

Training Fielding

Fielding

Up to this point, the emphasis has been on the techniques for the offensive side of the game. As I have stated before, I strongly believe in an "attack the defense and aggressive base running offensive strategy", but "it is the defense that wins championships". The following explains the advanced techniques necessary for developing a fundamentally strong defense.

Positioning

This chapter on fielding is about the techniques of catching the ball in the infield and the outfield. It is assumed that a player has the proper equipment essential for fielding i.e. correct glove size, etc.

Body Positioning

Both infield and outfield have body positions they share in common. To start with, the fielders need to be in a ready stance with the feet shoulder-width apart or slightly wider. The glove side foot should be an inch or two forward and the toes slightly duck-toed. The weight is always balanced on the balls of the feet over the two big toes. (GLOVE POSITIONS)



Corner



Middle Infield



Outfield

The glove position for middle infielders is slightly above the knees enabling the player to move farther more quickly. Corners have a lower glove position than

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do middle infielders. The glove should be approximately four to six inches off the ground with the glove open to the batter and elbows outside the knees. The hands can be horizontal or vertically stacked simulating an alligator's mouth. Outfielders should have their glove chest high and palms toward the batter in a relaxed forward position with their fingers pointed up. The knees are bent and the head is up watching the batter. Their whole body must remain balanced ready to anticipate the hit. The mind and the body are ready to follow. This stance is called the ready position.

Mind Positioning

During the seconds just prior to the pitcher's windup or her stepping on the rubber, the defensive player should review the next play by saying for example, "the ball is coming to me; I am going to first". This positive suggestion will assist body movement. All players need to move into a ready position when the pitcher is ready to pitch and the batter is in the box. Infielders and outfielders should step into an imaginary circle of focus just prior to the pitch being released allowing the mind to stay tuned on the batter. The body does not stop but continues to have slight but deliberate movement. Without question, this mental preparation is the best defensive technique there is.

Infielding

Technique Fundamentals

The infielding technique used most of the time can be described by the words: ready, down, split, hop or the footwork called a **scissors step**. From a ready position an infielder must attack the ball by moving forward whenever possible. Do this by moving the glove side foot first especially if you are a corner (1st or 3rd) then the other. Drop the hips down if necessary to receive the ball.

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The catch is made out in front of and inside the glove side big toe. This enables the glove to be in front of the body for better control but not too far that the glove becomes parallel with the ground as it becomes a ramp for the ball and not a barrier. I recommend maintaining a little more vertical glove at the point of contact to receive the ball. It is still out in front of the body.

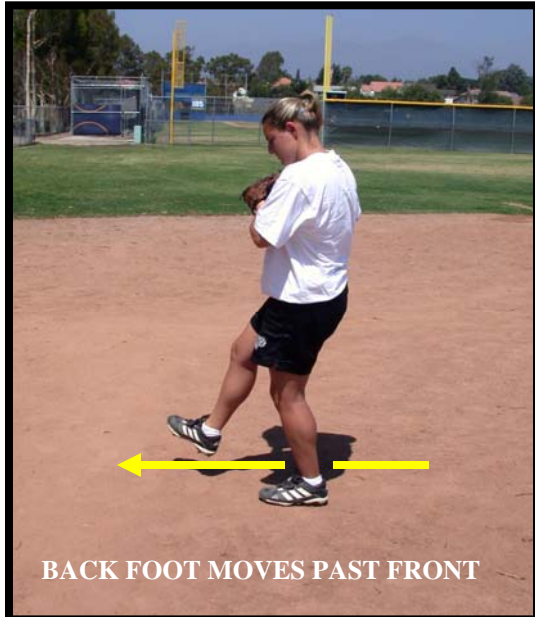
Picture an arrow pointing forward on the glove side shoe located by the big toe. This is where the ball should be caught (inside but in front of the big toe). The feet are split forward to back. This location of catching the ball is referred to as inside the body. Do not stop or hesitate. When making the catch, continue moving through the ball. Perhaps even add intensity at the point of contact to increase the quickness of contact. The weight is always forward on the glove side foot over the knee when the catch is made. The glove first contacts the ball then with the bare hand reaching into the glove to grasp the ball.

