



Shutting Down Hitters

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We often hear that practices belong to the coaches and games belong to the players. We also hear baseball gurus say that pitching is anywhere from 80 to 90 percent of the game. Consequently, coaches must spend quality time preparing pitchers mentally and physically for the challenge of shutting down hitters. Few pitchers have major-league talent, but if coaches can get the most out of each pitcher on the staff, they can be assured of a big-league experience.

Developing Mental Toughness

Yogi Berra once said, “Ninety percent of this game is half mental.” Most pitchers on a staff have the God-given ability to pitch at that particular level or they wouldn’t be on the team. In many cases the amount of success a pitcher enjoys depends on his mental condition, his mental toughness. Most coaches spend 95 percent of their time on the physical or mechanical aspect of coaching and 5 percent on the mental. Then coaches are amazed that their pitchers aren’t mentally tough! If a pitcher lacks skill in the mental game, he will be less successful in what he is trying to do physically—get the hitter out.

Tough physical conditioning helps a pitcher’s mentality. It gives him confidence. Competing against the hitter can be easy compared with doing physical conditioning in practice, so pitching becomes challenging and fun instead of physically draining.

Another way to strengthen a pitcher’s mentality is through positive visualization. A pitcher’s body will respond to the last thought he had. If his last thought was, “I hope I don’t hang this curveball,” his body responds to

the subject of his last thought—hanging the curveball—and he will hang the curve. If his last thought before releasing the ball is, “This curve will break sharply and hit the target low and away in the strike zone,” he will be much more likely to make the pitch.

During my junior year in high school, I was a hard thrower but averaged almost a walk per inning. A couple of months before my senior season began, my coach challenged me to visualize the best hitters in our district each night before I fell asleep. He encouraged me to see my fastball low and away in the zone with the hitter’s bat swinging late and several inches over the ball. He asked me to visualize my curve breaking sharply and finishing low in the zone. Thankfully, I took him up on his challenge and cut my bases on balls dramatically.

For some pitchers, positive thoughts and positive visualizations come easily. Others must practice and condition themselves. Coaches should get the staff together, have them close their eyes, and ask them to visualize the ball doing exactly what they want it to with the result being an out for the team. This exercise can be an enjoyable, relaxing, and productive part of practice.

Mastering the Strike Zone

In any game or situation, especially a big game, the pitcher and catcher must know the zone. Keep in mind that there are four strike zones:

1. The pitcher’s zone
2. The hitter’s zone
3. The rulebook zone
4. The umpire’s zone

A coach should have no sympathy for a pitcher who whines about the strike zone. The only zone that matters is the umpire’s zone. As long as the umpire is consistent, a pitcher can use the umpire’s zone to his advantage. If a pitcher is consistently near the umpire’s zone, he will get calls on the borderline pitches. The pitcher’s pitch should be from the top of the kneecap to the bottom of the kneecap. If a pitcher can live there, 99 percent of the umpires will call it a strike

Creating Deception

Deception is the most underrated tool in shutting down hitters. Many hitters have come back to the dugout wondering how that 84-mile-per-hour fastball got on their hands so quickly. An 84-mile-per-hour fastball with

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deception is just as effective against a good hitter as a 90-mile-per-hour fastball without deception. Some pitchers seem to be sneaky and have natural deception. Others must develop deception. Good extension (reaching toward the plate with a loose arm), keeping the front shoulder closed as long as possible, and breaking the hands with both thumbs down are all ways to help create deception and promote sound mechanics.

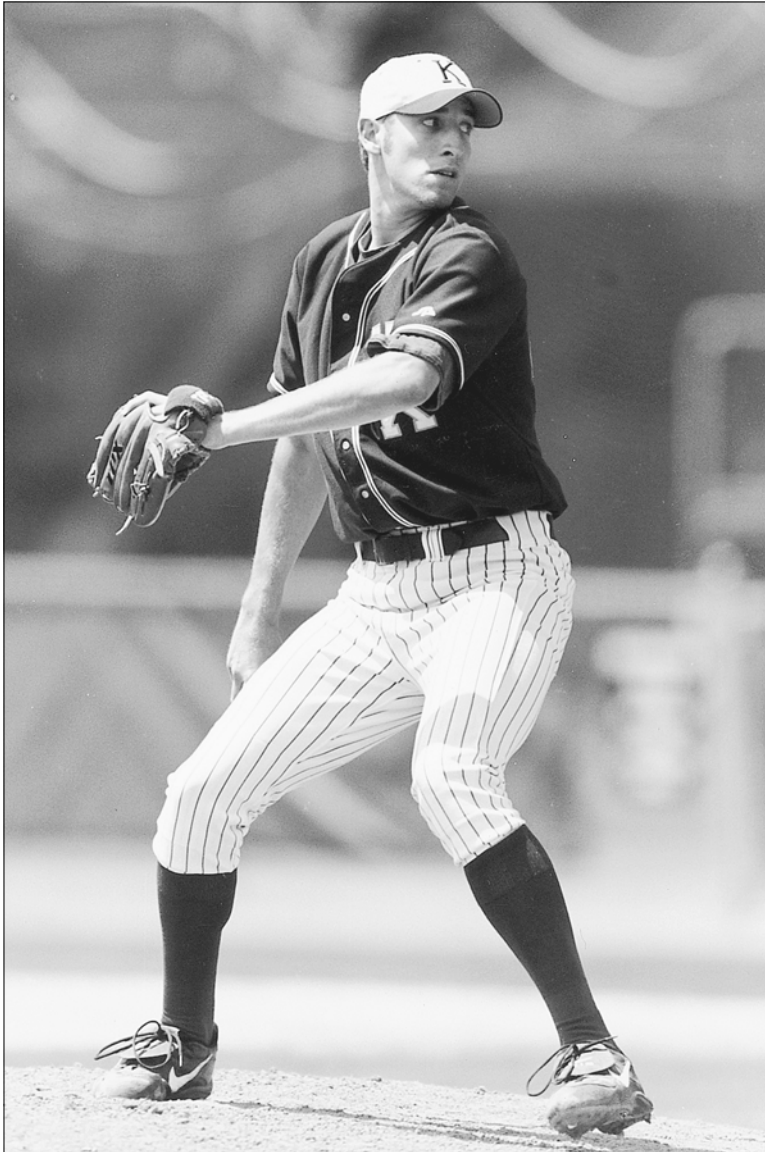


Photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Baseball

Pitcher Brandon Webb shows good deception by hiding the ball from the hitter.

Locating Pitches

Crucial to the art of shutting down hitters is the ability to locate pitches in the zone. At the advanced level of baseball, control is more than just throwing strikes. Control means being able to pitch to a scouting report and locate pitches.

Location is more important than stuff. No matter how a pitcher feels any certain day, location will win for him. Most of the time, a pitcher will not be able to improve velocity or “life” during a game, but he can always fix the location on his pitches with a good mental approach and sound mechanics.

God blessed each pitcher with a certain amount of ability to throw a ball. After a pitcher reaches a certain age, he will most likely not improve his velocity, but he can improve location, movement, and pitch selection. Not all pitchers were blessed with Roger Clemens’ ability, but everyone has 24 hours in each day and seven days in each week to improve and strive to perfect his game. Greg Maddux, with his 86-mile-per-hour fastball, will have the same amount of space in the Hall of Fame as Roger Clemens and his 96-mile-per-hour fastball.

Locating the Fastball

Ninety percent of all pitchers use the fastball as their basic pitch or setup pitch. In professional baseball, pitchers throw more fastballs because of the wood bat and their ability to throw in the low to mid 90s. Even with the use of the aluminum bat at the high school and college level, a good fastball located properly in or near the strike zone can be a pitcher’s bread and butter. A misconception many young pitchers have is that most hitters like to hit fastballs. Fastballs are straight and easier to hit, the pitchers believe, and therefore they are afraid to use their fastballs. Obviously, if a fastball is straight (no movement), then it becomes an inviting pitch for a hitter with good bat speed. But every hitter has a hole or a weakness in the strike zone that makes him vulnerable to a well-located fastball. The advantages of throwing a fastball are that it has more velocity than other pitches and is usually easier to control. In addition, despite what most hitters say, their biggest fear as hitters is getting a ball thrown *by* them or getting jammed and having their “manhood” taken away from them. The key is locating the fastball in the hitter’s hole. If a pitcher can do this, his job becomes much easier because the located fastball sets up all other pitches. Location, not velocity, is the most important facet of throwing a fastball. Next is movement, and last in importance is velocity.

Pitchers can obtain movement by experimenting with grips and arm angles. The four-seam fastball (gripping the ball across the horseshoe, or wide seams) will give optimum control and velocity. The two-seam fastball (gripping the ball between the narrow seams) will in most cases give a sink-

ing or boring movement with slightly less velocity. Actually, the four-seamer and the two-seamer can be like two completely separate pitches.

