

# Training Catchers

## Catchers - The Key to Defense

While not always given the title of team captain, the catcher should be the general or defensive leader. A strong, intelligent, and good athlete plays this position. It is the toughest and arguably the most important position on the field. She has the responsibility to call pitches, keep the pitcher under control, be the liaison between coach and pitcher, block the ball, throw down, call plays, align the cut off and get the crucial blocking tag at home plate, usually with the game on the line.



The following discussion summarizes the skills and techniques to be an effective catcher. Key skills involve quickness, strength, and having a softball head. She possesses aggressive, assertive, and mental control characteristics. It is highly recommended to do some classroom work on understanding batter positioning, common tendencies, pitch count, types of pitches and desired situation results. Take time to study the catching techniques off the field. (See Appendices for additional suggestions). The coach and catcher need mutual respect and trust.

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In addition to class work, practice time has to be spent on specialized plays and techniques. Practice one-touch tossing between pitcher and catcher so they will be most effective to act as one unit in crucial plays at the plate. You must practice throw downs to each base, different types of tags at the plate, and run-downs. These are important because it will give you the time to learn your teammates' timing and positioning for throw downs and pickoffs.

You need to acquire additional techniques like sweeping home plate. Use this technique on a combination force out with first or another base. Sweeping home means (straddling the plate, if wet; and, the back foot on the plate, if dry, and glove side foot forward) while waiting for the throw. As the throw arrives, drag the back foot across the plate on the side closest to the next target and away from the runner. Go into a scissors step pointing the glove side hip and shoulders in line with the target.

Practicing mask control and deciding whether to leave it on pull it off or discard it away from the play is important. Leave the mask on if it does not inhibit the play, sight, throw or decision making ability. In fact, the newer hockey style masks allow a catcher to have visibility without removing it. If it does not interfere, it is unnecessary and wasted time to remove it. It is important however to throw the mask away from the play if you have to remove it to locate the ball. This will ensure the helmet does not interfere with the catcher's play.

As you can see, the catcher has a great amount of responsibilities and skills to master. Sometimes catchers are born with leadership skills. Others need to learn them. If you want to be an outstanding catcher, be willing to go the extra mile. You have the position to bring the best out of your team.

## **The Basics**

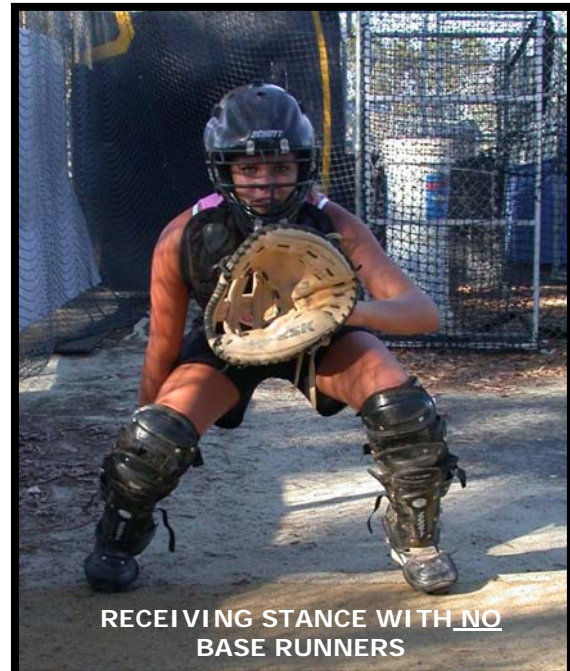
Catcher basics include proper stances, framing the pitch, working the umpire, blocking the pitch and footwork to throw. The technique discussed in the next chapter regarding how to catch near or off fences applies to the catcher too.

