

# 12

## Setting the Lineup: Positions 2 Through 9

---

Jim Morris

This chapter describes my philosophy behind establishing an optimum lineup. Setting a defensive lineup in positions 2 through 9 is a matter of putting together position players who will give you the best chance to get three outs each inning without giving the other team any extra outs by making errors or mistakes. If you do that, you are going to get back in the dugout quickly so that you can try to score some runs, which is the only way you can win the game.

You must have infielders who are successful defensively. Having quick, acrobatic infielders who make phenomenal plays is great, but it is more important to have infielders who can consistently make the routine plays, who are in the right position for *this* pitcher, *this* hitter, and *this* situation, and who then know what to do when the ball is hit.

The one thing that really carries over defensively and offensively is speed and quickness. People say that speed never goes into a slump. Speed can also make up for mistakes you make defensively. As always, I feel the number-one thing is to be strong up the middle.

Keep in mind that you need to get offense out of your infielders, especially at first and third base. I want my defense on the corners to be as good as possible, but the first and third basemen must drive in runs. You cannot be a starter for me without offensive production, although I may make late-inning defensive replacements. Earl Weaver, the great manager of the Baltimore Orioles, was a strong advocate of having as many strong hitters in the lineup as possible, and this philosophy gave him several championships.

This is not to say that the “Earl of Baltimore” did not believe in having good defensive players, but he did feel that one couldn’t sacrifice offensive strength too much to have defensive strength. “After all,” said Earl, “a player may only get one or two tough plays a game on defense, but he is going to get four at-bats every day.” Of course, in a perfect world, we would have great defense and great offense at all eight positions.

Good infielders are developed through hard work. I want our infielders to take 100 ground balls daily and, just as important, make 100 throws daily. Few infielders carry out this plan, but I want that to be their goal. If their arms become tired after a lot of throws and the throws to first base feel too long, they can throw to second base or field slow rollers. Although hard work is vital for infielders to develop the skills they need, hard work alone is not enough. They must work hard at specific skills to develop defensive skills properly. One often sees infielders taking a lot of ground balls in practice, but a careful examination of their work habits might show that they are just going through the motions and not accomplishing anything of substance. To develop good skills, a player must work at a specific skill! I have never had a great infielder who did not take great pride in his defense and work ethic.

Coaches always talk about players working hard in practice, and certainly that is a major factor in the development of a baseball player’s skills. But just working hard is not the answer to skill development. Many players will work hard for two or three hours in a practice session and not improve their skills at all. A player may come in after practice covered with sweat and with his head down on his chest with fatigue, but if you ask him what he accomplished during practice, he’ll shrug and say, “I worked hard out there! Just look at how tired I am!” That is an example of a player working hard but not working to improve on a specific skill!

For example, if a middle infielder has trouble turning the double play because his steps around the bag are too long, causing him to take too much time to throw the ball, he can work on double plays for hours, but he won’t improve his skill unless he works specifically on shortening his steps around the base. Another example might be an infielder who has problems catching ground balls because he holds his glove too high. He may field ground balls for a month, but he will not improve his fielding skills until he makes the specific correction in his execution by getting his glove lower.

## **Positioning Infielders**

All infielders should know where to line up in any situation. Under normal conditions, infielders should move as a group, no matter if the batter is a pull hitter or a hitter who hits the opposite way. One (or more) of the infielders should take charge and make sure that all the infielders are alert to

the signals from the dugout about positioning. Good defensive players should constantly talk to one another about the various aspects of the game that relate to good positioning. They should make sure that everyone is aware of the proper positioning for the particular situation, and all four infielders must constantly keep an eye on the coach in the dugout who is responsible for their positioning.

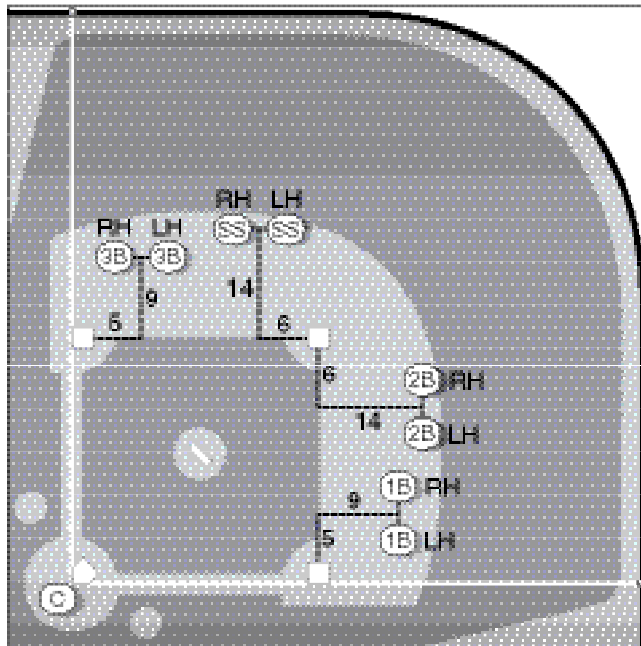
One of the first things the coach should consider in establishing the positioning of his infielders is the type of pitcher he has going for him in that game. If he has a hard-throwing pitcher on the mound, a higher percentage of balls should be hit to the opposite field than would be the case with a pitcher who does not throw with as much velocity. With a hard thrower pitching, the coach might want to adjust his infield (and outfield) positioning a bit more toward the opposite field than normal.

Another factor that can affect general positioning is the condition of the playing field. If the infield is damp and somewhat soft, or if the grass is high, the infielders might need to be a bit closer to the plate than normal because more slow ground balls will probably be hit in that game. Conversely, if the infield is dry and hard, infielders might play a bit deeper than normal because the ball will reach them more quickly than normal and thus affect their range.

The coach must establish a system that can have the players in a consistent position, depending on the hitter, the pitcher, the playing conditions, and the situation of the game. There are four depths in infield positioning, with variations that depend on factors that develop in the game and the abilities of the players involved, on both offense and defense. The coaches in the dugout need to control the positioning of infielders, and players must constantly look into the dugout for signals for positioning. The coach responsible for positioning should devise a series of signals that make it easy for the players to understand what position is called for in any situation. Coaches can use any number of gestures or movements to direct their players, and although you want signals that will not be too obvious to your opponent, the system must be simple enough that your players can easily understand positioning changes you make from one hitter to the next, or even from one pitch to the next.

## **One-Depth Infield Positioning**

The following is the procedure for what I refer to as one-depth infield positioning when no one is on base and the infielders are back (figure 12.1). This could be called the standard or starting infield defensive position. Every variation of infield positioning works off this one, so it is vital that all the infielders pay careful attention to it to make sure they are well aware of where they should be in this situation.

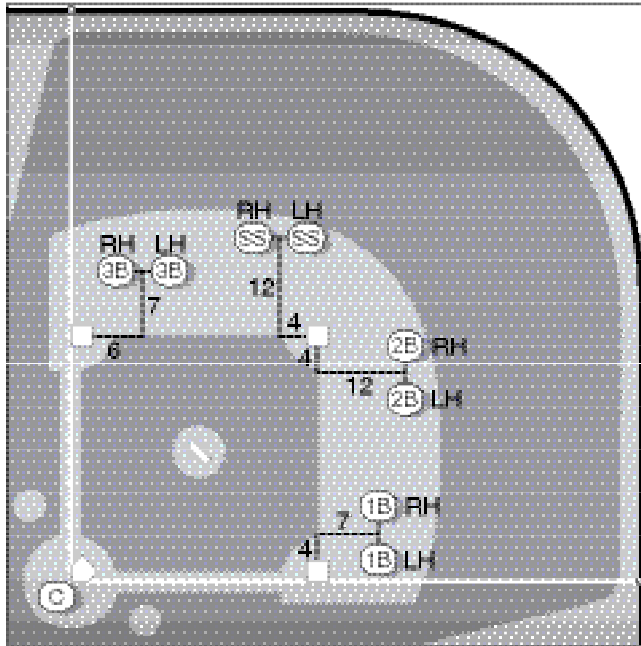


**FIGURE 12.1** One-depth infield positioning.

- The first baseman and third baseman are 5 steps off the base toward second base and 9 steps deep.
- The shortstop is 6 steps off second base toward third base and 14 steps deep.
- The second baseman is 6 steps off second base toward first base and 14 steps deep.
- For a left-handed hitter, the infielders move 2 steps to their left, and for a right-handed hitter they move 2 steps to the right. This movement of 2 steps is consistent for one-, two-, three-, and four-depth positioning.