To establish the inside fastball, the four-seamer is best because it is less likely to tail in to the hitter and give him a free base. If a good hitter becomes too comfortable in the box, the four-seamer can be used to keep the hitter from diving in and owning the plate. The pitcher should always feel as though *he* owns the plate. The four-seamer will help the pitcher establish the fear factor and repossess the plate. With no fear, the .330 hitter becomes a .400 hitter. By establishing the fear factor, that .330 hitter becomes a .250 hitter. A good aggressive hitter, if he is allowed to own the plate, will dive in and be able to cover not only the outside portion of the plate but also be able to hit a good pitcher's pitch two to four inches off the outside of the plate. By coming in occasionally on the hands of the good hitter, the pitcher will keep the batter honest and prevent him from being able to hit the pitcher's pitch on the outside corner. A coach should never advocate head hunting or throwing at hitters, but he should teach his pitchers to establish the inside fastball and occasionally pitch under a hitter's hands. In that way, a pitcher can equalize the aluminum bat. Otherwise, the hitter could become the headhunter by hitting rockets up the middle.

Pitching inside and throwing the ball beneath a hitter's hands is an art that has been given a bad name by those that choose to head hunt and play the game in an unsportsmanlike fashion. Hitters in the new millennium have more protection (helmets with ear flaps, elbow guards, and so on) than hitters did in the past, and pitchers brush hitters off the plate less often than they did in the past. These developments are part of why offense has become more prominent in college and professional baseball.

The two-seam fastball is a great pitch to use to get the ground ball with a man on first for the double play. With a man on first the pitcher must think ground ball as opposed to strikeout. Isn't it more fun to get two outs with one pitch? The two-seamer on the knees or below the hands will most likely get that double-play ball for the pitcher.

Locating the Breaking Ball

One of the most effective pitches in any pitcher's repertoire is the curve or slider low and away. In most cases the pitcher wants the breaking ball in one location. For a right-hander, he should try to throw the breaker down and away from the right-handed hitter and down and in to the left-handed hitter. The pitcher should practice this one location repeatedly in his bullpen workouts. Some pitchers have the ability to throw the backdoor breaking ball (a right-handed pitcher throwing the ball to the outside corner to a left-handed hitter and a left-handed pitcher throwing the ball to the outside corner to a right-handed hitter). Few pitchers can master this pitch, but those that do have a great pitch to use against a pull-oriented hitter.

A pitcher should strive to achieve command of two different breaking balls—one to throw for a strike in any count (the control breaking ball) and one to use as a kill pitch that he can throw on or below the knees with a sharp downward break. The kill pitch is useful with two strikes against the aggressive hitter.

Locating the Change-Up

With the fastball, a pitcher can pitch in the L (up and in, low and inside, or low and away) with success. The curve or slider can be thrown low and away or backdoor to a hitter. The pitcher should always throw the change-up at knee level or below. Ideally, the change should be thrown low and away to coax the hitter into pulling off or thrown below the zone to get a groundball. The low inside change, although not an ideal location, can be effective because the batter will most likely pull the pitch foul for a strike.

While throwing the change, the pitcher must trust the grip and allow the grip to slow the pitch. He must try to maintain his fastball arm speed, delivery, and follow-through. Quality arm speed and a good follow-through increase deception. Again, location is crucial. An average change-up on or below the knees is much better than a great change-up that is up and out over the plate. A change-up that creates deception, changes planes, and is thrown to the proper location is a wonderful pitch for a hurler at any level. A good change-up is usually 10 to 12 miles per hour slower than the pitcher's fastball. The change-up is a great pitch in itself, but it also enhances the fastball, making it appear quicker than it really is.

Practicing Pitch Location

When I was growing up, my brother, Tom, and I spent hours each week throwing to each other and playing strikeout. He would catch me until I struck out three hitters, and then I would catch him until he struck out his three guys. The catcher was always the umpire, and as brothers we competed in everything. When my brother wasn't there to throw with me, I would draw a target on the side of the barn and throw my two or three baseballs toward my target, pick them up, and start over. These early sessions not only improved my arm strength but also enhanced my ability to concentrate, throw strikes, and locate my pitches. Locating the pitches in the zone is similar to shooting free throws, kicking field goals, or putting. One develops the feel for it by practice, practice, and more practice. This requirement is a big reason why a pitcher shouldn't have too many pitches in his repertoire. If a pitcher has a four-seam fastball, a two-seam fastball, a breaking ball, and a change-up and throws a 60-pitch bullpen, he will practice each pitch in his arsenal only 15 times. Add a split-finger and he throws each pitch 12 times. Instead of being a jack-of-all-trades and master of none,

the pitcher should limit his repertoire to four pitches. He should perfect those four and learn to locate them.

A good drill for off-season bullpen work is for the pitcher to identify locations within the strike zone and orally call the zone where he wants to locate his pitch. To a hitter, the low and inside pitch is a one zone, the low middle pitch is a two zone, low and away is a three, middle is a four, middle-middle is a five, middle away is a six, up and in is a seven, up and over the middle of the plate is an eight, and up and outward is a nine zone. Figure 7.1 illustrates the nine zones.

An example of calling location would be for a pitcher to pick the target he wants to hit before his delivery, say “three,” and then try to throw the pitch low and away. This drill holds the pitcher accountable to the coach and catcher and heightens his concentration and effort.

Calling out the location holds the pitcher more accountable. In goal setting, if you tell someone what your goal is, you will work harder to achieve it. If you keep it to yourself, it is easier to give in and fall short of your goal.

At times during the early phases of off-season workouts, the coach may want to challenge pitchers to succeed in locating 16 out of 20 fastballs before they throw any change-ups or breaking balls. Or perhaps, if a pitcher is having trouble locating his change-up, the coach could have him call his zone and locate his change 12 out of 15 times in the two and three zones before moving on to the next sequence.

During these bullpen workouts, the coach should make sure that the pitcher has a plan—a sequence of pitches thrown in the windup, out of the stretch, and to right-handed hitters and left-handed hitters.

Reading Swings

The pitcher should learn to identify whether or not a hitter is “on” a pitch. How can a pitcher tell? If a hitter fouls a pitch hard and straight back to the backstop or pulls a pitch foul and spins a base coach around, he is on the pitch. At this point the pitcher must change speed, location, or both. If a right-handed hitter facing a right-handed pitcher lines the fastball in the first-base dugout, the pitcher should be able to read the swing and know the hitter’s barrel is not quite getting there. The pitcher should not speed up a slow bat; this is not the time to throw a breaking ball unless it is in the dirt. A hitter with a slow bat must start his swing earlier, so curveballs down below the zone can be effective. A good pitch would be another fastball, this time on the hitter’s hands. If a hitter continues to pull the fastball foul, the pitcher should start working off-speed pitches and fastballs on the outside of the plate.

A left-handed hitter will often have a smooth, powerful, sweeping swing. The fastball up and in is typically a good pitch. Because his left hand is



One zone



Two zone



Three zone



Four zone

FIGURE 7.1 Locations within the strike zone against a right-handed hitter.
Photos courtesy of University of Kentucky Baseball.



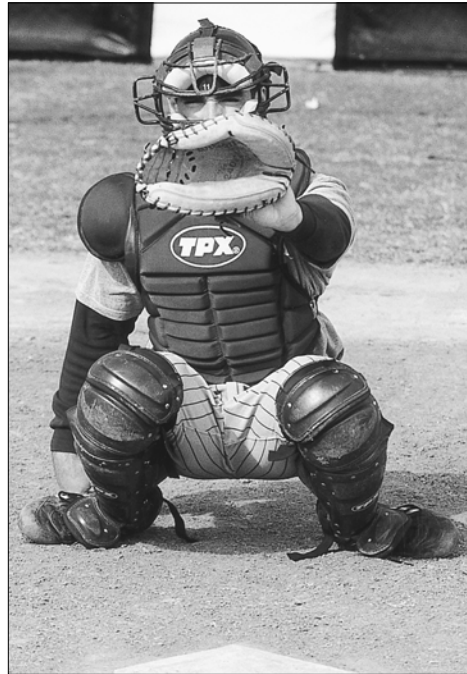
Five zone



Six zone

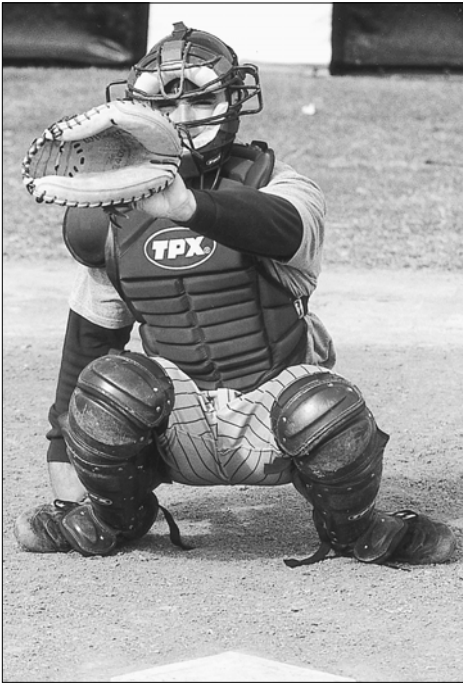


Seven zone



Eight zone

FIGURE 7.1 *(continued)*



Nine zone

FIGURE 7.1 *(continued)*

against an exceptionally hard thrower like Randy Johnson or Roger Clemens. Most likely these hitters “cheat” and guess. The pitcher must be observant and read any change in a hitter’s stance or body language.

