

the fake and who is responsible for receiving the throw. One of them then signals that information to the pitcher.

Z-Out Method The Z-out move is an effective pickoff play. The move can be created in the process of driving the runner back to the bag. As the shortstop moves toward the bag, he can read the base runner's reaction. If the runner immediately moves back to take a lead as the shortstop regains his fielding position, the Z may be effective. In such a case the shortstop moves off the bag in a different angle than normal. The pitcher will be able to recognize the difference in the angles. The shortstop moves off the bag but drifts enough toward center field so that the pitcher can recognize that a pickoff play is on. Besides setting the angle, the shortstop can indicate that the pickoff play is on by opening his glove to the pitcher. This pickoff is somewhat like the daylight method in that it can be done spontaneously. The major difference is the angle taken by the shortstop. The second baseman can use the Z-out as well.

Pickoff Play at Third Base

Prearranged pickoff plays can be used at third base. The pitcher and third baseman can use the count method, or the third baseman can break for the bag when the right-handed pitcher is at the top of his leg lift. The third baseman can also work an effective pickoff with the pitcher by pointing with his bare hand toward the base, indicating to the pitcher that he is going to the bag. The pitcher should visually time the third baseman and get the ball to the bag as the third baseman arrives.

Not as many pickoff attempts are made at third as are made at other bases. Both vigilance and prudence are necessary to defend properly against the base runner at third base. Timely throws to the base are important in preventing the runner from stealing home or advancing on a pitch that gets a few feet away from the catcher. If the runner is taking a reasonable lead and not forcing the third baseman to alter his position, then attempting a pickoff is unwise.

Bases-Loaded Pickoff

The catcher should always be looking for ways to help his pitcher when he gets into a jam. A successful pickoff play does that. The catcher initiates the bases-loaded pickoff play, which is most effective when the shortstop covers second base. This planned play requires a signal to the shortstop. A prearranged signal alerts the pitcher to pitch from the windup position. The signal indicates that on another signal from the catcher, the catcher will indicate to the pitcher when to step off the rubber with his push-off foot, pivot, and throw to the shortstop, who is covering second base. The catcher is responsible for the timing between the shortstop and the pitcher. This pickoff can be used when second and third base are occupied.

First-and-Third Pickoff

With runners on first and third, the pitcher has control of the situation if he uses his defensive arsenal. Besides the normal pickoff move, the first-and-third pickoff play can put some fear and caution into the mind of the base runner. To say that this play never works is to admit that one has not been observant. Remember that a pickoff play does not have to result in an out to be successful. If it freezes the base runner, causes the base runner anxiety, or creates doubt in the base runner's mind about the kind of lead or jump he can get, the play is successful. When run correctly, the first-and-third pickoff not only creates anxiety and freezes the base runner but also often results in an out.

The right-handed pitcher should make the start of his delivery look normal by lifting his stride leg to its normal height. He should look home before and during the leg lift. Because this is prearranged, he can use balance to make it look as though he is going to deliver the pitch to home plate. But instead of striding toward the plate, he sets his stride foot down by using a shorter stride and directing the stride foot toward third base. After a short stride toward third base, the pitcher releases his push-off foot from the rubber and then quickly pivots and throws to first base. At the least, this move causes the runner at first to hold his ground. If the runner at first base starts to steal as the pitcher lifts his stride leg, the runner will be picked off. The reverse of this play can also be used. The right-handed pitcher should quickly step back off the rubber, fake throw to first base, and then quickly use a full pivot and attempt to pick off the runner at third base.

The left-handed pitcher can step back off the rubber, fake a throw to first base, and then pivot to attempt a pickoff at third base. The left-hander may also fake a throw to third base, disengage from the rubber by stepping back, pivot quickly, and throw to first base.

Defending Leads and Special Plays

To contain the running game, a defensive team should develop specific strategies for defending against leads and special plays like the delayed steal, the double steal, the bunt, the hit-and-run, and the run-and-hit.

Running or Walking Leads

The remedy for defending against the walking lead or the running lead is to destroy the base runner's timing. This type of runner takes a short lead and starts his movement as the pitcher delivers the ball. An inexperienced pitcher, or a pitcher who refuses to pay attention to what the base runner is doing, can be run out of the ballgame. On the other hand, a vigilant pitcher who

Stopping Base Runners

varies his looks and changes his timing between the set position and the beginning of the throw to the plate will stay in control of the game. The pitcher should throw to the base more often to break the rhythm of the base runner. Mixing in a glide step with the regular leg lift moves is also a good maneuver.

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A vigilant pitcher who varies his looks and changes his timing between the set position and the beginning of the throw to the plate will stay in control of the game.

Delayed Steal

A team should always guard against the delayed steal. Generally, this steal is effective only when one or more defensive players become sloppy or are negligent. The delayed steal is usually effective because a middle infielder fails to drift toward the bag after the pitch passes the batter. The delayed steal is even more inviting for the runner when the middle infielders take their eyes off the ball after it passes the batter. A delayed steal may be successful if the catcher gets in a habit of lobbing the ball back to the pitcher. If the defensive players play each pitch with intensity, the delayed steal is less likely to be successful.

First-and-Third Situation

The double steal is always a threat and can be a nightmare for a team that is unprepared. It is hard to defend if the defensive team is unable to play catch. This situation requires the ultimate in teamwork. Each player has important responsibilities in defending successfully against the double steal.

Again, the defensive team has several weapons available, and they have the advantage of knowing which weapons they will use. The catcher has four basic ways to attack the runners:

1. He can look the runner back at third base and throw to second base.
2. He can look the runner back at third base, arm fake to second base, and throw to third base.
3. He can look the runner back at third base and throw high to the pitcher. If the runner bites on the high throw, the pitcher will be able to throw him out at third or get him in rundown between home and third base. This play requires a signal from the catcher to the pitcher before the signal for the pitch is given.
4. He can look the runner back at third and throw to either the short-stop or the second baseman. When the catcher uses this option, he must signal to the middle infielder that this special play is on should the runner attempt to steal second base.

The catcher must look the runner back on each of these options. Should the runner take too big a lead on any of these plays, the catcher should abort the planned play and simply throw the runner out at third base or get him in a rundown. If the runner at third breaks toward the plate as the catcher is looking him back, the catcher aborts the planned play, runs at the runner, and makes a tag or throws him out at third base.

This play requires discipline and aggressiveness on the part of the defensive team. The catcher must be well schooled in footwork and rhythm in throwing. The pitcher and each of the infielders must also be aggressive and disciplined.

The pitcher has control of the ball. His timing and ability to hold runners close are key components. In addition, the pitcher can use one of several pickoff plays. He must alert himself before each pitch of the potential double-steal attempt. Other weapons available to the pitcher are several kinds of pickoffs and the pitchout.

The middle infielders work as a team on this play. One of the middle infielders will receive the ball, and the other serves as the eyes for the receiver.

The Bunt

Most teams that use base stealing as a key component in their offense also include the bunt, the drag bunt, the squeeze bunt, and the push bunt to augment the running game. Again, catching and throwing are critical here. Unless the bunt is placed perfectly, an out should result. Often the defensive unit that is extremely good at playing catch can turn the bunt into a double play or get the lead runner. In that case the offense has failed to execute effectively.

A good bunting team is a formidable foe because they force the defense to execute. If the defensive team is aggressive, is able to play catch, and uses the arsenal they have at their disposal, they will prevail.

Regular bunt defenses, special bunt defenses, the pitchout, the pickoff play, holding runners close, and pitching high fastballs up and in all help defuse the bunting game. A well-disciplined and aggressive defensive team invites the opponent to bunt. A bunt should result in an out.

Hit-and-Run and Run-and-Hit

Stopping the running game also includes successfully defending the hit-and-run and the run-and-hit. Running teams invariably use the two plays to aid base runners. Both plays are difficult to defuse.

The pitcher who stays tuned in to the tendencies of his opponent, is aware of game situations, uses the pitchout and pickoff, and is able to execute good pitch selection and pitch placement makes these plays difficult for the offensive team to execute.

These plays place demands on the middle infielders. Both middle infielders must hold their ground until the hitter misses the pitch or until they determine the direction of the hit ball.

Knowing the Opponent's Offensive Tendencies

A key part of defusing an explosive base-running onslaught is knowing the opponent's past tendencies. Careful study of a team will reveal some patterns. Gaining knowledge of these tendencies is the first step toward developing a way to defend against them.

