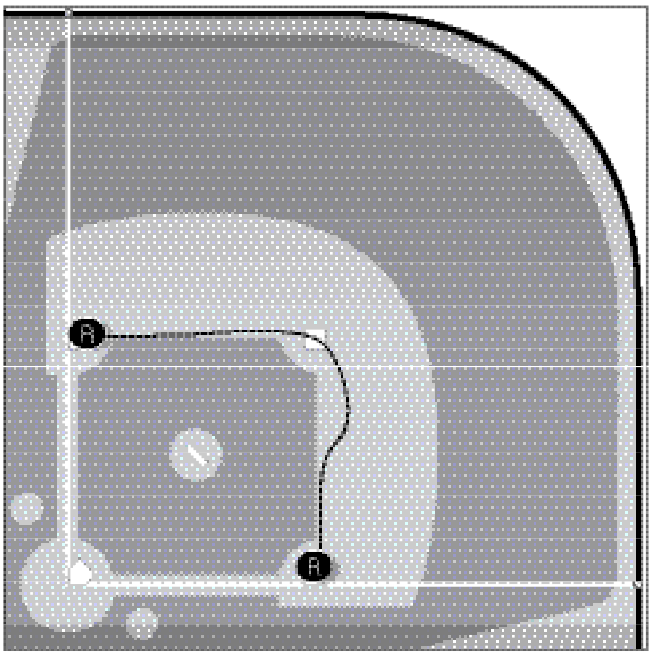

FIGURE 5.3 The runner rounds the base with a question mark turn when heading to third.

eyes on the pitcher and listen for instructions from the coaches on increasing or decreasing his lead. Keep increasing until the coach yells "hold" or "caution." If the coach reads a pickoff attempt, he will yell "back." The secondary lead at second is exactly like the secondary at first base. The runner shuffles until the ball is either caught or hit. If the hitter takes, he should stop his shuffle and return to second immediately. If the ball is in the dirt, he must read the catcher's block and only advance if he is sure he will be safe. He is already in scoring position at second; therefore he needs to use good judgment when advancing on a ball in the dirt.

Secondary lead at second: Groundball reads. The runner advances to third from second on all ground balls to the right side of the pitcher's mound. On ground balls that are hit directly toward the pitcher, the runner advances to third only after seeing the ball get past the pitcher. On a ground ball that gets past the pitcher on the third-base side of the mound, the runner advances to third if the ground ball is behind him. If the ground ball is to the left side of the infield, the runner must see the ball through the infield into the outfield before advancing to third. The runner may advance to third on a slow-hit ground ball to the third baseman. This is an exception to seeing the ball through the infield. The runner may also advance to third on backhand plays by the third baseman or shortstop when they must make a long throw across the field.

Advancing to third on fly balls. The base runner will always be trying to get to third on a fly ball if there are no outs. Our rule is to always tag up on a fly ball to the outfield with no outs. If the runner can advance to third on the catch, he can score easily from third with one out. He advances to third on fly balls using the keys discussed later in "Tag-Ups." If there is one out, he usually assumes a position off the base that allows him to advance to third or home if the ball is not caught by the outfielder. If the ball is caught, he is still in scoring position at second and should only tag and advance if he can stand up at third base. Remember, do not make the first or third out in an inning at third base.

Lead at Second

With less than two outs the runner at second will lead straight off the base. A good rule is to take a 15-foot lead or whatever the middle infielder will allow. The runner keeps his eyes on the pitcher and lets the coaches watch the middle infielder. The runner steals third on the pitcher and, to a certain degree, the middle infielder. To key off the pitcher he looks for the following:

- The pitcher who is 1.5 seconds or greater to the plate. Left-handed pitchers are normally slower to the plate.
- The pitcher who looks once to second and then pitches or the pitcher who does the same thing each time before pitching.
- If the middle infielders are not holding the runner, the runner can get a big lead, which means that we can even steal on the pitcher who is quick to the plate.

With two outs the runner takes a two-out lead. He takes his normal lead and then backs up two or three steps toward the outfield. This positioning allows for a sharper turn at third base and allows the runner to stay in the base line from third to home.

Lead at Third

The lead at third, like the lead at first, should be 12 to 15 feet. The runner must be aware of the possible pick at third by the pitcher or catcher. If the third baseman is close to the base, then the runner knows that chances are good for a pickoff attempt. If he is behind the bag by more than four steps, the runner can take a bigger lead and a bigger secondary lead. The secondary lead at third is a walking lead; the base runner tries to have his body facing the hitter and his right foot down as the ball arrives in the hitting area. If the runner has been instructed to go on the ground ball, a good walking lead will allow him to get a great jump to the plate.

When a runner gets to third, his number one objective is to score. The coach must remind him of the number of outs. The coach also reminds him to see all line drives through the infield before advancing to home. The coach also reminds him to tag up on all fly balls to the outfield. The only fly ball that the runner will not tag up on is the shallow fly ball or pop-up in between an outfielder and infielder. In this case, the runner will probably go halfway toward home or as far as he can get off of third and still return safely if the ball is caught. The coach will also tell the runner when to advance to home on ground balls. This scenario is often dictated by the number of outs, score of the game, inning in the game, and position of the infielders. Examples include:

- *Runner at third, no outs, infield back.* The runner advances to home on all ground balls that he sees. On the ground ball toward the pitcher, he must see the ball past the pitcher.
- *Runner at third, no outs, infield in.* The runner stays because there are no outs. He must see this ground ball through the infield.
- *Runner at third, no outs, corner infielders are playing in.* The runner advances on all ground balls hit to shortstop and second base, but must hold on ground balls to the third baseman or first baseman. Remember to see the ground ball past the pitcher.
- *Runners at first and third, no outs.* The runner advances to home on all ground balls to avoid the double play being turned. If a play is made on the runner at home, he should try to get in a rundown and allow the other runners enough time to get into scoring position at second and third.
- *Runner at third, one out, infield in.* The coach must decide whether he can risk the chance of the runner being thrown out at home. If he tells him to go on ground-ball contact, then he probably doesn't have a good feeling about the next hitter scoring the runner with two outs.

Reading the Pitcher

Pitchers are creatures of habit. One of the important things to observe early in a game is what the pitcher does in the stretch.

- *What is his time to home plate?* We calculate this by starting the stopwatch when the pitcher picks up his lead foot and stopping the watch when the catcher catches the ball. A time of 1.3 seconds or less means that the pitcher is quick to the plate. A time of 1.4 is average, and 1.5 seconds or more is slow. Knowing this time helps us determine who can steal and who can't.

- *Does he use a slide step?* The slide step is a quick step to the plate by the pitcher, in contrast to a normal lift of the knee and then a step to the plate. Our rule is that we never steal on a slide step, even after we have given the steal sign.
- *Does he throw over to first?* If so, are his feet quick or slow? Does he throw over coming up with his hands? Going down with his hands? From the set position? After setting, does he hold and throw over? Does he have a step-off move? Does he routinely hold the ball in the set position for the same length of time before he delivers to the plate; that is, does he use the one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two pitch?
- *Left-handers are different altogether; is his kick to the plate the same as his kick to first?* Usually the kicks are different. Does he look in the same spot when throwing to home and to first? Does he look to first and throw home? Look to home and throw to first? Does he have a step-off move? Does he break the plane of the rubber when he is going home?

The runner must observe and calculate all these factors before taking a lead. To get back to first standing up, the base runner crosses over with his right foot, steps with his left, and then steps on the inside corner of the base with his right foot. This technique forces the first baseman to go around him to catch an errant throw. If the runner dives back, he crosses over with his right foot and dives for the base. The key on the dive is to stay low to the ground.

Steals

This section describes different strategies for stealing bases, including the straight steal, the delayed steal, letting a runner steal on his own, and stealing home.

- *Straight steal.* The straight steal occurs when the coach gives the steal sign because he feels that the base runner has an excellent chance of being safe. The coach may have observed a slow release by the pitcher or catcher, or he may feel that an off-speed pitch is coming. Ideally, the coach should know the speed and running time of the base runner from first to second.

For example, pitcher's release (1.5) + catcher's release (2.2) = 3.7 seconds.

Base runner with 12-foot lead and slide at second = 3.4 seconds. *Go!*

- *Steal on your own.* In this steal the coach gives the smart base runner a sign. The thought is to let the runner determine when he can get a

good jump on the pitcher. The runner should have observed all the factors described in this chapter and get the feel or rhythm to steal the base. Our percentages of being successful are much better using this steal and trusting the runner.

- *Delayed steal.* This steal takes advantage of the lazy catcher and inattentive middle infielders who put their heads down after the catcher catches the pitch. The runner at first does not break immediately on the pitch. Instead, he delays to decoy the catcher and middle infielders. The technique is shuffle, shuffle, and break for second. The base runner goes from primary lead to secondary lead and then breaks for second. The delayed steal offers a great element of surprise for the runner who is not fast or not expected to steal.
- *Stealing home.* The steal of home is one of the most exciting plays in baseball. The runner steals on the pitcher who fails to look at him while winding up to deliver the pitch. The runner must get a big lead, but he must be careful not to tip the pitcher or third baseman that he is stealing. One way to do this is to bluff a steal of home before the steal itself. The hitter is instructed to swing at the pitch late to

The percentages of being successful are much better using the "steal on your own" signal and trusting the runner.

keep the catcher from catching the ball out in front of home plate. If we know that we may attempt to steal home, I have found it advantageous to inform the home-plate umpire that we may attempt it. This way he is on his toes and expecting it rather than being caught off guard.