With some hitters, especially aggressive high-fastball hitters, a pitcher can “climb the ladder.” If a hitter swings and misses or fouls a high fastball straight back, a pitcher can throw the second fastball a little higher. If the hitter misses again, the pitcher should go even higher for strike three or completely change planes and throw a curveball below the strike zone.

The catcher and coaches can help the pitcher read the swing. The catcher knows how close the hitter is to the plate. He can more easily observe whether the hitter is covering the entire plate with the barrel. With any luck, the catcher will be in the rhythm of the game and know the confidence level of the pitcher and hitter.

Classifying Hitters

In reading swings and communicating with catchers and pitchers, coaches will find it helpful to identify and classify different types of hitters. These classifications and pitching strategies aren’t foolproof, but they serve as a good starting point.

dominant, his swing may have a loop in it, so a fastball down and in can be a dangerous pitch. When a right-hander throws breaking balls down and in, the pitch must break very low and in beneath his swing plane. Change-ups low and away and backdoor breaking balls can also be effective.

For the hitter who has success staying inside the ball, the pitcher should throw hard stuff in with breaking balls away. For the left-handed inside-out hitter, breaking balls down and in and fastballs in can be successful pitches for a right-handed pitcher.

Often, when a power pitcher has overpowering stuff on a particular day, a smart hitter will “cheat” by opening up his stance slightly and starting his swing early. Occasionally, an average big-league hitter will jerk a line-drive foul on the pull side

Classification

Dead pull hitters

Uppercut swing with power

Slow bat (slider bat speed)

Breaking-ball out

Inside-out hitter

“Mix” hitter

How to pitch

Throw fastballs and off-speed pitches away. When ahead in the count, show the fastball in and off the plate to set up the pitch away as an out pitch.

Normally, this is a left-handed hitter using his dominant hand to create a slight loop in his swing. Throw hard stuff up and in and throw off-speed stuff low and away. Breaking balls from right-handers against a lefty with this style should be low and inside, below the zone.

Throw hard stuff in on hands and away (work fastballs in and out). Throw all off-speed pitches below the strike zone—in the dirt with two strikes. Any off-speed pitch up and out over the plate has a chance to be crushed. Don’t muscle up on the fastball, causing it to flatten out and lose velocity.

Obviously, throw a steady diet of breaking balls, but when ahead in the count, throw the fastball up and out of the zone. The hitter may swing at it because he finally sees a pitch he thinks he can hit. If he doesn’t swing, the high fastball will set him up for the good breaker down in the zone. Make him put the ball in play.

This hitter has a knack for hitting the ball to the opposite field. His hands will lead in his swing, and the barrel will stay on the ball slightly longer than it does with other hitters. The inside-out guy likes the outside pitch. The pitcher’s approach should be to pour hard stuff inside below the hands. When ahead in the count, show off-speed pitches away off the plate and get him out with heat in.

This is usually the hardest type of hitter to get out. Mix a repertoire of pitches down in the zone. He is normally the best hitter in the lineup and one of the best in

“Mix” hitter (*continued*)

the league. Keep the guys who hit in front of him off base. In crucial situations, pitch around this guy by mixing pitches six to eight inches off the plate and below the zone.

Getting Ahead in the Count

First-pitch strikes are crucial to a pitcher’s success. With an 0-1 count the hitter must deal with a pitcher’s pitch. The pitcher can throw any pitch in his repertoire in any location he wants. Most pitchers have better control of the fastball than they do any other pitch, but a pitcher can’t afford to become too predictable. As stated previously, a pitcher must develop at least two or preferably three pitches he can throw for a strike in any situation. To keep a hitter defensive instead of offensive, a pitcher at an advanced level should be able to throw the fastball, a control breaking ball, or a change-up for a first-pitch strike.

The first time through the lineup, a pitcher should be able to challenge most hitters with a first-pitch fastball. During the first two or three innings, the pitcher’s arm is live and fresh. The hitter’s timing is normally not at peak performance on the first pitch he sees in the game. The second time through the lineup, the pitcher will need to mix his pitches more on the first pitch, especially against hitters who consistently like to swing at the first pitch.

On the first pitch a pitcher should not be as fine—that is, pitching for the corners or trying to nibble on the corners—as he would be on, say, an 0-1 count or a 1-2 count. The first pitch to a hitter in most cases should be a challenge pitch. A challenge pitch need not be a four-seam fastball. It can be a two-seamer with sinking movement, a control breaker, or even a change-up. Normally, a pitcher should not throw a change-up on the first pitch the first time through the batting order. In most cases a hitter must see a fastball before the change can achieve maximum effectiveness. A change disrupts the hitter’s timing and is usually more effective after the hitter has already seen a fastball. The second or third time a pitcher faces a hitter, a first-pitch change may be very effective, especially against first-pitch swingers. But a pitcher shouldn’t try to paint the black on the first pitch and risk getting behind to a 1-0 count. The 1-0 count, obviously, is a hitter’s count instead of a pitcher’s count.

According to a study by Spanky McFarland based on data gathered from five years of Division I baseball, the batting average on the first pitch, or 0-0 count, is .186. The batting average on the 0-1 count is .199. On a 1-0 count, hitters hit a robust .386. These statistics and those in table 7.1 show that pitchers should challenge hitters in the zone early and get ahead in the count!

TABLE 7.1 Batting Averages on Specific Counts

COUNT	BATTING AVERAGE
0-2	.118
1-2	.151
2-2	.169
0-0*	.186
3-2	.192
0-1	.199
3-0	.267
1-1	.269
2-1	.290
3-1	.329
2-0	.342
1-0	.386

*First-pitch hitter

Reprinted, by permission, from Joe 'Spanky' McFarland, 1990, *Coaching pitchers* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 77.

Once a pitcher gets ahead in the count, he can start expanding the zone. On pitcher's counts—especially two-strike counts—a pitcher should throw his pitches as close to the zone as possible without hitting it. In other words, he should get ahead in the count with strikes and then get the hitter out with balls. When a pitcher gets behind in the count, he too must expand the zone and risk hitting a pitch out of the zone without getting good wood. Most of the time, this results in an out. When the hitter is ahead in the count, a pitcher can sometimes use the hitter's strengths to get him out. For instance, if a hitter is a "dead red" fastball hitter, the pitcher may show him a fastball out of the zone. If the hitter thinks he won't get another fastball to hit, he may swing at one out of the zone and get himself out.

Practically all hitters have a weakness. The coach, catcher, and pitcher have the job of finding that weakness and exploiting it, especially when ahead in the count.

Pitching Behind in the Count

Counts such as 1-0, 2-0, 2-1, 3-1, and 3-0 are known as hitter's counts. Typically, these are challenge counts for the pitcher. A pitcher with an exceptional fastball with life and movement still has a good chance to win when he is behind in the count. The pitcher must trust his stuff and not muscle up or overthrow in these situations. When a pitcher muscles up and overthrows, he usually loses velocity and movement and has poorer control—a bad combination. A catcher or coach can help the pitcher by reminding him to pitch at 98 percent rather than throw at 110 percent.



Photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Baseball

A pitcher with an exceptional fastball still has a good chance to win even when behind in the count. The key is to stay relaxed and avoid the tendency to muscle up and overthrow.

Ideally, a pitcher will have at least a couple of pitches he can throw for a strike when behind in the count. A control breaking ball or change-up are both excellent pitches to throw when he finds himself in a fastball count.

The pitcher must exude confidence when behind in the count. The catcher and the seven guys behind him feed off the pitcher's confidence. When the pitcher is confident, the defense is more likely to make the big play. The pitcher may want to take a deep breath and remind himself that he is still in control. Pitchers who have the ability to relax know that the hitter will be

coming out of his shoes in a hitter's count, so they throw a batting-practice (BP) fastball to coax the hitter into overswinging and popping up or pulling a ball foul to help even the count. A BP fastball is nothing more than a fastball thrown with a smooth delivery that is typically 6 to 8 miles per hour slower than the pitcher's normal fastball. Many confident pitchers have gotten out of big jams by throwing this gutsy pitch.

Repeating Pitches

Sometimes hitters think too much. A pitcher can have success against the thinking hitter by throwing the same pitch in a good location twice in a row. Many times after a hitter has been jammed or takes an inside fastball, he may look for a breaking ball away. Another aggressive fastball on the black on the inside of the plate may freeze the hitter.

A pitcher may miss with a curveball to a hitter, causing the hitter to assume that the pitcher can't get the breaker over and to look for a fastball. By repeating the curve, the pitcher will probably fool the hitter. The pitcher will also make an adjustment and throw a better curve on the second try. So, in repeating pitches, the pitcher not only outguesses the hitter but also makes adjustments on the pitch he repeats. Because the hitter usually is looking "dead red" fastball after a pitcher misses with a curve, a change-up is also a good pitch in that situation.