# Training Catchers

## Catcher's Stances

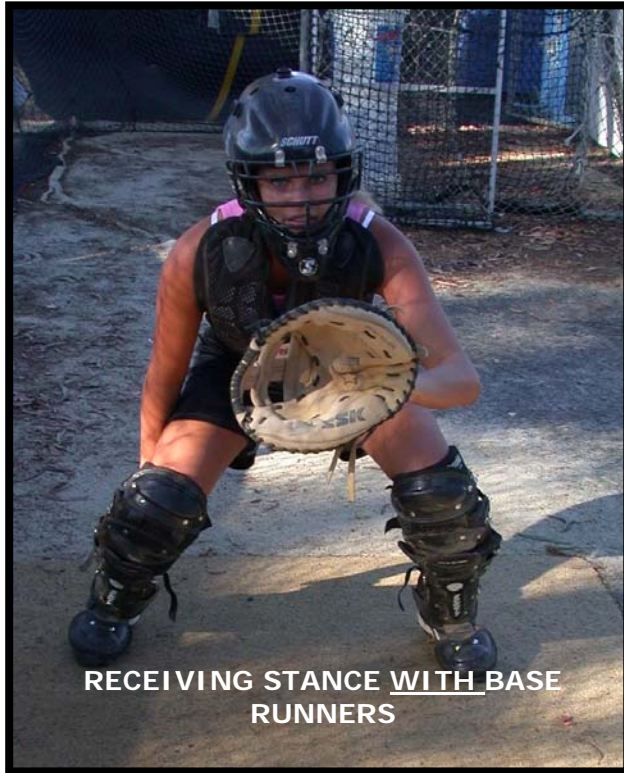
Signal stance: Feet typically shoulder width apart. Body is relaxed and low to the ground. Buttocks down. Left side uses glove to hide the signs by placing it alongside the left leg below the knee. The right knee turns in a little to block vision from the first base side coach. The signal hand is surrounded by the hips not too low under the buttocks or too high to be visible either. Keep hand close to body.

Receiving stance with no base runners: Stance is similar to signal stance with weight on inside of feet with feet a little duck-toed. The feet are even (parallel) so as to block more easily. The back is more parallel to the ground. The head does



not raise much. The buttocks are even with the knees but low to the ground so not to obstruct the umpire's view. It is also easier to block pitches too. The glove position is a relaxed comfortable distance from the body and the glove side elbow and arm at 45 degrees or pointing to a position of 2:00 on a clock. The glove should be as open as possible. The bare hand is at the throwing side behind the ankle or calf for protection. The arm is close to the body. This does not expose forearm or hand.

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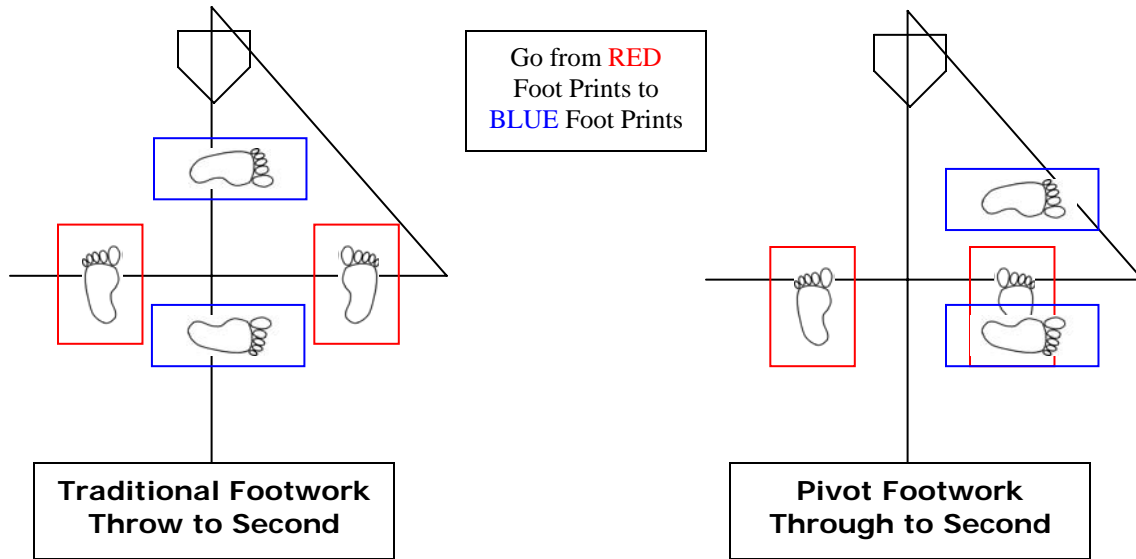


Receiving stance with base runners: Stance is the same as the above stance however the hips come up higher. The back and head are parallel to the ground. The buttocks are up more than above. The feet are even or maybe staggered 1-2 inches with throwing side foot back a little. One added comment is that the catcher will usually set up for the pitch that is called.