Base Runners' Tendencies

The defensive team should study the opposition and learn the tendencies of each base runner. Some runners will present a threat on every pitch, whereas others will apply pressure only in certain situations. To defend properly against the opposition, the defensive team should carefully consider this information.

A runner who takes a minimal lead should not draw many throws, particularly if he is cautious and eager to get back to the base after each pitch. The defensive team should watch for any change in the runner's body language or the size of the lead he takes. Any runner is a potential threat to attempt a steal.

Runners with a history of aggressive base running require a good deal more attention. Almost every base runner does something when he attempts to steal a base that is different from what he does when he is just getting a good lead. Only careful observation can pick up these little details.

Coaches and players should examine the opposition closely. Some teams and individual base runners attempt to steal on curveball counts or in counts when the pitchout is less probable. Some are more aggressive in certain situations. Those who seek to excel defensively will try to learn about these tendencies.

Counts favorable to the runner are 3-2, 3-1, 2-0, and 2-1. The pitchout is less apt to be called on these counts. These counts are also favorable for the hit-and-run and the run-and-hit. Because these counts are favorable to the base runner, the pitcher and catcher should be alert and at their best.

Some base runners are good at picking breaking pitches or off-speed pitches for steal attempts. A 1-2 or 2-2 pitch is considered a breaking-ball count. A 2-0 or 3-1 count is considered an ideal situation for a change-up. Some pitchers, however, regularly use the breaking ball and change-up on other counts. To stop the base stealer from gaining an advantage, the pitcher should avoid patterns. A good pickoff move, intelligent pitch selection, pitchouts, and a quick move to the plate are all methods to neutralize the base stealer. When the pitcher uses these weapons to contend with the base runner, he must simultaneously maintain focus on competing with the hitter.

Coaches' Tendencies

Every coach develops a unique base-running strategy, and each has tendencies, ranging from very conservative to extremely daring. Some coaches play by the book more than others do. Some coaches are guided by hunches, whereas others lean more strictly to the dictates of strategy. Some are predictable; others are not. Knowledge of the opposing coach's tendencies may be more valuable than knowledge of the tendencies of the base runner.

The following list serves as a quick review of the most effective strategies for stopping the running game. Keep in mind that total teamwork is necessary to stop base runners. All of the entities must be coordinated to be effective. As stated earlier in this chapter, a strong desire to keep base runners from advancing without their earning the trip is paramount in stopping aggressive base runners.

- Take control of the game.
- The pitcher must be quick to home plate.
- Pay close attention to each base runner.
- Be aware of the situation.
- Know the tendencies of the opponent.
- Develop and be able to execute one or more pickoff plays at each base.
- Vary the looks at the base runner.
- Vary the time between the set position and the beginning of each pitch.
- Use the glide step in key situations.
- Use the pitchout.
- Hold runners close, especially on steal situations, bunt situations, and hit-and-run situations.
- Outfielders should throw to get lead runners only when the percentages are on their side.
- Keep trailing runners off second base.
- Each position must assume responsibility.
- Compete fully.

A well-orchestrated defense with desire and sound fundamentals can often shut down a good running team. A sound defensive unit may even

make it appear that the offensive team is running itself out of potential rallies. Making this happen requires hard work and hours of correct repetition. Without hard work and effort, a defensive unit will be overmatched by a running team.

The runner will have an advantage if only one part of the defensive team misfires. Each player of the defensive unit must take pride in his job. Without teamwork, the defensive team forfeits the advantage of controlling the ball.

Although no formula can stop base runners entirely, the defensive unit has ways to compete and come out on top. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the team with the ball has the advantage because they initiate the play. They control the tempo unless the opposition is good enough to take control of the situation. Never lose sight of, or fail to respect, the opponent. The opponent also has maneuvers, plays, and the ability to formulate plans and compete effectively against defensive strategies. A good base runner is difficult to stop, but a defensive unit with a well-organized plan, teamwork, vigilance, and good execution can slow him to a crawl.



Fielding the Position

Geoff Zahn

Back in 1995 I was the pitching coach for Pepperdine University. We were ahead 1-0 in the ninth inning at Santa Clara University, needing a victory to have any shot at the conference championship. Our starting pitcher, freshman Randy Wolf, had just walked the leadoff hitter. I visited the mound to see whether he was too tired to continue. Before I got there he asked, "You're not going to take me out are you? I've got the next guy and I am going to finish this game." I had my answer before I asked the question. I reminded him that this next hitter would be bunting and headed back to the dugout. The next hitter put a perfect sacrifice bunt down the first-base line. I immediately yelled for the ball to be thrown to "One, one!" Randy was already charging for the ball. He picked it up and in one motion while falling across the line, jumped and fired the ball toward second. My voice went from "Oh no!" to "Great play!" as the throw beat the runner at second base. I had just witnessed the greatest fielding play by a pitcher that I had ever seen or have seen since in my 30 years of playing and coaching. Pepperdine and Randy Wolf went on to win that game 1-0.

Randy could never have made that play except that he believed he could make it. In his mind, nothing could stop him from making that play on that bunt. He had decided that the runner was not getting to second base by way of a bunt if he had anything to do with it. He didn't have to wait for the catcher to tell him where to throw. He had already made the play in his head, and he only had to react to where the ball was bunted.

How did Randy, or any pitcher, attain that mind-set of utter aggressiveness that allows him to make good, and sometimes great, fielding plays? If a pitcher wants to be a good fielder, he must start with his thought process. He can practice all he wants. He can do drills all he wants. He can strategize

all he wants. In the end it comes down to having an aggressive thought process that wills him to make the play. How many times have you seen players make plays that you didn't see in drills or that ran contrary to the strategy you had in mind for a particular situation? I have seen it happen many times. As coaches, we often think we have a drill for everything, and we forget to reinforce the very thing that will make great plays happen.

The key to everything I am about to discuss about fielding the position is that pitchers must have a tremendous will, a mind-set that they are going to win the game. You must reinforce that goal repeatedly so that it permeates everything they do. You ask them, "Why are you out there on that mound?" The answer they must offer is, "Someway, somehow, I am going to win this game." It goes from getting strike one, to getting the first batter out each inning, to saying, "I am going to get three outs before this team scores." Only then will fielding occupy as large a place in the pitcher's mind as throwing strikes. Fielding the position then becomes as important as any other facet of the game, a vital part of getting three outs before the other team scores. Thus, when you discuss and drill them on covering first, picking up bunts, backing up bases, and so forth, they approach it with a mind-set that fielding will help them win.

This may sound elementary, but it isn't. Players today subconsciously put other concerns above winning. How hard am I throwing? Are my mechanics good today? Is my curve breaking correctly? Are the scouts in the stands? What do I have to do to make the right impression? Will these guys score enough for me today? Will my team make the plays behind me? These are just a few of the things that can take first place in a pitcher's mind unless he is a born winner or unless his coach keeps winning in the front of his pitcher's mind. The winning mind-set sets the stage for the thinking and strategy of the different plays.

Covering First

No batter-runner can beat the pitcher to first base. In baseball lingo we hear, "There ain't a runner alive who can beat me to first." On any ball hit to the left side of his left shoe, the pitcher must explode with his first few strides toward the first-base line about 10 feet in front of the first-base bag (see figure 9.1). The pitcher should run to the line rather than directly to the bag for three reasons:

1. By running to the line and then up the line, the pitcher will be in line to hit the bag even if his attention is focused on catching the ball.
2. By running up the line and tagging the inside of the bag, the pitcher will avoid being spiked by the runner on a close play.

3. By getting to the line the pitcher creates a better angle to receive the ball from the first baseman. The only time the pitcher goes to the outside of the bag is when the first baseman fields a ball that takes him into foul territory and calls for the pitcher to go to the outside of the bag.

Once the pitcher gets to the line, he starts to get his body under control by taking short, choppy steps. This action gets him ready to become a first baseman and stretch for the ball in case the first baseman bobbles the ball and is not ready to feed it to him. The pitcher, like all other fielders, should always expect a bad throw. If he expects a good throw, he will not be ready to adjust to a bad one. If he always expects a bad throw, however, he will be prepared for the good throw as well as ready to make that extraordinary play on the bad throw.