Pitching Backward

Controlling or having command of at least three pitches allows the advanced pitcher to pitch backward. Normally, pitchers are taught to throw fastballs to get ahead and breaking balls to get outs. Pitching backward simply means to get ahead with off-speed pitches and then throw fastballs in typical breaking-ball counts. Pitching backward has become more popular at the college level to counteract the effect of the ever-improving aluminum bats.

Controlling the Tempo

Several years ago, one of my assistants, Jim Hinerman (now head coach at Georgetown College), conducted a study on the most productive allotment of time for pitchers between pitches. He discovered, to no one's surprise, that pitchers who take a lot of time between pitches usually struggle more than pitchers who work fast. Jim found in his study that the ideal time between pitches (from the time the catcher catches the ball to the next pitch) is 11 seconds. Using a short interval between pitches provides the additional

benefit of keeping teammates on their toes instead of their heels. An aggressive, confident pitcher not only controls the tempo but also keeps his teammates and his fans in the game. A composed, enthusiastic pitcher is more effective and more fun to watch. Umpires enjoy a fast-moving game and sometimes get in a rhythm with the pitcher and call more strikes. The pitcher should not change or rush his delivery, just take less time between pitches.

Another way for the pitcher to control the tempo is to prevent an aggressive hitter from rushing him. A smart pitcher can take an aggressive, hyper hitter out of his rhythm by simply stepping off the rubber, asking for a new ball, or making an extra trip for a rosin bag. A frustrated hitter loses concentration, making him an easier out.

Knowing Your Pitcher

The coach can sometimes help the pitcher avoid big innings by knowing his hurler's weaknesses. Most teams can survive giving up a run or even two during an inning, but a three-, four-, or five-run inning can be devastating even for a great offensive team.

Some pitchers have trouble getting out of the gate and have their worst inning in the first. For the slow starter, the coach should have a good plan for a pregame bullpen routine. The pitcher should throw a simulated first inning in the bullpen with a hitter standing in. He should face a minimum of three hitters—a leadoff hitter, an inside-out hitter, and a breaking-ball-out hitter. This preparation will force the pitcher to bear down and focus before going to the mound.

For the pitcher who has trouble getting the third out in the inning, the catcher and a leader in the infield should challenge and encourage him after two outs. An example may be for the third baseman to say, "All right, get a ground ball for me right here, and we'll go score a few runs for you." The pitcher must be encouraged to think positively and believe he can achieve a three-up, three-down inning.

For the pitcher who tires early or loses it after a certain number of pitches, the coach should have someone ready in the bullpen for relief as the maximum pitch count approaches. The coach may want to review this pitcher's conditioning, long-toss drills, and bullpen routines to improve his stamina and endurance.

Then there is the guy who loses focus and concentration in the middle of an inning. Perhaps the umpire squeezed him or an infielder made an error or his girlfriend is sitting in the stands with an old boyfriend. The catcher and infielders can have a huge effect on a pitcher who loses focus. The catcher can demand eye contact, place the ball in the pitcher's chest, and remind him that the team is depending on him. If that doesn't work, the catcher can signal the coach to get someone loose immediately.

Maintaining Composure

“You can’t control the game if you can’t control yourself” is a statement my pitchers have heard many times. A pitcher can’t control the comments from the opposing dugout, the yelling of the fans, a bad call by the umpire, or an error by a teammate, but he can control how he handles those circumstances. To deal with those events, he needs discipline and concentration; anything less than total composure and positive body language will be harmful. Positive body language helps a pitcher exude confidence, which transfers to his teammates. Negative body language from the pitcher gives the hitter confidence, encourages bench jockeying and catcalls from the stands, and may even affect the umpire on a borderline pitch. The guys in blue are human, too! A baseball field can hold only so much confidence. With negative body language, the pitcher gives his portion to the hitter. With competitive, positive body language, the pitcher can rob the hitter of his confidence.

Working With the Catcher

After a pitcher throws a no-hitter or wins a big game with clutch pitching, I have always enjoyed observing that the catcher is just as jubilant as the pitcher. The catcher was just as into the game as the pitcher was. Seeing a catcher and pitcher working as one in a big game is a thing of beauty.

As a pitcher, I sometimes knew what sign the catcher would hang before he put his fingers down. Sometimes, I would go an entire inning, or even several innings, knowing what pitch he was calling before he called it. These dynamics improve the pitcher’s rhythm and tempo, creating such positive momentum that a pitcher seemingly breezes through a long stretch of innings.

At other times the pitcher-catcher duo are completely out of sync. This may occur because of poor planning and the absence of communication between the coach, pitcher, and catcher. Although not always available, a scouting report on hitters can be extremely helpful. The help that a coach gives his pitchers and catchers in reading swings and discussing hitters and their tendencies between innings can make the difference between winning and losing.

At times a catcher will take his previous at-bat with him behind the plate. This mistake can allow the opposition to have a big inning, resulting in a loss. The catcher should be an extension of the pitcher. As much as possible, the battery should think as one and spend much time together in the dugout between innings.

The starting catcher should catch the starting pitcher as often as possible between starts. He should also catch the last part of his pregame warm-ups before the game. The catcher should know what is working for his starting

pitcher and be in tune with the pitcher's level of confidence and concentration.

The pitcher should have complete confidence in his catcher's ability to block the curve, slider, split-finger, or change-up in the dirt with a runner on third base. This gives the pitcher the incentive to make the kill pitch with two strikes and get out of a jam.

The catcher's body language should build confidence in a pitcher. It is uncanny how a positive gesture from a respected catcher can help a pitcher pitch with a higher level of confidence and efficiency.

A catcher is more than a target with a mitt. While working with a pitcher, he challenges, encourages, informs, and sometimes even helps coach a pitcher. Only a special individual can handle a struggling, high-strung pitcher. When possible, an upperclassman should be behind the dish, even if his skill level may be slightly behind that of an underclassman. Maturity and leadership are key. When Bob Uecker was a rookie catcher for the Braves, he made a mound visit to help the successful veteran Lew Burdette. Lew was steaming mad by the time Bob reached the mound. He told Bob, "Turn right around and get your rear end back behind the plate. I don't want anyone in this stadium to think you know more about pitching than I do!"

Catching is more than catching a ball and trying to throw runners out. A catcher's gamesmanship and moxie will often help a pitcher and team register a W instead of an L.

Calling Pitches and Pitch Selection

Whoever calls the pitches—coach, catcher, or pitcher—must know the pitcher's strengths and weaknesses and, if possible, the hitter's strengths and weaknesses. Most baseball experts contend that good pitching will normally win over good hitting. Just because a particular hitter may be a good fastball hitter doesn't mean that a pitcher should abandon his fastball. If the coach or catcher calls the game, the pitcher should always have the option to shake off the pitch and throw what he believes is his best pitch at that time. Suppose that in a crucial bases-loaded situation the pitcher faces a hitter identified by the scouting report as a breaking-ball out. If the pitcher doesn't have confidence in his curve, he may walk in the winning run with the recommended pitch. The wrong pitch thrown with confidence is better than the right pitch thrown with little or no confidence.

When trying to shut down hitters, confidence and location are more important than pitch selection. Coaches, catchers, and pitchers get worked up over pitch selection. People second-guess them, and they second-guess themselves about throwing the wrong pitch. Remember that 90 percent of the time the wrong pitch and the right location thrown with confidence will get a hitter out.

Shutting Down Hitters



Photo courtesy of University of Kentucky Baseball

If the coach or catcher calls the game, the pitcher should always have the option to shake off the pitch and throw what he believes to be his best pitch at that particular time. Here, Joseph Blanton chooses to throw a slider.

In the 1996 World Series, one of my former players, Jim Leyritz, hit a game-winning home run against Mark Wohlers. At that time Wohlers had one of the best fastballs in the major leagues. He consistently threw in the high 90s. Mark threw a slider and it hung a little out over the plate, and Jim crushed it. All I heard the next day was, "Why didn't Wohlers throw Leyritz a fastball in that situation?" The truth of the matter was that Jim was an excellent fastball hitter, and the slider was the right pitch in the wrong location.

Never say never concerning which pitch to throw in a certain situation. Most coaches list in their top three pet peeves 0-2 base hits. But Greg Maddux

says, "Why waste a pitch? Go ahead and get the guy out on three pitches." Unfortunately, most of us don't have a pitcher with Greg's repertoire and command.

One of my peeves is to see a pitcher throw a ball two feet outside just so a coach won't yell at him. The 0-2 pitch, in most cases, should be a setup pitch, not a waste pitch. For instance, if a particular hitter is a breaking-ball out, the pitcher should throw him a fastball off the plate a few inches inside or perhaps well above his hands out over the plate to set up the breaking ball away. Or if a hitter has a slow bat, a pitcher may want to throw a fastball just off the plate on the outside. Then, on the 1-2 count, the pitcher can come hard in on the hands to jam the hitter with another good heater.

Pitchers from my era were taught never to throw two change-ups in a row and never to throw a change-up with two strikes. Shortly after my minor-league stint with the Reds, I watched Mario Soto pitch against the Mets at Riverfront Stadium. Mario struck out Darryl Strawberry with the change three times and on a couple of occasions threw *three* change-ups in a row. There are rules of thumb in pitch selection but no hard and fast rules.