Tag-Ups

The base runner uses a tag-up when the batter hits the ball in the air and the runner feels that he can advance to the next base. The runner can advance to the next base once the ball contacts the fielder's glove. The runner should watch the play himself and keep one foot on the bag until contact occurs between the ball and glove. I prefer that the runner determine when to leave the bag rather than not watching the ball and listening to the coach. The runner should tag at first base when he feels that a deep fly ball is going to stay in the park and be caught. With no other runners on base he might be able to advance to second if the outfielder does not throw well or is not anticipating an advance by the runner. If the runner at first has any doubts that the ball will be caught, he should not tag up. Instead, he should go as far toward second base as he can without risking being doubled off first base.

The tag-up at second base is more complicated. The number of outs is a key factor in whether to tag or not. With no outs the goal is to get to third base with one out. Therefore, the runner is more likely to tag up and try to advance on the catch. Key factors on whether the runner can advance are the following:

- Depth of the fly ball.
- Strength of the outfielder's arm.
- The runner's speed.
- The positioning of the outfielder. Is he moving toward third base or away from the base? A general rule is that if he is moving away from third, the runner can advance on a medium-depth fly ball, and if he is moving toward third, the runner cannot advance.

The runner on second should be aware of two other possibilities. If the outfielder is running hard away from the base, the runner may assume a position off the base that allows him to score if the ball goes over the outfielder's head and to tag up and advance to third should the outfielder catch the ball. Should the runner determine that a deep fly ball is going to be caught and he knows that he can advance to third easily, he should be aware that he might be able to score from second base. Key factors here are a weak outfield arm or poor relay throw.

Special Plays

The following list describes the most successful strategies for common special plays.

- *Rundowns*. The key to staying in a rundown and ultimately getting safely to a base is the ability to run with the eyes on the guy with the ball. The idea is for the runner to change direction quickly once he reads the release of the ball by the fielders. With some luck he can force the fielder into a mistake and get to a base safely. If the runner gets picked off first and breaks back for second, he tries to line up the infielder at second and hopes that the first baseman makes a wild throw or hits him in the back. He shouldn't give up until the play is over.
- *Ball four, runner at second, wild pitch.* Sometimes the runner on second can score an easy run on a pitch that gets by the catcher on ball four. The hitter sprints for first and continues to second, hoping that the catcher tries to make a long throw from the backstop to second. If the base runner at second hustles to third and reads the throw from the backstop all the way to second, he should score easily.
- *Squeeze play.* On a safety squeeze the base runner at third will read the bunt by the hitter before advancing. Any bunt that doesn't go right at the pitcher should allow the base runner to score. On a bunt directly to the pitcher, the base runner will hold. On a suicide squeeze the runner at third will break for home plate when the pitcher's lead knee commits to the plate. We count on the hitter to bunt the ball on the ground.

  The double squeeze occurs with runners at second and third and one out. Both base runners break on the pitch as they would in a suicide squeeze. We instruct the hitter to bunt the ball down the third-base line. With a good bunt and a good runner at second, both runners may score on this play.
- *Extended lead, first and third, versus left-handed pitcher.* The base runner at first takes one more step on his lead, trying to draw a pickoff move from the lefty. The runner at third will extend his lead and break for home as soon as the lefty picks up his foot to move toward first. The runner at first will jab back to the base for one step in hopes that the first baseman will delay throwing home. A good time to use this play is when the lefty pitcher has a big kick to the plate or when the first baseman has a weak arm.
- *Extended lead versus right-handed pitcher.* The base runner at first takes one more step on his primary lead than normal in an effort to draw a pickoff throw from the pitcher. When the pitcher throws to first, the

runner sprints toward second base, hoping to draw a throw from the first baseman all the way into second. The base runner at third will get a good secondary lead on the pickoff throw to first and break for home as soon as he reads the release of the baseball by the first baseman. A good runner at third will almost surely score if the first baseman throws the ball all the way to second.

Hit-and-Run Play

The key thing for the base runner on the hit-and-run is to remember that we are betting on the hitter to do his job of making contact. The runner is not trying to steal the base; therefore, he should never get picked off. I suggest that the runner take a half-step shorter lead to give the impression that he is not going anywhere. After reading the pitcher's delivery to the plate, the runner should break for second base using a good crossover step. On the third step the runner should glance at the hitter to see if he has made contact and, if he has, to try to follow the ball. The runner should keep running unless the hitter pops the ball up or hits it in the air to the outfield. If the runner loses the sight of the ball he should look to the third-base coach for help.

A good base-running team can win a lot of games that they otherwise might have lost. The ability of a team or a player to steal a base puts a lot of pressure on the defense. It also means that you don't have to give up an out by bunting or executing a hit-and-run to get that player into scoring position. By saving outs, you give yourself more scoring opportunities. The team that knows when to advance to the next base on fly balls, ground balls, and base hits also creates more scoring opportunities. Use base running as a weapon.

6

Decision-Making in Specific Offensive Situations

Jack Stallings

Strategy decisions, in any sport, need to be based on good fundamental principles and on percentages that will give the team and its players the best chance of success. A coach may have a gut feeling about what might work in a certain situation, and sometimes (by heeding that gut feeling) he may make an impulsive strategic decision that seems to be contrary to all common sense or strategy percentages, yet it works that time! But to be consistently successful over a long period, a coach needs to make decisions that are most likely to be successful given the abilities of the players of both teams, all the factors of the situation, and the percentages of baseball.

Coaches must also understand that when they make a strategy decision, it is a good or bad decision at the time it is made based on the players' abilities, the situation, and the percentages, not on whether the play was successful or unsuccessful! Coaches make decisions based on all the factors available to them, and then the players have to execute the play called by the coach. How the players perform their skills on a particular play has nothing to do with the wisdom of the coach's decision. The coach must make his decision before he knows how the players will perform (known as first guessing), but the fans, parents, and media have the luxury of waiting until a play is over and then determining if the decision was a good or bad one (known as second guessing). Fans, parents, and the media are therefore *never* wrong on a strategy decision!

Assessing Players' Abilities

In making offensive strategy decisions, coaches must understand that they are not coaching baseball but are really coaching baseball *players*, so strategy decisions revolve around who is doing something more than what is being done. Understanding the situation of a game is obviously important in making strategy decisions, but knowing the abilities of the players involved is even more important. A coach must know as much as possible about the abilities of his players, as well as the abilities of the players on the other team.

Your Players

Baseball strategy will be more consistent when it is based on the abilities of your team's players rather than on the abilities of the players of the opposing team. A coach will be much more familiar with the abilities of his players and he can control pretty well what they do or try to do, but he can't control the players on the other team at all.

A coach should carefully and constantly study the strengths and weaknesses of each of his players, especially in practice, because if a player is not capable of executing a skill well in practice most of the time, he is not going to be able to execute that same skill well in games, at least not often. The old explanation, "Coach, I know I didn't make that play very well in practice today, but in a game I'll turn it up a notch and show you I can get it done," usually doesn't work. A player who uses that approach is making an excuse for the failure to work hard in practice and prepare properly to play the game well. Nobody sprinkles magic dust over the baseball field when they play the "Star-Spangled Banner" so that ordinary players become great performers. As an old minor-league manager used to say, "You can't push a button and turn a practice donkey into a Kentucky Derby thoroughbred."

Many coaches are naturally optimistic about their players. Because they work with the kids every day, they often overestimate their skills, especially if the players are nice guys. Coaches must be realistic in evaluating the members of their team so that they have an accurate idea of what each player can do.

A baseball cliche that probably goes way back to Wee Willie Keeler and Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance is "Know the strengths of your players and take advantage of them." A team will win many more games by having Babe Ruth or Mark McGwire swing away in a tight ballgame rather than having him sacrifice bunt. A coach certainly wants to be aware of the strengths of each of his players and try to put those players in positions where they can do their thing and take advantage of their strongest and best skills in various situations in the game. A coach should know their limitations as well and avoid asking players to do something that he knows they cannot do

well a good percentage of the time. As the old New York Yankees and New York Mets manager Casey Stengle said in his peculiar way of using the English language, "Why ask a player to execute if he can't execute?" Earl Weaver, the great manager of the Baltimore Orioles, said it another way: "Remember a player's capabilities and incapabilities and never ask a player to do something that is beyond him." Failure to evaluate the weaknesses of his players is a common and often serious problem of many baseball coaches.