A pitcher should go directly to the bag only if he gets a late start off the mound for some reason or if a runner is on first in a double-play situation. With a double-play ball hit to the first baseman, the pitcher heads directly to the first-base bag and yells to the first baseman that he has the bag. If the pitcher has time he gets to the bag under control and turns to stretch as a first baseman. This play is difficult for a left-handed pitcher because the ball is often on its way toward first from the shortstop before the lefty reaches first. Ideally, the left-handed pitcher should turn to stretch for the thrown ball with his left foot on the bag. As a left-handed pitcher, I found that I often didn't have time to get turned around, and I learned that it was more efficient just to put my right foot on the bag and stretch for the throw with my left foot.

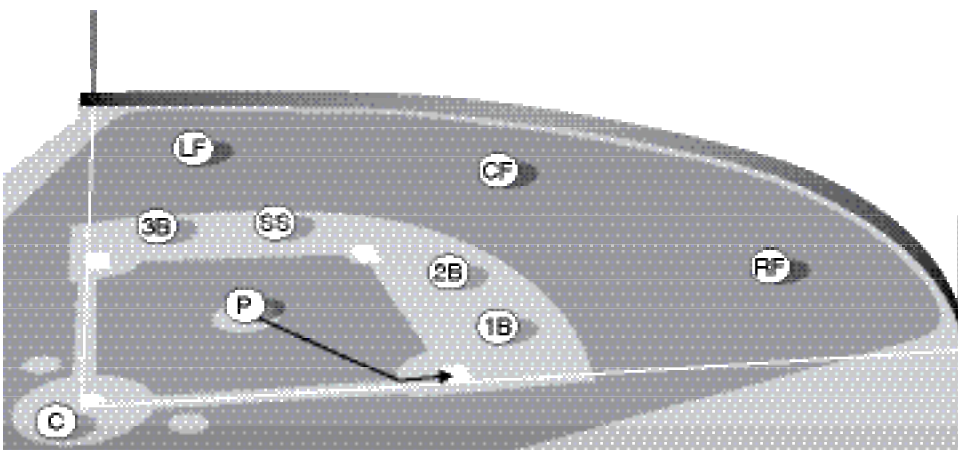


FIGURE 9.1 If the ball is hit to the left side of the pitcher's left shoe, the pitcher should cover first by running to the line about 10 feet in front of the first-base bag and then up the line to the bag.

Gene Mauch, my manager with both the Minnesota Twins and the California Angels, employed the best strategy for balls hit to the right side. The first baseman's mind-set is that he will come to get every ball he can unless he hears the pitcher call for the ball. The first baseman does not need to call for the ball because the pitcher assumes that he is coming after everything. The first baseman also knows that if he cannot get the ball to the pitcher before the pitcher gets to the line, the pitcher will slow down and stop at the bag to receive the throw. Ideally, the first baseman gets the ball to the pitcher early so that the pitcher has time to find the bag and step on the inside of it.

The pitcher's mind-set is that he will field every ball he can get that is in line with his path toward the first-base line and every ball that is in front of that line. He will only call for the batted ball that he is positive he can field. If he just *thinks* he can field it, he should let it go and let the first baseman take it. With any ball that the pitcher fields on his way to first base or any ball that he is late in calling for, he should be prepared to beat the batter-runner to first base because the first baseman may have committed too far toward fielding the ball. If, on a ground ball, the pitcher has to deviate toward second base from his path to the first-base line, he should definitely let the first baseman take the ball. This strategy works well because both the first baseman and the pitcher can remain aggressive within their areas of responsibility and there is no confusion about who is calling for the ball. This strategy is also successful when a batter pushes a bunt toward the right side.

With a runner on second base at the time of the pitch, the pitcher must prepare himself to throw home after he catches the ball and touches the first-base bag. He does this by pushing off the bag to the inside of the base line and moving his feet and arm into a position to throw home. By doing this, he protects himself from being hit by the runner crossing first base. By getting his body ready to throw, the pitcher is ready for the call from the catcher to throw home.

When we did our pitcher's drill at Michigan, we always simulated having a runner on second, and we had the pitchers throw home so that they were comfortable with making that throw. We also hit a number of ground balls that the pitcher had to read and decide whether to field the ball or let the first baseman handle it. When any fielders communicate I want them to use their "big-boy voice," the voice that everyone in the stadium can hear. By using that voice the players become accustomed to being decisive in calling for the ball.

Fielding Bunts

Again, the mind-set of the pitcher is that he will field everything and throw out the lead runner. He must have the attitude that the offense must ex-

ecute perfectly to make a sacrifice or drag bunt successful. Some coaches designate areas in front of the plate and the pitcher's mound that players use to decide whether the throw goes to second or safely to first. I believe the situation of the game and the ability and attitude of the pitcher dictate where the throw goes. Usually, if you are way up in runs or way down, you will make sure to get an out. Or, if you are up by two in the eighth or ninth inning, you will make sure to get an out. If you believe that runs are going to be hard to come by because of inclement weather or a developing pitchers' duel, even if it is early in the game, you want to be aggressive.

Again, attitude plays a big role in where the throw goes. Some players in the big leagues, even when they fielded balls in plenty of time to get the lead runner, always opted to make the safe play. The pitcher must be confident that he can make the play. Here is where a coach can make a big difference in a player's confidence. I will never forget a situation that occurred when I was in high school during basketball practice. I took a crazy jump hook shot that careened high off the backboard. My coach blew his whistle to stop practice. I was sure he was going to chastise me for taking such a low-percentage shot. Instead, he asked me if I thought I was going to make that shot. Inside I thought I could, but I thought he wanted me to say no. He then chastised me to take only the shots I thought I could make. He said there was nothing wrong with the shot as long as I thought it was going in. He taught me a valuable lesson. He was allowing for my individuality within my ability, and he was giving me the freedom to break out of the routine play. I ask my players if they think all those crazy shots that Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson made were the first time they ever took those shots. Of course not: those players practiced those outlandish shots repeatedly so that they just happened in the game. For that reason you should encourage your players to stretch themselves in practice to perform and practice the extraordinary play. They have fun with it, and you can applaud with them when they have the confidence to execute it in a game.

The key to fielding bunts efficiently is the footwork. Whenever possible the pitcher should get his footwork out of the way and be in a position to throw the ball before he fields the bunt. An aggressive pitcher will get his feet in a position to get the lead runner. Then, if he doesn't have a play at the lead base, he makes the adjustment to get the out at first. He should be in a position to take a crow hop toward the base he is throwing as he picks up the ball. For the left-handed pitcher that often means getting around the ball and turning toward the glove side. The pitcher must use his feet. I tell them often, "You didn't make a bad throw. You had bad footwork." When the pitcher picks up the ball he should use both hands, although he should also practice picking up a stopped ball with his bare hand. Pitchers should also practice throwing like an infielder without having to stand up all the way. They must learn this skill because often they do not have time to straighten up and crow hop toward the bag to make a good overhand throw.

Getting the body in position to throw before fielding the ball and then throwing from a lower fielder's position is more efficient. Figure 9.2, a and b show the pitcher throwing from a lower position with knees and back bent from picking up the ball. This throwing action resembles that of an infielder. The pitcher can perform it more quickly than he can the action of fielding the ball and then straightening up to make an overhand throw, as shown in figure 9.2, c and d. In the time the pitcher takes to straighten up to throw, the runner has made two or three steps toward first base. When the pitcher throws to a base, he should make a good, firm throw, but he should not throw all out using his best moving fastball. If possible, he should grip the ball with four seams.

Participating in a Double Play

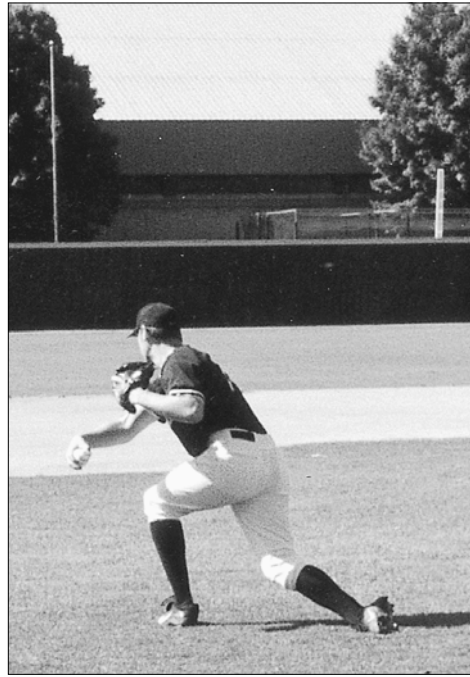
When a runner gets on first base with less than two outs, the pitcher should be thinking double play. Before he ever gets on the rubber to look in for the pitch sign, he must check with his middle infielders to see who is covering on a ball hit back to the pitcher. The shortstop is generally the one who will let him know by pointing to the pitcher and either back to himself or toward the second baseman. I believe it is best to have the shortstop take as many throws as possible because it is an easier play for him coming across the bag. The only time the second baseman should take the throw is when a right-handed dead-pull hitter is at the plate and the shortstop needs to shade to the hole between third and short.

