are awarded for landing on the green, hitting the pin, and so on. Closest to the pin each round can be awarded bonus points. The same target can be used over and over, new targets can be set up each time, or a course can be set up. Limit the drill to between 25 and 50 tosses per player and once a week for younger players.

**Make It Fun:** Set up a long-toss golf course of 9 or 18 holes at your facility. Place players in foursomes and see who records the best individual and team scores.



a



b

**Figure 8.27** Long toss golf can be a fun way to build arm strength in young players.

## Shoot and Score Drill

**Goal:** To develop the proper throwing mechanics necessary to throw accurately.

**Setup:** Two hockey or lacrosse goals; a bucket of balls; and paint, tape or some other way to create a target for each goal.

**Description:** After players warm their arms up, two goals are set up across from each other. One player stands to the side of each goal. Players take turns trying to throw a ball into the opponent's goal. For younger players, one point is awarded for each ball that rolls into goal and two for a ball that enters goal in the air. For older players and younger players as the season progresses, another variation is to hang, tape, or paint a target on the goal. One point is awarded for scoring a goal and two points for hitting the target. Targets also can be hung on fences, soccer goals, walls, and so on.

**Make It Fun:** Divide the team in half, and have each side compete for the best team scores. You can also crown an individual champion.

## Throwing for Distance Drill

**Goal:** To introduce the concept of using the entire body to help throw the ball greater distances.

**Setup:** A football field, cones or other markers, and a bucket of balls.

**Description:** If you practice near a football field, have players line up at the goal line one at a time. Stress proper mechanics and have each player throw a ball (or several balls) to see who can set the “world record.” After a few rounds, have players shuffle their feet and follow their throws so that they can see the results of generating momentum toward their targets. You can disqualify players who don’t use proper mechanics. Celebrate “world records” as well as throws made using proper mechanics. This is a fun way to build arm strength through long tossing and to emphasize the importance of mechanics and footwork. You should have players do the drill only once a week. For the youngest age groups have players line up on a line (e.g., foul line or goal line) and throw at the same time (see figure 8.28). They can then run to their ball, see whose ball went farthest, pick it up, and run back.

**Make It Fun:** Chart all throws each week, not just the “world records,” and allow the players to see how their arms get stronger over time. Also chart the differences between balls thrown flatfooted and balls thrown after shuffling the feet.



**Figure 8.28** Younger players throwing for distance.

## One-Knee Drill

**Goals:** To introduce and practice the concepts of proper arm action, keeping the hand above the ball before shifting it behind the ball near release, and releasing the ball with the elbow above the shoulder.

**Setup:** One ball for each pair of players throwing together.

**Description:** Breaks down players' arm action and works on keeping the elbow at the proper level. Players drop the throwing-side knee to the ground with their opposite knee up and play catch from a short distance using the four-seam grip. Concentrate on taking the ball down, out, and up from the glove and keeping the elbow above the shoulder (see figure 8.29). Players don't throw hard. Have them check their grip, hand, and elbow position after bringing ball down, out, and up. The hand should be on top of the ball with the fingers pointing away from the target. From there, the player points the front shoulder toward the target, rotates the hips, brings the arm forward, and releases the ball, keeping the elbow above the shoulder. Hand shifts to a position behind the ball as the arm comes forward. Younger players can use soft baseballs or do this drill with their coaches to improve efficiency and ensure safety.



**Figure 8.29** The One-Knee Drill emphasizes keeping the hand on top of the ball when taking it out of the glove and the elbow above the shoulder.

**Troubleshooting:** For players who continually drop the elbow below shoulder level you can have them perform this same drill with a batting tee set up next to their throwing side. The tee should be extended to just below shoulder level. The player must throw the ball in the manner described above without allowing the elbow to contact the tee.

## Pitching

Any baseball coach will tell you that a big percentage of a team's success or failure relates to the ability of its pitchers to throw strikes consistently. If you have a successful baseball team, chances are that you have a strong pitching staff.

Many youth baseball coaches make the mistake of not resisting the urge to instruct a young pitcher immediately. You should observe first and instruct later. Sometimes a coach will see a pitcher throw and immediately notice what he or she perceives to be mechanical flaws. Although this may be an accurate assessment, in reality it is very difficult to see what, if anything, a pitcher is doing wrong by watching the entire throwing motion. And it is impossible to determine what a pitcher needs to work on by watching him or her throw a few pitches. Instead, you should have the pitcher throw from a mound for at least 10 minutes at maximum velocity, mixing in all the pitches that he or she throws (only fastballs for younger players). See what kind of results the pitcher gets before you tinker with anything. Specifically you should ask yourself whether the pitcher is throwing strikes, has good velocity, and is generating movement. If the pitcher is having success, please resist the urge to change anything unless you notice something in the pitcher's mechanics that could possibly lead to an injury.

Once you have observed the pitcher's results, it is time to analyze his or her mechanics and to introduce verbiage that you can use and that the pitcher will understand when adjustments are needed. We like to break pitching mechanics down into what we call the *five links of the chain*. These links represent five aspects of a proper delivery; if any one of them breaks down, the chain is made weaker. When you analyze each of these five links individually, it is much easier to determine what the pitcher is having trouble with and how to make an adjustment. Examining each link also allows you to communicate effectively with a pitcher during a game.

We have all heard a coach or spectator yell, "Make an adjustment!" Well, which adjustment? With our five links to the chain, as a coach all you might have to say is, "Check your feet," and the pitcher will know exactly what to do to correct the mechanical problems he or she is experiencing. Before we go into more depth about the five links, we need to talk about the proper grips and the importance of throwing fastballs.

A pitcher needs a strong and accurate throwing arm. Young pitchers should work on throwing the two types of fastballs—the four-seam fastball and the two-seam fastball—for strikes and building arm strength before trying to master other pitches.

A certain amount of arm strength is necessary to throw a curveball properly. Can your 11-year-old pitcher come up with a modified breaking ball that will get hitters who are not used to that type of pitch out? Probably. Remember, though, at the developmental stages winning is not the number one priority.



Developmental means that we are trying to *develop* baseball players. Young pitchers should *develop* their arm strength by throwing fastballs. Change-ups are acceptable off-speed pitches for most ages, but this pitch should be monitored as well. When the young pitcher who throws 95 percent—or even more—fastballs gets older, he or she is going to have a stronger arm than the pitchers who mess around with too many breaking balls and change-ups. And, this pitcher is going to throw harder and be able to throw a better breaking ball using proper mechanics than the other pitchers. He or she will *develop* into a better pitcher and will avoid many of the arm problems that are becoming more prevalent in youth baseball—primarily because of the arm strength developed by throwing mostly fastballs at a young age.

### **The Four-Seam Fastball**

This should be the first type of fastball that you introduce. This pitch is the easiest to locate, because it flies straight when thrown correctly. That's why fielders prefer to use the four-seam grip when throwing to teammates. The pitcher holds this pitch with two fingers (younger pitchers can use three or even four fingers) across the four seams (see figure 8.30). The fingers should lay right next to the horseshoe made by the seams, with the fingertips contacting both seams. For pitchers with smaller hands, it is best to lay the index finger closest to the open end of the horseshoe. The index finger is the shorter finger, and the way the seam drops down at this point allows both fingers to contact it. For pitchers with bigger hands this is not as important.

The fingers should be fairly close together; the wider apart they are, the less velocity generated by the pitch. No matter what, the fingers should be a comfortable distance apart for the pitcher, and the thumb should be below the ball. Many pitchers will hold this pitch so that the fingertips do not contact the seams and the thumb is not under the ball. This makes it very difficult to throw strikes, because the thumb serves as a guide and the fingertips help generate the proper rotation, velocity, and movement. The ball should be held lightly in the fingers (like holding an egg) and not jammed into the palm.



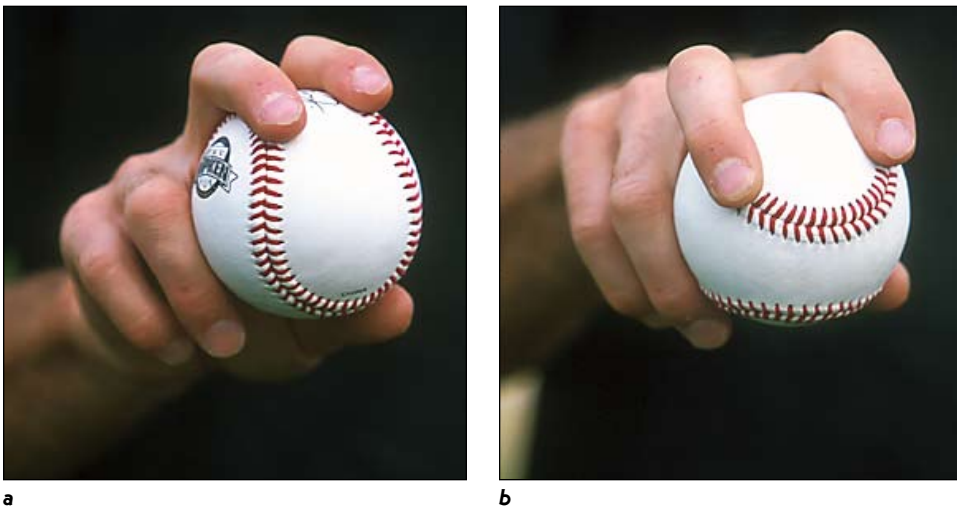
**Figure 8.30** Proper four-seam grip.