For a coach to know the abilities of his players well, he must teach them the skills they will be called on to execute most often during a ballgame, and he must observe closely how quickly and how well each player masters the skills and techniques. The coach must objectively evaluate his players' skills rather than merely making the subjective judgment, "Boy, he's a pretty good player!" The problem with subjective evaluation of players is that often a coach will remember a dramatic play someone made (maybe only once) or a play that someone made recently. The player who made the play will occupy in the mind of his coach an elevated position, a plane higher than his skills warrant. The expectations for him to perform well will thus be higher than his skill level. By using objective evaluations of players, the coach can minimize the influence of dramatic plays and be realistic in judging what players can do consistently. With the objective approach, a coach looks at his stopwatch and says, "That kid is a 4.1 runner," rather than looking at a player and saying, "Boy, can that guy fly!"

Their Players

The head coach or a member of his coaching staff should keep hitting and pitching charts on all opponents as well as information on their base-running skills, defensive abilities (such as arm strength, release time, and accuracy), and in what situations they attempt stolen bases, hit-and-run plays, and other special offensive and defensive plays. Coaches should pay particular attention to the opposing pitcher and catcher because they are the heart of the team's defense and their skills will influence many of the offensive strategy decisions that the head coach makes during the game.

Coaches should note the catcher's ability to throw quickly and accurately, his skill in blocking balls in the dirt, and his ability to react quickly on balls bunted in front of the plate or that get past him toward the backstop. Coaches should also watch for particular patterns and tendencies of the catcher in calling pitches. Some catchers, especially younger ones, get into a habit of following one particular pitch with another pitch. If a pattern can be determined, the hitter and coach can make better strategy decisions.

Evaluating the opposing pitcher is especially important in planning strategy. One common evaluation method is simply to check the pitcher's statistics. Although statistics can be deceiving at times, if a guy is 10-0 with a 1.02 ERA you have to figure he has the ability to get people out consistently.

Coaches must realize that when their team is facing an outstanding pitcher, they must usually play aggressively to try to get one or two runs. That may be all they can get against that pitcher, and then they must hope that their pitcher can shut the other team out or hold them to one run. The obvious things coaches should look for would be the opposing pitcher's "stuff"—the speed, control, and movement of his fastball, his breaking ball (the sharpness of the break as well as his control of it), and his off-speed pitch. Coaches should also look for such things as how fast or how slowly a pitcher works during a game, whether he becomes irritated when hitters upset his preferred pace, how well he pitches with runners on base including his ability to hold runners close to bases and his skill in executing various pickoff moves, his body language on the mound (especially when he gets in trouble during an inning), and how well he controls his emotions under pressure.

Coaches will also find it helpful to evaluate the ability of the opposing third baseman in fielding bunts, both sacrifice bunts and bunts for a base hit. If he demonstrates a lack of skill in this area, players who can bunt well can take advantage of that flaw. Evaluation of the abilities of opposing infielders in turning the double play is also useful. If they are able to do that well, they have a weapon they can use to advantage in certain situations of the game. If the opponent does not execute the double play well, the offensive team can adjust their strategy to take advantage of that weakness. For example, the offense would have more strategy options with runners on first and third bases and one out in a close ballgame.

Coaches should also study the defensive abilities of the opposing team's outfielders, especially their throwing ability—the strength of their arms, the quickness of their releases, their accuracy, and their skill at getting into good throwing position on fly balls or ground balls. Some outfielders have such great throwing skill that teams will generally not challenge their arms except in do-or-die situations. Other outfielders might be challenged constantly because of their poor throwing ability.

Nature of Baseball Strategy

One of the problems in making both offensive and defensive strategy decisions is that people oriented to football, basketball, and soccer try to apply to baseball the same strategy that they would use in the other sports. The first thing coaches and players must understand is that general baseball strategy is exactly backward from the strategy of football, basketball, and soccer because the strategy of those sports depends on a clock and how much time is left in the game. In football, for example, a team behind late in the game is running out of time and thus must gamble aggressively, taking dangerous chances to try to score quickly. Conversely, a football team with a lead late in the game will become conservative in an effort to kill the clock and deny the other team the time it needs to catch up. Baseball, however,

has no clock, so time is not a factor in strategy. The critical factor in baseball is the number of outs remaining in the game, so baseball strategy for the team that is behind centers on conserving those outs. On the other hand, a baseball team ahead late in the game can remain aggressive (unlike in football) because what it does on offense does not affect the number of outs the opposing team has remaining. This characteristic of baseball influences every offensive strategy decision made in baseball games. Understanding that principle can help a coach avoid making decisions that cause everybody watching the game to shake their heads in wonder.

In any given offensive situation, the coach must consider four factors in making his strategy decisions. He should analyze these factors in order of their importance. If a coach has a specific play in mind in a particular situation, or perhaps a couple of plays that he is considering, he should first consider the most important factor. If that coincides with what he wants to do, then he considers the second factor, then the third, and finally the fourth. If all four factors are in agreement with his idea, then his decision will be a sound one. Working through this process may appear to be time consuming, but it isn't really all that complicated because a couple of the factors will be obvious even before the play that sets up the game situation occurs. Much of the decision making is almost automatic.

The four factors the coach should consider, in order of importance, are

1. score,
2. inning,
3. number of outs, and
4. position in the batting order.

Score

In making any strategy decision in baseball, the most important factor is the score of the game. This should come as no surprise because the score affects the strategy decisions in every sport.

Leading in the Game

When a team is ahead in the score, it has the opportunity to become more aggressive on offense. It can gamble and take chances on the bases without affecting the other team's chances of scoring because the opposition will still have the same number of innings (or outs) to work with for the remainder of the game. A team ahead in a game may run itself out of an inning by having a base runner thrown out, but that will not keep the offensive team from winning the game if it keeps the other team from scoring during its turn at bat. On the other hand, if the team that is leading is aggressive on offense, it may end up scoring more runs (maybe many more runs) and win

the game easily, or it may put itself in a position to weather a late-inning rally by the other team and hold on for the win.

Many coaches are unsure about how aggressive their team should be when they are ahead in the game. Sometimes a team may be criticized for playing aggressively with a big lead in a game. Critics may say they are piling it on or rubbing it in. Many coaches get irritated when a team continues to play aggressively with a big lead, but this attitude has changed somewhat in recent years, especially in amateur and youth baseball. For one thing, young players don't have enough emotional control to turn it off and then back on again if they ease up and the other team mounts a strong rally late in the game. A team that eases up with a 10-run lead may fall victim to a big rally by the other team and end up losing by a run! A second factor is the lack of a million-dollar relief pitcher in the bullpen (as major-league teams have) who can come in and shut off a late-inning rally with a 97-mile-per-hour fastball. The scarcity of good pitchers in youth and amateur baseball offers some justification for continuing to try to score throughout the game. The third factor is the implied message that the coach is giving his team: "Ease up fellows. These guys aren't good enough to come back and beat us." Engendering that attitude can be dangerous during a game.

When a team is ahead in the score, it can afford to take more chances on offense.

The great collegiate coach, Gordie Gillespie, tells coaches at clinics, "Don't you dare ease up on my team! Don't you dare embarrass my team by easing up and implying we aren't good enough to come back and beat you!" A team with a lead should certainly continue to play aggressively early in the game and through the middle innings because offensive-minded teams can get a rally going and pile up many runs in a hurry. A coach who tells his team to ease up "because we already have enough runs" may live to regret it. In addition, the coach who through his actions implies that his team should ease up may cause his players to lose their competitive drive and end up just going through the motions. That behavior can cause real problems for a team, if not in that game then perhaps in a later one.

Trailing in the Game

When a team is behind in the score of the game, they should become more conservative to preserve the outs they have remaining in the game. The further behind a team is in the score, the more conservative they should become. If a team falls behind by two or three runs early in the game, they will probably stick to their normal game plan because many outs remain in the game and the team doesn't have to get all the runs back at one time. But it is foolish for a team to take a chance on wasting an out late in the game trying to score one run when they need five or six runs just to gain a tie! The inning in which a team begins to play conservative baseball should depend on how far behind they are, the type of skills the team has, and their ability to score runs. A team might continue to play aggressively if the best offensive skill they have is speed. They might play conservatively if their best skill is power.

The total number of runs in a game can influence the offensive strategy. For example, if in the middle of the game a team is trailing 3-0, it is clear that neither team is scoring much. Aggressive play may be necessary to scratch out a couple of runs to get in position to tie or win the game. On the other hand, if a team is behind 15-12, they are still behind by three runs, but both teams are scoring a lot of runs. Being aggressive to score one run may not be that important because the other team may score five or six more runs in their half of the inning!

Score Tied or One-Run Difference

With the score tied or with a one-run difference either ahead or behind, a coach should probably look at the way the game is developing and play accordingly. In a low-scoring, hard-fought pitching duel, a coach will probably lean toward playing more aggressively to score one or two runs because that may be all he can get and all he can expect to get. And one or two runs may be enough to win the game. On the other hand, if the game is developing into a slugfest with runs being scored in bunches like grapes,

taking a big gamble to score one run may not help if the other team scores five runs in the next inning.

Inning

After the score, the next most important factor to consider when planning an effective offensive strategy is the inning. The decision to play more conservatively or aggressively often depends on whether the game is in its early, middle, or late innings.