## Footwork to Throw

Traditionally footwork a “**hop**” to throw resembles movement along two lines of an upside down figure four. The feet start on the horizontal line and hop to the vertical line. Another option would be to “**pivot**” on the throwing side foot and align the hips and shoulders with the target. This is a little quicker and even for younger catcher’s can be used to first or third but perhaps not second. The older catcher can use this technique at all bases or even throw from the knees if the ball is blocked. A throw down to third base could be a right foot drop step and step to third behind batter.

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## Framing and Influence

Framing the pitch is when the catcher, upon receiving the ball, rolls the wrist towards home plate. This action might influence the umpire. Work at catching the ball in various parts of the glove could help to influence the umpire's call too. Also important is making sure the catcher gives the umpire a good view to the plate.

Frame pitches that are within the outermost part of the strike zone and not outside of this area. Definitely do not pull the hand back to the strike zone. This will lose credibility with the umpire. A catcher must learn the consistency of where the umpire is calling pitches that day and adjust to it. The roll of the wrist is easier on the sides and up but a little more difficult on the low pitch. On framing the low pitch the thumb of the glove hand rolls upward away from the body but towards the plate. The palm of the hand facing upward shows the ball too visibly to the umpire. The roll of the wrist is always towards the center of the strike zone. Frame as the pitch is arriving not after it is caught. The catcher tries to build a trusting relationship with the umpire. Never try to show up or embarrass the blue.

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## Blocking (pitches and runners)

The object of blocking the ball is blocking and not catching. Control the ball in front



and toward the plate. When blocking balls in front, try to replace the feet with the knees instead of moving the body forward. Tuck the chin into the chest, and roll the shoulders around the ball. The glove fills the void between your legs. The bare hand positions behind the glove between the legs. The only exception to not replacing the feet with the knees is when a wild pitch hits the ground out in front of the plate then rolling to the knees forward is the better move. Blocking to the sides

should be a nearest leg extension to the ball, trying to square up towards the plate as much as possible. The movement is simply extend the leg and slide in a heel – knee – toe progression of movements. Another option of blocking balls to the sides is sliding the entire body simultaneously around the ball. Either technique works and needs to be practiced by the individual catcher.



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Blocking runners at home plate is similar to the other bases. Place the left toes outside the foul line. The reasoning is that the base runner typically slides away from the plate and this is the area to take away from her. Both feet (toes) should be facing the runner. The ankles and knees hinge better this way versus from the side. Upon receiving the ball replace both feet with the knees on a close play and block with the whole body and protective gear. Remember a good rule of thumb is to dish out more aggressiveness than the runner is going to give the catcher. Try not to drop down until the runner has committed on where and what she is doing. If the ball arrives early go down the line to the runner. Do not wait on her. Protect your plate.



## Special situations

Better vision is a reasonable goal in all techniques. In catching, just before the pitch, a catcher may want to blink her eyes so they stay open and alert when the pitch arrives. It has been said to look at something green like grass to keep the eyes sharp and more focused.

Relaxation is a key to the mental game and involves the glove hand before catching the ball. Catchers may rest the glove hand until the pitcher is ready to release then put it into position. This adds a last split second focus for the pitcher's sight and a more focused readiness for the catcher.

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The catchers throwing motion is the abbreviated infield-throw from where she catches the ball or the  $\frac{3}{4}$  snap throw. Use good form. Try not to separate the hand and glove too early or toss the ball to the hand. Use the proper throwing form as described earlier but be as efficient as possible. Try to eliminate steps on the throw. Steps waste time. After catching a low pitch, if you are strong enough, throw from the knees or with the throwing side knee down.

The one touch toss is a key technique for pitcher to catcher and vice versa. Constantly work on the one-touch toss. Upon securing the ball, point the palm toward the target and release without moving the hand anywhere. In live situations, pitchers need to practice positioning on the plate to receive throws and make tags from all around the backstop. Catchers need to locate balls and hit targets depending on pitchers' positioning. Pitchers particularly must practice with toes pointed to the runner for safety when making the tag. Otherwise all the catcher's efforts are wasted.