To shut down hitters consistently, a pitcher must compete, pitch with confidence, and remember that location and movement are more important than velocity.

The competition between the hitter and the pitcher is one of the great matchups in all of sport. Getting a hitter to ground into a double play or strike out with a runner on third base with less than two outs makes a pitcher feel like a million bucks. This doesn't happen by chance; it takes preparation, poise, and a plan. As coaches, we can help pitchers prepare, guide them through a plan, and then help them develop poise and confidence by believing in them every day. An assistant coach several years ago was struggling with his relationships with our players. I asked him one day, "Why do you coach?" He responded immediately by saying, "I love the game." But it is not enough to love the game. Millions of fans love the game. We must love the players who play the game. We coach baseball players, not baseball. When we learn to love our players and can provide discipline and good coaching, then our players will have the poise and ammunition it takes to be champions.

8

Stopping Base Runners

Bob Bennett

Stopping an opponent from executing any offensive aggression requires two fundamental skills—catching and throwing. The more skilled the offensive opponent, the more refined these two fundamentals must be. Stopping the running game, particularly when the runners are highly skilled and well educated, is an extremely challenging endeavor. When both the offense and the defense are equally talented and educated, great moments occur.

For every great defensive strategy created, an equal offensive strategy may also be created. If the talent and education of both sides are equal, I believe that the defensive team has a slight, if not significant, advantage. In no other sport does the defense control the ball. Control of the ball allows the defense to determine whether to throw to the batter, attempt a pickoff play, vary the timing between pitches, throw a pitchout, or run a special play.

Good base runners are aware of the arsenal possessed by the defensive team. A good base runner attempts to gain the edge over the defense by taking command of that arsenal. So the job of putting together a method for stopping the running game is no easy task. Putting together a successful running game is equally difficult. There are no easy solutions. Hard work, concentration, determination, competitive drive, and repetition are the tools I would choose to assemble a method to stop the running game.

Some argue that base running wins or loses more games than any other aspect of baseball. Both the offense and defense must recognize and emphasize base running. This chapter deals with how to stop the base runners; therefore, a strategy for defense will be developed.

A basic defensive premise is to make base runners earn advancement to second base. The defense must not allow runners to advance to second because of negligence, sloppy play, lack of vigilance, or the inability to catch and throw. More singles are hit than extra-base hits. Generally, an error only allows the runner to reach first base, and a walk only places that runner on first base. If the defense consistently keeps the runners who reach first base from advancing to second, winning will likely result.

Developing Strong Catching and Throwing Skills

To stop any base runner, catching and throwing skills are essential. A good throw followed by a mishandled ball produces a failure. A weak or off-target throw followed by a good catch also usually results in an unsuccessful play. Even if every other part of the play is well done, these two basic skills are needed to stop the base-running game consistently. The pitcher's time to the plate with accuracy is a key component. The catcher's accuracy, strength of arm, and quickness of delivery to the base is another important ingredient. The final part of the play is for the infielder to be able to hold his ground (field his position), move to the base, make the catch, and tag the runner. Teamwork is fully in bloom when successfully defending against a base runner.

A first baseman's ability to hold the runner and give an alert call to the catcher when the runner attempts to steal second is crucial. Warnings by one of the middle infielders of an attempted steal of third base are equally crucial, as is the warning by the third baseman should the runner at third attempt to steal home.

Each infielder, the catcher, and the pitcher must perform specific duties well to stop a base runner. To develop the teamwork required to combat the attack of aggressive base stealers, players at each position must hone the skills to match the challenge. Prudent teaching methods call for diligent independent work with each position before coaches can expect perfection as a team. Coaches should strive to teach players at their respective positions the skills necessary to perform successfully. As each player develops, a coach can help refine a player's skills by connecting the various responsibilities. When the pitcher has learned various pickoff moves and understands that timing is important and the catcher has learned footwork and can consistently throw with accuracy to each base, the two positions are ready to work together. When the infielders have raised their level of skills to hold runners, move to the base, and quickly make a tag, the team is ready to defend against the steal. How they perform when they come together tells the coach and the players what skills need improvement and what skills shine.

In working with individual groups, I suggest that no times be kept and that no runners be used in the drills until each group is ready. When they are ready, runners should work only on leads and jumps. If all the parts appear to be working adequately, then go full speed. If the success rate for throwing out runners is poor, identify the problem or problems, go back to individual position work, and refine the skills before going live again. This may take a great deal of time, or it may occur relatively quickly. The skill level of the players and their commitment to the job will determine the speed and success ratio. In order for each position player and the pitcher to understand their roles, their positions must be clearly defined. Each player needs a clear understanding of how important his position is in containing the running game.

Understanding Each Player's Key Role

The pitcher and catcher are extremely important to stopping the running game. They depend on one another to be successful. A great deal of the responsibility for stopping base runners falls on the catcher and pitcher, but each of the other positions has an important role as well.

Infielders

Each infielder has specific duties that he must perform consistently and properly to defend against base runners. Base runners create problems for any defensive unit. Infielders must sacrifice some range to hold base runners close to the base, but the infielder responsible for holding the runner must also be able to field his position. In some situations, and with some runners, infielders give up a great deal of ground to hold the runner close. Other situations may call for the fielder to sacrifice little ground. The defensive team needs to be aware of each situation and make sure that they position themselves to match the situation.

First Baseman

With a runner on first base the first baseman is responsible for holding that runner close to the bag. Normally the first baseman places his right foot on the inside portion of first base and moves off the base to cover his area when the ball is delivered to home plate. This method greatly limits the range of the first baseman. If the runner is a threat to steal second base and the score is close, the first baseman has no choice but to go to the bag and hold the runner.

The first baseman has some other options. He can play behind the runner, approximately three steps toward second base and three steps toward right field, as shown in figure 8.1. (Note that all steps referred to in this and

other illustrations in this chapter are three feet in length.) In this position the first baseman will be able to hold the runner. In addition, he will be able to move closer to his normal fielding position as the pitcher delivers the ball to the plate. In certain situations this positioning is sound. A slow runner will allow the first baseman to play in this position. If the score favors the defensive team in the late inning and the base runner at first is not a key run, then the first baseman may also wisely choose this position. The three-over and three-back position may also be used to set up a pickoff play.

The first baseman may also choose to play back even farther, even all the way back in his normal position (see figure 8.2), depending on the score, the inning, the runner, and the ability of the first baseman and the pitcher.

With a runner at first base and the bunt play imminent, the first baseman must hold the runner at first and then break in to field his position. The first baseman's duties increase with a runner at first base, but the possibility for him to shine and show his worth to the team also increases. From the charging position to cover the bunt, the first baseman and the pitcher can work a timed pickoff that creates an advantage and a weapon for the first baseman.

The first baseman also has the key role of notifying the pitcher and the catcher when the runner advances to second base. When the runner strays off first base and leaves himself vulnerable, the catcher and first baseman should be ever vigilant and use various pickoff plays.

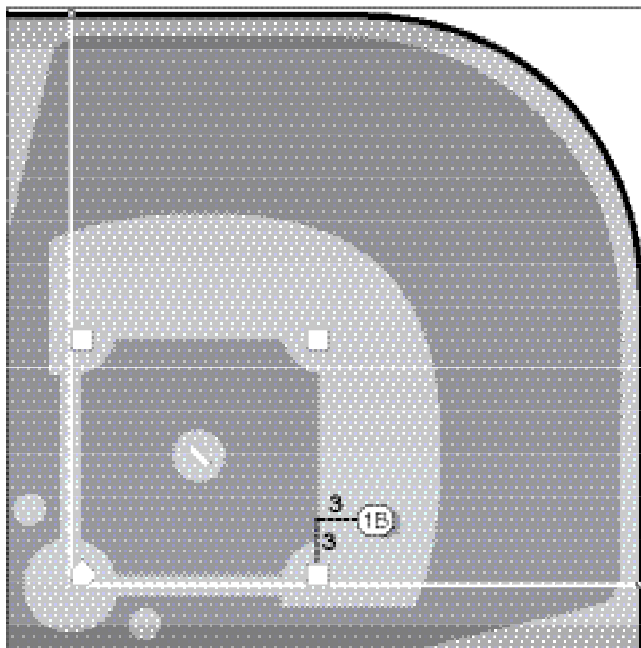


FIGURE 8.1 A position that allows the first baseman to hold the runner is the three-over and three-back position—three steps toward second and three steps toward right field.