Early Innings

Some youth teams seem to delight in scratching for an early run, perhaps to get the lead and put the other team at a psychological disadvantage. That strategy might be wise if their talent is best suited for one-run-at-a-time baseball, but a team must have good pitching and good defense to play that style of baseball. In addition, that approach ignores the fact that in most baseball games a big inning of three or four runs plays a big part in the outcome of the game.

According to major-league baseball statistics, in a little over 50 percent of all major-league games, the winning team scores more runs in one inning than the losing team scores in the entire game. A team should thus look for the opportunity to go for a big inning whenever possible. This approach may be especially successful early in the game when the starting pitcher may not be settled down or effective. Most teams will generally play more conservatively at the start of the game in hopes of getting several runs in an inning. Other teams often sacrifice bunt in the first inning to try to get one run and the lead. By doing so, they may rob themselves of a big inning and allow the opposing starting pitcher to settle down with only one run scored. Another interesting statistic from major-league baseball is that (on the average) teams score more runs in the first inning than they do in any other inning of the game. Teams may waste a potentially big first inning by sacrifice bunting and playing for one run to start the game. On occasion that approach may work and produce a 1-0 victory, but the percentages of baseball would argue against using that type of strategy in the first inning or early in the game.

Middle Innings

The middle innings often determine the character of the game. If the game has become a slugfest, the strategy of the coaches should reflect that circumstance. If the game has developed into a pitching duel, they should make strategy decisions accordingly. Of course, the character of a game may start out one way and then change as the game progresses. A 0-0 pitching duel with a lot of strikeouts may change in the middle innings if one or both pitchers suddenly can't find the plate with a roadmap or if they start to find

the middle of the plate rather than the corners. Base runners begin to look like a blur going around the bases. On the other hand, after giving up four or five runs in the first inning and causing his coach to start pulling his hair out, a pitcher may suddenly settle down and begin to pitch like Pedro Martinez. Coaches should carefully evaluate the mood of the game in the middle innings and try to take advantage of any changes or mood swings that occur.

Late Innings

Late in the game a team's offensive strategy will, of necessity, revolve primarily around the score of the game. The team will play conservatively if it is behind to save outs, and it will play aggressively if it is ahead to try to add to the lead. By this time, the character of the game (low scoring or high scoring) will be established, and the coach can make decisions accordingly.

Coaches must understand that the decisions they make in the late innings of a close game are often important to the outcome. Coaches must keep their emotions under control during this time. Strategy decisions made under any circumstances must be well thought out and take into consideration all relevant aspects of the game, but decisions made in the late innings of a close game require even more emotional control. The coach should make a rational, intelligent decision rather than make a snap judgment in the heat of the moment. All too often, when a coach gets into a tight situation late in a close game, he begins worrying about winning the game rather than thinking about what decisions he can make to help the team perform to the best of its ability. Wanting to win is obviously important, but when a coach gets so wrapped up with the thought of winning that he can't think rationally about what his team should do in a close game, he will usually fail to think objectively and will make decisions based on a gut reaction rather than on sound strategy principles.

One of the factors that can radically change the way a coach uses strategy during the late innings of a game is the presence (or absence) of an outstanding relief pitcher. Teams having an outstanding relief pitcher will feel comfortable playing for one run late in the game because they are confident that their closer can hold the lead. On the other hand, the presence of an outstanding relief pitcher on the other club may cause the offensive team to change their strategy in the late innings of a game to try to avoid going into the last inning trailing by a run . The presence of a great relief pitcher in the bullpen will influence the strategy of the managers in both dugouts in the last two or three innings of a game.

Number of Outs

Following consideration of the score and the inning, the next factor the coach should consider is the number of outs in the inning. A coach must consider

what the percentages are of scoring a run (or runs) in a particular inning. The number of outs remaining in the inning will significantly affect those percentages.

An inning comprises three portions (or three-thirds), and baseball percentages show, understandably, that a team's chances of scoring a lot of runs in an inning are better with none out, when it has all three of the thirds of the inning remaining. The percentages for a big inning are somewhat lower with one out and only two-thirds of the inning remaining and less still with two outs and only one of the thirds left. Of course, we all know that occasionally a team will erupt with two outs and nobody on base to score five or six runs, but a big inning like that occurs much more often with none out or one out. Coaches must consider the percentages in planning their strategy moves for each inning.

No Outs

With no outs, a team should play somewhat conservatively if the number of runs and the inning also make it practical because of the good possibility (in percentage terms) of getting a big inning going and scoring several runs. For example, if a runner is thrown out trying to stretch a long single into a double with none out, the team may have lost its chance of having a big inning. Certainly, having a runner thrown out at third base or home plate for the first out of the inning results from questionable strategy. The runner may be able to make it safely on a close play, but the runner at second base or third base with none out may have a greater probability of scoring than he does in an attempt to beat a close play at third base or home plate. The old cliche "Never make the first out of an inning at third base or home plate" makes a lot of sense from the standpoint of strategy and percentages.

One Out

With one out a team should be a bit more aggressive in trying to score one run. One-third of the inning is already spent, so the percentages for a big inning are somewhat lower. With one out a team will want to be very aggressive in attempting to reach third base if the score and the inning are in agreement because a runner at third can score on a fly ball or an infield grounder in addition to the other ways of scoring. Most high school and college coaches and major-league managers strongly emphasize getting base runners to third base with one out if the score is close.

Two Outs

With two outs and only one-third of the inning remaining, the percentages for a team to score many runs in the inning are greatly reduced, so (if the score and inning are in agreement) the team should aggressively try to score one run. A team should be especially aggressive in trying to reach second base with two outs because the probability of scoring from first base with

two outs is low (14 percent). Taking the gamble to reach second base may be worth it because the scoring percentages are much better (26 percent).

In addition, a team should be extremely aggressive in trying to score with two outs if the chances of scoring are better than the next batter's chances of hitting safely. For example, if the third-base coach feels that the base runner has a 50-50 chance of scoring on a hit with two outs, he should send him in unless the on-deck hitter is hitting near .500 because the percentages for success are better. With two outs, holding up a runner with a 50 percent chance of scoring doesn't make sense when the on-deck hitter is batting .190!

Position in the Batting Order

The last factor to be considered in planning strategy is the sequence of upcoming batters. Although the batting order may be the last factor to consider, it is no less important than several of the others are. The hitters coming up and their skills (or lack of skills) will have a big effect on the coach's decisions.

Most batting orders are pretty standard (in spite of some far-out ideas generated at times by fans, TV announcers, and sportswriters) because a normal batting order makes sense and goes along with the percentages of baseball. The better hitters for average and on-base percentage and the better base runners usually bat 1-2-3 in the order, the power hitters usually bat in the 4-5-6 positions, and the weaker hitters generally bat in the 7-8-9 positions. At times a coach who is a so-called baseball expert will come out with a plan to improve baseball scoring percentages by having Barry Bonds, Sammy Sosa, or Mark McGwire hit in the leadoff spot, but within a short time he will usually go back to the standard batting order.

Offensive strategy should be planned according to the skills of the player at bat and the abilities of the players due to bat later in the inning. A team will normally play more conservatively with its stronger hitters coming to bat in an inning because they have a better chance to score a bunch of runs. A team will normally play a bit more aggressively with their weaker hitters due to bat because they may only get a chance to score one run.

A coach should not deliberately use his stronger hitters in such a way that he puts his weaker hitters in a position to have to drive in the important runs. A good example of this might be using the number 5 hitter to sacrifice bunt a runner to second base. The opposing team then walks the number 6 hitter, and now the number 7 or 8 hitter has to drive in the run. Upon reflection, the decision to bunt may have been unwise.

Speaking at a clinic, Bill Rigney, former manager of the Giants, told the story of having Willie Mays sacrifice bunt in the ninth inning of a one-run game. The other team then intentionally walked Willie McCovey (who was replaced by a pinch runner), and now he had two left-hand hitters facing a

left-hand closer with the two best RBI men in the National League sitting beside him on the bench. Said Rigney, "I suddenly realized I wasn't too smart."

To devise a good strategic plan, you have to know the percentages. The scoring percentages in table 6.1 are based on more than 60 years and thousands of major-league baseball games, but they should be reasonably similar for youth, high school, collegiate, and minor league baseball. A study of these statistics reveals some interesting facts and conclusions.

The scoring percentage of a runner on first base with none out is 43 percent, and with a runner on second with one out it is 45 percent. That tiny 2 percent increase in scoring percentage makes the idea of using a sacrifice bunt with a good hitter at the plate suspect. The scoring percentage of a runner on second base with none out is 60 percent, and with a runner on third base and one out it is 54 percent. This decrease in scoring percentages makes sacrifice bunting the runner to third base extremely questionable if the batter is a decent hitter. Another look at the percentages shows that the improvement in scoring percentage by having a runner on third base instead of on second base is 10 percent with none out, 9 percent with one out, and 6 percent with two outs. Therefore, on a steal of third base (regardless of the number of outs) the runner must have a great jump on the pitcher and a chance of success up around 90 percent for it to be good strategy.