## Two-Depth Infield Positioning

Two-depth infield positioning (figure 12.2) is double-play depth, so it will require some shortening up by all the infielders, especially the middle infielders. In a double-play situation, the middle infielder must break hard to get to the base under control so that he can pivot smoothly and according to the location of the throw. To do this he must be closer to the base in the starting position.

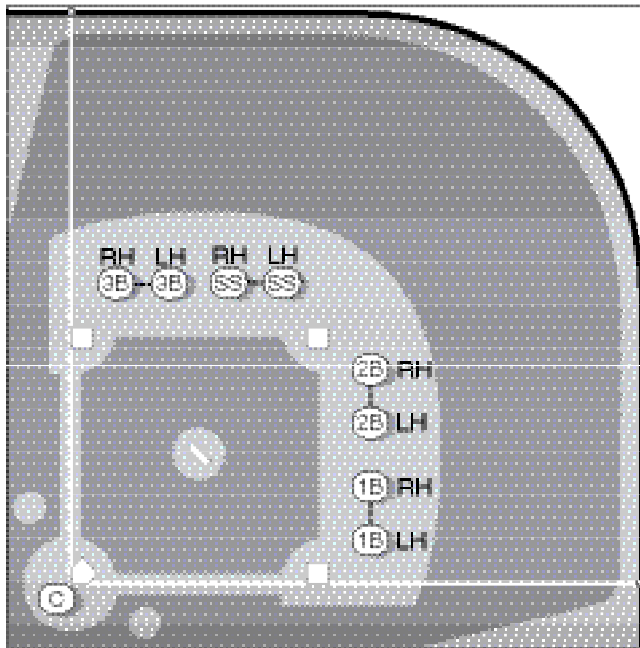


**FIGURE 12.2** Two-depth infield positioning.

- Double-play depth for the first baseman and third baseman is up two steps and over one step from the one-depth starting position.
- The middle infielders are up two steps and over two steps toward second base from the one-depth position.

## Three-Depth Infield Positioning

When a runner is on third base with no outs and the coach of the defensive team is confident that the other coach will play conservatively on a ground ball to the infield (following one of the unwritten rules of baseball strategy: don't make the first out of the inning at home plate), the defense should come in enough so that the runner will not try to score on a ground ball. At the same time they must understand that the farther in they are, the less range they have on a ground ball. In this situation the infielders should simply position themselves back two or three steps from the base line where they can accomplish the twin goals of keeping the runner from scoring on a ground ball yet have decent range on a ground ball. This is referred to as the three-depth position (figure 12.3).

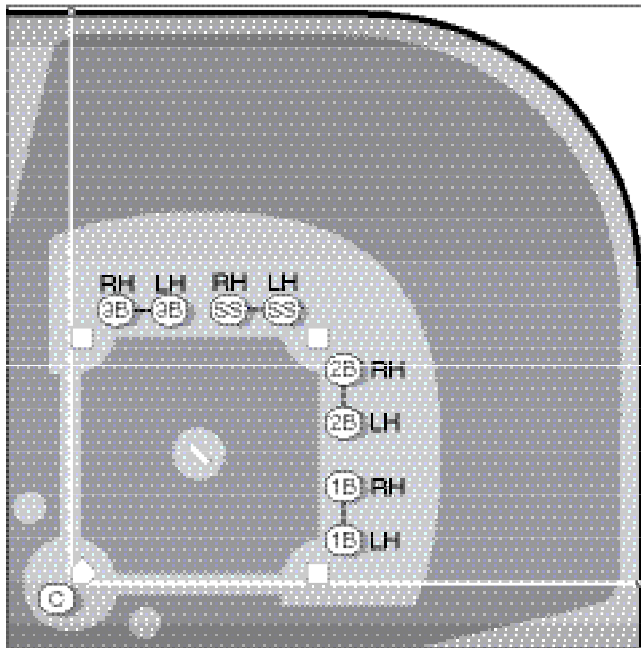


**FIGURE 12.3** Three-depth infield positioning.

## Four-Depth Infield Positioning

When a runner is on third base with one out and the game situation suggests that the base runner will try to score on any ground ball to the infield, all the infielders should be about even with the base line so that they can throw out a base runner at the plate trying to score. The infielders would walk forward from the one-depth position to a position even with the base line to reach the four-depth position (figure 12.4).

Some coaches like to add a little wrinkle to the four-depth position. Doing this is acceptable if it does not get too far away from the normal four-depth position. In this method, each infielder comes in toward the base line, but not all play at the same depth. They position themselves according to arm strength. For example, if the second baseman and first baseman each has just an adequate arm, they would be even with the baseline. If the third baseman has good arm strength, he might be a step behind the base line, and if the shortstop has a great arm, he might be a step and a half or two steps behind the base line. This method of using the four-depth position allows all four infielders to be able to throw out the runner at the plate on a normal ground ball, and it allows the infielders with stronger throwing arms to cover a little more ground. We must caution, however, that infielders should not position themselves anywhere they want; some players have an



**FIGURE 12.4** Four-depth infield positioning.

exaggerated opinion of their arm strength and may want to play deeper than advisable, so the coach must continue to control the positioning of the infielders.

The coach can simply signal one, two, three, or four depth, and the infielders will know where to play. The coach also needs to be able to move the infielders from pull to opposite way with a signal from the bench:

- Slight pull from the initial starting position is two steps, and dead pull is four steps. All infielders move as a group.
- Slight opposite is two steps, and dead opposite is four steps for the entire infield. Infielders should remember that the starting position for a right-hand hitter is different from the starting position for a left-hand hitter.

Scouting opponents and having a good idea where they are most likely to hit the ball is a tremendous advantage for any baseball team. Almost every baseball team will do some scouting of their opponents, with the extent of scouting generally dependent on the travel budget and the number of coaches available to watch games. But doing a good job of scouting and having good information about your opponents will pay off only if you have your defense aligned properly. Knowing the types of hitters on the opposing team can be helpful in a general way in the positioning of your



Infielders should never make a physical adjustment before the pitch or they risk tipping off the pitch to the hitter.

fielders, and, of course, specific information on each hitter in the opposing lineup is invaluable in planning your defense. Obviously, this scouting information can be used in pregame meetings with the starting pitcher and catcher as well as with the infielders and outfielders. The information should be catalogued for easy recall when each hitter comes to the plate during the game.

Discussing scouting information with your players is certainly valuable, but we believe the positioning of fielders should mainly be in the control of



the coach in the dugout. Good positioning of infielders cannot be left to chance or to the whims of a particular player, nor can the coach assume that the players know what they are supposed to do without any instruction or attention from the coaching staff. Proper positioning of infielders (as well as outfielders) is something that must be done consistently well if the defense is to make the best use of their skills in various situations. Coaches can use various movements and gestures to relay the information from the dugout to the infielders. They should be simple enough that you can get the message to your players and change them from one hitter to the next or even from one pitch to the next without being so obvious that your opponent can easily read them.

## **Coverage of Second Base**

Middle infielders should look at the catcher when he is giving signs for the type and location of the pitch. This information will give infielders an indication of where the ball is most likely to be hit if the hitter makes contact. The infielders are thus alert for the possibility that the ball will be hit in a certain direction, but they should not make a physical adjustment before the pitch. An infielder who moves early could tip off the pitch to the hitter.

Knowing the pitch and the abilities of the hitter is also important in deciding who covers second base on a steal or hit-and-run. A simple sign of open mouth or closed mouth between the shortstop and second baseman has been used for many years to indicate who is covering second base. This coverage signal can be changed on every pitch by the middle infielders if need be, depending on the pitch, the hitter, or the situation. An obvious situation to switch coverage of second base occurs when the base runner on first base is not a normal base stealer. Because he has little chance of stealing the base successfully, the opposing coach may want to put him in motion on a hit-and-run play. This is a good time to switch who covers second base. A simple sign from the coach on the bench to the middle infielders on whom he wants to cover second base will work.