### ***The Two-Seam Fastball***

Once a young pitcher can consistently throw the four-seam fastball for strikes, it is time to introduce another type of fastball that generates more movement. The two-seam fastball is held with the seams at the point where the seams are closest together instead of across the seams (see figure 8.31, *a* and *b*). Once again the ball should be held lightly in the fingers. The fingers should be a comfortable width apart, either on top of the seams or inside the seams. The most important consideration is to find the grip that allows the pitcher to generate the most movement and still throw strikes consistently. When a right-hander throws a two-seamer to a right-handed batter it should run inside. A left-hander's two-seamer should cut away from a right-handed hitter. Throwing strikes is more important than generating movement.

If the pitcher is having trouble throwing strikes, examine his or her grip before getting into mechanics and the five links of the chain (discussed next). The problem could be as simple as the ball being held too far back in the palm, the fingers being too far apart, or the thumb creeping up alongside of the ball.



**Figure 8.31** Proper two-seam grip (*a*) and grip in which the fingers are spaced too far apart (*b*).

## Five Links of the Chain

Once the pitcher consistently throws strikes using both fastball grips, you can begin to look at and discuss mechanics. As we said, it's extremely difficult to determine whether anything is wrong with a pitcher's mechanics—or to isolate a problem—by watching the pitching motion in its entirety. If the pitcher has trouble consistently throwing strikes, the motion must be analyzed link by link to determine where the breakdown is and how it can be fixed. Break the pitcher's delivery down into the following five parts, and look at each aspect individually.

### Feet

Many youth baseball fields are not of professional quality. We've all seen the fields where a big hole exists right in front of the pitching rubber. This can make it extremely difficult for a pitcher to throw strikes, especially if the pitcher starts with the feet actually on the rubber. When a pitcher who starts on top takes the first step back and then tries to pivot with the other foot, if there is a hole in front of the rubber, he or she has to pick up that foot, turn it and then place it down in the hole. This causes the shoulders, head, and eyes to drop several inches, making it very difficult to throw strikes consistently. For this reason we recommend that young pitchers start with their heels against the rubber and the toes in front of it (see figure 8.32).

As far as which side of the rubber the pitcher should stand on, younger pitchers should find the spot where they are most comfortable and throw the most strikes. As they get older they can figure out where to stand to give themselves the best angle to home plate based on the movement they generate and their pitch repertoire.

The first step back is a very small step that allows the pitcher to generate some momentum while keeping the weight centered over the front foot. This step should be short and smooth, not long and violent, and the head should remain over the pivot foot. If the step back causes the pitcher to lean



**Figure 8.32** The first link in the pitching chain is a small step back.

*(continued)*

back so that the head is not over the pivot foot, the pitcher's tempo might be too fast. Get him or her to slow down and reduce that step. The step back can be in a 45-degree angle or slightly to the side, whichever is most comfortable.

After the step back comes the pivot. The pivot should leave the throwing-side foot completely parallel to the rubber (see figure 8.33). If the pivot foot is not parallel, the pitcher will point away from home plate once he or she gets to the next link, the balance position. This means that the front side is already open before the pitcher even really begins moving toward home plate, which can make it very difficult to throw consistent strikes.

### **Balance Position**

Like a hitter's weight shift, the balance position is where the pitcher gathers his or her energy before exploding forward. The pitcher should be in control of the leg when it is lifted into balance position. As the front leg comes up, the pitcher gathers, pausing slightly as the hands and leg come together above the knee (see figure 8.34). At this point the buttock in front should be turned slightly toward the catcher. The pitcher should be leaning slightly forward with the weight centered over the pivot foot. After the pause, the pitcher drives toward the plate. Some pitchers have a higher leg kick than others. This is fine as long as they gather at a point where they can maintain their balance.



**Figure 8.33** The foot in contact with the rubber pivots so that it is parallel to, but still contacting, the rubber.



**Figure 8.34** The balance position allows a pitcher to gather energy before striding toward home plate.

as long as they gather at a point

## Power Position

The power position is created as a pitcher takes the ball down, out, and up from the glove with the hand on top of the ball; points the front shoulder toward the catcher; and strides toward home plate. When the ball is removed from the glove, with the hand on top of it, it is taken down, out, and up in a circular motion. At this point the ball is facing toward center-field and the hand is still on top of the ball (see figure 8.35). Holding the ball in this manner allows the pitcher to create arm action as he or she moves into the next link (rotation). Arm action is created when the hand goes from being on top of the ball to behind it as the arm comes forward. Many young pitchers will take the ball out of their glove and leave the hand below the ball. These pitchers will not be able to create the proper arm action and will struggle to create an L shape with their elbows as they bring their arms forward. Their throwing motion will resemble that of an old Iron Mike pitching machine.

Once the ball is taken down, out and up, the front shoulder and arm should point toward the catcher, serving as a guide toward home plate for the rest of the body. As the pitcher strides toward home, it is important to keep the pivot foot in contact with the rubber so that the body's weight and momentum don't come forward before the arm is in position to release the ball. This is known as staying back (see figure 8.36).



**Figure 8.35** The pitcher's weight is on the back foot, the hand is above the ball, and the front shoulder is pointing toward the target in the power position.



**Figure 8.36** As the pitcher's arm begins to rotate forward, note that the back foot still is in contact with the rubber.

*(continued)*



## Rotation

Rotation occurs when the arm and weight come forward, the hand shifts from being on top of the ball to behind it, and the front side pulls forward and down, creating torque. As the arm comes forward, the elbow should stay above the shoulder, forming an L shape at the release point (see figure 8.37).



**Figure 8.37** The arm should form an “L” at the release point.

the back foot should not come forward when the arm does, but instead after the ball is released as part of the follow through. Again, this is called staying back.

## Follow-Through

After the ball is released, if everything to that point has been done correctly, the follow through takes place (see figure 8.38a). The follow-through is the end result of the momentum generated through the first four links. Ideally, the pitcher follows through in a good fielding position (see figure 8.38b); however, this is not essential if the pitcher is generating good velocity and throwing strikes. As always, observe and analyze the results before trying to adjust the follow through.

Young pitchers can use the fastball as four separate pitches. For example, a right-handed pitcher can throw a two-seamer in, a two-seamer away, a four-seamer in, and a four-seamer away. Those pitches paired with a good

A three-quarters delivery is okay as long as the elbow stays above the shoulder, taking strain off of the elbow. Pitchers who drop their elbows will not be as consistent and are more likely to experience elbow injuries. As the arm comes forward, the front arm is pulling down and in toward the body, creating the torque necessary to generate maximum velocity. The hips also should rotate as the front side pulls down and in, and the front foot should point toward the catcher. If the front foot does not open up and point toward home, the pitcher’s hips will not be able to rotate and he or she will have to throw across the body. The pitcher’s torso should remain upright through rotation to throw more downhill. Remember that





**Figure 8.38** If the pitcher's first four links are in order, the follow through should occur naturally.

change-up provide plenty of options and eliminate the need for a curveball. As pitchers progress and develop physically around the age of 12, it is okay to introduce the proper way to throw a breaking ball and to allow them to practice it. Keep in mind that kids develop at varying rates physically and emotionally. Some 10-year-olds may be mentally and physically capable of throwing curveballs correctly. No matter at what age the pitch is introduced, however, the pitcher's use of the curveball should be monitored closely and extremely limited. If the pitcher is incapable of throwing the pitch with proper mechanics, don't allow it to be thrown until the pitcher has developed sufficient arm strength to throw the pitch correctly.

Here are some key points to emphasize with young pitchers:

- Make sure the catcher is in the crouched position, always providing a target (mitt), and that the umpire has signaled to you before you pitch.
- Use the legs, not the arm, to shift the weight toward the plate.
- Be relaxed and in control throughout the pitching motion.
- Keep your eyes on the target throughout the delivery. Don't over-throw.
- Follow through, and be ready to field at the end of the motion.
- The best pitch in baseball is strike one!

## Pitching From the Stretch

---

So far our discussions about pitching mechanics have focused on the proper way to pitch from the wind-up, one of two starting positions assumed by pitchers during the course of a game. The wind-up is used primarily when no runners are on base. When runners are on base, in leagues where leads and steals are allowed, pitchers often throw from the stretch. Some pitchers find that they prefer throwing from the stretch all the time, which is fine as long as their results are consistent.

When assuming the stretch position, right-handed pitchers start by placing their right foot parallel to and against the rubber with their back toward first base. The opposite is true for left-handers. As pitchers contact the rubber in the stretch position, their hands are separated. This is the time when pitchers must take their signs from the catcher. Failure to do this when contacting the rubber can lead to a pitcher's removal according to Babe Ruth League rules. The pitcher can hold the ball in the throwing hand, usually behind his or her back, or in the glove when receiving the sign. It's usually better to have the throwing hand on the ball in case a quick pickoff throw is necessary.