Base-Running Strategy

The choices that coaches make from among the dozens (or hundreds) of different tactics available for use in the various game situations can be a big factor in the outcome of some games. The coach should make strategy decisions based on the four factors of score, inning, outs, and position in the batting order already covered in this chapter, and he must be especially aware of the skills of the players involved, both his and the opponent's. In addition, the coach must work with his players to acquaint them with good strategy because he often does not have enough time or opportunity to relay to his players what he wants them to do if A happens, or B happens, or C happens, or if C and J happen at the same time! The wise coach will use

TABLE 6.1 Scoring Percentages

RUNNER ON FIRST	RUNNER ON SECOND	RUNNER ON THIRD
0 out = 43%	0 out = 60%	0 out = 70%
1 out = 29%	1 out = 45%	1 out = 54%
2 outs = 14%	2 outs = 26%	2 outs = 32%

intrasquad games and practice drills to set up various base-running tactical situations so that players can learn to react to them properly when they occur.

Runner on First, Less Than Two Outs, Questionable Fly-Ball Catch

With less than two outs a runner on first should go as far toward second base as possible while still being able to get back to first if the ball is caught. The runner should be on balance and standing still when the fly ball approaches the outfielder so that he can break for second base if the ball falls in or return to first if it is caught (see figure 6.1). Many runners go too far and then start leaning or moving back toward first base as the ball nears the outfielder. If the ball falls in safely, they may not be able to change directions quickly and may be forced out at second base.

On an ordinary fly ball, the runner on first can go farther toward second base on a ball hit to left field than he can on one hit to center field or right field because the throw from the left fielder to first base after the catch will be a long one (see figure 6.2). On a deep fly ball to left or left-center field, the runner from first base can go all the way to second base and stand on the base with his right foot on the bag and his left foot and his body facing toward third base. If the ball is not caught, he can break immediately toward third base and may be able to score if the ball is not returned to the infield quickly. If the ball is caught, the runner should first move his left foot toward first base, push off with his right foot that is on the base, and return to first base. In starting to return to first base the runner should take plenty of time and be deliberate in his movements because

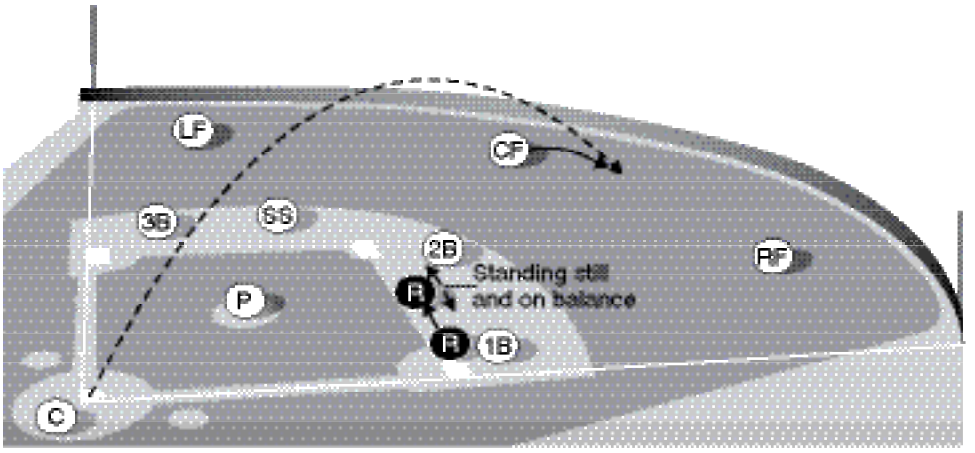

FIGURE 6.1 Runner on first, less than two outs, questionable fly-ball catch.

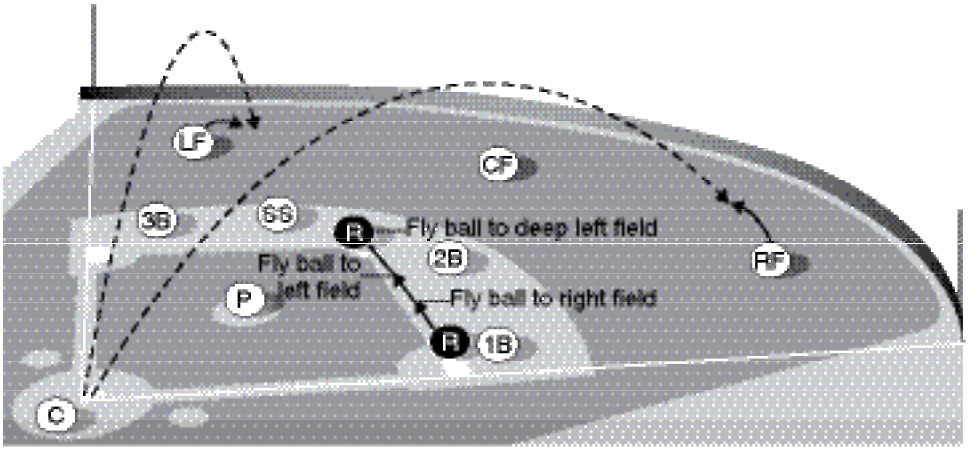

FIGURE 6.2 On a fly ball to left field, the runner on first can go farther toward second than on one to center or right field. On a deep fly ball to left field, the runner on first can go all the way to second.

1. he wants to make sure he doesn't step toward third base with the right foot *before* stepping toward first because doing so constitutes "starting for third base" and the runner could be called out on an appeal play for not retouching the base, and
2. most left fielders are not noted for strong throwing arms and wouldn't be able to get the ball from deep left field all the way to first base unless it goes by Federal Express.

Runner on Second, Less Than Two Outs, Questionable Fly-Ball Catch

The situation with a runner on second and less than two outs often causes indecision and confusion in the minds of base runners and sometimes coaches as well, but remembering a couple of basic strategy concepts can make matters clear. Two strategy principles already discussed in this chapter dictate what the runner should do in this situation, notably trying to reach third base with one out and not making the third out of the inning at third base. With a runner on second base and none out, the runner should tag up on second until it is obvious that the outfielder cannot catch the ball (see figure 6.3). By waiting to be sure, the runner may not be able to score if the ball falls in but is returned to the infield quickly, but even then he would be on third base with none out and a 70 percent chance of scoring. Once the runner is certain that the ball cannot be caught, he can break toward third base and should be able to score on the play, but as long as there is any

chance that the outfielder will catch the ball, the runner should stay tagged up on the base.

With one out, the runner should come off the base as far as he can while still being able to get back to the base if the ball is caught in the outfield. He should be on balance and standing still when the ball is coming down so that he can react equally well back to second base or toward third base (see figure 6.4). As long as there is any chance that the ball will not be caught, he should remain off the base; if it becomes obvious early enough in the play that the ball will be caught, he should go back to second, tag up, and advance to third after the catch. The runner must clearly understand that it is

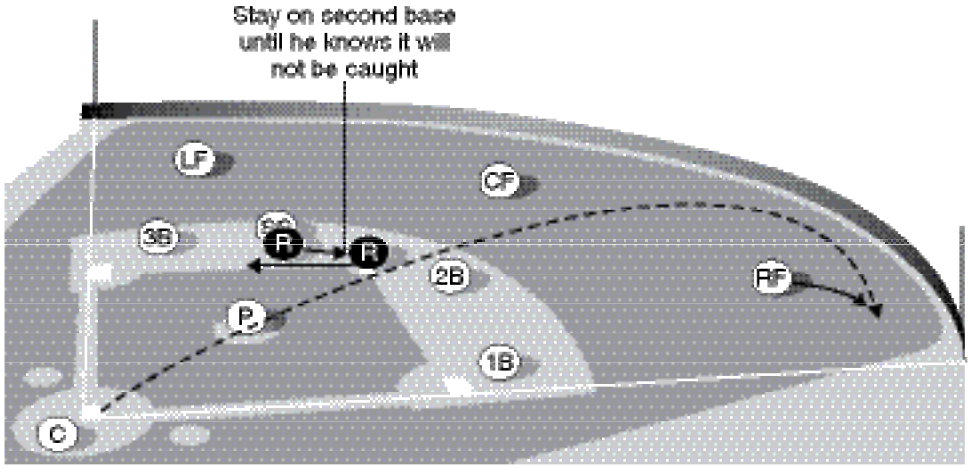

FIGURE 6.3 Runner on second, no outs, and a questionable fly-ball catch.