## **Positioning Outfielders**

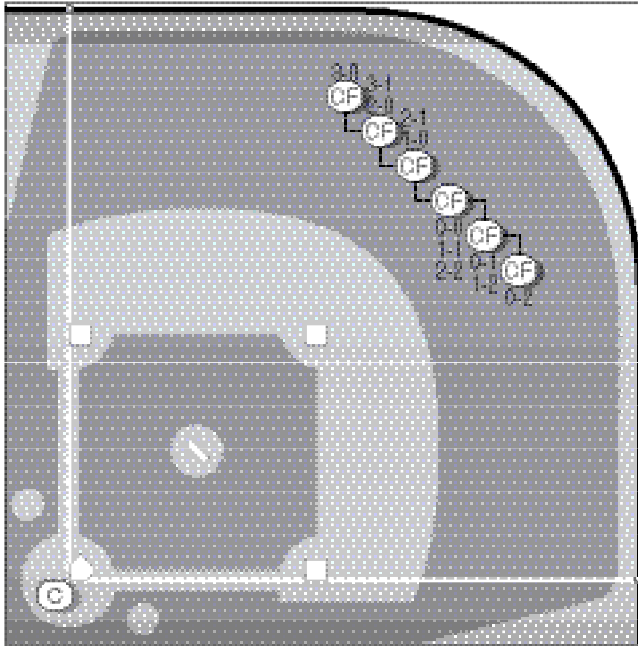
The positioning of the outfielders should follow along the lines of the principles of positioning infielders. The three outfielders should be aware of the importance of shifting their positions constantly during a game, during each at-bat, and pitch by pitch. Because of the distance from the players, the coach responsible for positioning outfielders will often wave a towel or some similar object to signal correct positioning. Often the coach will appoint the center fielder to be the leader. He makes sure that the other outfielders are looking for the signal and moving as directed by the coach.

The coach should have signals to indicate the standard or starting position for the outfielders for both right-handed hitters and left-handed hitters and signals to indicate outfield depth and pull or opposite field. The system is similar to that used for positioning infielders, discussed earlier in the chapter.

The positions of the outfielders will depend on many things, such as the tendencies of the hitter, the wind speed and direction, the pitcher on the mound and his style of pitching, the pitch being thrown, the ball-strike count, and the game situation. All three outfielders should shift as a group to present a balanced alignment. For example, if the center fielder and right fielder move several steps toward the right-field foul line and the left fielder remains in place, a huge gap will appear in left-center field, weakening the outfield coverage of the team. Let's look at some of the major factors that should be considered in positioning outfielders:

- *The hitter.* Although amateur outfielders do not see opposing teams enough to learn all the tendencies of their hitters, team scouting reports, some close observation, and a little common sense can go a long way toward helping outfielders play hitters properly. If, for example, a right-handed hitter fouls off a fastball into the right-field bleachers, the outfielders may think, "Gosh, he didn't get around on that one very well," and let it go at that. But if the hitter is constantly late on fastballs, the outfielders should shift in that direction until the hitter proves he can get around on the fastball.
- *The count.* Outfielders must be aware of the tendencies of hitters according to the ball-strike count and shift accordingly during the game. Numerous studies conducted over the years have determined where hitters are most likely to hit the ball according to the ball-strike count, all the way from Little League to the major leagues, and all of them have shown the same thing—when a hitter is ahead in the count, he is more likely to pull the ball and hit with a bit more power, and when he is behind in the count, he is more likely to hit the ball toward the opposite field with a bit less power. Many coaches have their outfielders take two steps over and two steps up or back after every pitch. For example, the center fielder would get in his standard starting position for a particular hitter at the start of the at-bat. If the first pitch is a ball he would take two steps toward left field (the pull field) and two steps back (to account for added power). If the first pitch is a strike, he would take two steps toward right field (the opposite field) and two steps in (to account for less power). This would continue on every pitch (figure 12.5).

I don't think we can expect our outfielders to move two steps here and two steps there on every pitch as if doing a dance step, but they should move after every pitch in the proper direction to adjust to the



**FIGURE 12.5** To adjust to the change in the ball-strike count, many coaches have outfielders take two steps over and two steps up or back.

change in the ball-strike count. An outfielder who stands in the same spot for nine innings is not alert to what is going to happen in the game!

- *The wind.* Outfielders should be aware of the direction and force of the wind throughout the game. The wind may not cause much change in the positioning of the outfielders, but they must be prepared to adjust to the wind when going after a fly ball. If the wind is blowing briskly, the outfielders should overcompensate for the effect the wind will have on the flight of the ball.

## Developing a Priority System for Fly Balls

Good communication on fly balls is a tremendously important aspect of team defense, and a team should spend considerable time developing this skill. Good communication on fly balls is important in eliminating collisions, minimizing confusion and indecision, and ensuring that the player with the best skills and the best angle to catch the ball has the priority over less-skilled players. The frustration is enormous when a team mishandles a

routine fly ball and allows it to fall to the ground safely. Poor communication or no communication at all is usually the cause, so coaches must develop and install a system that allows their players to understand and have confidence in a priority system for fly balls.

Simple terminology for fly-ball communication is always the best. For example, we have our players call, "Ball, ball, ball," when they want to make the catch. The other players call, "Take it, take it, take it," to reassure the priority player that he is in charge to make the catch. The player making the call should yell loudly three times because the crowd can be noisy and two (or more) players may call for the ball at the same time. Similarly, the other players should loudly call, "Take it," three times to eliminate confusion.

The following priority system should be in place:

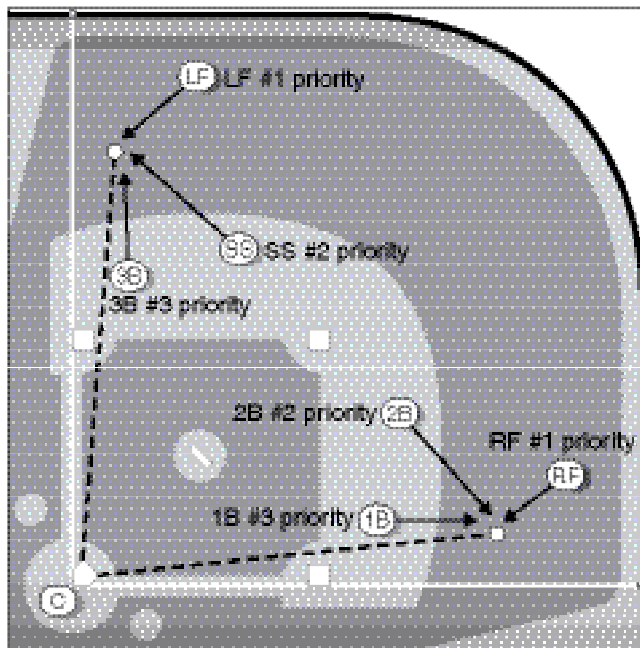
1. All players have priority over pitchers.
2. The first and third basemen have priority over the catcher.
3. The middle infielders have priority over the first and third basemen.
4. The shortstop has priority over the second baseman.
5. The outfielders have priority over the infielders, with the center fielder having priority over the right fielder and left fielder.

This priority system works well because it gives the main priority to the player who should be the most skilled at catching fly balls and should have the best angle to the ball. For example, let's consider a short fly ball hit in the triangle near the foul line in short right field. The player with first priority to make the catch would be the right fielder, who is supposed to be highly skilled at catching fly balls and has a good angle because he is coming in on the ball. The player with second priority to make the catch would be the second baseman, who is generally a good glove man and in this case has an angle on the ball because he is going slightly backward and toward the foul line, catching the ball from the side. The player with third priority would be the first baseman, who would be in the lineup more to catch thrown balls and drive in runs than to catch fly balls. In addition, he has the worst angle of the three players because he is running straight back and will probably have to make the catch over the shoulder (figure 12.6).

The same principles for the priority system would hold for a fly ball hit in short left field near the foul line; a fly ball hit in foul territory between the first baseman, catcher, and pitcher; or for a fly ball hit anywhere in the ballpark!

Three additional suggestions for implementing the priority system on fly balls will help minimize or eliminate confusion and indecision.

1. The first is to limit the people who call for the ball to those who have a chance to make the catch. The right fielder doesn't need to be yell-



**FIGURE 12.6** Priority system for catching a short fly ball hit in the triangle near the foul lines in right and left fields.

ing advice on a fly ball hit between the shortstop and the third baseman.

2. The second suggestion is for everyone to wait until the ball starts down to say anything. Calling for the ball when it first leaves the bat and is on its way up leads to players saying, “I’ve got it, no you take it!” Confusion and mistakes result. Calling for the ball too quickly is probably the most common mistake players make on fly balls. Teams must correct this tendency, especially on those in-between fly balls that can cause so much trouble.
3. The third suggestion feeds off the second—wait, wait, wait to call for the ball, and then call it loudly and with authority! If players practice and improve on the first two suggestions, they will begin to make these plays with increased confidence, which will lead to greater aggressiveness in calling for fly balls loudly and with authority.