Next, the pitcher should think of what pitch he could throw this particular hitter to get him to hit the ball on the ground in the middle of the field. Obviously, in most situations, the pitcher wants to keep the ball down or have it moving downward underneath the bat to produce a ground ball. If the hitter is right-handed and looking for the ball away to hit behind the runner, then the pitcher can jam him with low fastballs or throw him low off-speed pitches to speed up his bat and cause him to hit toward the middle of the field. An inside change-up and a left-hander's slow curveball are not the best pitches in this situation because the batter can pull either pitch through the hole at short. Remember that I am speaking in generalities, not absolutes. If a pitcher has a devastating pitch that can strike out a hitter at any time, then he needs to have the confidence to throw it. If the hitter is a right-handed pull hitter, the pitcher should make him hit something hard, low, and away.

If the hitter is left-handed, the pitcher should first assume that the batter is looking for a pitch he can pull. He wants to hit the ball on the right side of the diamond in the hole created by the first baseman holding the runner on and the second baseman playing close enough to second base to turn the double play. Generally, the pitcher should throw the typical lefty pitches that are down hard and away.



a



b



c



d

FIGURE 9.2 Throwing from a low position, as shown in (a) and (b), is much quicker than taking the time to stand up to make an overhand throw, as in (c) and (d).

Photos courtesy of Bob Kalmbach—University of Michigan.

A left-handed pitcher facing a typical left-handed hitter can keep the ball in the middle of the field by throwing his regular or cut fastball down and away. One year early in spring training, I, a left-handed pitcher, was scheduled to pitch batting practice. My manager, Gene Mauch, had me face left-handed hitters Rod Carew, Reggie Jackson, and Fred Lynn. He got behind me, behind a screen, and told me to throw them fastballs down and away. He bet me that if I would get the fastball down and away, they would hit the ball on the ground in the middle of the field. On top of that, he made me tell them what was coming. Sure enough, every ball I got down and away ended up on the ground in the middle of the field. Granted, some of them were hit hard, but Gene's theory worked. He reasoned that because left-handed hitters did not see that many left-handed pitchers, they would give a little at the plate and pull the front shoulder out a little early, leaving them vulnerable to the low outside pitch. I figured that if that pitch worked against three future Hall of Fame players who knew what was coming, I had better use it in the game. Of course, Mauch was also telling me that I was going to use it. I didn't need any further discussion with Gene. I got out of many a jam with that pitch for the rest of my career.

Once the pitcher has his plan about how he wants to pitch the hitter, he can get on the rubber for the sign. When he gets the sign for the pitch he wants, he should put the pitch in his memory bank, come to a set position, and then focus his attention on reading the runner and holding him on. Before he decides to throw to the plate, he must go back to his memory bank and refocus on the pitch before he starts his delivery.

I do not encourage left-handed pitchers to raise their legs to start their delivery to the plate and then read the runner. I believe this method causes them to divide their focus, which ultimately affects their control of the pitch. Against a lefty who practices that move, we instructed our runners to make an early false break to divert the pitcher's attention or cause confusion. I believe in keeping everything simple and in the pitcher's favor. I would rather see the lefty learn to be quick to the plate just as a right-handed pitcher must learn to get the ball to the catcher in time for him to throw out potential base stealers.

After he releases the ball to the plate, the pitcher becomes a fielder. If the ball is hit hard back to him, he should know that he has plenty of time to make the double play. He should catch the ball and then turn his feet toward second while his eyes are picking up the fielder who is covering the bag. He should then take a crow hop and lead the fielder so that he can catch the ball, step on the bag, and throw to first. If the ball is hit softly or a little to the side, the pitcher should get his footwork out of the way by turning his body in a line toward second before he catches the ball. That way he can be moving toward second the instant he catches the ball. He visually picks up the fielder and then makes a quick throw to the fielder covering the bag. This method is much faster and gives him a greater chance of completing the double play or at least getting the ball to the infielder quickly so

Fielding the Position

that the incoming runner isn't on top of him as he catches the ball (see figure 9.3).

Again, the pitcher should make a firm throw, not a moving fastball. If the runner is moving on the pitch, the pitcher should plan to throw to second, especially on a hard-hit ball. He should get the throw off to second



a



b

FIGURE 9.3 (a) The pitcher is already turned toward second as he fields the ball and is in great position to pick up his target and make the throw to the fielder covering second. (b) The pitcher is incorrectly facing home plate as he fields the slowly hit ball. He has not gotten his footwork out of the way, and he must turn to pick up the target of the fielder covering the bag. This method takes more time and lessens the chance of completing the double play.

Photos courtesy of Bob Kalmbach—University of Michigan.

quickly. If the fielder knows he cannot get the incoming runner out, he should come off the bag toward the pitcher, receive the ball, and relay to first in time to get the batter-runner. But if the fielder is yelling "One, one," the pitcher should adjust and throw to first to retire the batter-runner.

If the ball is hit to the first baseman, the pitcher explodes toward first to receive the return throw from the fielder. He must communicate with his first baseman to let him know that he will cover the first-base bag.

During pitchers' drills we often had a runner at first during the double-play situation. We told the runner to try to get a jump on the pitcher if he could. In this way we made the drill more gamelike because we required the pitcher to hold the runner on and then throw a strike to the plate. Sometimes, if the runner stole, we let the pitch go through and allowed the catcher to throw to second. This told us whether the pitcher was adequately holding runners on first base and allowed our catcher to throw to second in game situations.

First-and-Second Bunt Situation

A bunt situation occurs in late innings of tight ballgames with runners on first and second and no one out. The offensive objective is to move the runners into scoring position at second and third. The general offensive strategy is to bunt the ball hard down the third-base line to force the third baseman to field the ball and thus have no play on the lead runner at third base. I have seen many defensive plays designed to try to stop this play, but I will discuss only one of those plays.

Why am I choosing to focus on one play? When I was coming up through the Dodger organization, we were taught just a few defensive plays. The Dodgers reasoned that they would much rather we execute a few plays well than run a myriad of plays that we performed with mediocrity. Throughout the minor leagues, we had four bunt and pickoff plays that our opposition knew we ran. We got many outs with those plays, even though the opponents' coaches warned their players of the plays we were about to run. I believe the play I am about to discuss is the best defensive play in this situation because over the years it has had the most success.

Usually the first baseman gives the play to the pitcher orally. The first baseman may say something like, "Bunt play number 1 is on. You have the third-base line." Once the pitcher understands that the play is on, he can get on the mound to take the pitch selection sign from the catcher. (I choose to give the plays to the pitcher orally because many pitchers are so wrapped up in the pitches that they do not get bunt-play signs.)

I should mention here two points of strategy:

1. If the pitcher wants to know whether the offense has put the bunt play on, he should perform a spin move pickoff toward second base.

If the batter is going to bunt, he must make a move to get into the bunting position when the pitcher picks up his lead leg. If he makes no move to get ready to bunt, the coach may want to take off the bunt play.

2. If the pitcher suspects that the bunt is on, he should make sure he throws strike one. In addition, the hardest pitch to bunt down the third-base line is something hard, low, and away. A fastball, cut fastball, or hard slider, serves that purpose. If he can throw strike one, hard low and away, the pitcher will make it difficult for the offense to execute the bunt.

After the pitcher gets the sign, he should come to a set position and then look back to check the runner at second. The shortstop will be holding the runner on and may even give up his defensive position to do that. The pitcher's responsibility is to focus on the runner to make sure he does not get too big a lead or start moving toward third when he turns to deliver the ball to the plate. He does not need to worry about the shortstop being out of position for this play. The pitcher only needs to make sure that the runner at second does not get a good jump toward third.