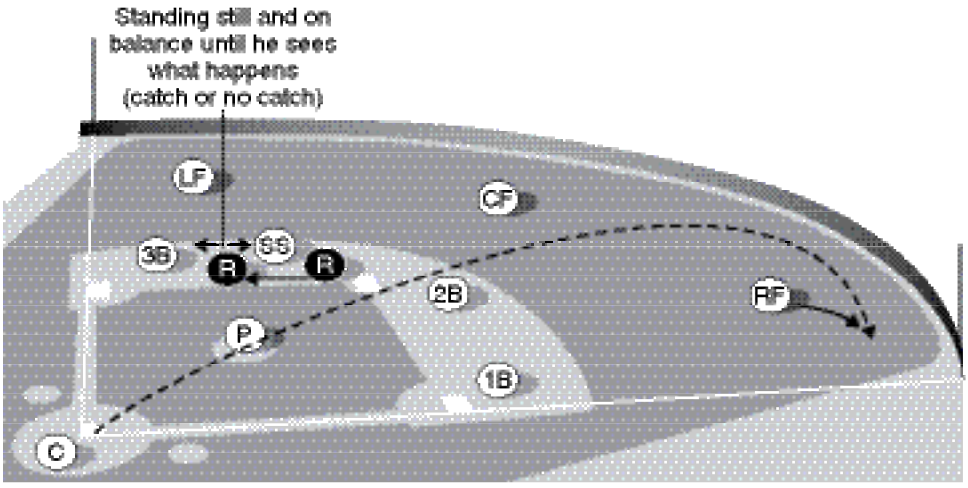

FIGURE 6.4 Runner on second, one out, and a questionable fly-ball catch.

not good strategy to try to advance to third if doing so might result in making the third out of the inning at third base. The runner should not try to advance unless he can do so with an excellent chance of success.

Runner on Third, Fly Ball With Less Than Two Outs

A runner on third base should go back to the base and tag up on all balls hit anywhere in the air. If a line drive is hit in the direction of the third baseman, the runner must immediately break back toward third base to avoid being doubled off if the third baseman catches the ball. If the ball gets past the infielder, the runner can change direction and score easily, but he must avoid being doubled off on a line drive toward third base. Bucky Harris, manager of the Washington Senators back in the good old days, was once asked to recall the greatest play he had ever seen in a baseball game. He replied, "Mickey Vernon was on third base with a right-hand hitter at the plate. The batter hit a screaming line drive that the third baseman caught moving toward third base—he took one step and tagged the bag, but Vernon was already back to it." "What's so great about that play?" he was asked. Harris said, "Because 99 out of 100 players would have hesitated before going back to third and would have been doubled off."

With none out the runner on third base should be conservative in his attempts to score on a short fly ball that might result in a close play at the plate, especially if the next batter is a fairly good hitter. The probability of scoring from third base with one out is 54 percent, so the runner should have better than a 50-50 chance of scoring with none out for tagging up to be a wise move.

With one out a runner at third base will be more aggressive in attempting to score on a short fly ball (if the other factors suggest being aggressive), because the probability that a runner will score from third base with two outs is only 32 percent. If the next hitter is hitting less than .320, being aggressive is probably the right thing to do. On a deep fly ball, the runner tagging up should stay on the base for a moment after the catch to make sure that he will not be called out on an appeal for leaving too early. On a short fly ball, however, that practice will probably result in a close play at the plate, so he must leave *exactly* with the catch of the ball (see figure 6.5).

Normally, a runner on third base with less than two outs will tag up on all fly balls and stay on the base until the ball is caught, but in one situation he should use a different tactic. On a very short fly ball to the outfield on which the runner would not be able to tag up and score if the ball is caught, he should come off the base as far as possible, but not so far that he would be doubled off if the ball is caught. If the ball hits the ground he may be able to score; if it is caught, he simply returns to third base (figure 6.5). If he stays tagged up on the base on a short fly ball and leaves the base when the ball hits the ground, the outfielder may be able to throw him out at the plate.

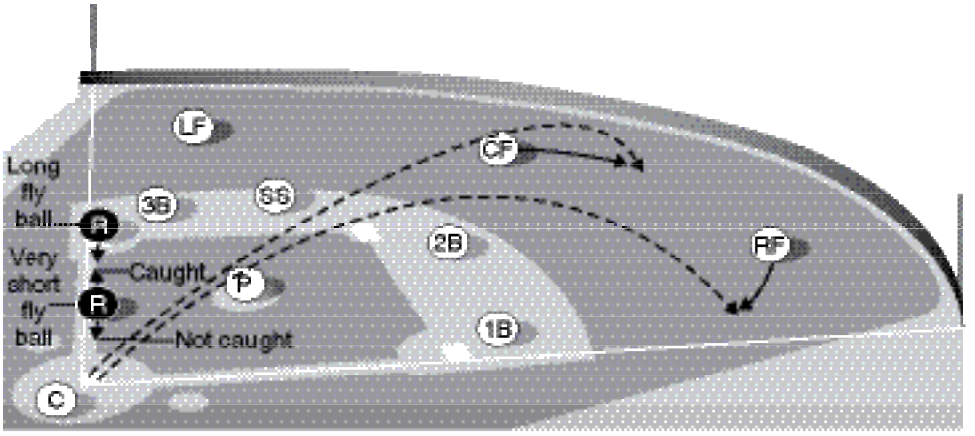

FIGURE 6.5 Runner on third, fly ball with less than two outs.

Runners on First and Third, Fly Ball With Less Than Two Outs

On a fairly deep fly ball with runners on first and third, both runners can tag up, but the runner at first or the first-base coach must alert the batter not to pass the runner tagged up at first base. When the ball is caught, both runners can break after the catch and watch the throw (see figure 6.6). If the throw is to home plate, especially if it is a high throw over the head of the cutoff man, the runner on first should be able to advance to second. If the throw is toward second and it appears it will beat the runner from first to the base, the runner can stop and return to first base as the runner from third base scores.

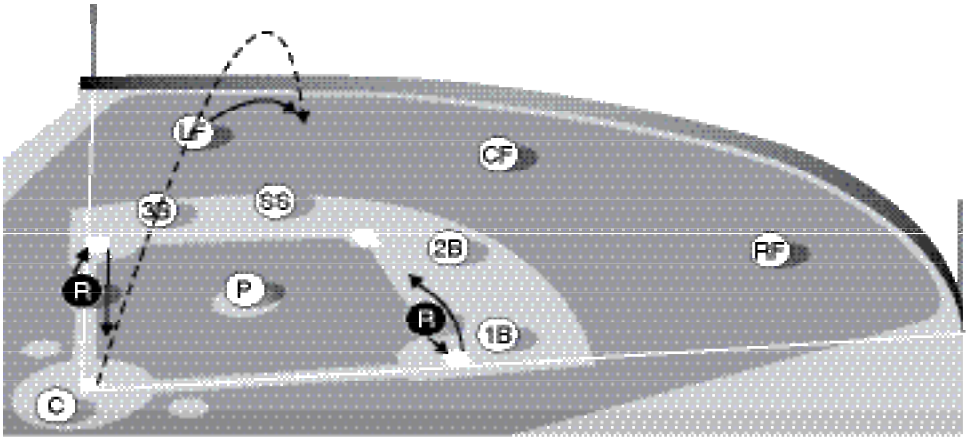

FIGURE 6.6 Runners on first and third, fly ball with less than two outs.

Runners on Second and Third, Fly Ball With Less Than Two Outs

With runners at second and third on a fly ball that will be caught without difficulty, both runners can tag up and break when the catch is made (see figure 6.7). The runner on second base must keep an eye on the runner ahead of him to make sure that he continues toward the plate. If the runner from third base believes the throw will beat him to the plate and he retreats to third base, the runner from second base must also stop and return to second. Otherwise, two runners will end up at third base, making for an easy tag out.

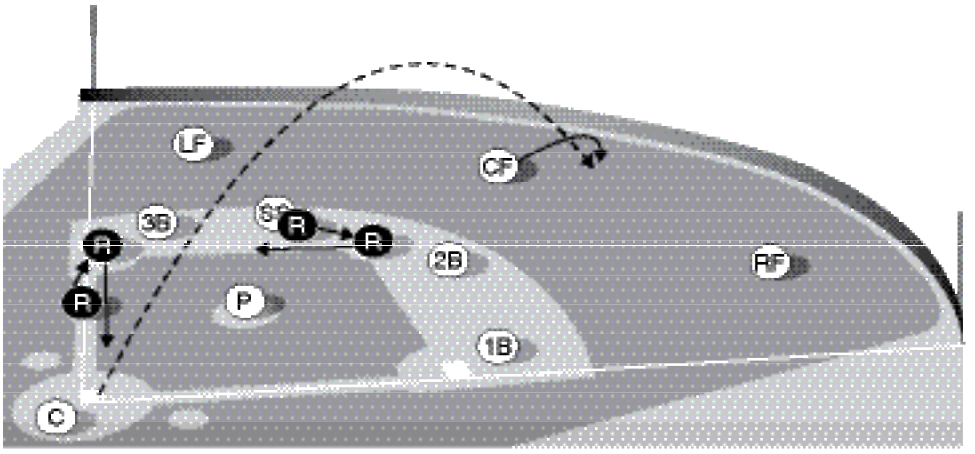

FIGURE 6.7 Runners on second and third, fly ball with less than two outs.