## Game-Situation Substitutions

The coach should build an attitude among his players that each has a job important to the success of the team, regardless of whether that job is as a

member of the starting lineup or as a defensive replacement, pinch hitter, or pinch runner. If a coach has a good roster of players, some with better offensive skills and some with better defensive skills, he can use them to advantage by making intelligent game-situation substitutions. We prefer to have the strongest possible offensive players in our starting lineup, so many of our game-situation substitutions are to put in a superior defensive player late in the game when our team is leading. This action not only puts a better defensive team on the field late in the game when we have a lead but also ensures that many players get playing time during the season in crucial parts of the game. This approach can have a big effect on winning the game and is a great morale builder for the team.

On the other side of the coin, a team may have in the starting lineup an outstanding defensive player at a key position who is not a strong hitter. In this type of situation the coach may need to pinch hit for this player late in a game when his team is behind or tied. This type of move requires using two players, the starter and a pinch hitter who can play adequate defense at that position. At times, the move may require the use of three players—the starter, the pinch hitter (who is not an adequate defensive player), and a defensive replacement for the pinch hitter. If the pinch hitter does not run well, the move may require four players if a pinch runner comes in to run the bases. The coach must organize his thinking about the possible use of all his roster players in various situations so that he will be prepared to act when substitutions are needed. The coach should try to alert players ahead of time that they might be used “if this happens or if that happens” so that they can be preparing mentally and physically to go into the game.

A pinch hitter can be used during a game to substitute for a less skilled hitter who is in the starting lineup or to create a more favorable matchup between the pitcher and hitter. If a coach has an outstanding hitter who is not a regular player (something not often seen in amateur baseball), he may use that player to pinch hit regardless of how he matches up with the opposing pitcher. More often the coach will have several possible pinch hitters for a particular situation and will want to consider how well each of them matches up with the opposing pitcher. The coach can consider such things as sending up a right-handed hitter against a left-handed pitcher or vice-versa, inserting a good fastball hitter against a fastball pitcher (and the same against an off-speed or breaking-ball pitcher), or putting in a good low-ball hitter against a low-ball pitcher. A coach also needs to consider what type of hitter the situation calls for if he has several pinch hitters available. For example, if he needs a pinch hitter to lead off the inning, he might prefer to have a hitter who has a good eye at the plate, makes good contact, and can run the bases. On the other hand, if he has a runner on third base and less than two outs, he might prefer to use a hitter who can get the ball in the air to drive in the run.

Using team personnel to take advantage of the players' varied skills and abilities is a vital part of managing a baseball game. Coaches should study their personnel carefully to make the best use of their players and help the team perform to the best of its ability. A coach who uses his team wisely will be successful not only in winning games but also in developing a roster of skilled players who all feel important to the team's success.

This page intentionally left blank.



# 13

## **Defensive Positioning**

George Horton

When Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball, I'm not sure anyone really knew how far ahead of his time he was. I find it fascinating that our game remains little changed from its inception more than a century ago. The height of the mound has been changed, the fences have been moved in and back, the bats and balls are different, but the baseball diamond itself has remained intact. It is amazing that the diamond dimensions have withstood the sands of time. The baseball diamond has to be the crown jewel of all sports.

Coaches and players have at times adjusted the standard positioning locations. In my career I have seen schemes with four outfielders and five infielders. I have seen the depths of outfielders and infielders fluctuate from program to program and philosophy to philosophy. But most teams continue to use the basic positions with only slight adjustments. Mr. Doubleday must have had incredible insight into the speed and timing of our game to create diamond dimensions that would stay intact forever.

The concept of positioning is simple, but the subtle adjustments can be complex in the total defensive scheme. I believe that you must have a system and philosophy and be consistent with execution. First, I believe that you must convince your players to buy into the system, and you must stress the importance of the team defensive philosophy. I try to make this statement with both a discussion and a physical exercise. Every year I do this session as the first baseball activity. I use a long discussion and physical practice period to get this point across. This session emphasizes to everyone the importance of this part of the game. They recognize that if I commit so much time and effort to team defense, it must be an important ingredient. Over the years this philosophy has proved successful. It definitely sends

a strong message to my players, and I seem to get their commitment in return. The players always try hard to work together and within the system.

The athletic ability of your athletes will make a difference in the quality of the defensive coverage. Obviously, if you are loaded with quick, fast athletes, they will be able to get to more balls than a less athletic team can. This chapter covers concepts that maximize the defensive coverage, regardless of the athleticism of your team. Although we all must make the most out of what we have on our team each year, successfully recruiting outstanding athletes obviously makes any system more productive.

## **Team Defensive Philosophy**

The team defensive philosophy that I like to use is detailed in the following paragraphs. In my 26 years of coaching I have adjusted and changed my philosophy many times. I use a combination of scouting information and a positioning scheme that covers the highest percentage of fair ground on the field of play. Over the years I have found this to be the most effective team defensive philosophy.

### **Playing a Zone Defense**

The first point I make with my players is that they are going to learn how to play a zone defense. As in some other sports, the defensive scheme would be ineffective if we had some of the players playing a man-to-man scheme while the others were playing a zone. I realize that in basketball and sometimes in football, this mingling of concepts can be an effective defensive scheme. But in baseball, the goal is to cover as much fair territory as possible. I stress with them that most balls put in play go toward the middle of the field. I want them to understand the importance of the middle of the field so that they do not overlap the lines. We want to have a chance on balls hit in the seams of the infield or in the alleys in the outfield. I will discuss exceptions to this philosophy later in this chapter. The ultimate goal is to have a defensive player in the area where the ball is hit. The key points here are that we need only one player in that area and we need to defend only against the fair ball. Proper orchestration between players will minimize their overlapping of each other and their covering of foul ground.

I emphasize the importance of proper spacing to each defensive player. Predicting exactly where on the field the ball is going to be hit is extremely difficult. Certainly, we have scouting information that makes our predictions more accurate, but we're not always right. Because we cannot always be accurate with our defensive positioning, we want to use proper spacing to maximize our fair-ball coverage. I like to have a system that gets infor-

mation to the players from the dugout so that they have time to interact with the other defensive players and commit to their responsibility. I don't want our players to be robots who rely totally on the coaches. We try to get information to them early so that they can make their own adjustments and use their own ideas. If we are too insistent on having accurate information, we eliminate the players' instincts and feel for the game. Forcing your players to do it your way can be counterproductive. I want them to be able to discuss their ideas with the coaches. Their instincts and information are often valuable to the team effort.

### **Establishing a Quick Tempo**

One of our commitments on the defensive side is to establish a quick tempo. I believe that it is easier to play defense if a minimum amount of time passes between pitches. The defensive players will be on their toes. I like the pitcher to sprint to the mound between innings. I want him to do his warm-up pitches quickly without sacrificing quality. I want him to spend little time off the rubber. Obviously, if he is throwing strikes, this theory works better. At times, however, he should slow things down when the other team has created some momentum.

### **Using a Consistent Approach**

Teams and coaches vary in how they position their defenses. The computer has made it possible to obtain and analyze a lot of information. This information can be customized into specific areas of emphasis. Many software programs on the market can be of great help in putting together a defensive plan. Some coaches like to position the defense based on where the hitter most often hits the ball. Others emphasize how they are going to pitch to each hitter. Another theory is to look solely at where all hitters tend to hit the ball off each individual pitcher. Baseball people have argued about these priorities as long as our game has been played, and they will continue to do so. I believe that you must stick by whatever priority you establish. By being consistent with your approach the percentages of being correct and incorrect will even out over the season. If you tend to switch around or go with gut feelings, you may find that your predictions are inconsistent. Our system emphasizes two main areas—how we pitch to a particular hitter and the opposing hitters' chart we keep for each individual pitcher (see figures 13.1 and 13.2). This system can only be effective if two things happen:

1. You must be coaching at a level at which the pitchers have consistent control, which means that the ball goes consistently to the called location.

2. You have a system that you run from the dugout or you have coordinated the pitcher's game plan with the positioning game plan and both the pitcher and the fielders stick with the plan.

Over the years we have found this system to be an effective way to set up our positioning. Obviously, any system includes variables because of situations and priorities based on the inning and score of the game. Situations and adjustments will be discussed later in this chapter.

## Keeping It Simple

I like to keep our system simple. I think that many coaches put too many things in their playbooks. Doing this makes the game more difficult to play and accounts for the mental lapses caused by confusion. What happens is that the players tend to perform the fundamentals of catch in a mediocre manner when they have too much to think about. Your system will only be effective if your team can play sound catch within the system. I prefer to do fewer things and try to do them extremely well. This philosophy can apply to any defensive scheme. Keep the positioning system simple. Do not put in too many pickoffs, bunt defenses, or first-and-third defenses. I believe in having the fundamental plays and repeatedly working on them. This approach will maintain each player's confidence and efficiency in his part of the total goal and will slow down the game in your players' minds.