Once the pitcher has determined that the runner is under control, he devotes all his attention to the pitch. He must turn his head and deliver quickly to the plate, not giving the runners time to get a large secondary lead. As soon as the ball leaves his hand, the pitcher must start toward the third-base line. This movement is the key to this play. Before the pitch gets to home plate, the pitcher should be on his way to the third-base line in the direction of a little less than halfway toward third base (see figure 9.4). His fielding responsibility is to get any ball bunted to the left side of the mound.

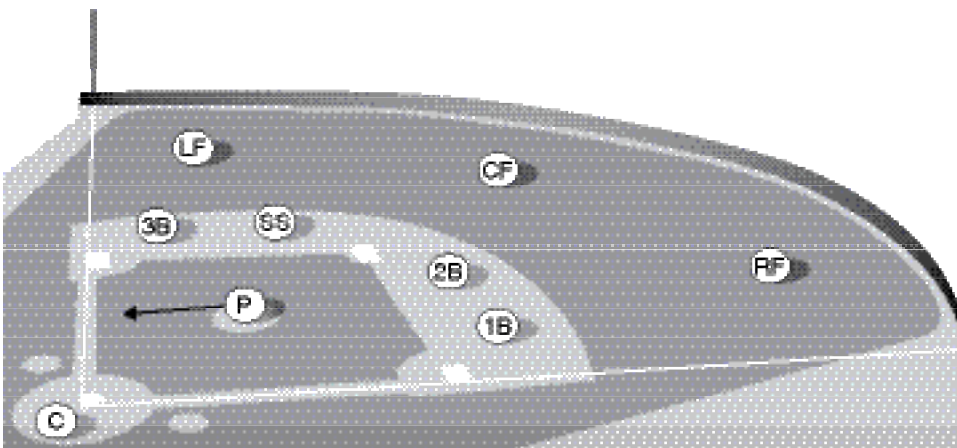


FIGURE 9.4 Immediately after he releases the ball to the plate, the pitcher should take a path a little less than halfway toward third base to cover the third-base area for bunts.

The first baseman's responsibility is to cover the area from the mound to the first-base line. (He can do that by reading the angle of the bat before the ball is bunted.) If the ball is bunted down the third-base line, the third baseman must either go get the bunt or let the pitcher field the ball and get the out at third. Making this judgment requires the third baseman to know his pitcher's ability to get off the mound, make the play, and then make a good throw to third.

To help the third baseman learn his pitcher's ability, we often had the outfielders bunt and run the bases when we practiced this play. The pitchers run the play the same way they would in a game, other players get some practice bunting and running in a game situation, and the third baseman and pitcher develop the necessary coordination and timing.

I can't stress enough the need for the pitcher to have an aggressive mental attitude to make this play successful. He must fix in his mind that he will get the out at third. He must come off the mound aggressively with the intention of being the one to make the play. He must make the offense execute the bunt perfectly to advance the runners. With that in mind, he should make the play at first base only when

- he bobbles the ball and loses the play at third,
- he hears the catcher and third baseman yelling, "One, one," or
- he hears the third baseman calling for the ball. (Even if the pitcher is already over the ball ready to make the fielding play when he hears the third baseman calling for the ball, he should know that the play has to be at first base because the third baseman has left his position to make the play. When he hears the third baseman call for the ball, he should allow the third baseman to make the play. The third baseman usually has an easier play because he is moving somewhat toward first base.)

As with all plays, communication plays a key role in the success of the play. The third baseman has the most responsibility on this play to communicate with the pitcher, although the catcher must also see the play and call for the throw to go to the correct base. The situation of the game will determine how aggressive the third baseman is in taking the play. With a safe lead late in the game, a coach may say to his third baseman, "Make sure you get an out." On any bunt on which he has any question about whether the pitcher will make the play, the third baseman should call for the ball and get the out at first. In this situation, the defensive team is willing to give up the advancement of the runners in turn for the out because they want to make sure they stay away from a big inning for the offense. None of this strategy should change the pitcher's aggressiveness in making the play. He just always needs to be ready to listen to the third baseman.

This play is easier for the left-handed pitcher because he can field the ball and easily get his feet ready to make the play at third. The right-handed pitcher should try to get around the ball, turning to his glove side, so that he can get his feet ready to make the throw to third base (see figures 9.5 and 9.6.). If he must redirect the throw to first base, quick feet are the key to making a good throw.

Backing Up Bases

For the pitcher, the key in backing up bases is to anticipate where the play is going to end up and where he can perform the role of being the last safety valve. For instance, on a base hit to left field, the pitcher should position himself between first and second in line with the throw to second and out of the way of the base runner. He becomes the safety valve if an overthrow occurs at second or the ball gets away from the infielder. If the pitcher will end up in foul territory when backing up a base, he should get as deep as the field will allow. Coming up to get a bad throw is always easier than having to go back to get a throw.

With a runner on first base and a routine base hit to the outfield, the pitcher should back up the most forward bag, third base in this situation. If, in this situation, the ball gets by the outfielder or is an extra-base hit, the pitcher should back up home plate and be ready to adjust to back up third base in case the play shifts to third.

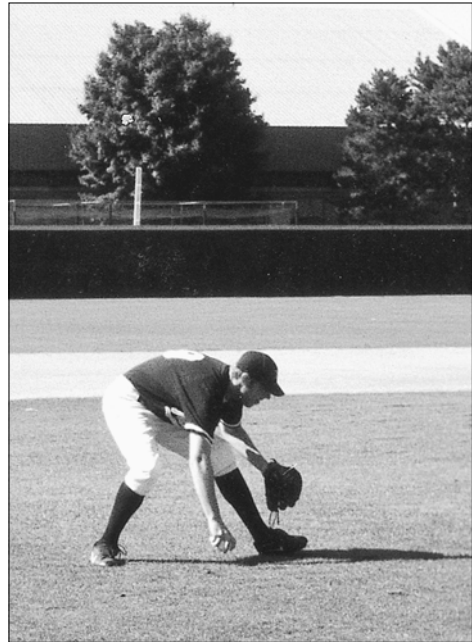
When an extra-base hit occurs with runners on first and second, the pitcher should hustle to a position between home and third base where, as he sees the play develop, he can adjust to where the throw ultimately goes. If the ball is hit to right field in this situation, he usually will have taken a step or two toward first base to cover the bag in case an infielder stops the ball. Once the ball gets through the infield, he must hustle to a position between home and third to be ready to back up either base (see figure 9.7). I like the pitcher to shade toward home plate on this play because if the play does go to third base, the left fielder should have moved in to position to help back up third base. If the ball is hit to left field in this situation, the play is much easier for the pitcher. He should position himself behind home plate in line with the throw from the outfield. He should be ready to cover home plate as well as get any errant throw.

As a rule, the catcher should be calling the base to which the throw will be going, but the pitcher should not just blindly go to back up that base. The catcher may often start by calling a particular base but change his call as the play develops. The pitcher should therefore put himself in a position where he can adjust.

Pitchers are generally taught to follow their throws during pickoff attempts and back up that base. I think it is important to consider the



a



b



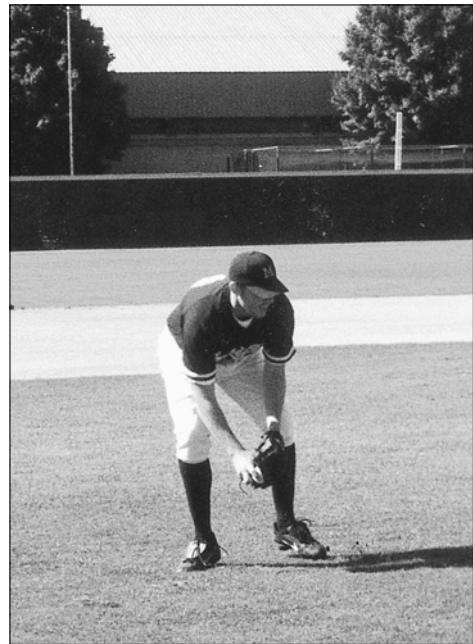
c

FIGURE 9.5 The pitcher-fielder correctly gets around the ball by (a) moving toward the ball, (b) getting his body in line with where he is going to throw the ball as he fields it, and (c) throwing the ball from that position. This technique is much faster and more accurate than the one shown in figure 9.6.

Photos courtesy of Bob Kalmbach—University of Michigan.



a



b

FIGURE 9.6 In (a) the pitcher-fielder fields the ball while still facing home plate. His back is to his intended target. In (b) he has had to turn around to pick up his target and make the throw. This technique is much slower and less accurate than the method shown in figure 9.5.