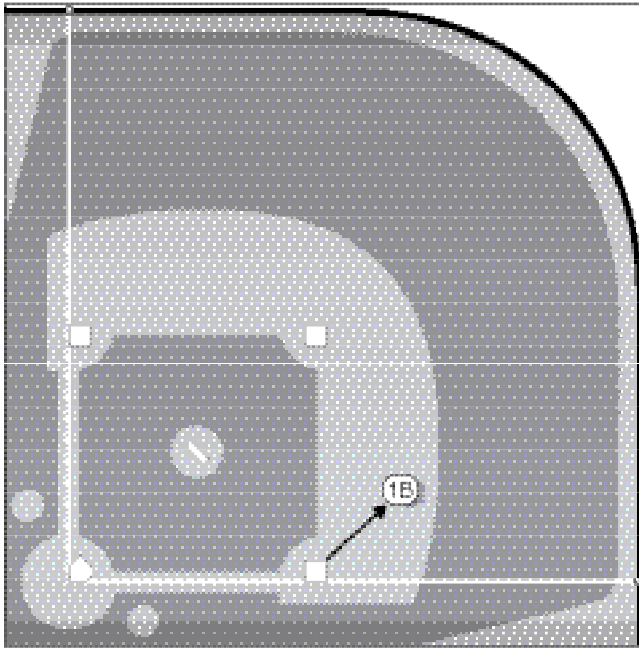


FIGURE 8.2 Alternate position for the first baseman.

Middle Infielders

One of the middle infielders will be responsible for covering second base if the runner attempts to steal that base. That infielder must move in a few steps so that he can both cover the base and field his position. Like the first baseman, the covering middle infielder has a more difficult job and gives up range because of the possibility of a stolen base.

The noncovering infielder can play in normal infield position (see figures 8.3 and 8.4). Some infield coaches have both infielders move in. In this case both middle infielders sacrifice range. A wiser method is to have one middle infielder play in a normal position and the other middle infielder move in to cover the bag. Generally, the second baseman covers the bag when a right-handed hitter is at the plate (see figure 8.5). The shortstop covers the bag when a left-handed hitter is at the plate (see figure 8.6). With skilled hitters at the plate, the middle infielders will be forced to switch coverage and alternate according to the pitcher, the pitch thrown, and the strategy they believe the opponent is trying to employ.

With a runner at second base one of the middle infielders will be primarily responsible to work with the pitcher to keep the runner from getting maximum leads. The other middle infielder will have secondary responsibility and may act as a decoy or even ad lib a pickoff with the pitcher or the catcher.

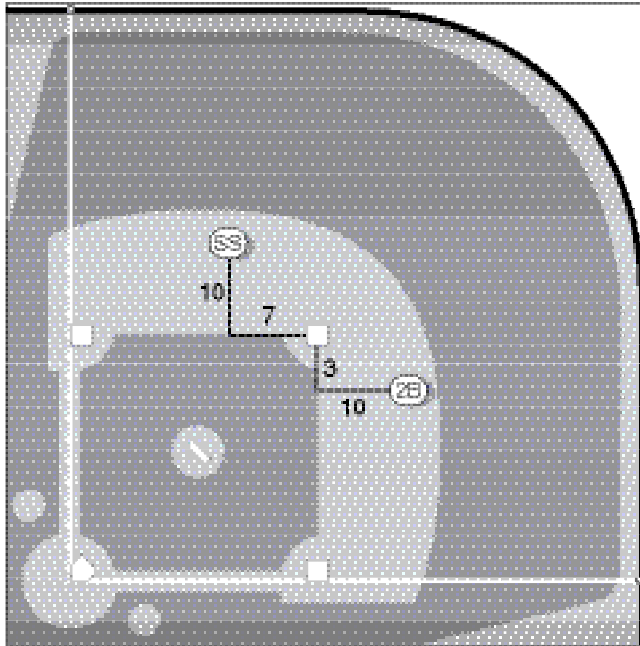


FIGURE 8.3 Normal position for middle infielders (right-handed batter).

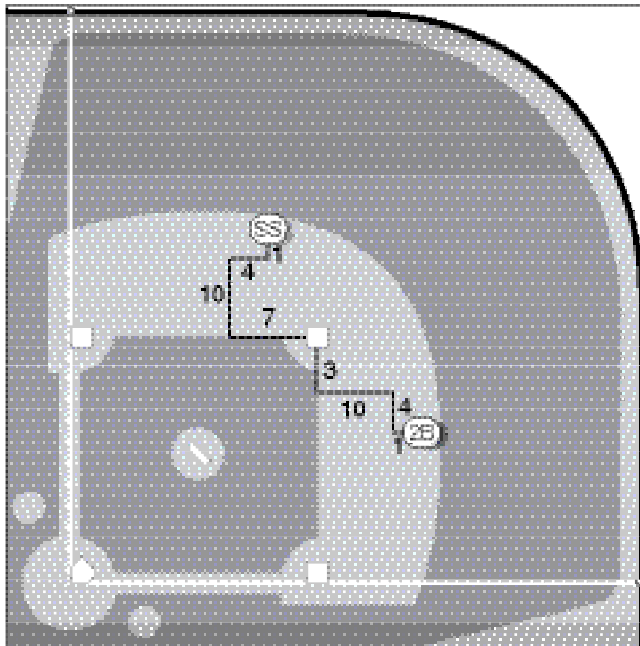


FIGURE 8.4 Normal position for middle infielders (left-handed batter).

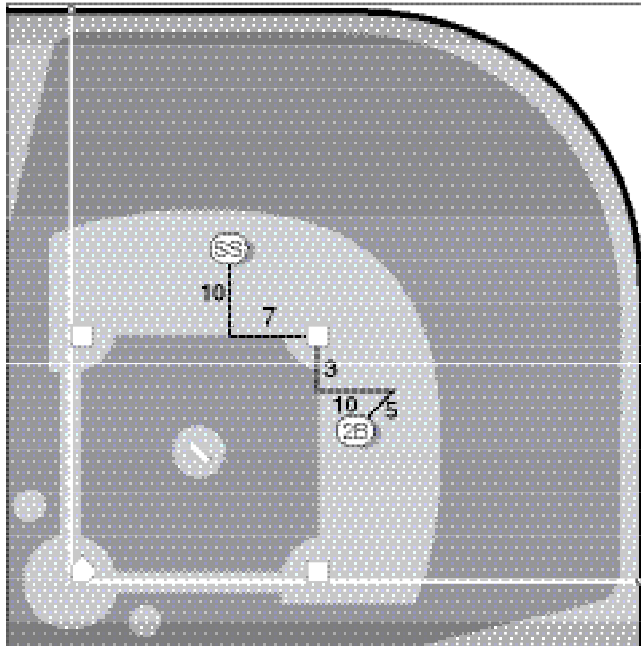


FIGURE 8.5 Middle infield coverage with runner on first base and right-handed batter.

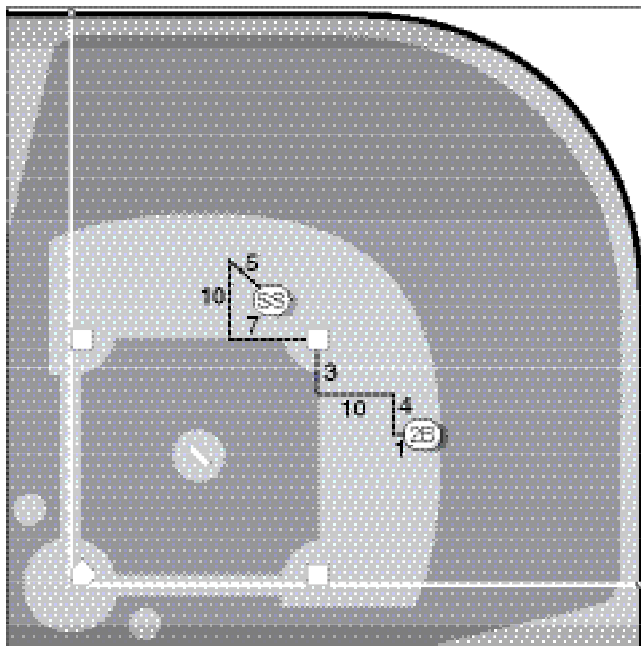


FIGURE 8.6 Middle infield coverage with left-handed batter.

Movement by the middle infielders helps drive the runner back toward second base. These two players have the job of shortening the lead of the runner or getting the runner to move back toward the base before the pitcher delivers the ball to the plate. The pitcher should work closely with the middle infielders. He is responsible for allowing the middle infielders to work with the runner and then be able to recover in time to field their respective positions properly. Timing and movement may be enough to minimize leads and jumps. If the runner maintains a long lead or is getting a good jump, several kinds of pickoff plays can be effective if done properly.

Third Baseman

A skilled, fast base runner who is able to maximize his leads often forces the third baseman to alter his position, especially if the third baseman likes to play extremely deep. Generally, the third baseman has time to play in a normal position and still get to third base to cover the bag on an attempted steal.

The third baseman is also responsible for making sure the runner at third is not allowed to expand his leads freely. The third baseman must force the runner to retreat toward third before the pitcher throws to the plate. The pitcher and third baseman should work out the same kind of timing that the pitcher uses at second base with the middle infielders.

Outfielders

Stopping base runners is not only the responsibility of the pitchers, catchers, and infielders. Outfielders also play an important role in reducing the effectiveness of the running game. An outfielder's negligence can negate a diligent effort to keep the base runner from stealing a base or getting a good jump. Throwing to the wrong base, not hitting the cutoff man, failing to charge the ball, and not getting into good fielding position to make a catch are some of the ways an outfielder allows base runners to take over the game.