Another point of discussion is whether a coach calls pitches from the dugout. I have always believed in calling pitches and running the defense from the dugout. I know many coaches and analysts disagree with this approach. I believe that in the college game, the coaches have the most experience, knowledge, and information. But that doesn't mean that we are always right. Controlling the games allows us to put the entire defensive scheme together from the dugout. We do not use this method to prevent players from having input or thinking for themselves. We want them to have input and be able to discuss what they see or pick up on. Another knock against this approach is that from the dugout we are not able to see little adjustments that hitters make. To help solve this problem, we have adjustment signs from the catcher on the field. This contribution gives us valuable information that we can put in the formula to predict the outcome. Within our system we also allow the pitcher to shake off the pitch that we call from the bench. We understand that he must feel committed and good about the pitch selected. The pitcher must trust and commit to each pitch. Some people may argue that no teaching occurs if the coaches control everything. We work hard to communicate with and explain to our players the reasons for everything we do. This approach serves the purpose of educating them on the finer points of playing defense and prepares them for the time when they are calling things for themselves. This system has been extremely successful for me over the years.

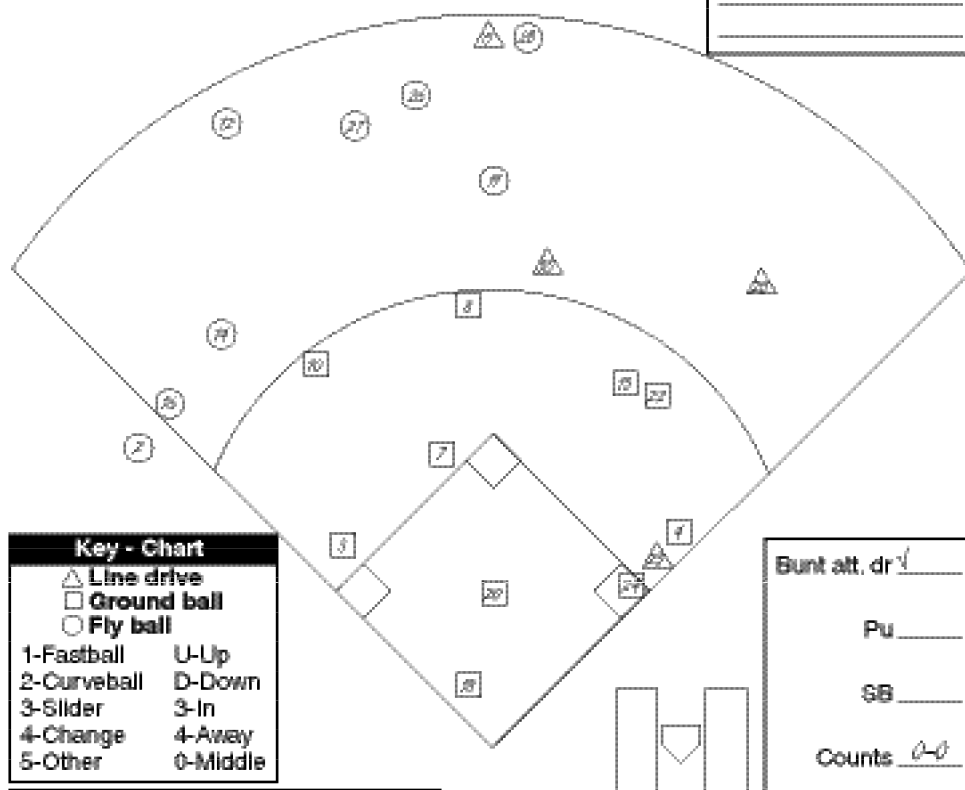
Uniform # 32 Name Chad Cordova Position P Bat      Throw R Del. a/n.       
Team: Cal State Fullerton

**FIGURE 13.1** Opposing hitters' chart that we keep for each pitcher. The chart includes all hitters, both left-handers and right-handers, and indicates where they hit each type of pitch.

**Hitter Tendency Chart**

Uniform # 7 Name Wright Position LF Bat L Throw R Def. aln. 1st to 3rd base  
 Team: LB State

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



**H & R** \_\_\_\_\_ **Counts** \_\_\_\_\_

	HEP	F-1	CS	3A	2B	SS	3B
B	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
B	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
B	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
B	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	37	37	37	37	37	37	37
B	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
S	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

**FIGURE 13.2** One hitter versus all pitchers.

## Goals of an Effective Defense

An effective defense accomplishes many things. The defense uses a middle-of-the-field priority system, as discussed earlier. Quality defense eliminates free bases or free base runners and forces the opposition to earn everything they get. We try hard to limit the opportunity for extra outs in an inning. We try to get every out available within an inning or play. We try to be perfect mentally, but we realize that on occasion we are going to break down physically. We recognize that momentum is part of the game, so we try to capture or obtain that momentum from the defensive side. The three biggest defensive momentum builders or breakers are the double play, the successful extra-base-hit alignment, and the bunt defense. These defensive plays, when executed properly, are killers for the offensive effort. Failure to execute these plays is usually devastating.

A goal that I have in the learning phase of the defensive concepts is to teach enough complexity in defensive schemes that the players will simultaneously learn how to execute on offense. I believe that if you can successfully break down the difficulty in covering certain offensive plays, you can motivate your players to try certain things on offense. If a player believes that he can be successful with a certain play or skill, his chances of executing that play or skill go way up. Your players will be more likely to try



Quality defense makes the opposition earn everything they get.

things on their own. In simple terms, defense teaches offense and offense teaches defense.

Another huge goal that I have is to get my players to commit to the defensive effort. Accomplishing this task is sometimes difficult, perhaps because so much of the credit for the success of a baseball team goes to the players who do well offensively. The media is notorious for recognizing the top offensive players and saying nothing about the defensive effort of the team or individual players. Year-end awards and honors are based mostly on offensive success. In most cases, this fails to recognize the commitment that we tend to get from our players on defense. I believe that games and championships are won on the defensive side of the ball. Within a game a player performs defense much more often than he hits. My mission is to convince my players of the importance of their defensive commitment to the outcome of the game. One of the biggest challenges for most players is to play defense immediately after having had a poor at-bat. I want them to put that poor at-bat behind them and totally commit to the defensive effort, mentally and physically. This is much easier said than done. Teams and individuals must have discipline to adhere to this principle. They must be patient and wait for their next opportunity to release their offensive frustration. I just do not want them to be thinking about offense when they are on defense. I want them to leave their offensive frustration in the dugout.

## **Practice Format**

The tricky part of my job is to create the right learning environment for my team to progress defensively. I try to accomplish this mission using the whole-part-whole system. In other words, I try to teach everyone what the team is trying to accomplish in whatever defensive system they are learning. After introducing the concept to the team, I address the individual fundamentals necessary to accomplish the system. I then like to go back to the team interaction and hope that it all comes together with quality execution. This philosophy usually holds up well with all defensive goals that my program uses. My team cannot be effective in executing a team defensive concept until they have a handle on the defensive fundamentals individually. Even the most fundamentally competent individual, however, cannot be effective within the team unless he has total understanding about the interaction with his teammates. Competency with both individual and team fundamentals is crucial for consistency in performance. I have found with this type of lesson plan that we end up with confident players.

Whenever possible and when time allows, I try to design my practices so that we work on the individual position fundamentals first. I like each player to go through some routine or session designed to help him with his physical mastery of defense at his particular position. Each position is unique



as to the type of routine that players might go through. I then like to bring them all together for a quality catch session. Then we would do a session designed to work on a fundamental that is position specific. The fundamental for that day is usually consistent with the team session that follows. This allows the individual player to work on and, we hope, to master his part of the total picture. With this system, the individual's chances of controlling his part of the team interaction go way up. This system has been productive in leading to a positive practice session, and it applies to the confidence level I discussed previously. Most important, it paves the way for the team to compete with confidence in their capabilities.

## Timing and Signals

In using signals we always try to keep in mind our goal of establishing a quick defensive tempo. We want our system to be simple and efficient. We want our system to work when the noise level is such that hand signs are the only way to communicate effectively. We use three coaches to signal the defense. One coach signals the outfielders, one coach signals the infielders, and the pitching coach signals the catcher and pitcher. We use three coaches because we want to save time and because a single coach cannot effectively handle all three areas. This system gives each coach a maximum of four players to manage and communicate with at any given time. In our system we give the information to our players early so that they have ample time to communicate and adjust with their teammates and go through their own mental routines before each pitch.