Once the sign is taken, the pitcher places the throwing hand (and the ball) in the glove and pauses with the glove and throwing hand together slightly below chest level. Failure to pause before delivering the pitch is a balk, which allows all runners to advance one base. This pause is known as the set position or coming set. At this point only the pitcher's head is allowed to move (usually to see what the runners are doing). If the pitcher moves the shoulders and head together, that also is considered a balk.

Right-handers at this point should lift the left leg into a balance position similar to the one discussed in the *five links* before delivering the pitch. This movement and the pitch delivery should be performed as quickly as possible while still maintaining proper mechanics to prevent runners from stealing. The delivery never should be expedited to the point that accuracy suffers. Left-handers can be more deliberate, using a higher leg kick and a slower delivery to confuse a runner on first base. The key for the lefty is to make the leg kick when delivering the ball home appear to be as similar as possible to the leg kick used when throwing to first.

---

## **Error Detection and Correction for Pitching With Runners on Base**

### ***ERROR***

The pitcher becomes distracted and loses control of the pitches with a runner on base.

### ***CORRECTION***

Remind the pitcher not to rush the delivery from the stretch. From the stretch position, the pitcher must still lift the knee into balance position and rotate the hips as the arm comes forward rather than step straight toward the plate with no lift or rotation. He or she shouldn't shorten the arm motion when throwing from the stretch.

---

## Tee Drill

**Goal:** To help prevent players from dropping the elbow when throwing.

**Setup:** Two players (or a player and a coach), a batting tee, and a baseball.

**Description:** Player assumes a one-knee position as described in the One-Knee Drill (see Throwing Drills Worksheet in the Coach's Clipboard within the online course). A batting tee is placed on the throwing side, close enough so that if the elbow drops it will hit the tee. The player takes the ball out of the glove, down, out, and up (making a circle) and checks the grip before rotating forward and releasing the ball, usually exaggerating the elbow position to keep from hitting the tee. Done daily this will help create muscle memory and prevent players from throwing improperly. See figure 8.39.

**Making It Fun:** Find a target and throw at it, awarding points only if the elbow is above the shoulder and the target is hit by the throw.



**Figure 8.39** The Tee Drill is designed to help the pitcher keep the elbow above the shoulder.

## Long-Toss

**Goal:** To build arm strength and develop carry on throws.

**Set-up:** Two players and a baseball.

**Description:** Not just for pitchers. Helps improve any player's arm strength. Players play catch to warm up. Once the arm is warm, players move back a few steps with each throw. They should get far enough apart that it is a challenge to get the ball to the partner. The players take a long step forward, concentrating on keeping the elbow way above the shoulder, and throwing the ball with a slight arc. It's okay if the ball arrives on one hop. They throw until their arms start to fatigue, then move closer to finish up. Pitchers should do this between starts. Younger players shouldn't do this more than once per week. Older position players can do this several times per week.



## Power Position Drill

**Goal:** To reinforce which direction to face when throwing (youngest levels), proper grip, getting the ball out of the glove and then down, out, and up in a circle, keeping the hand above the ball before rotation, keeping the elbow above the shoulder, pointing the front shoulder toward the target, and staying back.

**Set-up:** Two players (or a player and a coach) and a baseball.

**Description:** Variations of this drill can be used at all levels. It can be simplified for the youngest age groups to stress the goals just mentioned as well as the concept of stepping toward the target and following through. For older and more advanced players, the drill can help troubleshoot mechanical problems experienced by pitchers. Older pitchers should work on staying back instead of stepping toward the target when performing this drill.

Player creates a wide base with the feet and grabs the ball using a four-seam grip. The weight is shifted to the back side before going forward. Hands break and the weight goes back; the power position is assumed (it can be checked if necessary): Hand above the ball as soon as it is removed from the glove; get the ball down, out, and up in a circle, finishing with the elbow above the shoulder and the hand and ball pointed away from target. The front shoulder should be pointed toward the target. Hand shifts from on top of the ball to behind it through rotation. The ball is released (does not have to be thrown hard). Follow-through takes place with the trail foot staying near the rubber (stay back!). Player rotates on the back foot so that the hips turn. Front toe points forward (see figure 8.40).



**Figure 8.40** The Power Position Drill helps pitchers work on shifting their weight back from the backside to the frontside and staying back.

## Troubleshooting Using the Power Position Drill

**Short-arming**—Begin in the finish position with the throwing arm extended forward as if the player has just followed through. Take the weight all the way back through power position before finishing to stretch out the throwing motion.

**Getting pitches up**—Have the catcher shorten up with the pitcher throwing from the mound. To throw downhill from the power position, the pitcher has to get the elbow up and stay on top of ball.

**Long-striders**—Again have catcher shorten up with the pitcher throwing from a mound. If the stride is too long the pitcher will not be able to compensate to get downhill in time to throw a strike.

**Breaking balls and off-speed pitches**—Pitchers struggling with their grips, mechanics, or control can practice their breaking balls and off-speed pitches from the power position on or off a mound from a shortened distance between starts to get a better feel and make corrections. Use of breaking balls should be monitored and limited for all youth players.

**Make It Fun:** Throw at a fence or screen with a target from the power position, awarding points for executing the drill properly and hitting the target (see figure 8.41).



**Figure 8.41** Turning the power position drill into an accuracy contest makes the drill more fun.

## Balance Drill

**Goal:** To teach the pitcher to gather energy at a proper balance position before taking the body and arm forward through rotation.

**Set-up:** Pitcher, catcher, mound, and a baseball.

**Description:** Pitcher throws from a mound to a catcher at a shortened distance. Start motion from the stretch, lifting the leg and pausing for a count of three (one, one thousand; two, one thousand; three one thousand) at balance position (upper and lower body come together, leg slightly closed with buttock pointing toward catcher, glove slightly above knee, upper body not leaning back). On the count of three, the pitcher strides forward and releases the ball. Drill makes the pitcher gather energy at balance position so that the body and arm can come forward toward home plate together (see figure 8.42).

**Make It Fun:** Throw at a fence or screen with a target while executing the balance drill. Award points for executing the drill properly and hitting the target. Can split the target in half and ask the pitcher to throw inside or outside, awarding points only for pitches that are in the correct location (or more points for hitting the exact location).



**Figure 8.42** The balance drill keeps pitchers from rushing through the delivery before the arm is ready to rotate forward.

## 1-2-3 (or Toe Tap) Drill

---

**Goal:** To keep the pitcher from rushing through the balance position before the arm can catch up. This drill reinforces the concept of staying back until the ball is released and landing softly.

**Set-up:** Pitcher, catcher, mound, and a baseball.

**Description:** Pitcher throws from a mound to a catcher at a shortened distance. Lifts the leg and puts it down (counts one), lifts the leg and puts it down again (counts two), lifts the leg and throws on a count of three. This drill teaches balance and coordination and builds strength in back leg. Makes the pitcher stay under control and keep from landing too hard, which can make throwing strikes difficult. Shoulders should stay fairly level without changing planes abruptly when the foot finally lands.

**Make It Fun:** Throw at a fence or screen with a target while executing the 1-2-3 or Toe Tap Drill. Award points for executing the drill properly and hitting the target. Can split the target in half and ask the pitcher to throw inside or outside, awarding points only for pitches that are in the correct location (or more points for hitting the exact location).

---

## Catching

Another important defensive skill is catching. This includes catching pitches, catching thrown balls, fielding ground balls, catching fly balls, and catching line drives. It is a fundamental defensive skill; both fly outs and ground outs begin and end with catches. And the player who has to catch the most balls is, appropriately enough, the catcher.

Remember that defense essentially has two parts: catching and throwing. You can watch two youth teams warm up before a game, and nine times out of ten you can determine who will win by watching the two teams play catch. The teams that play catch the best win most games, and the players who play catch the best are the ones who advance to the highest levels of the game.

### *The Catcher's Position*

The catcher's position is the most demanding in baseball. During a game, the catcher is the busiest player on the field—crouching behind the plate, calling pitches, blocking balls, keeping track of the count on each batter, repositioning teammates defensively, and so on. So select a sturdy, smart, and strong youngster to be your catcher.

A catcher's mitt is padded and rounded so that the ball easily lands in the pocket. The extra padding also helps ensure the safety of the player using the glove.

**Basic Stance** The basic stance for a catcher is how he or she sets up before the pitch is thrown. Young pitchers may throw a couple different fastballs and a change-up, so catchers of all ages should learn how to give signals correctly and how to prepare to receive the pitch. The catcher gets in an athletic position; the feet are shoulder-width apart with the weight on the balls of the feet and the knees slightly bent. From this point the catcher squats and determines a comfortable width for the feet. Once squatting the catcher should be in a comfortable, balanced athletic position with the knees just far enough apart so that the pitcher can see the signs (see figure 8.43). The signs should be given with the hand placed close to the catcher's protective cup. If the legs are too far apart, that can allow the opposing team to steal the signals.