This continuous motion technique takes the belly or body to the ball (not the ball to the body). The motion continues with the back foot crossing over in front of the other foot. As the belly goes to the ball and the back foot crosses in front it is important to note that the hips stay square on the ball. Stay



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square until the back foot moves past the other foot. As the back foot moves past

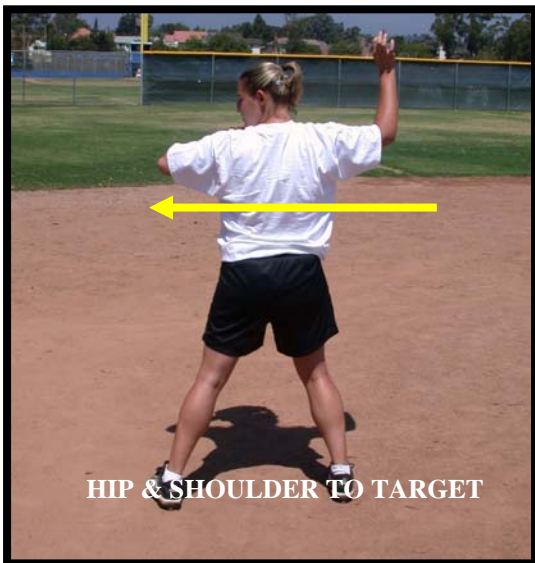


the hips, the front hip should turn while in flight in the direction of the target and the crossover foot points towards the throwing side.

The glove side hip and shoulder should always point in the direction of the target. The glove and throwing hand moves quickly to above the throwing side ear (elbows should be [redacted] the shoulder [redacted] as [redacted] onto the [redacted] foot [redacted] throw properly [redacted] the back foot crosses over

and touches down, the glove and hands should be in position above the ear to

throw. This is referred to as transferring the ball at the ear.



It is important to maintain proper body balance and weight distribution through out the throwing motion. Too many players take the ball out of the glove in other body locations or never use two hands to catch the ball. This slows release time and creates an improper weight distribution for a correct throw. I have always referred to it as an infield scissors step. I use the words "ready-down-split-

hop" to describe this motion. This puts the body in the correct position to make strong, quick and accurate throws.

Situational Techniques

The situation dictates the various techniques to use to field the ball. Other fielding techniques are described here to explain how to handle those situations.

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A hot bouncing ball without any reaction time requires receiving the ball with a traditional soft-hands technique (this time ball to the body). This means aligning the ball with the belly button and catching the ball out in front of the body. Sometimes there is no opportunity to move the feet.

Upon contact with the ball, the fielder cushions the ball's force by cradling the ball into the belly. The weight is still on the balls of the feet and the body is almost stationary. For younger ballplayers this traditional soft-hands method is easier to learn and is a solid fundamental technique. Nevertheless, as soon as possible get them to start moving to the ball using the infield scissors step. Too many players stay with this traditional technique only and do not develop into a competitive player.



While discussing hard hit balls, two other techniques are in order: **the rock-n-fire and the pivot**. On a play where the ball is hit directly at or close by a player hot or hard, these two techniques are effective. This also holds true when a shorter throw double play is possible.

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The rock-n-fire creates a triangle of a catch with the weight on the balls of the feet. The feet are even in a horizontal line or slightly split with glove side foot a little in front. As the soft-hands catch is made the weight shifts to the throwing side foot. Keep the hips low. As the glove and ball are taken from the belly to the side or the shoulder or chest get into position for a quick $\frac{3}{4}$ snap throwing motion. (This is further discussed in the next chapter). The weight shifts back towards the target on the throw. This is necessary on long distance throws. No foot movement is used. It is realistic too not to shift weight when closer to the target. Stay balanced. Throws depending on age that are far require a weight shift.

Please note, for example, that on a bunt to first base the preferred technique is the rock-n-fire. However, the body position is slightly different.

When approaching the ball, the feet are not square (perpendicular to the foul line) but the glove side foot is angled back more toward the bag. This positions the body for the quick rock-n-fire. Therefore, the corners should use this technique to throw back to their bases on short hits or bunts.



In the same situation, on a play where you throw to the backhand side, the pivot technique is recommended. Everything remains the same to catch the ball except the body movement. The weight remains centered and balanced and the

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body pivots or turns with knees bent and hips down pointing the glove side elbow to the target. A $\frac{3}{4}$ snap throw is still used. These two techniques are very effective but must be trained.

A continuous footwork with throwing motion technique (called a **one-motion**) is discussed more in the next chapter on throwing, but it is a necessary compliment to the other infield techniques. The one-motion footwork is a running through the ball movement and releasing the throw before the second step once the ball is caught. Speed through the ball is important and because of the

typically short distance of the throw, how quickly and accurately you release the ball is more important than how hard you throw it.

This technique is very effective on bouncing balls in the infield or quick outs to a base by an outfielder. This technique can also be used running away from the target with a $\frac{3}{4}$ snap throw. To distinguish it, I call this the **continuous running** throw.