The pitch-out is a special situation that is very crucial. The catcher after clearly communicating with the pitcher what her intentions are should stand just inside the catcher's box with both feet and only after the pitch is released step to the ball and secure it. Be sure to practice the pitch-out to both sides so there are no surprises when the situation arises. Use a fast ball high as the pitch. Do not get cute with different type of pitches.

Fielding bunts is another important technique. To make this simple, when fielding a bunt that the third baseperson or first baseperson can not field just in front of the plate, try to use scissors footwork moving in the direction of the target. When the bunt is on the third base side and the throw needs to go to first base, the catcher needs to move around the ball to align herself better with the target. This technique is closer to the hop footwork for a rock-n-fire defensive technique. Try not to move around the ball on all balls if a scissors step footwork can be used. It would be inefficient and unnecessary.

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## Controlling the Game

Holding runners on the bases involves not only the demonstrated ability to pick off and throw down but also the intelligence to test and challenge the runner. A note, if your catcher cannot throw the ball all the way to second skip doing this between innings and telling the opposition your weakness. Keeping the runner and coach guessing is a very effective defensive weapon. One of the best techniques a catcher possesses is after receiving a pitch with runners on base is to simply **look** at the runner. Nothing else is needed to freeze the base runner or cause her to move in a direction.

As the defensive leader on the field, be loud, clear and succinct when relaying commands and plays. The catcher has the best seat in the park and can best determine the situation and play.

In summary, the catcher should be in control of the defense at all times. She creates the plays and is instrumental in making outs. She sets the momentum and tempo on the field and acts as guidance counselor for the pitcher. She is the liaison with the umpire. Next to the pitcher, the catcher is the most important selection on the team.

## Training Catchers

# My Favorite Drills

## Catching

### UP DOWNS

#### **Objective**

Simple but effective. Strengthening legs and quickness.

#### **Explanation**

Replace feet with knees multiple times. As many as the player(s) can handle.

### BLOCKING & DIVING IN MUD

#### **Objective**

Always fun. Work on skills while under extreme conditions. You will find out which catchers love the dirt.

#### **Explanation**

Block and dive at coaches call. Form a line of catchers and have fun.

### WHEELER DEALER TO NET

#### **Objective**

Multiple repetitions of throw downs without the need for coaches.

#### **Explanation**

Set up catchers on a field with a wheeler dealer on a box and nets at all bases. Run through the gauntlet of throws to each base hitting desired targets. Build endurance and accuracy.

### RECYCLE BIN

#### **Objective**

Leaning the body forward when blocking.

#### **Explanation**

Use a recycling trash bin with a lid. Locate catcher to the back of the bin. Flip the lid over and on top of the catcher's helmet. When she prepares to block she drops down and if done properly the lid will sweep behind the catcher. If she is too straight up the lid will hit her helmet. A reminder to do it properly.

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## **SEEBALL**

### **Objective**

Work technique of framing, blocking, pop ups etc.

### **Explanation**

Use the see ball golf ball to pitch each location for framing. Catcher uses bare hands and rolls toward plate. Blocking etc can be done indoors without any other equipment. It is fun too.

## **TIMED GEAR UP**

### **Objective**

Understanding importance of being ready quickly for pitcher.

### **Explanation**

With gear ready, put all gear on quickly timing the action. Try to gear up in 10 seconds or less.

## **TIMED CONTACT TO RELEASE**

### **Objective**

Quicker releases with accuracy.

### **Explanation**

With a timer or stopwatch check contact of ball to glove to release of throw. This is one of the segments that can be improved on.

## **SPINNER AND CANNONBALL TOSSES**

### **Objective**

Quickness and accuracy in release tossing back to plate.

### **Explanation**

Set up spinners and cannonballs in a row all around the backstop. Catcher has to go to the ball and toss back to the plate. Start with the spinners to work spins. Then the cannonball for strengthening. Focus on one-touch tossing.

## **RECEIVING STANCE, BLOCK, POP UP IN A ROW**

### **Objective**

Endurance and blocking technique to each side.

### **Explanation**

Moving to the left block, pop up and do it again and again. Multiple times. Then go to the right.

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