Foul Fly Ball With Less Than Two Outs

All runners should tag up on all foul fly balls, regardless of where they are hit. If a fielder does not make the catch, the runners can simply stay at their bases. If the ball is caught, they may have a chance to advance. The runner who wanders around the infield on a foul fly ball simply because he thinks it will not be caught is foolish. Occasionally a player will make a great catch of a foul fly ball, crash into the fence, and have trouble getting up. The base runner does not want to be standing 30 feet from the base watching with his mouth open in amazement. By tagging up on all foul fly balls, runners can react to a caught ball if there is a possibility of advancing (see figure 6.8).

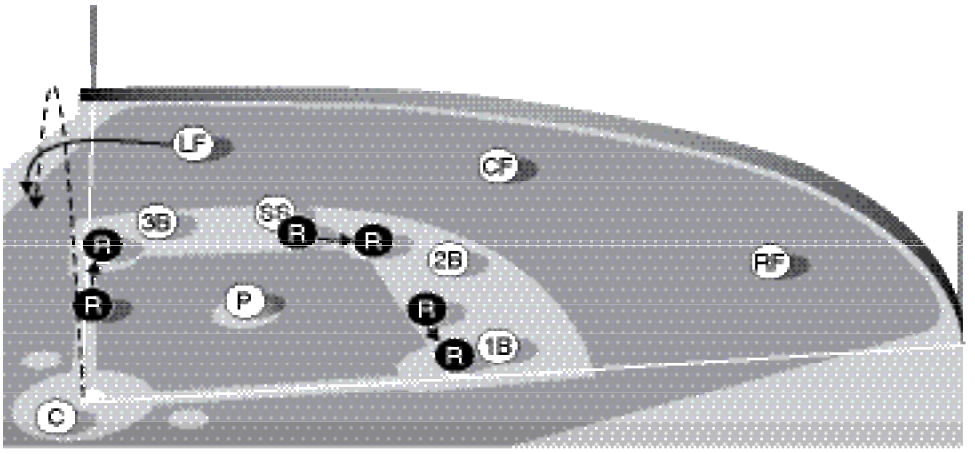

FIGURE 6.8 Foul fly ball with less than two outs.

Runner on Second, Ground Ball With Less Than Two Outs

A runner at second should try to advance to third base on all ground balls hit to his left unless the ball is hit near him and hit very hard. The shortstop must make a tough play to go to his left, field the ball, and then turn and make a good throw to third base. If the ball is a one-hop, hard-hit grounder directly to the shortstop, he may be able to make the play, but most of the time a runner at second base can advance and reach third safely on a ground ball hit to his left. If the ground ball is hit straight at the base runner and he has his weight leaning toward third base at the end of his secondary lead (as he should have), he should be able to reach third base most of the time. On a ground ball to his right, the base runner must freeze in place until the ball gets past the third baseman. If the ball goes into the outfield, he can then break for third base. Although his momentary delay may prevent him from scoring on a ground ball that goes into left field, he will not run into an easy out at third if the shortstop or third baseman fields it. If the batter hits a slow roller that the third baseman must charge, the base runner should be able to reach third base easily as the third baseman makes the play to first. Of course, a ground ball hit to the second baseman or first baseman should allow the runner on second to advance easily to third base (see figure 6.9).

Runner on Third, Ground Ball With Less Than Two Outs

A base runner at third with less than two outs should review the game situation with the third-base coach before the play develops so that he will be

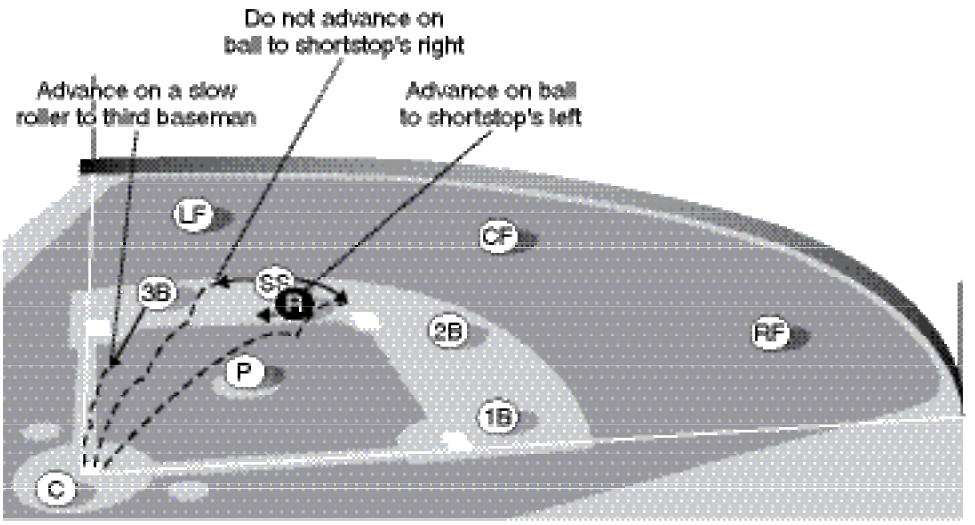

FIGURE 6.9 Runner on second, ground ball with less than two outs.

confident about what he needs to do. He should then check the positioning of the infielders to see if they are at normal depth or in close to cut off the run at the plate. Normally, base runners should not attempt to score with none out on a ground ball unless the infielders are back and the ball is a high bouncer that the infielders cannot field and throw to the plate quickly. The runner should remember not to make the first out of the inning at home plate. With one out the runner should discuss the appropriate strategy with the third-base coach and make sure they agree about the best percentage play to use at that time. If the infielders are playing in, base runners will often be told to try to score only if they get a good break on a high bouncing ball. If the infielders are halfway or in the deep position, the coach will instruct the runner either to go on contact or to read the bounce.

If the coach has decided that the situation of the game warrants aggressive baserunning, he will tell the runner to go on contact. On any ground ball the runner will immediately break for the plate and try to score. This action obviously has advantages and disadvantages. If the ball is hit straight at an infielder, the runner may be out at the plate by a big margin, but if the infielder has to move a step or two to field the ball, the runner has a chance to be safe at the plate.

If the coach decides to use the read-the-bounce play, the runner will break for the plate on any ball that bounces high or is not hit straight at an infielder. He will not break for the plate on a hard-hit ground ball until the ball passes the infielder and goes to the outfield. Obviously, this requires the base runner to delay momentarily the decision to go or not to go. That slight delay may give the infielders enough time to throw him out at the plate.

Runners on First and Third, Ground Ball With Less Than Two Outs

The situation with runners at first and third seems to cause confusion and indecision in many baseball games, especially at the youth and amateur level, and even in the major leagues! The defensive team may turn the double play in a first-and-third situation while the lead runner remains at third base. Even worse, the runner at third may hesitate for a moment, break for the plate when he finally hears the third-base coach screaming at him to go, and then get thrown out at home plate for a triple play. Applying a basic base-running principle simplifies the strategy for this play.

If the infield defense is at normal double-play depth, the runner on third must break for the plate on all ground balls hit sharply enough to the infield that they can be turned into double plays (see figure 6.10). If the runner does not break for the plate and the defense turns a double play with none out, the offensive team ends up with a runner at third base with two outs and only a 32 percent chance of scoring that inning. On the other hand, if the runner on third breaks for the plate and is thrown out, the offensive team now has one out, runners on first and second, and a 45 percent chance of scoring that inning. If the runner does not try to score with one out and the defense turns the double play, the inning is over. If the runner breaks for the plate and is thrown out, there are now two outs, runners are on first and second, and the inning is still going. In this situation a good base runner can sometimes break for home, glance back, see that the throw is going to the plate, stop, and get in a rundown long enough to allow the other two base runners to advance to second and third.

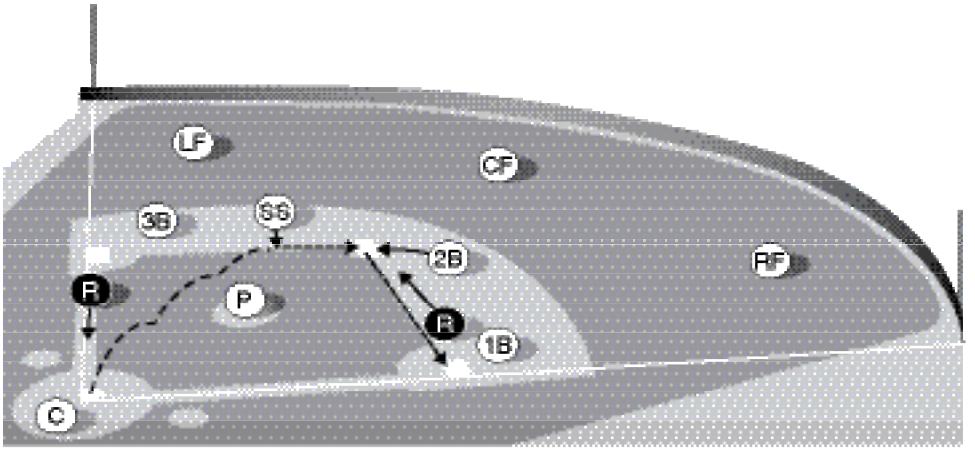

FIGURE 6.10 Runners on first and third, ground ball with less than two outs, and the infield at double-play depth.