**Figure 8.43** The catcher's signs need to be visible to the pitcher, but hidden from the opposing team.



**Receiving Stance** When preparing to actually receive the pitch, the catcher must be comfortable and find a stance that is relaxed enough to allow him or her to receive the ball with soft hands. The elbows should be outside of the shin guard and the wrists should be loose. A catcher's weight should be on his or her insteps, not the toes, to help keep the weight out in front. The glove should be turned slightly counter clockwise when receiving the pitch to keep the hands soft, and the throwing hand should be protected behind the mitt or by placing it along the outside part of the leg while keeping the weight forward (see figure 8.44).

**Runners on Base/Two-Strike Stance** With runners on base, two strikes on a batter, or both, the catcher should adjust the stance to get in a good throwing position. This means being in an athletic position with the weight forward on the balls of the feet. The rear end is pushed up higher in this stance so that it is just as easy to throw or drop to block a pitch. If the rear end is closer to the ground, the first movement has to be up and not toward where the throw will ultimately go. The knees should point toward second base, with the left foot slightly in front of the right and the throwing hand balled up in a loose fist and placed behind the mitt to protect the fingers (see figure 8.45). It is imperative that the catcher watches the ball as it travels all the way into the mitt. You can't throw it if you don't catch it first!

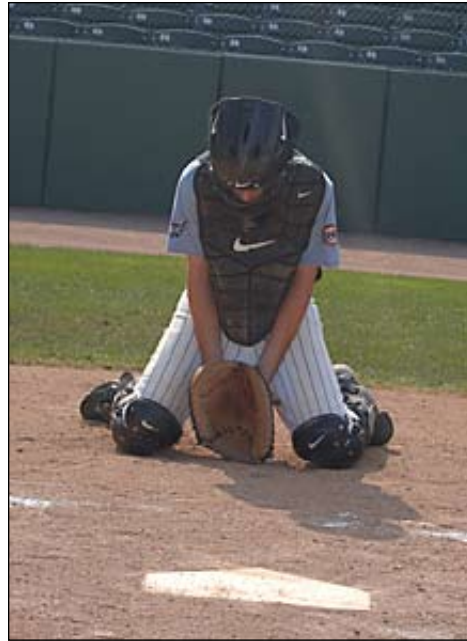


**Figure 8.44** When receiving a pitch the catcher should be comfortable and relaxed.



**Figure 8.45** When a runner is on base or two strikes are on the batter, the catcher should be in a stance with the weight forward and rear end pushed up.

**Blocking Pitches** The willingness and ability to block pitches separates good catchers from great catchers. Blocking is the toughest skill for any catcher to master. The catcher must anticipate the ball in the dirt, especially with two strikes on a batter and runners on base. When blocking, the catcher should place the throwing hand behind the mitt and the glove between the legs to keep the ball from skipping through. The catcher should drop the rear end as close to the ground as possible, curling the shoulders and swinging the hips around to create angles parallel to home plate and to help guide the ball in front of the plate. The mitt should be kept in position on the ground between the legs as the catcher attempts to smother the ball with the chest protector. The chin should be tucked in toward the chest to avoid getting hit in the neck, and the head-mask should be moved to a spot directly over where the pitch bounces (see figure 8.46). All balls should be blocked into fair territory when possible. Whichever direction the catcher has to move to block a pitch, he or she should turn that shoulder in toward home plate to direct the ball in front of the plate. The catcher should try to block wild pitches to either side at a 45-degree angle in hopes of deadening the ball in front of home. On balls in the dirt, he or she should drop to the knees as quickly as possible, moving forward and down. After the ball is blocked it should be picked up with the bare hand—the first time!



**Figure 8.46** Blocking pitches successfully is a matter of desire and technique.

**Receiving a Throw at the Plate** Two scenarios exist in which a catcher might receive a throw from a teammate at home plate. The first is on a ground ball to an infielder in a situation where the infield is pulled in, and the second is on a throw from the outfield.

When receiving a throw from an infielder, the catcher should set up in front of home plate so that he or she can see both the runner and the fielder. The catcher should assume an athletic position with the knees slightly bent and the left foot should be pointing up the third base line (see figure 8.47). This may tempt the runner to slide to the outside of the plate. The catcher should leave the mask on if possible and give the fielder a target with two hands out in front of the body. Like any fielder receiving a throw, the catcher should

be relaxed, anticipating an errant throw. The catcher must make sure that he or she catches the throw first before even thinking about applying a tag. Once the ball is caught, the catcher should put the ball in the throwing hand inside the mitt as quickly as possible. Then he or she should turn to see the runner's path. If the runner slides, the catcher should push his or her body down and across the base path. If the runner doesn't slide, the catcher should stay athletic and tag the runner with the bare hand holding the ball inside the glove.

On throws from the outfield the catcher again should assume an athletic position with the knees bent. (see figure 8.47) If the ball arrives in the air, the tag should be handled the same way as previously described. If the ball bounces in, the catcher should keep the glove low near the ground in case of a skip or bad hop. The ball must be caught before a tag can be made. The actual tag is handled as mentioned in the previous paragraph.



**Figure 8.47** The catcher tries to block the plate when a runner comes home.

**Catching Pop-Ups** When a ball is popped up around home plate, the team should inform the catcher that the ball is “up” and whether or not he or she has room to make the play. The catcher should keep his or her eyes open when the batter swings to give him or herself the best opportunity to see where the ball is hit. When possible, the catcher should turn his or her back to the infield before making the play. This makes the spin less tricky than it would be the other way. The catcher should remove the mask quickly and, once the location of the ball is determined, toss it far enough away so that it won't be an obstacle. The feet should keep moving and not be crossed. If the catcher keeps the knees bent and doesn't stand flatfooted, he or she will have a better chance to make the play. The catcher should try to line up under the ball so that it would hit him or her in the nose, and he or she should catch the ball with two hands above the head (see figure 8.48). On pop-ups hit in foul territory down either baseline, catchers should chase the pop-up until called off or told that there is no play on the ball.



a



b



c



d



e

**Figure 8.48** On pop-ups, the catcher should try to turn his or her back to the infield and then find the ball before tossing the mask aside.



**Throwing After Receiving the Pitch** For the catcher trying to throw out a runner attempting to steal, footwork is the key. The catcher should anticipate a steal on every pitch. The ball must be caught first, but the catcher should not reach for the pitch, because the primary objective is to get the strike call for the pitcher first. In this situation the catcher should catch the ball as close as possible so that he or she can get it out of the glove quickly. A four-seam grip always should be used when throwing to a teammate on defense. After receiving the pitch, the catcher should generate momentum toward the base he or she is throwing to and point the front shoulder directly toward the target (see figure 8.49). The ball should be released as quickly as possible, but the catcher should try to remain balanced.



a



b



c



d

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.49** If a runner is stealing, the catcher must make sure of the catch before generating momentum toward the target and releasing the ball.





**Figure 8.49** (continued)

**Fielding Bunts** Another aspect of catching, one that doesn't really have anything to do with actually catching a ball, is fielding bunts. Catchers always must know the game situation (the score, which bases are occupied, the number of outs, and so on). The catcher has the play in front of him or her. He or she should determine who should field the ball and to which base a throw should be made.

When preparing to field a bunt, the catcher should keep the knees bent and remain in an athletic position. The catcher should pick up the ball with the bare hand the first time. If the catcher prefers, he or she can use the glove to assist the bare hand in scooping up the ball. The catcher should assume that he or she will field the bunt and not rely on teammates. Once the ball is fielded the catcher should keep the feet moving and turn the front shoulder toward the target. The catcher should step toward the target when making the throw and then continue walking toward the target after the throw (see figure 8.50). For bunts that end up near the first-base line, the catcher should take a step or two toward the pitcher's mound to clear the runner.



a



b



c



d



e

**Figure 8.50** When fielding a bunt, the catcher needs to take charge of the situation, pick up the ball quickly, and point the front shoulder toward first before throwing.

## Backstop Drill

**Goal:** To execute the skills needed to be a catcher.

**Setup:** Catcher in full gear and three players—a pitcher, a runner, and a first baseman (the coach can pitch).

**Description:** This game highlights five skills required of a catcher. You can split any one of the following skills into a separate game, or you can do all five in one.

**Blocking pitches** (see figure 8.46 on page 147)—Throw three wild pitches in the dirt in front of the catcher. The pitch must be within reach of the catcher (not too far to the side). The catcher attempts to block each pitch. Catcher scores one point for each successful block. Use softer balls for younger players.

**Throwing out runners** (see figure 8.49 on pages 150-151)—The fielder plays shortstop. A runner on first tries to steal second as the pitcher pitches. The catcher throws to the shortstop covering second, who tries to tag the runner out. Do this play three times. The catcher scores one point for each throw to second that arrives in time to get the runner out (the point is scored even if the shortstop drops the ball at second or misses the tag). This can be done using both a shortstop and second baseman and having them alternate their coverages.

**Blocking the plate** (see figure 8.47 on page 148)—The runner is on third base. The catcher (or you) throws a ground ball to the fielder, who is playing shortstop. The runner breaks for home and tries to score. The catcher blocks the plate and attempts to tag out the runner. Do this play three times, scoring one point for each successful tag. Ask your runners to try to avoid contact with the catcher whenever possible. Also, monitor sliding to help lessen the chance of injuries. You can do this using positions other than shortstop.