When the first hitter or a new hitter is coming to take his at-bat, our system calls for all defensive players to pick up the appropriate coach with their eyes, just as the hitter reaches the dirt surrounding home plate. After each pitch, we teach the defensive players to get eye contact with the appropriate coach, just as the return throw from the catcher hits the pitcher's glove. This timing allows players to make any required adjustments and still allows them ample time to interact. We have to practice this routine. As I indicated earlier, it is our first lesson plan every year. The players work constantly on this system when we scrimmage so that they become comfortable with the routine and the sign system. We like to get all the tension or distractions out of the way so that they can get comfortable and commit to the baseball.

## Positioning Basics

One of our first missions in the teaching sequence is to teach the defensive players the proper place to position themselves. We like to start with a session to show them where their home base should be with a right-handed

hitter when playing him straight up with nobody on base. Once we have shown them where we think this position should be, we ask them to step off the distance from the bases. A good example would be the shortstop and second baseman's positions. In his right-handed straight-up position with no one on base, the shortstop would be approximately 7 steps from the second-base bag down the line toward third base and approximately 15 steps back from the base line. With the same hitter, the second baseman would be 5 steps from the second-base bag down the line toward first base and 15 steps back from the base line. As you might have noticed, the difference in the two positions is 2 steps in a lateral direction. The difference in the lateral direction is a reflection of the side the hitter is batting from. We use this 2-step difference with positioning adjustments for infielders, which I will explain later in the chapter. Stepping off the positioning spots is useful when we travel to different fields where the cuts of the grass vary from those in our home park. The bases will always be the same distance apart. Using this step system prevents distortions in the positioning plan that could come from unusual cuts of the infield grass and from outfield fences that are not symmetrical or have a short porch. Many infielders position themselves on the back edge of the infield dirt. If they use the dirt as a guide, they might be too deep or too shallow for our system. The outfielders sometimes base their depth on their distance from the fences. With some fields the depth of the outfield fence could distort the desired depths of the outfielders. The most accurate way to ensure consistency from field to field is for all players to judge their depths on distances from the bases.

## **Adjusting to Different Signs and Hitters**

Once we have established the proper spots for right-handed straight-up for all positions, we have the players practice the adjustments to different signs and types of hitters. We use rules to ensure that we maintain the proper spacing when we make hitter adjustments. Our rule of thumb is that when an infielder makes an adjustment to slight pull or slight opposite, he moves two steps in the proper direction. The exception to this is that we have our corner infielders move only one step when moving toward the foul line, once they have reached the seven-step position, to avoid overlapping the foul line. If the plan were to play a particular hitter to pull, then all infielders except the corner infielder on the pull side of the field would move four steps in the proper direction. That corner infielder would move two steps. This system allows us to move and position the infielders with a specific sign. In addition, with this system we know they will be coordinating their movements, unless we choose to make a special positioning adjustment. This system also explains the two-step lateral difference between the shortstop and second baseman in our right-handed straight-up example discussed previously. As you can see, if the hitter at the plate was left-handed, the

second baseman would be seven steps off the base and the shortstop would be five steps off the base.

In the outfield, our rule for every slight pull or slight opposite adjustment is for the outfielders to move three steps in the proper lateral direction. If the adjustment were from straight up to pull, then the outfielders would all move six steps in the proper lateral direction. Again, this approach allows us to have the outfielders coordinate their movements and spacing. Situations often occur when we do not want all three outfielders to move together. We accomplish this special alignment with a different set of signs.

This entire system allows a coach to give one sign to the entire defense and be able to count on the players to move to specific defensive spots. Countless variables in the objective of the defense would call for a few adjustments from this basic positioning system. Individuals could be moved with a sign specifically for each player. The infield might play the hitter one way while the outfield plays the hitter a different way. In some cases one side of the field may play one way while the other side plays another. This is one reason that we like to have two coaches giving the positioning signs. The main point to keep in mind is that within this system we can communicate accurately with every player on the field. Players should know exactly where to play with a hand signal.

Let's break this down with an example of the basic positioning for the infielders. Let's assume that we have to defense an average-running, right-handed hitter who is no threat to bunt. No one is on base, and it's early in the ballgame. Let's say we are going to play this particular hitter straight up. Here is how we would like our infielders to set up (figure 13.3).

First baseman—9 steps off first-base bag, 12 steps from base line

Second baseman—5 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

Shortstop—7 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

Third baseman—7 steps off third-base bag, 12 steps from base line

Now let's take the same game situation and put a left-handed hitter at the plate. We are still going to play this hitter straight up. Let's see how this differs from our positioning for a right-handed hitter and see if our adjustment rules would apply (figure 13.4).

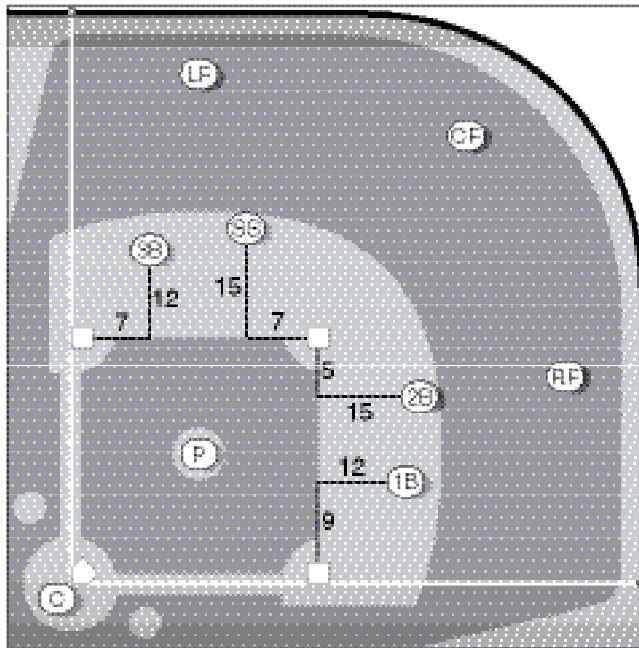
First baseman—7 steps off first-base bag, 12 steps from base line

Second baseman—7 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

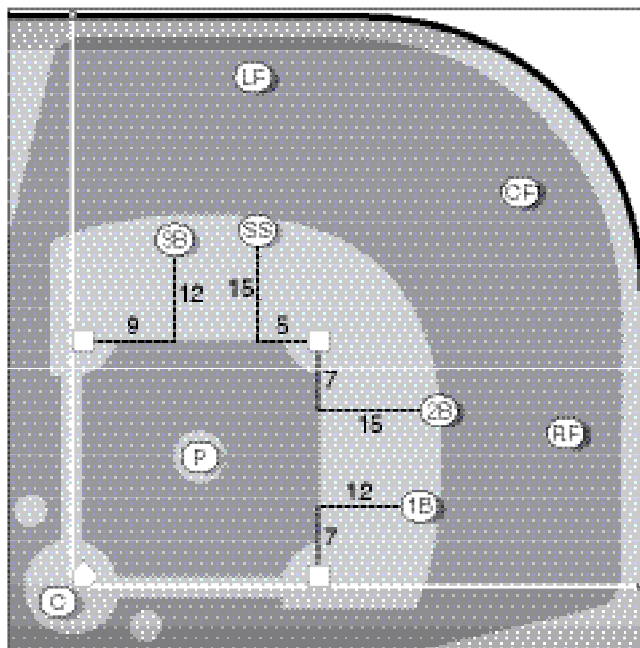
Shortstop—5 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

Third baseman—9 steps off third-base bag, 12 steps from base line

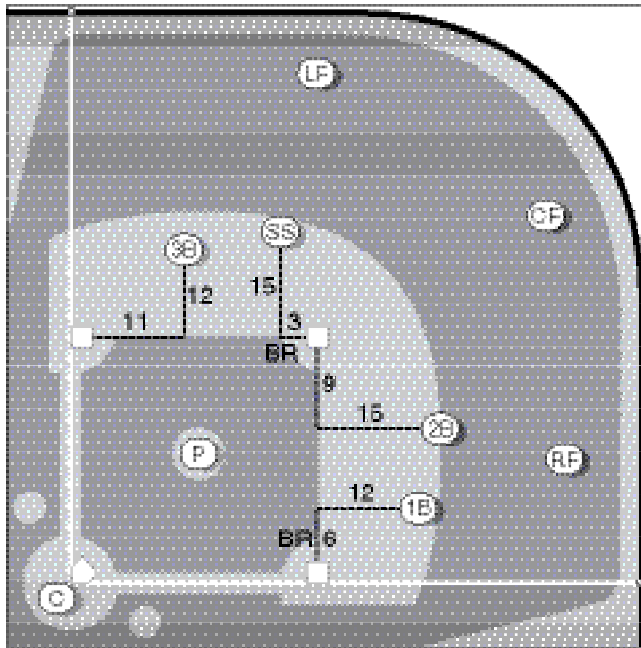
If we were going to adjust to the same left-handed hitter and go to a slight pull defense in the infield, here is how that would translate (figure 13.5).