Photos courtesy of Bob Kalmbach—University of Michigan.

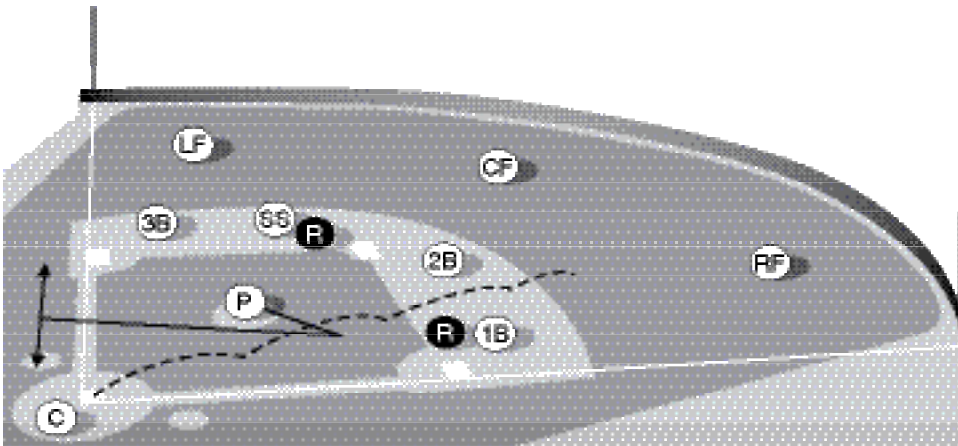


FIGURE 9.7 With runners on first and second and a ground ball hit through the right side of the infield, the pitcher must start to cover first base. After the ball gets through, he must hustle back between third and home to back up those bases. This is one of the hardest defensive plays to execute properly.

opponent's strategy and back up accordingly. With runners on first and third and two outs, the pitcher should expect some kind of play to be run to try to score the runner on third. If he picks off the runner at first base in this situation, it is usually because the opponent wanted the runner picked off. With that in mind, the pitcher must figure that the play will ultimately end up at home plate, with the opponent trying to score the runner from third, so he should back up home plate.

Although coaches can use many different drills and ways to develop these defensive skills in their players, much of the success that players have comes back to their attitude of aggressiveness. Those who have a perfectionist attitude will usually need some time before they feel free to make that tremendous aggressive play. Perfectionists will spend hours honing their skills before they ever try them in a game. They don't want to stretch out of their mold until they are extremely confident they can pull it off without making a mistake. They aren't opposed to being aggressive; they just want to practice and perfect all aspects of a move before they exhibit it. Patience and practice are the keys for these players. The coach should provide constant reinforcement that it is OK to stretch oneself and fail. With time, perfectionists can become extremely aggressive.

All types of individuals need to be positively motivated to stretch themselves in the joy of competition. Tommy Lasorda, my coach in the minor leagues and with the Dodgers, was and still is a great motivator. When a player would not hustle to first base on a hit that could have been a double had he been aggressive, Lasorda would let the player know clearly that he was wrong. He would shout, "A truck driver could have gotten a single on that ball! A *ballplayer* would have had two on that hit! We're looking for *ballplayers*." That was his straight-talking way of saying that aggressive players win championships. They also enjoy the game more and know that they are doing everything they can to be the best they can be. I hope you are inspired to help your players become outstanding, aggressive defensive *ballplayers*.

10

Working a Game

John Winkin

The strategy involved in working a game centers completely on the pitching capabilities of each pitcher, especially on several key factors. First, and perhaps most important, are the pitcher's individual talents, his strengths and weaknesses, his mental toughness and mound composure, and his game and mound experience.

Few coaches are fortunate enough to have entire pitching staffs made up of players possessing outstanding pitching talent, good mound composure, and the kind of mound experience that allows planning a strategy for working a game. Coaches must usually center strategy for working a game on each individual pitcher's capabilities.

A second key factor in working a game centers on pitching mechanics. All of the things a pitcher wishes to accomplish in delivering each pitch revolve around his pitching mechanics. Many pitching coaches stress that success stems from the delivery of the pitch from an appropriate balance point with a lift-and-throw action to the determined location. Good pitching mechanics greatly increase the chances of successfully accomplishing the determined mission of each pitch.

The third vital factor in working a game is the ability to locate a pitch consistently in and out and up and down in the strike zone. Consistently locating each pitch plays heavily in the ability to work a game.

Of course, the ability to deliver each pitch in the desired location affects game-planning adjustments involving pitching strategy. These include

- all matters relating to pitch count—number of pitchers, pitching endurance in a game, and so on;
- planning any strategy about how to pitch to individual hitters, let alone an entire batting order; and

- looking and plotting to keep key hitters from exploiting the extension of their hands and the fat part of the bat.

The ability to pitch to location and do it on a consistent basis weighs heavily in any strategy for working a game and planning pitching changes.

The fourth key element in working a game is the ability to change speeds. Coaches working with pitchers emphasize the need to have command of a fastball, a breaking ball, and a change-up. Having the ability to call on this kind of an arsenal certainly arms a pitcher with a greater ability to work the game.

Pedro Martinez is considered the most dominating pitcher of his time. He has the reputation of having the best fastball, the best breaking ball, and the best change-up among his pitching peers. That certainly explains a lot about his ability to work his game and dominate hitters. Perhaps his greatest weapon is his ability to change speeds. Greg Maddux, with perhaps a lesser fastball, breaking ball, and change-up than Pedro, accomplishes the same kind of exceptional success with his great ability to locate each pitch and change speeds.

The fifth key factor is self-esteem, a paramount requisite to having the ability to work the game. Self-esteem encompasses several important facets:

- What does a pitcher believe he does well and does the best?
- What is a pitcher good at?
- What gives a pitcher the confidence and composure to overcome whatever adversity arises?

Those qualities are all part of self-esteem as a pitcher; one can't succeed and survive without it.

Those five factors serve as the foundation for working a game, and they establish the basis for strategy involved in any game experience.

Establishing a Strong Foundation

In my coaching experience at the high school level, in American Legion, at the college level NCAA Division III, NCAA Division I, and NAIA, I've counted on a six-step warm-up or pregame routine as the first move toward establishing the foundation for working a particular game. This pregame experience is designed to establish and practice the five key factors for a successful game experience:

1. Mastering proper pitching mechanics, from the balance point in the delivery, to the windup, to the stretch

2. Locating pitches in and out and up and down in the strike zone
3. Changing speeds
4. Establishing at least two pitches that will be strengths
5. Building self-esteem for the game experience at hand

This six-step routine allows a pitcher to warm up while slowly increasing the distance between steps. Each step is a new drill that focuses on an aspect of pitching mechanics, making the pitcher's delivery more consistent. The drill also serves as a starting point in building endurance. These are the five goals of the six-step routine:

1. To allow the pitcher to stretch out safely while concentrating on specific mechanics
2. To develop a routine for the pitcher to warm up properly
3. To practice and make a habit of using proper pitching mechanics
4. To allow 10 repetitions in each step that focus on certain aspects of the pitcher's delivery (with each step in the progression relying on each of the earlier steps)
5. To complete, in 15 to 20 minutes, the progression in which the pitcher gradually works back to the full distance of 60 feet, 6 inches, from a beginning distance of 15 feet between pitcher and catcher

Step 1: Two-Knee Drill

The pitcher kneels about 15 feet from and squared to the catcher. With the ball in his throwing hand, the pitcher rotates his upper body so that his nonthrowing shoulder and elbow point to the catcher as he brings his throwing arm and the ball up to the cocked position.

Once the arm and hand are in the cocked position, the pitcher gains momentum by uncoiling his upper body. He then spins the ball at half speed to a location as he stretches out. As the pitcher releases the ball, he protects his arm and shoulder with the proper follow-through—armpit over the knee, elbow by the knee, and a complete sweep of the fingers. For steps 1, 2, and 3, the best location is low and inside to the opposite hitter—right-handed pitchers to left-handed hitters and vice versa.

Step 2: One-Knee Drill

The pitcher and catcher position themselves about 20 feet apart. The pitcher kneels on his drive-leg knee with his stride leg bent toward

the catcher. The stride leg (or landing leg) is in the ideal landing position.