For the advanced player a more aggressive infield catching method to combat the short hop ball is called an **infield scoop**. It involves the basic ready-split-hop technique and the infield scissors step without using soft hands. It is a departure from tradition.

In situations of a short hop the fielder should attack the ball, but upon catching (contacting) the ball with the glove, thrust the glove and hands forward (scoop) and out or up. This also pulls the body, especially the back leg, forward gaining an additional three to six feet closer to the throwing target. The ball must be looked into the glove (which is tucking the chin into the chest) and pulling the back foot straight and strongly over past the front foot. The catch is made with two hands. Avoid skipping, crossing the foot over behind the other, or clicking the heels in the air. This does not gain as much distance as the forward scissors step.



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Using the scoop glove action and strong scissors step significantly increases out percentages even with the fastest runners or running left side slappers. Although this is an advanced technique, it is critical for the infielder to learn.



A **traditional backhand** should be used when the ball goes to the backhand side and is away from the body. The backhand is considered an emergency or 9-1-1. This means the ball could not be caught by any other technique moving forward. The technique is started by a crossover step, which was explained in the base running technique. The step is back (deep) and not forward or to the side. The hips are dropped down and contact is made with the glove straight up and down off the glove side foot. As contact is made, soft hands are used to bring the ball and glove together towards the chest with the throwing hand to above the ear position. On the backhand, a player should always move through the ball. This means most of the time you should take one more step beyond contact onto the throwing side foot. If this is not possible then shift the weight back off the throwing side foot for the release of the ball. This is still moving through the ball. Do not

stop your body movement when you make the catch. Or pick it moving away from it.

A couple other technical ideas need to be discussed. Movement to the ball is a must! As stated previously, on any movement of more than one step forward a player can start with either foot first. This movement of glove side foot first is more critical for corners than middle infielders. If reaction time is minimal and there is only enough time for one step try to get the glove side foot to the ball. Use

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this technique even in a quick short-hop scoop. Sometimes on a hard hit line drive it is all you can make.

Moving forward, but to the side, requires a direct angle. A ball hit in front of a player, to the forehand or backhand side, but reachable inside the body should be fielded just inside and in front of the big toe of the glove side foot. If the ball is closer in then field the ball outside the knee and turn in more. Avoid footwork going around the ball! That makes you less competitive and takes more time. The technique to use is the infield scissors step.

Moving forward but to the back hand side uses exactly the same footwork but just as the ball is caught, with two hands, turn the glove side foot (toes) toward the direction of the target. This means the catch is still made off the big toe. Sometimes this means you must swing the opposite leg around in front 180 degrees or more to throw to the target. This is referred to as an **inside backhand**.

This is cutting in on the ball. And it is a preferred technique to using a backhand. Or we should call it a lazy backhand if a backhand is used when cutting in on the ball is possible.



Out Fielding

Outfielders should have the same skills as infielders and practice some of the same techniques. The common techniques are the scissor step with a higher hop called a **half crow hop** and a **one-motion**. One major difference between infield and outfield techniques is that in the infield it is taught to immediately attack the ball while the outfielder takes a small step back. The outfielder must learn the drop-locate-sprint technique. They usually have more time to react. They also field the ball as much in the air as on the ground.

The key to out fielding footwork is a successful drop step. This is the start of the fielding motion. Even if the ball is on the ground, the outfielder has added

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reaction time to drop step, locate and sprint. The outfielder's stance is the same as the infielder except for the glove location.

The very first action of the outfielder when the batter contacts the ball is to use a minimal (a couple inches) locating drop step to check the ball. The first immediate action after this drop step is deciding an angle to the ball. If it is in front, push off the back foot and sprint to the ball. If it is to the right or left use the



same sprint and use the scissors step infield technique. If it is to the side (lateral), use a base running crossover step and full sprint to the ball taking the best straight angle to the ball. The player's angle to the ball will depend on the distance and speed of the ball. If the ball is in the air, use either the running crossover or the open step to turn the hips and sprint.

consistency to the creates muscle memory for have seen coaches who players in an angled stance can drop step with either location of the ball quickly. for the player and team. In have found the slight step with the same foot (the foot) simplifies the motion more consistent approach to the ball.

Use the same foot for the drop step every



time there is a hit. This adds movement and quick reaction. I have put their and players who foot reading the Great if it works my experience, I checking drop throwing side and allows a

After the drop-locating step, if the ball is hit to the glove side in flight over the glove side shoulder, use an open pivot step. With the glove side foot turn the hips and get into a sprint and track down the ball. If the hit is over the throwing side, use the running crossover and sprint to the ball. The drop step to the favored

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side is acceptable but will eventually require a head turn if the ball is hit or drifts to the opposite side of the crossover.