**FIGURE 13.3** Straight-up positioning for defending against a right-handed hitter with average running speed, no bunt threat.



**FIGURE 13.4** Straight-up positioning for defending against a left-handed hitter with average running speed, no bunt threat.



**FIGURE 13.5** Slight pull positioning to defend against a left-handed hitter with average running speed, no bunt threat.

First baseman—6 steps off first-base bag, 12 steps from base line

Second baseman—9 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

Shortstop—3 steps off second-base bag, 15 steps from base line

Third baseman—11 steps off third-base bag, 12 steps from base line

I hope this gives you a good understanding of the system we use. Obviously, this system does not account for all the variables in positioning that game situations or particular hitters call for, but we find it a useful basic system to work from in making more adjustments when necessary.

Now we have the decision-making process in front of us about how we are going to defend a particular hitter given the situation. As I mentioned earlier, you can choose what to emphasize in the scouting information that you have accumulated. When we put the plan into action, we always keep in mind that we cannot accurately predict where the ball is going to be hit all the time. No matter what our information tells us, we realize that the hitter could hit the ball anywhere on the field. So we must avoid overloading one part of the field and weakening the less likely part of the field. Our philosophy is to play to the scouting information collectively, without totally giving up the least likely areas for that particular hitter. In other words, we avoid extreme defensive alignments.

The two areas of information that we emphasize most heavily in deciding how to align our defense are

1. the way we plan to pitch to the hitter and
2. where the hitter has hit the ball off our pitcher or where similar hitters have hit the ball off our pitcher.

Over the years we have found these the best criteria to follow in developing a defensive plan. We can never be 100 percent accurate, but we try to boost the chances of being correct by having a solid plan. No matter what system you use, you must be consistent.

## **Establishing Priorities**

I believe that it is important to convince young defensive players that they must establish and understand their priorities in positioning alignments and decision making. They must know their alignments for many special defenses and situations, such as the double play, base coverages for stealing, holding runners at first base and at second base, bunt defenses, first-and-third defenses, playing the infield in with a runner on third base, and taking away the chance for an extra-base hit. I have found that young players try to accomplish too much. When they play double-play depth, they tend to play too deep. The middle infielders get too far away from the second-base bag, trying to cover the hole between them and the corner infielder. When they have base coverage for steals, they try to hold their ground too long and are unsuccessful at beating the catcher's throw to the bag. When they play in to attempt to throw a runner at third base out at the plate on a ground ball, they play halfway in, in what I call no-man's land. In bunt defenses they do not commit to their responsibility well enough because they try to do too much. When guarding the line they play too far away from it, and inevitably a ball goes between them and the line.

Coaches must teach players that they cannot accomplish everything with their alignment scheme. In most cases they must sacrifice some coverage to position themselves for their individual responsibilities. As a coach you must make it acceptable for a player to get beat by a ball hit in an area that is priority three or four. You must make it acceptable for a ball to go through a hole created when a player leaves his spot to cover a base. Players must understand that sometimes we just have to give the hitter some credit. I like to use the phrase, "You must give up something to get something." This philosophy will make your defense more efficient when the batter hits the ball where you are trying to get him to hit it or bunt it.

The priority system can apply to decisions made by the players on defense. Young players often get things out of sequence because they are trying to trick the offensive players. They tend to think and prepare for the

special play or trick play instead of committing their thought process to the most probable play. During my coaching career I've had some difficulty in this area with some of the more cerebral players. When this occurs, I try to get those players to understand why I don't want them to operate that way. I want them to keep the game simple in their minds.

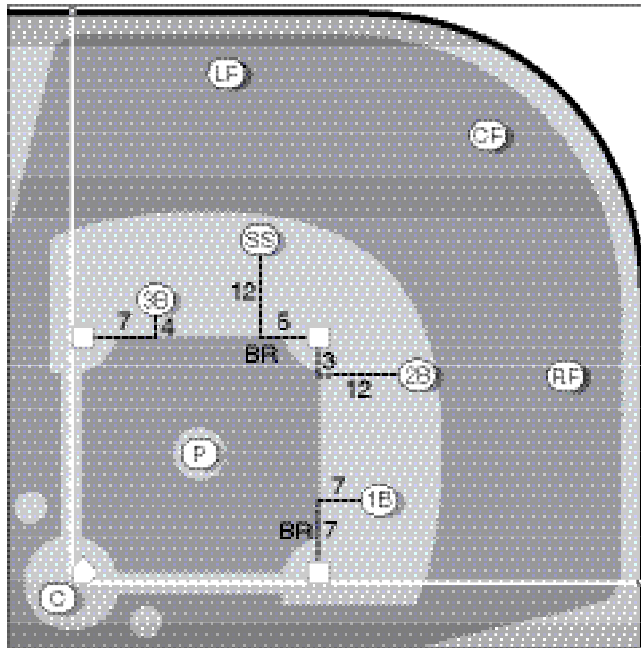
## **Double-Play Depth**

The priority for infielders is the double play. When they position themselves for the hitter, the infielders must understand that they have to give up some coverage to have a chance at the double play. This priority also applies to the middle infielders concerning playing the hole instead of being close enough to the base to have a chance to turn a double play. When we are playing a hitter to pull, the middle infielder on the pull side would not allow his lateral adjustment to take him so far from the base that he would not be able to beat the throw to the second-base bag. Therefore, we put hole coverage second to the priority of being at the base.

Here are some of the rules that we use for our infielders:

- The first baseman is no deeper than 7 steps behind the base line if he is playing behind the runner (figure 13.6). This rule would always apply with runners on first and second or with the bases loaded. This positioning is 5 steps farther in than the positioning he uses with nobody on base or in a two-out situation. The tendencies involving the hitter and pitcher would determine his lateral positioning.
- The third baseman is no deeper than 4 steps behind the base line (figure 13.6) whenever the double play is in order. This is 8 steps farther in than the positioning he uses with nobody on base or in a two-out situation. The tendencies involving the hitter and pitcher would determine his lateral positioning.
- The shortstop and second baseman are no deeper than 12 steps behind the base line (figure 13.6) whenever the double play is in order. This is 3 steps farther in than the positioning they use with nobody on base or in a two-out situation. The tendencies involving the hitter and pitcher would determine their lateral positioning. We do not allow them to move so much laterally that they are unable to turn the double play. The exception to this rule occurs when we put on a special defense that releases them from that responsibility. Occasionally we decide to commit to defending the hitter and how we are going to pitch to him. This option requires a special defense in which only one middle infielder will be in position to turn the double play. We seldom do this and try to avoid these exaggerated defenses.

Ideally, we are trying to get a ground ball hit in the middle of the diamond. When we accomplish that, we would like to have a defensive player in that area to get the double play that we worked so hard to set up.



**FIGURE 13.6** Double-play depth: runners at first and second, right-handed hitter, straight-up positioning. Defending against hitter with average running speed. No bunt threat and no sacrifice-bunt defense.

## Special Coverage

Three situations require special positioning schemes:

1. Defending against the extra-base hit
2. Playing the infield in to attempt to throw out a runner trying to score from third base
3. Defending with what we call our flight-of-the-ball defense

We normally go into what we call our no-doubles defense beginning with the eighth inning of a one-run game. Several variables might change the timing of when we defend against the extra-base hit. The key is the percentage or chance that the opponent will get an extra-base hit and what that would mean to our team's chance of winning or losing a ballgame.