With runners at first and third, less than two outs, and the infield in on the grass to cut off the run at the plate, the runner on third should normally not try to score on a ground ball because the middle infielders will find it extremely difficult to turn a double play from the in-on-the-grass position (see figure 6.11).

Tendencies of Opposing Coaches

Every baseball coach will tend to do certain things in certain situations with particular players. This tendency may not represent a failure to think creatively; it is more likely the result of having some success with certain offensive or defensive plays (and with the players involved) and feeling comfortable with them. A coach should constantly study the actions of opposing coaches so that he can remember (or better yet, write down!) what the opposition usually does in certain game situations. Just as a coach should develop a "book" on the skills and abilities of the players on all opposing teams, he should develop a book on the opposing coach so that he can anticipate what the opponent might do in particular situations based on what he has done in the past in similar situations.

Trying to guess what an opposing team will do in certain situations based only on a gut feeling isn't too smart. But if the coach knows that the opposing coach has attempted a particular strategy in the same game situation in the past, he can make an intelligent guess about the opponent's next move. Because memory can play tricks on all of us, coaches should keep notes on opposing coaches to have accurate knowledge of their tendencies.

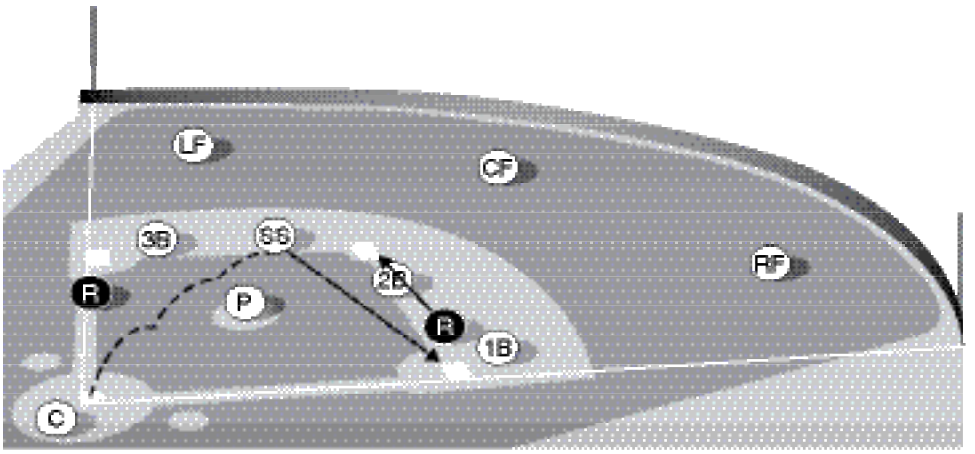

FIGURE 6.11 Runners on first and third, ground ball with less than two outs, and the infield in on the grass.

Another way to discover the tendencies of an opposing coach is to observe what he tries to do on defense when his team is in certain offensive situations. Those tendencies can provide a good indication of how he would react on offense in the same situation and vice versa from offense to defense. He thinks you are going to try a particular play right now because that is what *he* would do in that situation, so his actions can give you an insight on what he might do when the roles are reversed. For example, if your leadoff man gets on first base in the first inning and the opposing team puts on a special bunt-defense play, that should indicate to you that *he* would bunt in that situation. If the opposing coach brings his infield in with a runner on third base and less than two outs in the first inning, that should tell you that he believes that run is vital to winning the game, and thus he is probably not going to play for a big inning later in the game. A coach who allows his hitter to swing on a 3-0 pitch in a certain situation will probably expect you to let your hitter swing on a 3-0 pitch in the same situation.

I remember a Georgia Southern University game many years ago when Tom Kotchman (now a scout-manager in the Anaheim Angels organization) hit a bottom-of-the-9th, two-out, nobody-on, 3-0 batting-practice fastball out of the park (to the amazement of the other team) to tie the score. He came up with two outs and nobody on in the bottom of the 11th inning, and they threw him *another* 3-0 count batting-practice fastball. He won the game when that one also went out of the park—you have to wonder if the other team was watching the game at all!

If an opposing coach is consistent in his strategy moves and you remember them or write them down, you will have a good idea of what a coach might do in a particular situation. Although those predispositions are not carved in stone, knowing an opponent's tendencies can be a big help during any game.

A coach may disguise his tendencies by occasionally changing up in a particular situation of the game. Sometimes a coach will do something strategically out of character from what he would normally do in that situation simply to try to keep the other coach guessing and confused about his normal strategy decisions. Doing this often is unwise if it means doing something that is not a good percentage play. Normally a coach would not deviate from his standard best strategy in a crucial part of a game, but he may do so occasionally to confuse an opposing coach about his tendencies in certain game situations.

Matchups During a Game

Television announcers for major-league games seem to talk constantly about matchups during the game. They suggest that the two managers are playing a game of "If he does A, I will do B, and if I do C, then he will do D"

throughout the entire game. In a major-league game, matchups are important, and the two managers will be constantly searching for an edge in a matchup of skills of opposing players. Trying to arrange good matchups at the minor-league, collegiate, high school, or youth level of baseball, however, is difficult simply because the level and consistency of skill is not as high. If a major-league manager does some deep thinking and crafty maneuvering to arrange for his left-handed pitcher to pitch to their left-handed batter, he should have some good reason to expect his left-hander to give their left-hander some tough pitches that he can't handle well. Much of the time this matchup will give one manager's team a slight advantage over the other team. The left-handed pitcher may face only that one hitter, and a side-arming right-hander may come in to face the next hitter (who hits from the right side of the plate) in yet another matchup. So it goes in the constant battle of wits between the two managers, each seeking favorable matchups in the game.

Contrast that sequence to a situation in a game involving players who are younger and less skilled than major leaguers. One coach will bring in his left-handed pitcher to pitch to their left-handed hitter in a "good matchup." The southpaw pitcher throws four balls into a different area code and wild pitches in two or three runs in the process. Or a coach sends up a right-handed pinch hitter to face a left-handed pitcher. The batter swings at three pitches that hit on the grass in front of home plate for an embarrassing strikeout.

Rather than trying to create matchups with young players, coaches will often alter their strategy because of the matchup already present between the pitcher and batter. For example, with a runner on second base (who is an important run) and none out, a coach may allow the hitter to swing away if he is able to hit the ball to the right side of the ballpark (either to the second baseman or to right field) because doing so will get the runner over to third base with one out. But if the hitter cannot consistently hit the ball to the right side of the field, then the coach will put on the sacrifice bunt to get the runner to third base. Of course, if the hitter can neither hit to right field nor bunt well, the coach has no matchup at all. He will have to use a pinch hitter or just grit his teeth and hope for the best.

Coaches who try to establish good matchups in amateur or youth baseball should avoid thinking their way into trouble, which sometimes happens when they try to copy major-league managers. Coaches at amateur levels may have problems not because their decisions are wrong, but because the consistency of skills at that level is not high enough to allow accurate prediction of the players' performance. An example of an amateur coach overplaying matchups might be using a .280 hitter to sacrifice bunt a runner to second base to bring up the next hitter, who is batting .340. Great move, coach, but not if the .340 hitter does not match up well with that particular pitcher and is hitting only .160 against him.

The number of specific offensive situations in a baseball season is virtually limitless. If a coach is going to make strategy decisions that will give his team their best chance to win, he must be able to make wise, sensible decisions in every one of those game situations. A coach cannot possibly catalog every possible offensive situation that might arise in a season and devise a good decision for each one. He would need a book 12 inches thick, cross-referenced for every possible factor. So what the coach must do is understand the skills of the players involved and the percentages of baseball. He must then be able to evaluate each situation in light of that knowledge to arrive at a good decision. In addition, the coach must have the fortitude to make his decision and stick with it rather than allow other people (such as loud-mouthed fans) to second-guess him and push him into making a hasty and poor decision.

Postgame Wrap-Up

Offensive strategy and tactics in baseball, to use an old line, "ain't rocket science," but they do have some aspects of science in them and require a coach to understand basic principles. Certainly, baseball has changed considerably over the years, and strategy and tactics have changed to reflect the various skills of players, the improvement in equipment, the way ballparks are constructed, changes in the entertainment demands of the fans, and even changes in society.

Any student of the game knows that baseball in the days of Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner, and Tris Speaker emphasized the sacrifice bunt, the hit-and-run, the stolen base, and one-run-at-a-time baseball much more than they are today. A player in that era who wanted to be in the starting lineup had to develop his skills in those techniques to a high level or the manager would not play him much. As a result, many players at that time could perform those skills well, and mangers commonly used strategies that called on those skills.

Current baseball strategy and tactics normally place greater emphasis on power hitting, the use of pinch hitters and pinch runners, selective use of the stolen base, and a more conservative offensive strategy that tries to avoid wasting outs in an effort to create the big inning. But effective application of both strategies—the old-fashioned one-run-at-a-time strategy of yesteryear and the modern big-inning strategy of today—requires consideration of the situation of the game, the percentages of baseball, and especially the abilities of the players. That part of baseball strategy and tactics has never changed because it makes sense, it is consistent, and it works!

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PART

II

Pitching

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