**Fielding a bunt and throwing to first base** (see figure 8.50 on page 152)—A runner is at home and the fielder is at first base. Roll a bunt down the first- or third-base line; the runner heads for first base as the ball leaves your hand. The catcher, starting from a crouched position, springs up as the ball is rolled and the runner takes off for first. The catcher attempts to throw the runner out. Do this play three times, scoring a point for the catcher for each out at first. (If the ball arrives in time to get the runner out, score the point for the catcher even if the fielder at first base drops the ball.) A pitcher, first baseman, and second baseman can be involved to work on team bunt coverage and fundamentals as well as communication.

---

## Rapid-Fire Pitches Drill

**Goal:** To help catchers develop hands that are relaxed and quick enough to handle a variety of pitches.

**Setup:** Catcher in full gear, several players each with at least six balls lined up 20 or so feet in front of home plate.

**Description:** Start from the catcher's left and move to the right. The catcher receives a throw from each player. Last player on the right throws two balls and then the drill proceeds back to the left with one player throwing right after the other. Catcher must receive the pitch with soft hands and let the ball drop quickly so that the next throw can be caught. Don't let everyone throw at once (see figure 8.51).

**Another Dimension:** You can use soft baseballs, sponge balls, or tennis balls and have each player throw pitches in the dirt to allow the catcher to practice blocking. As the catcher gets older and becomes more comfortable with blocking, you can use real baseballs.

**Making It Fun:** Catchers can compete to see who can catch or block the most balls successfully. Cones can be set up in front of home plate to direct catchers where to try to direct blocked balls.



**Figure 8.51** The Rapid-Fire Pitches Drill can be used to practice receiving, concentration, and blocking.

## Pop-Up Drill

**Goal:** To learn how to catch pop-ups properly.

**Set-up:** Pitching machine, bucket of balls, and clear home plate area or other open area.

**Description:** Pitching machine is set up so that it throws pop-ups straight up in the area of home plate. The catcher should work on finding the ball, discarding the mask, turning the back to the infield, and catching the ball above the head with two hands. The catcher squats behind home plate wearing full gear. The ball is shot through the machine, and the catcher stands up and turns away from the infield, removing the mask and throwing it away from where the ball will land. It is important to keep the feet moving and to not stand flatfooted in case the ball does not come down exactly where you expect it to or if the ball drifts in the wind. The catcher should be in an athletic position with knees slightly bent and the body square to where the ball is coming down. The key is to get to the spot where the ball is going to come down as quickly as possible so that you can camp under it and catch it properly without having to move (see figure 8.48 on page 149).

## Catching Thrown Balls

A fielder may receive a ball when covering a base or not covering a base. Many of the same principles apply in either case. First we address catching principles in general, and then we look at covering a base.

### **General Principles**

To catch a thrown ball, the player should position the glove according to the flight of the ball. If the ball is below the waist, the fingers of the glove hand should be pointed down with the mitt fully open (see figure 8.52*d*). If the ball is at chest level or higher, the fingers of the glove should be pointing up (see figure 8.52*a*). When receiving a throw, a fielder always should present a target with two hands (fingers pointing up) at chest level out in front of the body (see figure 8.52*b*). All throws should be caught in front of the body so that the eyes can see the ball and the glove at the same time. When the ball enters the glove, the mitt should be squeezed and the bare hand should be used to hold the ball in place (see figure 8.52*c*).





**a**



**b**



**c**



**d**

**Figure 8.52** When preparing to receive a throw, players should present a target with two hands in front of the body (*a-b*). Catching the ball in front of the body allows the eyes to follow it all the way into the glove (*c*). The glove is pointed so the fingers point down to catch throws below the waist (*d*).

### Covering a Base for a Possible Tag Play

When covering a base for a potential tag play, an infielder needs to sprint to the bag and get in position to receive the ball wherever it is thrown. The fielder should straddle the base in such a way that the glove can be placed straight down to apply a tag on the incoming runner (see figure 8.53a). The fielder should let the ball travel all the way to the glove before catching it; the ball will get there faster traveling on its own than it will if the fielder reaches out to catch the ball and then pulls the glove back and puts it down to apply the tag. When covering a base, the fielder should be in an athletic position with the knees bent and the feet on either side of the bag. A tag play can happen very quickly, so the player receiving the throw can't always use two hands to catch the ball. The fielder should watch the ball all the way into the glove, give with the throw as it approaches, squeeze the glove, and then move the glove straight down and straight up (see figure 8.53b-d). If the runner is not sliding, the fielder may want to catch the ball and apply the tag with two hands before the runner steps on the base. When receiving a throw at a base, the fielder should always anticipate a bad throw and be willing to move off the bag to field or knock down an off-target throw.



a



b

(continued)

**Figure 8.53** On a possible tag play the fielder straddles the bag and lets the ball travel before catching it and applying a tag.



c



d

---

**Figure 8.53** (continued)

### Covering a Base on a Force Out

Whenever the possibility of a force out exists, the player responsible for covering the bag should get there as quickly as possible to be a stationary target. If the last thing the player who has caught the ball sees is a teammate running toward a base to cover it, he or she is more likely to throw the ball to that spot instead of the base where the teammate is headed. Think about a wide receiver in football. It's a lot easier catch a pass after running a button hook or a comeback pattern, when the receiver is virtually still with the shoulders square to the quarterback, than it is to catch a pass while running across the middle.

So, the fielder receiving the throw must get to the bag as quickly as possible with the shoulders square to the player who will be making the throw (see figure 8.54a). When the only out you are going to get is the force out, the player covering the base should put the throwing-side heel on the inside edge of the base (the edge closest to where the throw is coming from) and wait to see where the ball is traveling. Once the direction of the throw is determined, the player covering the base should take the glove and glove-side foot directly to the ball at the same time. The ball should enter the glove at about the same time that the foot hits the ground (see figure 8.54b-c). The only time this is not true is when the second baseman is covering on a possible force play. In that case, the player puts the left foot on the base and takes the right foot toward



**Figure 8.54** When a force out is imminent, it is important for the player covering the base to be a stationary target and let the ball travel before stretching out to receive the throw.



the throw in case a double-play situation presents itself. No matter what, it is important not to take the foot toward the ball too soon, because it can lock the fielder receiving the throw into a position that will not allow him or her to reach a throw that is slightly off target. The receiver of the throw also should stand tall at the bag in an athletic position with the knees slightly bent, ready to move off the base for an errant throw.

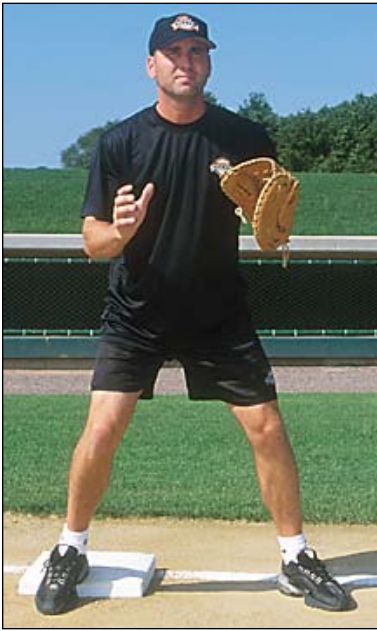
## First-Base Play

For some reason, over time, a stereotype of the first baseman has emerged. The big kid who doesn't field that well but can hit the ball a mile often gets stuck at first base. It seems to happen at all levels of baseball. We think, however, that having a good defensive first baseman can make a team—specifically a youth team—much better defensively. Other than the catcher and the pitcher, no one on the field is going to handle the ball more than the first baseman. With that being the case, why wouldn't you put a solid fielder with good hands there?

When a ground ball is hit to first, the first baseman fields it like any other player on the field—with a wide base, the rear end down, and the hands out in front. If the ball pulls the first baseman from the bag, he or she will use the underhand flip described in chapter 9 to flip the ball to the pitcher covering the base. If the ball is closer to the bag, the first baseman may run over to tag the base. Sometimes a first baseman may start a 3-6-3 or a 3-6-1 double play; other times, depending on the situation, the first baseman may attempt to cut down a runner at home.