Each outfielder should know the strength of his arm. Having this knowledge will help the outfielder cut down lead runners, prevent them from advancing, and stop the trailing runner or runners from advancing. For example, if his arm strength and accuracy is 220 feet, that is his maximum throwing range. At the 220-foot range or less, that outfielder should have a good chance of throwing out a lead runner under normal conditions. Making a throw of greater distance gives the advantage to the base runner. The outfielder's option in such a case should be to give up the run or lead runner and keep the trailing runner from advancing.

Game situation, score, speed of the base runner, the jump by the base runner, and the distance the outfielder ran to get into his throwing range must all be figured into the strategy of whether to throw to get the lead

runner or keep the trailing runner or runners from advancing. Outfielders are keenly involved in minimizing the running game of the opposition.

Catcher

Receiving the ball properly, getting a proper grip, keeping the feet balanced, having a quick and consistent release, and throwing with accuracy are skills that the catcher must have to stop the base runner from advancing on him. To be considered a solid thrower, the catcher must transfer the ball from his mitt to the glove at second base in 1.9 to 2.1 seconds. This time must be consistent to be effective in stopping the steal. A lot of work and a good deal of talent are necessary to attain these marks consistently. If the catcher's times are slower than desired, the pitcher's quickness to the plate may be able to make up the difference and provide adequate time for the catcher to throw out the potential base stealer.

The catcher's stance has a great deal to do with his mobility. The manner in which he receives the ball has a lot to do with how he gets the ball into position to throw. A coach and the catcher should be committed to sound fundamentals in both positioning and receiving the ball.

A catcher willing to throw has some great opportunities to bail his team out of some crucial jams. He should develop one or more pickoffs with each infielder. Base runners become reluctant to take liberties with a catcher who has a quick pickoff move. An aggressive and vigilant catcher stops base runners from taking long leads and prevents those runners from casually returning to base after taking a lead.

An aggressive, prudent catcher will use the pitchout as an important tool to stop the base runner. The pickoff play emanating from the catcher is also an effective weapon.

Pitcher

The pitcher is in control of every play because the action starts with him, so he is the key figure in stopping base runners. His first opportunity to stop the base runner is to keep the runner from getting on base. That is the first line of defense. Obviously, fewer base runners create fewer challenges.

Control is a pitcher's ally when facing good base runners. Control and good stuff create an even stronger weapon against the running attack. These strengths give the infielders, outfielders, and catcher a chance to maximize their abilities. Add power to control and stuff, and the defensive team's advantages grow greater. When the pitcher strikes out a lot of batters, walks very few, and has the ability to minimize the strength of the batter, the infielders get better hops, can make more reliable decisions, and simply face fewer tough situations. Outfielders can position themselves more efficiently and get more reliable jumps on both fly balls and ground balls.

Unfortunately, some pitchers with superior talent grow up relying only on that talent. They don't pay much attention to base runners, give little attention to getting the ball to the catcher quickly, and have little concern about holding runners close to the base. To have an effective defense against a good running team, a good bunting team, or a good hit-and-run team, the pitcher must realize that he is the key to stopping those kinds of offensive teams. The pitcher can develop many tools that will serve him well against such teams.

Vigilance is a word the pitcher should attach to any base-running situation. He must be alert and aware. He must prepare for any situation, avoid surprises, take charge of the game, and be ready to use all available tools. For example, in an average game six or seven runners will reach base by way of base hits. Two of the hits will probably be for extra bases. The pitcher will walk three or four batters, and the defense will make one error. In an average game then, 12 to 14 batters will get on base. The pitcher should hold runners on base, stay vigilant, operate with sound fundamentals, and not allow runners to reach a base they have not earned.

Without a concerted and competitive effort from the pitcher, the defense cannot stop base runners. The pitcher must seek and expect to succeed on every pitch.

Holding Runners

The pitcher has many weapons in his arsenal to battle aggressive and clever base runners, but he too must be willing to be aggressive and clever. Being quick to the plate, varying the kinds of looks to the base runner, varying the timing before he throws to the plate, using different kinds of pickoff moves, stepping off the rubber, and using a glide step are some of the useful techniques and movements he has at his disposal.

Quickness to the Plate

A quick delivery to the plate is the best way to keep a runner from stealing a base. If the pitcher delivers the pitch to the plate in 1.3 seconds or less, only an exceptionally fast runner will be able to steal. Even the fast base runner will be greatly challenged if the pitcher is quick to the plate. He is even more challenged when that pitcher uses the rest of his weapons. The pitcher that commits to getting the throw to the plate quickly enhances all of the other tools and methods for stopping the base runner. A pitch that gets to the plate in 1.3 seconds or less is the primary weapon to use against fast base runners.

Glide Step

By using a lower leg lift, known as a glide step, the delivery to the plate can be quicker. The glide step gets the stride foot down more quickly and should cause a quicker delivery to the plate. The glide step is a good secondary way to defend against a potential base stealer. Good base runners often abort an attempt to steal because they are able to see the change in delivery. When that happens the glide step has served its purpose.

The reason the glide step is not a good primary way to throw from the stretch is that the throwing arm has trouble catching up with the quick stride. The pitcher finds it difficult to get on top of the ball and keep the ball down. When he rushes the arm to get into throwing position, the curveball flattens out.

The move is a useful extra weapon or a supplement to the regular stretch move. The glide step should allow the pitcher to cut 1 to 2 tenths of a second off his normal stretch time. By using it occasionally, the pitcher plants a seed in the base runner's mind that he may use it at any time.

Varying the Timing From the Set Position to the Delivery of the Pitch

The pitcher must come to a definite stop in his stretch position. He can stop and then quickly throw to the plate. He may also choose to hold in the set position before delivering the pitch. Changing the interval between the set position and delivery of the pitch disrupts the timing of the base runner. By controlling the tempo the pitcher destroys tactics like walking leads and makes it difficult for the runner to time the delivery.

The pitcher should know what kind of lead each runner has taken. If the lead is too big, the pitcher should step off the rubber, throw to force the runner back to the base, or throw to pick the runner off that base. Upsetting the timing of the base runner can effectively prevent him from getting a good jump. A smart pitcher appears to change the timing before each delivery to the plate. On one pitch he may choose to stop and then quickly start his delivery. On succeeding pitches he may stop and wait for a count of three before beginning the delivery to the plate. His goal is to keep the base runner guessing and prevent him from timing the delivery.

Varying the Looks to the Base Runner

Before delivering each pitch to the plate, the pitcher must look at the lead of the base runner. After coming to a set position, he may look at the runner once and then throw to the batter. Base runners often read the pitcher's look and get their jump, or start, based on the pattern the pitcher establishes. If the pitcher varies his looks to the runner, he does not establish a pattern.

The pitcher can vary the looks in many ways. The look can be once, twice, or three times. It can be a quick look or a long look. To avoid creating a pattern of where he looks before delivering the pitch, the pitcher should always look home before throwing home or before throwing to any base.

Another way to vary looks at the runner is to use different techniques in head movement. One technique is to move the head from shoulder to shoulder in a parallel direction. Moving the chin up and down is another technique. A combination of both movements is a third way to disrupt the timing of the base runner.

Stepping Off the Rubber and Throwing Over

Simply stepping off the rubber can disrupt some runners by forcing them to retreat and at least rethink the issue. This technique can defuse the runner who takes a walking, or running, lead. Combining the step-off with a throw to the base is also a deterrent to a base stealer. By varying the interval between the step-off and the throw over, the pitcher creates yet another method of forcing the runner to shorten his lead. A well-organized and prudent use of the step-off, timing, and a throw over can also result in a good pickoff play.

The pitcher essentially becomes an infielder when he steps back and clears from the rubber. After stepping off the rubber, the pitcher may also develop one or more methods to deter the base runner from straying off base or from stealing the next base easily. The Barr move is such a pickoff play. Jim Barr, a former major-league pitcher, made this move famous. When Barr, a right-handed pitcher, stepped off the rubber, he stepped back and toward third base. This movement essentially placed his body in a better position to make a quick throw to first base without stepping with his stride foot. After clearing from the rubber, he was legally in a position to throw to first base without using a stride. He spun on his left heel and threw to first base. When variation in timing is added to this move, it becomes an excellent pickoff move (see figure 8.7).

Pitchout and Pickoff Plays

Other effective weapons for controlling the running game include the pitchout and pickoff.

Pitchout

A vigilant, smart catcher prudently uses the pitchout to throw out runners and control the running game. If the pitchout is properly executed, the runner should be thrown out. Both the pitcher and catcher have major responsibilities in executing the play.