While in the cocked position, the pitcher focuses on location. As he throws he transfers his weight from the back leg to the front leg by pushing off the back foot, rising from a kneeling to standing position while uncoiling his upper body to allow for the explosion and travel of the arm, elbow, shoulder, and hip. Again, as the pitcher releases the ball, he must concentrate on the proper follow-through—armpit over the knee, elbow by the knee, sweep of the fingers, and rotation of the hips.

Step 3: Hip or Chair Drill

Hip Drill

The pitcher stands on the mound about 30 feet from the catcher. The pitcher needs to measure off his stride line, ensuring that his toe and knee are pointing toward the catcher.

Once the pitcher is at cocked position, he will simultaneously transfer his weight from the drive leg to the front leg, begin rotation of the hips toward the catcher, and bring the arm and shoulder through the proper throwing path, ending with the correct follow-through.

This drill develops powerful hip rotation. On the follow-through the pitcher should not bring his drive foot forward. He merely turns the foot over so that the outside part of the ankle points toward the ground and the inside of the knee points toward the opposite knee.

Chair Drill

The chair drill uses the same ideas and concepts as the hip drill, but it may be used when a mound is unavailable. Use the chair to simulate the downward slope of the mound. Follow the procedure used for the hip drill. The pivot foot rests on the chair and rotates on the chair as the pitcher executes drill.

The push-off foot does not leave the chair. The pitcher should concentrate on turning the foot over and rotating the hip. His weight should not shift forward until his arm is up and in the cocked position.

Step 4: Balance-Point Drill

This step, along with steps 5 and 6, should be done from the pitcher's mound. The catcher positions himself about 45 feet away from the

pitcher. The pitcher marks the point at which his stride foot should land, making it easier to verify a correct landing spot.

With all his weight over his drive leg, the pitcher raises his stride leg until his thigh is parallel to the ground. The stride toe should be pointed down to allow the pitcher to land on the front half of his foot. The glove and throwing hand should be at break point. The pitcher focuses on the catcher's mitt, breaks his throwing hand down and out of the glove, and brings it quickly to the cocked position. At the same time, he strides toward the plate, transferring his weight from the back to the front leg, begins hip rotation, and brings his drive foot off the ground and forward as he moves his arm and shoulder through the proper throwing path. He should end with the correct follow-through.

This being the most important step, the stress must be on being in balance before the pitching explosion. We use the expressions "Lift and throw" and "Throw up-down."

Step 5: One, Two, Three Drill

The purpose of this drill is (a) to bring together steps 1 through 4 and (b) to break the delivery into three stages, stopping after each stage to ensure that the pitcher is in the correct position. Stage 1 focuses on addressing the rubber and beginning the delivery. Stage 2 emphasizes the balance point. Stage 3 concentrates on the release of the ball.

The catcher positions himself about 50 feet from the pitcher. In stage 1 of this drill, the pitcher addresses the rubber, gaining momentum by stepping back with his stride leg and turning his pivot foot in front of the rubber. As he begins this rocking step, he must keep both his wrist and the ball completely hidden in his glove. At this point, the pitcher should stop and check his position.

Stage 2 concentrates on the balance point and cocked position. As the pitcher reaches the balance point, he must conceal his wrist and the ball from the batter's view. The coach should stop at this phase to check that the pitcher is in proper balance, with hands breaking from the middle of his body to go to the cocked position.

Stage 3 is the throwing and follow-through stage. With the arm in the cocked position and weight over his back leg, the pitcher aims his hip and front shoulder toward the target. He drives with the back leg and strides toward the plate. As the stride foot lands, he transfers his weight from the back leg to the front leg, rotates his upper body so that the throwing shoulder replaces the nonthrowing shoulder, opens his hip toward the catcher, brings his arm and shoulder through the proper throwing path, and ends with the correct follow-through.

Step 6: Stretch Drill

The stretch is from full distance, 60 feet, 6 inches. In developing the slide step, the pitcher quickens his delivery home while changing his proper pitching mechanics as little as possible. From the stretch the pitcher comes to the set position.

Once he completes step 6, the pitcher should be adequately warm and stretched. He is now ready for the rest of his throwing experience, whether it is his long or short throwing day. At this point the pitcher should gradually add other pitches to the fastball, such as the curve, slider, or change. Once he is comfortable with his pitches, he can complete his throwing for that day. We do this by throwing three sets of spins, or "2-2-2" (two fastball spins; two breaking-ball spins; two change-up spins).

This pregame warm-up goes a long way toward establishing the foundation for working a game. The warm-up is a vital experience for setting the tone for any strategy that might be involved in working that game. An important part of this experience is the supervision provided during this warm-up period. At the college level a pitching coach is probably available to guide the warm-up. At most other amateur levels a coach may not be available. In that case the pitcher and catcher must be knowledgeable about the steps practiced in the warm-up and the key guidelines for concentration in each step. The pitcher must also be able to correct himself.

Coaches must find time to provide coaching support sometime during the pregame warm-up period. Skip Bertman, the legendary LSU head coach, always made time to get to the bullpen area to observe, counsel, and check on the warm-up of his starting pitcher. During my head coaching experience at all amateur levels, I've tried to follow that same procedure. For most college programs with a good pitching coach on the staff, one can expect careful monitoring of that warm-up experience.

In monitoring at least part of the warm-up experience, the coach should offer encouragement to the pitcher to provide that all-important building of confidence, self-esteem, and appropriate frame of mind for the game.

Jay Kemble, who served as a pitching coach for the University of Maine for quite some time and who in recent years has been a successful high school and legion coach, puts it this way: "To me, building pitchers' confidence is the most important thing; you have to get pitchers to think they're better than they really are." The pitcher's frame of mind going in is vitally important. Coach Kemble also says, "No matter what the level, I've told the pitcher, 'Don't leave the bullpen until you have two pitches going for you.'"

Each step in the six-step warm-up has 10 warm-up pitches. In each step the pitcher works on location in the strike zone. The pitcher practices 5 pitches in and 5 pitches out or 5 pitches up and 5 pitches down. Similarly, in

working on change of speeds the pitcher throws 5 fastballs and 5 change-ups in each sequence. The warm-up should emphasize the balance point, the windup, and the stretch. The pitcher must follow and practice proper pitching guidelines.

After completing the six steps of the warm-up period, the pitcher concentrates on his strengths—practicing the fastball, the breaking ball, and the change-up. We've found it useful to have him practice pitches in sets of two pitches each (2-2-2)—two fastballs, two breaking balls, two change-ups. Normally, we've begun with three sets of 2-2-2 as the starting point. The pitcher then focuses on having his top two pitches going for him before he leaves the bullpen.

During the many years I've coached, few players have had natural prospect talent, so building that foundation has been crucial. I've counted on the supervised six-step approach to get a pitcher ready to work the game. The success of that preparation usually sets the tone for any strategy involved in working a game.

At the amateur level of baseball competition another important factor is the pitcher-catcher relationship. A key starting point in this relationship is having the catcher handle the pitcher in as many pitching-catching experiences as possible. An important time in developing this relationship is the warm-up period, especially the closing portion when the concentration is on mastering strengths. The feel each gets for what is going well—knowing what the strong pitches are, what the pitcher can do well—creates the appropriate starting point for working the game. The pitcher and catcher must work together at least during the ending of the warm-up period. Obviously, this all sets the tone for any strategy considerations involved for the start of the game.

Maximizing the Pitcher's Strengths

Our overall philosophical approach has for many years centered on maximizing the use of each pitcher's strengths. We go with what each pitcher can do the best, what each can do with confidence and poise, and what each can do consistently! This approach obviously offers the best percentage chance for success. The old adage "Don't get beat with your third best or weakest pitch" certainly fits most amateur-level pitching choices. You have to go with what you can do best, what you can locate best, and what you have confidence in. It's hard to succeed with what you can't do well just for the sake of what might be good strategy. You must capitalize on a pitcher's strengths, whatever they might be.

As pitchers accumulate game experience, their strengths broaden and grow. I've long counted on the maturation that each pitcher gains with game experience and appropriate guidance. Good coaches and catchers recognize this maturation and broadening of strengths. Accordingly, the ability

to work a game and apply strategic pitching combinations grows with this maturation, but having success still goes back to going with a pitcher's strengths game by game.

The key to pitching success centers on consistent use of what produces the needed strike or needed out. Several times in my coaching experience, I've won key in-season games, postseason tournaments, and even a College World Series game by pitching to one location. I often used only two pitches



Pitching success centers on consistent use of what produces the needed strike or needed out. The key is to capitalize on each pitcher's strengths.

because that's what the pitcher on that day could perform with consistency and confidence. We always feel that it's important to capitalize on the pitcher's strengths.