But what happens when a ground ball is hit to one of the other fielders? That's when the first baseman's job becomes most important. When that happens, the first baseman needs to get to the base as quickly as possible and set up as a stationary target for the player fielding the ball. The first baseman should not crouch, but instead should be as big a target as possible while still keeping the knees slightly bent. The throwing-side heel should be placed on the inside of the base, and the shoulders should be squared to the fielder making the throw (see figure 8.55*a*). The most important thing for the first baseman to remember is to not stretch too soon (see figure 8.56). He or she should let the ball travel across the diamond, taking the glove and glove-side foot toward the throw together (see figure 8.55*b*). The ball should hit the glove about the same time that the foot hits the ground. The first baseman should always anticipate an off-target throw and be prepared to leave the base to catch or knock down the ball in such a situation. After catching the ball in the glove and squeezing it, the first baseman should come off the bag in a position to throw if there are runners on other bases.





a



b

**Figure 8.55** The first baseman should be a big target and remember not to stretch to the throw until it is determined exactly where the ball is going.



a



b

**Figure 8.56** These photos indicate an incorrect setup and a case where the first baseman stretches too soon.

## Pitcher Covering First

Any time a ball is hit on the ground (or in the air, for that matter) to the right side of the infield, the pitcher should get into the habit of moving toward first base in case the first baseman has to field the ball and can't get back to the base in time to record the out. When this happens the pitcher should sprint to a point about 10 to 12 feet up the first-base line toward home plate. From there the pitcher should slow down and run parallel to the baseline, presenting a target at chest level (see figure 8.57*a*). The first baseman should get the ball to the pitcher as early as possible, using an underhand flip when appropriate, so that the pitcher can catch the ball and then look down for the base (see figure 8.57*b*). The pitcher should try to touch the inside edge of the base and then turn toward the infield to keep an eye on any other baserunners and avoid a collision with the player running to first (see figure 8.57*c-e*). If the pitcher gets to the base before the first baseman has delivered the ball, he or she should stop and set up like a first baseman to receive the throw.



a



b

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.57** On a play where the pitcher covers first, it is the first baseman's job to get the ball to the pitcher as early as possible.



c



d



e

**Figure 8.57** (continued)



---

## Error Detection and Correction for Catching Balls at First Base

### ***ERROR***

The first baseman has trouble catching high, but not bad, throws.

### ***CORRECTION***

Encourage the player to wait longer before stretching out and shift the weight off the heels in case he or she needs to jump. As the throw approaches, the first-base player should extend upward for the catch. The key is to let the ball travel and determine the best way to catch the ball as it arrives at the base.

---

## Fielding Ground Balls

All players should keep in mind the basics when fielding ground balls. An 8-year-old should field a ground ball the exact same way that a big league veteran does—albeit not as consistently. There is a proper way to prepare for the ground ball, a proper way to field it, and a proper way to throw it after the catch.

### ***Ready Position***

Every player on the baseball field should assume the ready position as the pitch enters the hitting zone. The ready position is nothing more than an athletic position, with the knees slightly bent, the weight on the balls of the feet and the feet shoulder-width apart (see figure 8.58). Like a cornerback waiting to explode and cover a wide receiver or a basketball defender, the ready position places the fielder in the best possible position to move in any direction



---

**Figure 8.58** The ready position is similar to athletic stances used in other sports.

when the ball is hit. Players should not have their hands on their knees when assuming the ready position, because if they start that way, they must move their hands from their knees first before they can move toward the ball.

### ***Fielding a Ground Ball***

To field a ground ball properly, the fielder must create a wide base with the feet. Doing so allows the infielder to get the rear end down and closer to the ground instead of having to bend at the waist. Having the rear end down allows the head to stay up and the eyes to stay focused on the ball. The hands should be placed out in front of the body so that the eyes can follow the ball all the way to the glove. Fielders should place their bare hand beside the glove and relax the wrist of the glove hand so that the fingers point almost straight down. Once the ball enters the glove and is squeezed, the bare hand should go on top of the ball to allow for an easy transfer and a quicker throw.

***The Basics for Fielding a Ground Ball (see figures 8.59 and 8.60)***

1. Create a wide base with the feet.
2. Get the rear end down and low to the ground.
3. Push the hands out in front (with the head up).
4. Relax the wrist.



**Figure 8.59** Creating a wide base, getting the rear end down, and pushing the hands out in front of the body is essential when fielding a ground ball.



**Figure 8.60** The wrist should be relaxed with the fingers pointing down to provide the proper glove angle when fielding a ground ball.



## Rolled Ground Balls

**Goal:** To teach infielders the proper fundamentals for fielding ground balls and help them develop muscle memory.

**Description:** This drill seems simple, but it is appropriate for all ages. Balls can be rolled as soft or as hard as necessary, and the type of hop can be controlled. Players assume the ground ball position with a wide base, the rear end down, and the hands out in front (glove-hand wrist relaxed so that coach can see inside of glove with fingers pointing down). Use a flat surface to prevent bad hops and bad habits. At first the ball should be rolled directly into glove from about 10 feet away. Have players hold the ground ball position for five reps to feel a little burn in the thighs. As players get comfortable fielding ground balls properly, the coach can move back and roll balls harder. For conditioning, you can ask older players to hold the position for more reps. Ball must be caught out in front so that the eyes can follow it to the glove (see figure 8.61).



**Figure 8.61** The basic ground ball drill can be tailored to all ages and skill levels.

### **Backhands**

The backhand is an important skill to teach players of all ages. It's great to stress to kids the importance of getting in front of as many ground balls as possible and knocking them down. However, as players get older, the fields get bigger and the players get faster. Sometimes infielders try so hard to get in front of a ground ball that they actually catch the ball moving away from the base. This may cause them to take a couple of steps or hops in that direction before being able to stop and move their feet back toward first base. That extra couple of hops can make the difference between an out and a hit. This is when the backhand should be used. The earlier it is introduced and practiced, the easier it will be to use naturally when the opportunity presents itself. Players who get in the habit of rounding groundballs hit to their right or trying to get in front of everything because they can be successful with those approaches

at the youngest levels will have a more difficult time adjusting to the bigger fields when they get older.

Two types of backhands exist: the one in which you catch the ball off the throwing-side foot and the crossover or lunge backhand. The first type of backhand is for when the ball is hit so hard to the player's right (or left for a left-hander) that he or she doesn't have time to get in front of it (see figure 8.62*a*). The second type of backhand is for a ball that is farther away. Crossing over and assuming a lunge position helps the player have greater reach (see figure 8.62*b*).

The fundamentals used for the backhand are the same as for the routine ground ball. Fielders create a wide base with their feet, get their rear ends down, and catch the ball out in front of their bodies. The wrist should be relaxed, with the fingers of the glove pointing straight down and touching the ground. After the ball rolls into the glove, it is squeezed and taken directly to the center of the body. Players who twist the glove run the risk of twisting the glove too soon and closing it off to the approaching ball.



a



b

**Figure 8.62** Two ways to catch a backhand: (a) with the throwing-side foot extended and (b) with the glove-side foot crossed over in a lunge position.

## Throwing-Side Foot Backhand Drill

**Goal:** To learn how to catch the backhand off the throwing-side foot correctly.

**Description:** Player lines up in front of a coach with the right leg extended. Pivots right foot so that the instep faces the coach and drops the left knee to the ground (opposite for lefties). Creates a wide base to help get the rear end down and places the glove in front of the right foot toward the coach. Coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into the glove until the player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove, and bringing it to the center of body. Ball is rolled directly toward the front foot. Glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so that the coach can see into glove. Have players avoid twisting the glove so that they don't close it too soon. After five reps have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding repetitions in this manner can help with conditioning as well (see figure 8.63).



**Figure 8.63** The throwing-side backhand drill is for balls that are hit hard to the fielder's backhand side.

## Glove-Side Foot Backhand Drill

**Goal:** To learn how to catch the backhand off the glove-side foot (crossover or lunge backhand) correctly.

**Description:** Player lines up in front of the coach, takes the left leg and crosses it over the right as if turning to walk. Right knee is dropped to the ground (opposite for lefties) much like a walking lunge. Creates a wide base to help get the rear end down and the glove in front of the body. Ball is caught off the front foot instead of in front of it (but still out in front of the body). Coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into the glove until the player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove, and bringing it to the center of the body. Ball is rolled slightly in front of the lead foot. Glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so that the coach can see into the glove. Have players avoid twisting the glove so they don't close it too soon. After five reps have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding repetitions in this manner can help with conditioning as well.