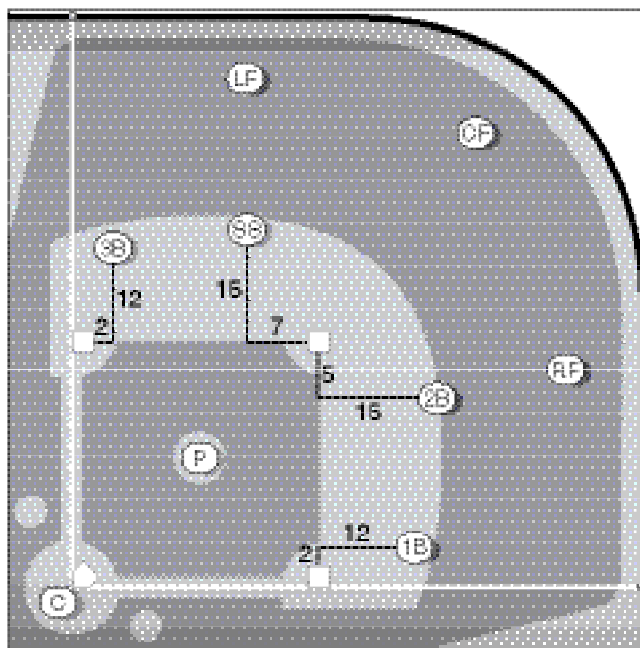
In defending against the extra-base hit, we make adjustments with the outfielders and the corner infielders. We generally like our outfielders to play four steps deeper. The only thing that would prevent them from taking the four steps back would be the depth of the outfield fence. If moving four steps back takes them too close to the fence, they would go back only



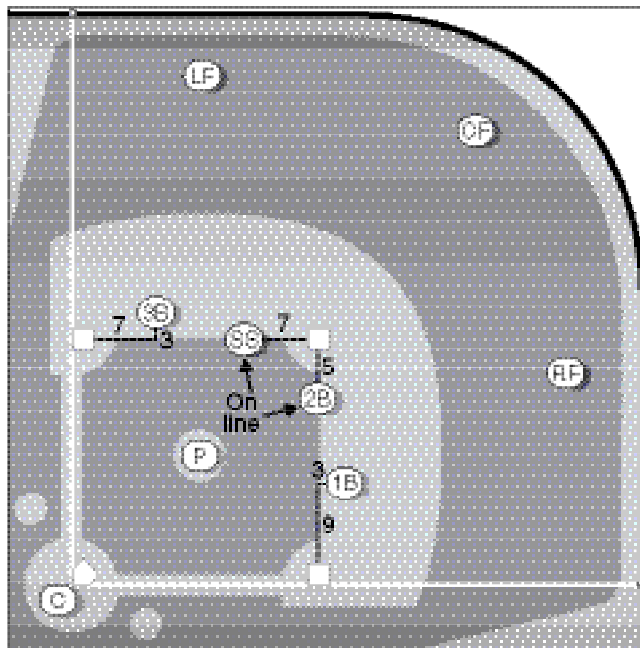
far enough so that they do not overlap a home run ball. Keep in mind that if all three outfielders move four steps back, their spacing in the gaps will be distorted. Consequently, the corner outfielders should pinch the gaps by taking two steps closer to the center fielder (figure 13.7). The outfielders must also put this defensive plan into their decision-making process. When we are in the no-doubles defense, they are not to dive to catch a ball unless they are 100 percent sure that they can catch the ball or keep it in front of them. They must talk about this before the ball is hit.

The corner infielder's adjustment is to play close enough to the foul line that no hit ball could possibly go between him and the foul line. This means that the farther back they play, the farther off the line they can play. If they are shallow, they should be very close to the foul line. If the first baseman is holding a runner on first base, he should not move very far off the line on the pitcher's delivery to the plate.

When we defend with the infielders so that we can throw out a runner from third base at the plate, we make the following depth adjustments. The first baseman and third baseman align themselves three steps behind the base line (see figure 13.8). The exception to positioning at this depth would be to defend a potential bunt play or when an exceptionally fast runner is at third base. The lateral adjustments would be based on how we have decided to play the particular hitter. The middle infielder's depth would be



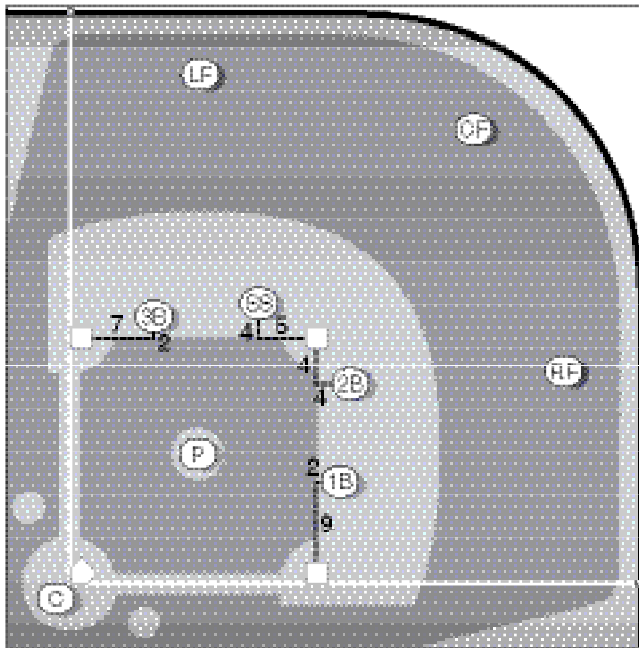
**FIGURE 13.7** No-doubles defense: right-handed hitter, straight-up positioning. Defending against hitter with average running speed, no bunt threat.



**FIGURE 13.8** Defending with the infielders in: right-handed hitter, straight-up positioning, no bunt threat.

even with the base line. If there were an exceptionally fast runner at third base, the middle infielders would move in two steps. Their lateral alignment would be based on how we are playing the hitter.

We have an alignment that we call our flight-of-the-ball defense. In this defensive situation, there is one out and the double play is in order. A runner at third base is the game-winning or game-tying run. The goal of the infielders would be to get the double play if the ball is hit hard enough (flight of the ball) or, if not, to get the out at the plate. The speed of the hitter becomes a huge factor in the prepitch decision-making process, but the positioning is crucial as well. In this flight-of-the-ball defense (figure 13.9), the infielders make the following alignment adjustments. The third baseman plays two steps behind the base line and determines where to throw the ball based on how hard it is hit. The first baseman either holds the runner at first base in a first-and-third situation or plays two steps behind the base line. In our scheme the first baseman always throws a ball hit to him to the plate. We feel it is too difficult to turn a 3-6-3 or 3-6-1 double play with the game on the line. The middle infielders align themselves no deeper than four steps behind the base line. They base their throw on how hard the ball is hit. Their lateral adjustment is based on how we are playing the hitter. They stay close enough to the second-base bag to allow them to turn a double play, as we discussed in the paragraph on double-play depth.



**FIGURE 13.9** Flight-of-the-ball defense (bases loaded): right-handed hitter, straight-up positioning. Defending against hitter with average running speed, no bunt threat.

## Late Adjustments

Many programs teach and believe that the infielders and sometimes the outfielders should make alignment adjustments according to the pitch being thrown. This can be accomplished by having the middle infielders relay the pitch orally or with a hand sign. We have gone away from this system because it allows a smart team or player to recognize the pitch being thrown by the pitcher. What happens is that the defensive player moves in one direction or another, which indicates what type of pitch is being delivered. We believe in relaying the pitch information to the infielders, but we do not move physically in any direction. Instead, we ask the infielders to anticipate in the proper direction. This method prevents the smart team or player from knowing what we are throwing.

Another form of late adjustment is what we call cat and mouse. In this adjustment an infielder shows one depth and moves in or back while the pitcher is in his delivery. We do this in three circumstances:

1. A corner infielder shows the hitter that he is taking away the bunt, but he then plays deeper for better coverage.

2. A corner infielder baits a hitter into thinking that he can easily bunt in his direction, but the infielder moves in to get an easy out on a bunted ball.
3. With a runner at third base and less than two outs, the idea is to show one depth and end up in another depth to confuse the decision-making process of the runner at third base. If the infielders start back and end up in, they might get an easy out at the plate on a ground ball hit to them. If the infielders start in and move back, they might induce the runner at third base to hold on a ground ball hit to them.

Our philosophy includes the cat and mouse with the corner infielders, but we don't believe in the cat and mouse with the runner at third. We like to keep things simple, and we think that the cat and mouse with a runner at third creates complexity that outweighs the benefits.

## **Dugout Communication System**

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, we use two types of communication with the defensive players on the field. We use physical signs and oral signs. During most games, we can use both interchangeably and effectively. In the most important games, however, oral signs are typically useless because players cannot hear them coming from the dugout area. Therefore, we have found it essential to develop our physical signs to a point where we can communicate almost everything to the defense. This approach has served us well when we have participated in regionals and the College World Series. Although this chapter is about defensive positioning, we have both types of signs for all of our defensive systems, including bunt defenses, first-and-third defenses, base coverages, pickoff plays, pitching around hitters, walking hitters intentionally, and game-winning situations. We also have quite a few signs that allow the catcher and our pitching coach to communicate information back and forth and work together to get the hitter out.

Here is some of the information that we find necessary to get to our defensive players:

- Positioning alignment
- Individual defensive player adjustments
- Power or lack of power
- Slice
- Pinch
- Two-strike adjustment