When balls are hit directly overhead, the player should use the running crossover step. This is the quickest way to turn the hips and achieving a full sprint. Handle balls that shift in flight from one shoulder to the other, as the outfielder runs directly back, with a simple head turn. During the run back, maintain a full sprinting footwork. The ball is suspended in flight and for one brief moment it is alright to turn the head away from the ball since the ball in flight will not change direction in that amount of time. Too many players try to sprint in one direction then use a "half Carioca twist" to turn to the opposite side to make the catch. This usually wastes too much time to catch this type of hit.

It is a bad habit for players to run at just enough speed or time the sprint just in time to get to the ball. Just getting to the ball is not satisfactory for great out fielding. Always sprint fully to the ball. With runners on and less than two outs, sprint beyond the ball and move back through it. Try to make a two out catch in a semi-stationary position but with your feet moving in place. With the feet moving in place focus the mind on the catch. Catch the ball in front of the face on the throwing side.



The glove is part of your hand until you are ready to make the catch

Most importantly, an outfielder needs to understand that the glove is part of the hand and it does not exist until you catch the ball. Too often outfielders run with their gloves fully extended before the catch is made. This slows them down. Use the sprint technique and forget about the few ounces of leather on the hand.

Catches that are made over head with fully extended arms, (the ones that good sprinting just got you there in time for),

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require **full crow hop** footwork once the outfielder can quickly stop. From a standing still position, step with the glove side foot towards the target and drive the back leg (throwing side) over in front like the scissors step with the higher hop using the down-around-snap throwing technique (discussed in the next chapter). This catch is the only time I believe there is a need for the full-crow-hop footwork.

As to which techniques to use depend on the situation and position of the ball. The successful outfielder knows the game situation (outs, base runners, batter tendencies, score, inning, etc.) and can clearly communicate this information to the team. On balls hit down, grounders or bouncers, the most frequently used method to field the ball is the scissors step (or called the half crow hop). Especially on balls that are bouncing hard, the half crow hop allows a quick and strong release. The body square to the ball will prevent the ball from getting by the outfielder. (Note the difference between the scissors step and half crow hop is the height of the hop for momentum

I use the words controllable or uncontrollable to help a player determine which defensive technique to use. A ball that is controllable (for example easily rolling) and the situation requires a quick force out at the base, use a scoop and one-motion throw. This is the only difference to the half crow hop. Catch the ball outside the glove side foot and release it in a one-motion throw for a short distance out. For a longer throw, requiring more power and quickness, a scoop and throw is a half crow hop and abbreviated throw. Use this technique whether catching the ball inside or outside the body.

There are many opinions about the merits of taking the ball outside the body in the outfield. I teach new outfielders to handle everything inside the body. However, I have no objection to an outfielder using the scoop outside the body on a controllable ball if she can prove her release time is improved and her fielding percentage is excellent. An outfielder should charge directly at all balls hit to an angle or to their side. Do not circle around them. Movement around the ball wastes too much. If practiced, using the proper angles with the half crow hop step or inside backhand is much more effective. The



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one-motion throw and footwork is great especially for the right fielder to get the quick out at first on a dinked ball or Texas leaguer.

Along with the drop-locate-sprint technique, when balls are hit overhead requiring fully outstretched arms to catch the ball, a basket catch is in order. This is defined as catching the ball with palms up and together as if there were no glove on the hand. This allows for a less than perfect catch. The ball can be bobbed or set up in the air for another attempt to catch. This same technique is used if the ball is to the sides. Anytime the body is fully outstretched to make the catch this is the most forgiving catch.



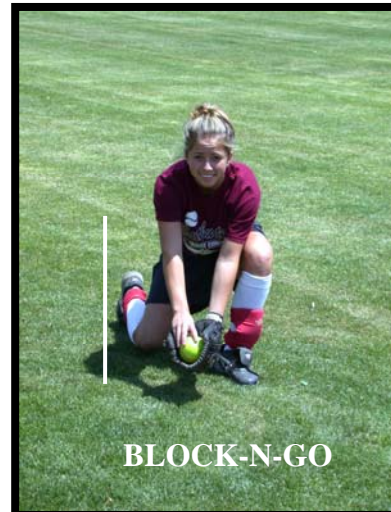
Another necessary skill to master is **diving**.