**Figure 8.64** The Glove-Side Backhand Drill is for balls that are hit farther to the backhand side.

### ***Throwing After the Catch***

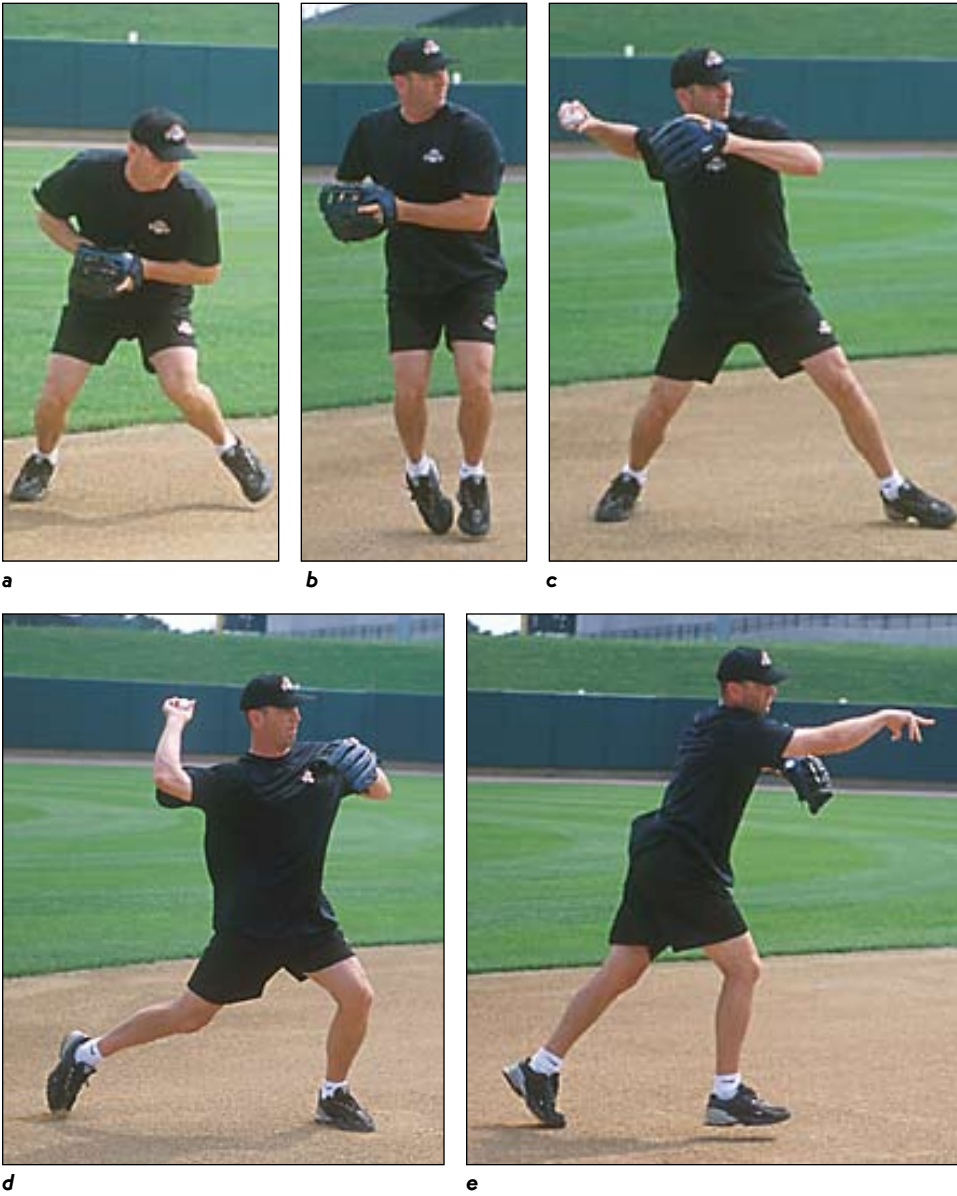
Remember that defense has two parts: catching and throwing. Well, now that your players know how to catch a ground ball, how do they throw it? Young infielders often make the mistake of rushing their throws or relying strictly on their arm strength when throwing the ball across the infield after fielding it. An important lesson for all young baseball players is to understand the role that the body's momentum can play in making a stronger throw. Derek Jeter is perhaps the best example of a player using his body, specifically his legs, properly when throwing to first base.

After catching a ground ball, Jeter's first move is not to stand up straight. Instead, he remains in an athletic position with his knees bent and shuffles his feet in the direction of the intended target. Then, after releasing the ball, he continues to follow the throw in the same direction. By the time the ball is thrown around the infield after an out at first base, Jeter is all the way on the infield grass. In essence, he has shortened his throw by shuffling toward the target and used that momentum to help the ball carry to its destination. He naturally follows the throw, because he has exploded properly toward the target before releasing the ball.

Every infielder, especially the younger players who still are developing their arms, should get in the habit of fielding the ground ball properly first with a wide base, the rear end down, and the hands out in front. From there, all that remains is to shuffle, throw, and follow. Every time. Generate momentum directly toward the target, throw the ball after one or two quick shuffle steps, and continue following the ball toward the target to ensure its accuracy (see figure 8.65).

Many young players run toward the target when attempting to throw after the catch. They turn their torsos so that their shoulders are square to the first baseman and actually start running in that direction, often stepping forward with the wrong foot when releasing the ball. Make sure that these players point their front shoulder toward the target without turning to square their shoulders in that direction. They should shuffle, not run or cross one foot over the other. This keeps proper throwing mechanics in check and helps players avoid getting their feet tangled.





**Figure 8.65** It is important to generate momentum toward the target and follow the throw after fielding a ground ball.

## Throwing After the Catch Drill

**Goal:** To reinforce the importance of generating momentum toward the target, throwing, and following after catching a ground ball. This drill is appropriate for all ages.

**Catch Phrase:** Catch it, stay low, and go low or shuffle, throw, follow

**Description:** Three cones are set up, each several feet apart, placed in a line toward the target where the throw will be made (easiest to set up as a simulation of the 5-4 force out at second base) (see figure 8.66). Player sets up with the right foot next to first cone (facing the coach) and assumes the ground ball fielding position (wide base, rear end down, hands in front). The coach rolls the ball to the player, or the player starts with a ball and simulates the fielding position. After fielding the ball, the player shuffles the feet to the second cone, releases the ball, and follows the throw past the third cone and toward the target (cones should be placed so that the distance is appropriate to accomplish the intended result for a given age group) (see figure 8.67). Emphasize the four-seam grip. Ball can be thrown to a coach or another teammate. Player should stay low (and not stand straight up) after fielding the ball. This can be turned into a contest by placing a chest- or head-high target at second base (with a net or screen behind to catch errant throws). Players who hit the target stay alive, while those who miss are eliminated.



**Figure 8.66** Setup for the throwing drill.



a



b



c

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.67** Throwing After the Catch Drill: The ball is caught at the first cone, and the player shuffles to the second cone and throws before following the throw past the third cone.





d



e



f

**Figure 8.67** (continued)

## Catching Fly Balls

The final link to a solid team defense is the outfield. A good defensive outfield that communicates well is a joy to watch and can really improve a team's chances of success. Outfielders can be taught the correct fundamentals for catching a fly ball relatively easily, but learning to read the ball off the bat and get a good jump on fly balls takes countless hours of practice.

The basic job description for an outfielder is to field all batted balls that get through the infield—on the ground or in the air—and prevent runners from taking any extra bases. On a sure single, the outfielder wants to field the ground ball (like an infielder with a wide base, the rear end down, and the hands out in front) and get the ball to the appropriate cutoff man as quickly as possible to hold the runner to first base. When runners are on base and there is a hit, the more quickly the outfielder can get to the ball and get it to the cutoff, the less likely that the runners will advance more than one base. When an outfielder catches a fly ball, he or she prevents the batter from getting to first base and, in some cases, any runners from advancing.

Like their teammates in the infield, outfielders must be in the ready position and be prepared for action on each pitch. The outfielders should hold their gloves more near waist level than their infield counterparts, but their knees should bend slightly and their weight should be on the balls of their feet (see figure 8.68). Outfielders should always be squared toward the hitting zone. Some outfielders look only at the hitting zone when the ball is pitched so that they can see it hit the bat. Others will follow the ball from the pitcher's hand all the way to the hitting zone. Either method is acceptable. Outfielders can use whichever approach makes them the most comfortable. If outfielders are aware that they have a specific responsibility on every batted and thrown ball, it will be easier for you to keep them alert even though they often are far from the action.

Baseball is a game of quick action and reaction. Outfielders must get to the spot quickly after a ball is hit to keep the batter off the bases or prevent the baserunners from advancing. To accomplish this, outfielders should move at full speed to the spot where they think the ball is traveling, get under control to make the play, and then get rid of the ball as quickly as possible, throwing it



**Figure 8.68** The outfielder's ready position.



to the appropriate infielder. Most young athletes tend to drift toward the ball, which means they are still moving as they catch the ball. This delays them in getting rid of the ball and can allow runners to advance.

### **Crossover Step**

The most efficient way to move laterally on the baseball field is the crossover step. Baserunners use the crossover step when they are stealing a base, infielders use it when moving toward a ground ball or pop-up, and outfielders use it to track down fly balls that aren't hit directly at them. The crossover step allows the player's first step to be in the direction of the ball. A good crossover step is a great defensive weapon for an outfielder (or an infielder). To execute the step, the fielder pivots the foot closest to the ball so that the toe of that foot points toward the ball while at the same time he or she crosses the opposite foot over the one closest to the ball (see figure 8.69). Many times a fielder incorrectly lifts the leg nearest the ball and puts it back down in almost the same place before crossing over. Doing this means it takes one extra step to get to the same spot where the player who executed the proper crossover step is.



**Figure 8.69** Outfielders, infielders, and baserunners use the crossover step to move laterally.

## Making the Catch

To catch a fly ball correctly, the player should get to the spot where it is going to come down as quickly as possible. The ball should be caught while moving forward whenever possible. Outfielders should not drift so that they are moving away from where they have to throw the ball as it falls into the glove. The eyes should remain on the ball at all times, and the ball should be caught with two hands above the head (see figure 8.70). This allows the outfielder to watch the ball all the way into the glove. After the ball enters the glove and it is squeezed, the outfielder should put the bare hand on top of the ball and bring the glove and ball directly to the center of the body (chest) for a quick transfer and throw. As soon as the outfielder thinks that the ball can be played by him or her, he or she should call for it by yelling, "I got it! I got it! I got it!" An outfielder's first step on a fly ball should be back, unless he or she is absolutely positive that the ball is short.