Getting the First Strike

Having success all starts with getting first-pitch strikes. What are the two pitches the pitcher can throw for strikes? What can the pitcher get over for the first strike? Most important, on that day what is the pitcher's best pitch to get over for a first-pitch strike to each hitter?

Hall of Fame coach Charlie Greene has had many years of experience as a pitching coach in professional baseball. When asked about the importance of getting the first-pitch strike, he said, "Getting the first-pitch strike is the key to any success in working a game. You've got to go with what the pitcher can throw the best to get a strike." Charlie says that the slider may be the easiest pitch to get in for a strike and that the two-seam fastball is next.

Greene says, "You can't aim for the corners when you can't throw strikes; you may have to go for the middle of the plate and hope the movement on the pitch will keep the ball from going in the middle of the plate." The pitcher must work to get first-pitch strikes on each batter. I've always liked the two approaches that Charlie emphasized:

1. When you're behind in the count, go back toward the middle of the plate.
2. When you're ahead in the count, go away from the middle of the plate.

These are excellent guidelines for working the count. Pitching starts, however, with working with the one or two pitches that the pitcher can throw for a first-pitch strike.

Mike D'Andrea, a former pitcher at the University of Maine and in the Atlanta Braves organization, is now a highly successful coach at the high school and legion level. As of this writing, he has had three consecutive state high school championships and two state legion championships. Standout pitching and defense have been the key to his success. Mike says, "You have to throw strikes; if you can't throw strikes, you're not good enough to pitch in my program. I want my pitchers getting the first-pitch strikes to over 50 percent of our hitters."

Mike D'Andrea said that as an Atlanta Braves organization pitcher, he was fined accordingly if he didn't get first-pitch strikes to over 50 percent of the hitters. D'Andrea uses these goals for his high school and legion pitchers:

- Aim to achieve 50 percent first-pitch strikes in the game.
- Keep 3-and-2 counts to fewer than five per game.

- Move around the strike zone on the opponent's number three, four, and five hitters.
- Never walk the opponent's number seven, eight, and nine hitters; attack them down the middle.

How does a coach get young pitchers to achieve first-pitch strikes to over 50 percent of the hitters? D'Andrea suggests starting by having pitchers master throwing pitches down the middle of the plate. Next, pitchers divide the plate in half and work each half of the plate. Finally, they divide the plate into thirds—in, out, middle—and work the thirds. In essence the six-step warm-up routine suggested earlier is the perfect routine for following this method.

D'Andrea works toward getting his pitchers to throw strikes—over 50 percent first strikes, no walks, no long counts—by thinking that way from day one of practice. Let me emphasize again that a crucial point in achieving first-pitch strikes is the tail end of the pregame warm-up in the bullpen.

Bill Swift, a former University of Maine pitcher, started in four consecutive College World Series, pitched for the U.S. Olympic team in 1984, and rose to become a 20-game winner with the San Francisco Giants. He currently coaches at the amateur level in Arizona. He stresses that at all levels he wants his starting catcher to catch at least the last 10 or 12 pitches in the pen. Both the pitcher and the catcher must know what's working well before they start the game.

The pitcher has to go into the game focused, prepared, and confident in his ability to throw first-pitch strikes. The head coach, pitching coach, catcher, and pitcher all have roles in achieving that success. Constant work by all parties starts on the first day, becomes an ongoing process up to the first game, and continues game by game all season long.

Several other important factors are involved in getting strikes. First, emphasis must be placed on pitching mechanics and mastering and grooving the pitching explosion for the delivery of each pitch to location. Someone on the staff with the necessary pitching knowledge (comparable to a pitching coach) must supply constant supervision to each pitcher. He must carefully monitor focus and concentration, proper grips, and the facets of pitching that affect control. If a head coach doesn't have the proper help available, he must find time to monitor and work with those who will do the job for him.

Second, the pitcher must focus on location, that is, the target, usually the glove. We've found it important for the pitcher to focus his eyes on the target when he gets to the balance point and separates the pitching hand from the glove. Charlie Greene agrees that the "look at the target must take place when the hands separate. The focus on the glove and the quality of concentration are extremely important!"

Third, pitch selection depends on what the pitcher can get over for a strike. Valuable here, of course, are the two pitches the pitcher can throw for strikes. Normally, the slider is the easiest to throw for a strike, and the two-seam sinker is probably next. Greene notes that “anytime you can ‘cut’ the ball, it’s easier to throw for a strike.” He also points out that the curveball is toughest to throw for a strike. As for strategy, Greene says that “you can’t aim for corners if there’s inconsistency; it is better to go for the middle and hope movement will take it away from the middle.”

Mike D’Andrea likes his pitchers throwing a lot of fastballs. He feels that pitching fastballs sets the tone and that, at the high school level, the fastball is the easiest pitch to control. By practicing throwing the fastball often (as suggested earlier by dividing the plate), I’m not afraid to go with that pitch to get strikes.

As for grips at that level, right-handed pitchers should use the two-seam fastball throwing to the right side of the plate and the four-seam fastball to the left side. Left-handers should throw two seams to the left side of the plate and four seams to the right side. Some coaches suggest using two seams all the time. By the way, D’Andrea makes an important suggestion: “Don’t take movement away from a pitcher by forcing him to use a grip.” In other words, go with what is comfortable and works well for the pitcher.

Best Pitch

The pitcher should always use the best pitch on certain counts, and the catcher and pitcher must be in tune about what the best pitch is for each point of the game.

Obviously, if you can count on two pitches (a la Pedro Martinez), you are that much better off. Two critical counts that call for using the best pitch are 1-1 and 2-2. As Greene points out, “You’re advancing the count. You have to try to get ahead.” Greene likes a sinker as a best pitch. My experience has been that the best pitch most times is the one that’s going the best for you at that point in the game. The catcher and pitcher have to be on top of this all the time. Bill Swift says, “I always depended on what was going best for me at that point. If I was on a good roll and in a good rhythm, I could depend on that strength that was going good.”

I believe in that approach and would again add that in these situations the pitcher should never get beat by his third-best pitch. The head coach or pitching coach should always make sure that the pitcher and catcher are on the same page.

Out Pitch

The out pitch comes, of course, on a 3-2 count or on the 1-2 or 0-2 count when it is not used for waste, batting practice, and change-of-speed

strategies. The out pitch should be a best pitch, but more appropriately it should be the pitcher's most effective out pitch. Often a best pitch is a fastball in a certain location, but that pitcher's out pitch might be a particular breaking ball or change-up. Again, the pitcher and catcher should be in tune on this and use the out pitch accordingly.

I like the philosophy Charlie Greene suggests: "For the location of the out pitch, the further ahead you are in the count, the farther you can go away from the middle of the plate—for the 3-2 count, you need accuracy, not full effort."

Changing Speeds

Pitchers must be able to change speeds on the good hitters to keep them off balance. The outstanding pitchers are masterful in changing speeds. One marvels at the greats in professional baseball and the success they enjoy by using change-of-speed strategy. Skip Bertman for years had his pitchers use a BP (batting-practice speed) pitch, always located away from the middle—even low and outside the zone. This strategy gives pitchers a three-speed arsenal. The success of this strategy depends on getting ahead of the count with strikes. Pitchers have a powerful weapon when they can throw strikes, have a good change-up, and can effectively locate a BP pitch when ahead in the count.

As indicated earlier, we've always spent time having pitchers throw change-ups in these workouts. The focus is first on mastering a comfortable grip, then developing the appropriate release, and finally improving pitch location.

Changing speeds is a valuable part of strategy in handling and pitching to the good hitter—the hot hitter.

Mastering Pitch Location

The ability to use the width of the plate aids any strategy involved in working the game. Atlanta Braves pitchers Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine epitomize how successful one can be by mastering location of pitches in and out. I've marveled at their level of accomplishment for years and spent a great deal of my time with pitchers having them work to achieve a good level of consistency in pitching to the direction desired. Location wins games for pitchers who can't always count on overpowering hitters, and it obviously makes the talented pitcher that much more effective. Working on direction and location with a high degree of concentration can do wonders in improving the effectiveness of any staff. Pitchers who can place the ball with accuracy can use strategies that involve use of location in working a game.