There are two types of dives, the head first dive and the bent leg slide dive. The head first dive is necessary in some instances where all other options are exhausted and it is the only way to catch the ball. The head first dive is a head leading fully outstretched body parallel to the ground landing on the stomach with arms straight out and palms up to catch the ball. Do not use hands or elbows to cushion the fall. It will lead to potential injury.

For most balls that you can not catch using the normal technique, the preferred dive is the bent leg slide. Just as in a slide into a base, this type of dive is the safest and most forgiving. It is forgiving because the ball can contact the body if not caught first. It can be trapped then picked up and shown to the umpire for a catch. Also, from a bent-leg-slide position the body can pop up and continue any succeeding play.

There will be times, when the ball absolutely has to be caught. Use a **blocking** technique for this. The ball is charged and before the catch is made drop the throwing side knee to the ground in the path of the ball. The leg can be turned at a angle for more blocking area. Catch the ball out in front of the body and soft hands or belly the ball looking it in for a sure catch.

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When the situation is such that runners are on base and the ball must not get by the outfielder, use a **block-n-go** technique. The blocking movement is used with a throwing leg that is straight to the ball and when the ball is caught, the body momentum pulls the knee off the ground into a half crow hop step movement and strong throw.

A fielder must catch a fly ball by moving through the ball when there are runners on base. It has been discussed that it is essential to sprint beyond the ball and move back to make a sure catch. Especially with runners advancing, the outfielder has to get behind the ball and use a scissors step movement through the ball to be in position to throw quickly and strongly. On all footwork in the outfield where a long throw is needed the footwork used should finish with a strong push off and back leg drive over the front leg upon release of the throw. When there are two outs or no base runners, the fly ball may be caught by setting up under the ball. Keep the feet moving even if it appears to be an easy catch.

Not a Waif Anymore

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When teaching outfielding, it must be stressed that outfielders are not three waifs. Each position is important and has specific responsibilities. There is more to out fielding than simply catching a fly ball. Learning the following techniques is very important to be a complete and successful outfielder. These include the half crow hop step, one-motion, blocking, block-n-go, full crow hop, basket catching, diving in addition to movements like drop-locate-sprint, open pivot, crossover, moving through the ball, feet moving in place, and head turning. There are also several types of throws to be mastered.

Overall here are a few final thoughts on fielding. The infielder's scoop technique is a departure from tradition but the results are so effective it is worth the time and repetitions to acquire the technique. Most of the time the footwork preferred is the scissors step. An inside backhand is also used along with rock-n-fire and pivot techniques. Backhanding the ball should only be out of necessity, an emergency, to catching the ball. One-motion footwork is great to combat the slappers bounce. Outfielders must learn an effective drop step and aggressive sprint (every time) to the ball. Proper and direct angles are much more competitive and reliable but they must be practiced. The techniques in the outfield are more than a fly catch. They need to be practiced and used when the situation dictates.

Many drills can be used to breakdown and improve the above techniques. Some more are included in the appendices as my favorite drills. The special situations chapter will discuss turning double plays.

THE SECRET TO A CHAMPIONSHIP DEFENSE

BY GERRY MAURO

IF ON EVERY DEFENSIVE PLAY YOUR TEAMMATES KNOW

1. WHAT TECHNIQUE YOU WILL USE TO FIELD THE BALL

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WALL REACTION DRILL

Objective

Quick reactions with footwork and glovework.

Explanation

Coach throws balls against a wall from behind player so that the ball comes off the wall and causes the player to field with quick reactions. Coach can vary throws, hops and intensity.

SEEBALL TRAINING DEVICE

Objective

A fun device capable of multiple repetitions with accurate shooting of balls.

Explanation

Use golf ball or baseball size plastic balls for a complete workout. All techniques.

FOOT WORK-CONES OR BARRIERS

Objective

Footwork through ball then to target.

Explanation

Use cones or barriers located at different locations on the infield. Hit balls or throw balls from the plate forcing the player who is positioned behind the barrier to attack catching in front of the barrier moving through the ball then with a scissors step going to the target. Too often shortcuts are taken and these cones prevent this. Use for all types of footwork and throws.

LOCO BALLS

Objective

Footwork and quicker reactions in the OF or Infield.

Explanation

Start with coach rolling loco balls and catching with bare hands. Then use a paddle then a glove to catch. Progress to hitting the balls to represent a live game situation. Try throwing the ball up and bouncing on the infield but not catching until it bounces twice. It makes the catch and footwork more difficult.

DST and BABY GATORS

Objective

Make the normal drills you like more difficult. 25% harder to catch with just the balls and 50% harder with balls and baby gators.

Explanation

Use your normal drills or just hit and catch. It is all a better workout.

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