**Figure 8.70** The basic or routine fly ball should be caught with two hands over the head whenever possible.

## Crow Hop

Because of the distances involved in most throws from the outfield, an outfielder needs to learn a crow hop, a technique in which the fielder generates momentum toward the target before releasing the ball. Many players throw strictly with the arm, which greatly restricts how far they can throw and leads to arm injuries. The fundamentals are basically the same as for any overhand throw except that the crow hop allows the outfielder to generate the momentum necessary to make a long throw and get rid of the ball quickly (see figure 8.71).

A crow hop really isn't a hop, because when you throw you should keep your head, eyes, and shoulders in the same plane. If you were to really hop, your eyes, shoulders, and head would bounce up and down making an accurate throw more difficult. (Do you think it's easier to hit a target when your eyes remain in the same place or when they move up and down?) To execute the crow hop, after fielding the ball, the outfielder shuffles his or her feet two or three times toward the target, throws the ball, and then follows the throw toward the target for several steps. This should be an overhand throw using a four-seam grip to maximize carry and accuracy.



a



b



c



d



e



f

**Figure 8.71** The crow hop really isn't a hop, just a way to generate momentum toward the target and help a throw carry.



## Thrown Fly Balls

**Goal:** To allow players to learn how to catch fly balls in a fundamentally sound manner without fear of missing the ball or getting hit with a batted ball.

**Description:** Players must be comfortable catching fly balls properly (with two hands above the head so that the eyes can follow ball into the glove) before fly balls are hit to them. This can avoid injury and embarrassment. The simplest way is to throw fly balls to players and force them to do it correctly. Start with short, easy tosses, and adjust the height of the throws to the skill and comfort level of the players. You can start out younger players with soft baseballs or some other alternative to help avoid injury and build confidence. Stress getting to the spot where the ball is coming down and catching with two hands above the head. (see figure 8.72).

**Make It Fun:** You can turn this drill into an elimination contest with gloves for the youngest players and without gloves using softer balls for older players.



**Figure 8.72** You can use small groups when throwing fly balls to your team.

## Machine or Rolled Ground Balls Drill

**Goal:** To teach players the proper mechanics for fielding a ground ball in the outfield, helping them build confidence.

**Description:** A little different than infielders, but outfielders still need a wide base, the rear end down, and the hands out in front of the body. Get wide by stepping toward home with glove-side leg forward and glove in front of that foot (see figure 8.73). Players should get comfortable with proper fundamentals before fielding hit balls. It's okay to use a pitching machine for outfield ground balls right from the start. Roll or feed players ground balls one at a time. Have them get to the spot quickly, get under control, field properly, generate momentum toward the coach, and throw (crow hop). Don't allow players to walk or run through ground balls. They need to slow down and get under control to field properly.



**Figure 8.73** Machine or Rolled Ground Balls.



## Crossover Step Drill

**Goal:** To allow players to work on developing the crossover step in a controlled setting.

**Description:** Crossover step (pivot one foot while crossing the other one over in the direction of the ball or next base) is the most efficient way to move laterally on the baseball field. This is very important for all fielders and base-runners. Outfielders line up. Each has a ball. First one steps forward, tosses the ball to a coach, and assumes a ready position. Coach tells the player which direction to go ahead of time. Player crosses over in that direction, then the coach tosses the ball so that it can be caught with two hands over the head. Player should concentrate on crossing over correctly until comfortable doing so. Coach should tell players which direction they will go ahead of time until they master the step. Then mix it up at will (see figure 8.74). If the player



a



b

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.74** A proper crossover step is the most important aspect of the Crossover Step Drill.



c



d

**Figure 8.74** (continued)

performs the crossover step incorrectly, halt the drill and ask him or her to do it properly.

**Make It Fun:** See Pass Pattern Drill.

## Drop-Step Drill

**Goal:** To allow players to perfect the drop step in a controlled environment.

**Description:** Much like the Crossover Step Drill but a bit more advanced. Players line up. First one steps forward, tosses a ball to a coach, and assumes a ready position. Coach says, “Go,” and the player performs a drop step (drop one foot back, turn the body, and cross the other foot over in the direction of the ball). The step really is a combination of a drop step and a crossover. Coach throws the ball directly over the player’s head, high and close enough that he can catch it with two hands above the head. Have players take time to get the footwork correct before tossing. Stop players and have them do it correctly before throwing the ball if the drop step is not executed properly (see figure 8.75).

**Make It Fun:** See Pass Pattern Drill.



a



b



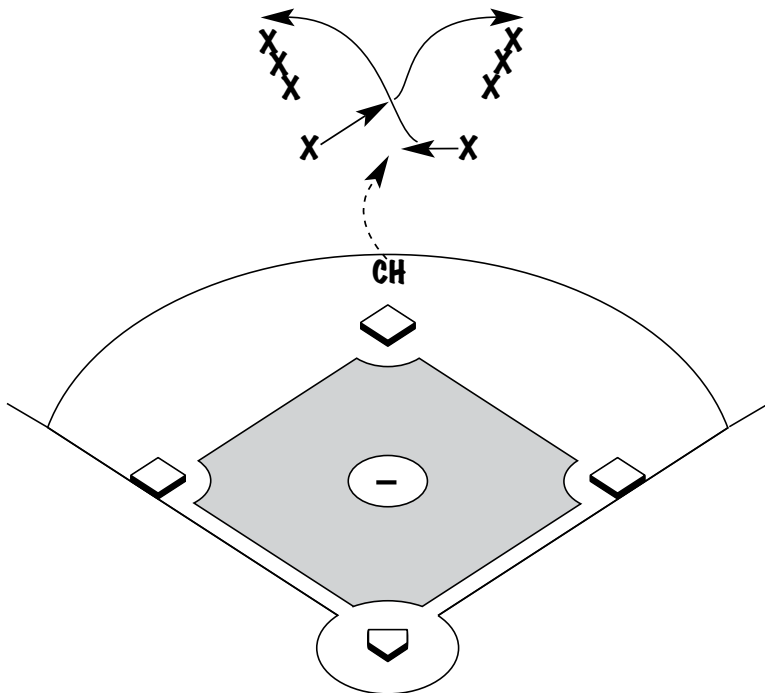
c

**Figure 8.75** The drop step is a combination step in which the outfielder opens up in one direction by stepping back and then crosses the opposite foot over.

## Communication Drill

**Goal:** To teach fielders how to communicate properly and about fly ball priorities.

**Description:** Outfielders form two lines at least 20 feet apart. First players in each line step forward. Coach throws fly balls in between the two fielders, who must communicate and make the play. Player fielding the ball should yell, "I got it!" at least three times. Other player should back up. A strong, accurate throw should be made to a coach or cutoff man (another player who rotates out of the drill) after the ball is caught. For younger players you can use soft baseballs, sponge balls, foam balls, or tennis balls. You can use pitching machines to throw higher fly balls that land in about the same place each time. If fly ball priorities are introduced, you can designate one player as the centerfielder. This drill can be done to simulate three outfielders as well (see figure 8.76).



**Figure 8.76** Setup for the Communication Drill.

## Pass Pattern Drill

**Goal:** To find a fun way to allow players to work on crossover and drop steps.

**Description:** A coach or player (this can be long toss for pitchers) serves as quarterback (QB). Player tosses a ball to the QB and then uses a crossover or drop step in the appropriate direction before running a pass pattern. QB throws the ball high enough so that the player can run under the ball and make a one-handed, over-the-shoulder catch. Have the player start over if the initial step is not executed correctly.

**Make It Fun:** This drill is a lot of fun to begin with. Make it more fun by turning it into an elimination game, with players who perform the tasks correctly and catch the ball staying alive. See which player can catch the deepest touchdown pass.



## Fence Drill

**Goal:** To teach outfielders how to recognize where the fence is and still be able to catch a fly ball.

**Description:** Teaches outfielders to be aware of their surroundings. Not intended to practice robbing home runs, but that element can be added for fun. Each player gets in line with a ball. First player tosses a ball to a coach, who throws a fly ball so that it will land on the warning track. Player races back, feels for the fence with the bare hand, and then catches the ball with two hands over the head. Another great way to force players to practice the crossover and drop steps (see figure 8.77).

**Make It Fun:** Use softer balls, and let players try to rob home runs.



a



b

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.77** The Fence Drill helps players get comfortable catching fly balls near the fence.



c



d

**Figure 8.77** (continued)

## Catching Line Drives

A line drive is a hard-hit ball that moves directly in a line low to the ground (usually at the height of the player or lower). Teach your players to try to catch line drives above the waist, if possible, and always with two hands out in front of the body so that the eyes can see the ball and the glove at the same time. Sometimes on line drives that are not hit directly at the fielder, he or she may have to make a one-handed play. Balls above the waist should be caught out in front of the body with the fingers pointing up, while balls below the waist should be caught with the fingers pointing down.