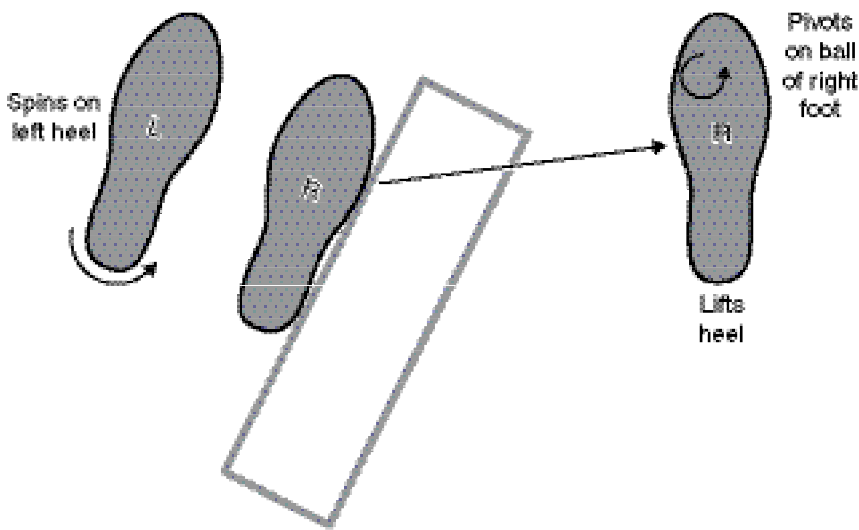


FIGURE 8.7 Barr pickoff move.

The pitcher should bring up his lift leg in normal fashion. To quicken the release, the pitcher shortens his arm arc. This action will get his arm in throwing position much faster than would occur in his normal throwing action. The pitchout is similar to the throw of the catcher. The start of the pitch should look as though it is a regular delivery to the plate. Shortening the arc of the backswing and striding quickly after lifting the leg to its normal height should reduce the pitcher's delivery time to the catcher by 1 to 2 tenths of a second. The pitch must be thrown far enough outside the strike zone so that the batter is unable to reach it.

When properly executed, the pitchout controls the base stealer and virtually destroys the hit-and-run. The pitchout can successfully defuse the aggressive offense in bunt situations. A pitchout combined with a pickoff play by the catcher often cools the hot feet of a base runner.

The catcher should assume his natural stance. When the pitcher lifts his stride leg, the catcher should slide his left foot to a position even with and touching his right foot (right-handed batter). He uses the same technique with a left-handed hitter except that he moves the right foot to a position even with the left foot to get into a good position to receive the pitchout. This movement places his feet in position to achieve good balance when moving to get in front of the pitchout. The catcher has the responsibility of getting his body into a balanced position to throw.

Pickoff Plays

To maximize use of the pickoff, the pitcher should first use the previous information. We often hear that a pitcher attempted a pickoff and that the

play was unsuccessful. But a successful pickoff play need not produce an out. Of course, if an out occurs, the play is successful, but success also comes if the pickoff play forces the runner to shorten his lead or disrupts his ability to get a good jump. Among the several different kinds of pickoff plays are spin turns, jump turns, timed pickoff plays, daylight-method pickoff plays, and count-method pickoff plays. Pickoff plays between the catcher and each infielder are also important in defending effectively against the base runner.

A well-timed pickoff is a beautiful sight for the defensive team and a devastating one for the offensive team. Pickoff plays are difficult to perfect because they require teamwork. Perfecting a pickoff play takes more than two or three group practice sessions. Many kinds of pickoff plays at each base can be effective, but perfecting just one is better than running several sporadically. The team should thus work to excel at one before trying to do several.

Pickoff Plays Between the Pitcher and First Baseman

The pitcher can throw over to first base not only after he comes to a set position but also as his hands move up or down while getting ready to come to a set position, as long as the first baseman is at the bag holding the runner. As the pitcher, particularly a right-handed pitcher, is starting his hands up to get into a set position, he may choose to turn and throw over to first base. He may also turn to throw over as his hands move downward to assume the set position. This move is particularly effective if the base runner tries to get an early lead or if the base runner tries suddenly to extend his lead. The left-handed pitcher is facing the runner. He may also throw to first base before coming to the set position, but he can create more deception by using balance and timing after he has come to a set position.

After the pitcher comes to a set position, he should have a quick, effective way to turn and throw to the first baseman. He can use two basic maneuvers. One is to lift the heel of the push-off foot to clear the rubber, turn on the ball of the push-off foot, step toward first base, and throw. He should bring the ball above the glove as he is making the turn. This will get him into a throwing position quickly. He should work on this standard move until he perfects it.

Another standard maneuver is a jump turn. This move requires the pitcher to jump without balking or bending either leg dramatically, land on his push-off foot, and throw as he strides toward first base. He should lift the ball above the glove as he is spinning in the air. He clearly lifts both feet and must make sure that his stride foot lands in an angle toward first base. Some pitchers are adept at this pickoff maneuver, which is a legal move. Umpires do insist that the heel of the stride foot gain ground toward first base. A spin on the stride-foot heel is illegal. The stride foot must move toward first base.

Either pickoff move can be effective. Whether one move is better than the other depends on the pitcher. A pitcher effective with both moves has two valuable weapons to use against an aggressive base runner. If he perfects one move but not the other, he can use the move not yet perfected as a setup move.

When the first baseman plays behind the runner, the pitcher and the first baseman will have to work out some sort of signal to execute the play. The pitcher must ascertain the intention of the first baseman. If he knows that the first baseman will move to the bag, a timed pickoff can be effective. This can be done by counting or by having the pitcher visually time the movement of the first baseman.

When the first baseman is deep, a count-method pickoff is effective and may surprise the base runner. Generally, on a count-method pickoff, the movement toward first base by the first baseman begins when the pitcher turns his head to look toward home plate. The pitcher begins to count one thousand one, one thousand two, and when he reaches the one-thousand-three count, he turns and throws to the first baseman, who should just be reaching the bag to make a tag.

If the first baseman holds the runner at first, he must move off the bag and charge toward home plate when a bunt is possible or when the batter squares to bunt. A useful planned play calls for the first baseman to leave early. The pitcher waits until the first baseman and the third baseman are strategically located before throwing to the batter. After the pitcher releases the ball, the first baseman charges directly toward the potential bunter. This is one way to defend against the bunt and a good way to set up a pickoff at first base. To run the pickoff play, the first baseman charges off the bag and moves in toward the batter. After taking three steps toward the bunter, he retreats quickly to first base and takes the throw from the pitcher, who has timed the movement of the first baseman. Ideally, the ball and the first baseman arrive at first base at the same time.

A good first baseman is always looking for ways to hold runners close to the bag and still gain as much range as the situation allows. To stop the running game, the pitcher must be vigilant and ready to use any or all of the techniques and plays at his disposal.

Pickoff Plays Between the Pitcher and Middle Infielders

The techniques and strategies used at first base can also be employed at second base. Varying the timing and number of looks, stepping off the rubber, and using a variety of pickoff plays give the pitcher and middle infielders a slight, if not significant, advantage. The pitcher and the middle infielder who has primary base coverage must coordinate their jobs. A steal of third base or failed bunt coverage usually occurs when the players at the two positions fail to work closely with one another. The shortstop or second baseman is responsible for keeping the runner close to the bag. The pitcher

should not throw to home plate until the runner at second base is stabilized or forced back toward the bag.

If the infielder is unable to stabilize the runner or minimize his lead, the pitcher should step off. On particularly troublesome runners, the pitcher and one or both of the middle infielders can initiate one of many pickoff plays. The count method, the daylight method, the fake and go, and the Z-out method are the most common pickoff plays.

Count Method After the middle infielder, usually the shortstop, gives a signal, the pitcher turns his head toward the hitter. That starts the count for the pitcher and tells the infielder to start moving to the bag. The pitcher counts one thousand one, one thousand two, and on the count of one thousand three, he turns and throws to the infielder. The ideal timing calls for the ball and the infielder to arrive at the same time. To add more deception to the play, the infielder giving the signal may signal to the pitcher to look back at the plate more than once. The action should begin on the look indicated by the infielder.

Daylight Method When the shortstop is covering the bag and gets closer to the bag than the runner so that the pitcher can see daylight between the two, the pitcher should turn and throw to the bag. When the shortstop gets far enough ahead of the runner to show daylight to the pitcher, he should always continue to the bag. The pitcher must throw to him or step off. The pitcher should never throw to the plate under these conditions. To offer more security to the pitcher, the shortstop may extend his glove toward the bag to indicate that he is definitely going all the way to the bag. That signals to the pitcher that a pickoff play is on. If the second baseman is covering the bag, his bare hand should extend toward the bag to tell the pitcher that a pickoff play is on.

Fake-and-Go Method Both middle infielders and the pitcher are involved in the fake-and-go pickoff play. After the signal is given, one middle infielder moves quickly to the bag. This action should force the runner back toward the base. After drawing the runner back, the covering middle infielder moves quickly back to his position, inducing the runner to move toward third base and renegotiate his lead. As the covering middle infielder starts back to regain his fielding ground, the other middle infielder moves quickly to the base to receive the throw from the pitcher. The pitcher times the second infielder. His throw ideally arrives at second base as the second infielder gets to the bag.

Either middle infielder may break first and retreat from the base, leaving the other middle infielder responsible to time the action, move in to receive the throw, and make the tag on the runner. A carefully designed signal system indicates to the pitcher which infielder is to take the throw. The middle infielders signal each other to determine who is responsible for