

Playing the Infield – Catcher

The catching position is comprised of a number of components that need to be mastered. The position is complex, and requires not only a good athlete but a coach with patience.

Signaling position –

- ✓ Start in a squat with feet close together, toes pointing slightly inward to keep knees from spreading too wide.
- ✓ If signals are being used they are given in this position – avoid giving the signals too low (hard to see by pitcher, visible to other team).

Receiving position –

- ✓ Once the signal has been given, the catcher moves to a crouching position - feet slightly wider than shoulders, right foot slightly in front of left and pointing toward second baseman (reverse if catcher is a lefty), elbows outside of knees.
- ✓ Have catchers sit on the edge of a chair to help develop a proper crouching position.
- ✓ Another exercise is to have catcher start in a football lineman position and slowly rock back into a catcher's crouch.
- ✓ A properly placed catcher has the glove extended to a plane just behind the batters back elbow.
- ✓ Catchers should use two hands to catch the ball; protect the bare hand by folding the fingers over the thumb, and placing it behind the glove, palm down.
- ✓ Catchers should not reach for the ball (particularly with batters who swing late), and both coaches and catchers should be on the lookout for batters who step back with their back foot before swinging.

Catching the ball –

- ✓ To best protect the catcher's hands from foul tips, all pitches from the knees up should be caught thumbs together - with both glove and bare hand positioned with fingers up.
- ✓ Low pitches should be caught pinkies together – fingers down.
- ✓ Coaches should emphasize that proper technique and a sharp focus on the ball is the best way to avoid getting hurt; it is also the best way to catch the ball.
- ✓ Focus and technique can be developed through 'quick hands' drills, with the catcher receiving pitching speed throws from 25-30 feet distances – have the catcher in full gear against backstop, and use softer baseballs or tennis balls.
- ✓ Another drill is to let the catcher without gear use his bare hands to catch a rag ball. In both drills have the catcher receive balls in a variety of locations to simulate real conditions, and emphasize technique.

Handling the low pitch –

- ✓ The emphasis here is blocking rather than catching the ball.
- ✓ Proper technique for pitches over the plate has the catcher dropping to both knees, head on the ball with chin down, and glove between legs (5-hole) with fingers down and bare hand behind the glove.
- ✓ Feet should be outside of knees with the toes out and the insteps against the ground rather than the tops of the feet.
- ✓ For pitches to either side of the plate, the catcher drops to the outside knee first, and angles the outside shoulder toward the pitcher; the other knee slides over and drops and the glove and bare hand come down to block the 5-hole.
- ✓ A point of emphasis when blocking balls is to keep the eyes on the ball at all times – if a catcher turns his head he loses the protection the headgear provides.

Throwing on steals –

- ✓ Quick and accurate throws are largely a matter of proper technique – ball grip and footwork.
- ✓ The ball should be gripped across the seams to prevent tailing; this can be practiced during normal catch and throw warm ups.
- ✓ On straight steals, the catcher starts low and moves into the pitch, leading with his pivot foot (back throwing foot) as he catches the ball. He then takes a quick stride toward the base being thrown to with his lead foot to trigger the throwing motion. Side arm throws at this age are inadvisable – use overhand or three-quarter technique.
- ✓ For right-handed catchers, inside pitches to right-handed batters or with left handed batters up, proper footwork entails taking a quick slide step to the left with the left (lead) foot, followed by a similar step to the left by the right (plant) foot. The lead foot then strides forward towards the base being thrown to, to trigger the throwing motion.
- ✓ For left-handed catches, the reverse is done for inside pitches to left-handed batters or with right-handed hitters at bat.

Plays at the plate –

- ✓ For safety purposes, catchers should at all times avoid collisions.
- ✓ Always give the runner room to slide – this avoids contact and helps the catcher by letting him know where the runner is going to be.
- ✓ On throws from the middle or the right side of the field the catcher leaves the third base side of the plate open.
- ✓ On throws from the left side of the field the catcher needs to align himself on the line of the throw.
- ✓ At no time should the catcher straddle or block the plate.
- ✓ Once the ball has been received it should be gripped firmly in the bare hand, and that hand should be placed entirely in the glove. The catcher drops to the knee closest to the runner and places the glove down in front of the slide.
- ✓ The mask should be kept on during the entire play. If the runner misses home plate, the catcher should not run after him; the proper play is to wait at the plate for the runner to come back.

Catching the pop fly –

- ✓ All catchers may blink, especially initially, when the bat hits the ball, which is why some catchers never pick up the pop fly. This tendency can be overcome by having the catcher put on his facemask and have somebody gently toss a ball against it to develop player confidence in the equipment.
- ✓ On a pop fly, the catcher immediately removes his mask but holds it in his bare hand until he has picked up the direction of the ball.
- ✓ He then tosses the mask in another direction and lines up his body to face the grandstand, as other infielders would.
- ✓ The ball should be caught above the head with arms extended.
- ✓ Coaches and catchers should be aware that the spin on pop flies will almost always cause the ball to drift back toward the infield.
- ✓ Pop flies in front of the plate are usually best caught by the other fielders.

Fielding bunts –

- ✓ Catchers need to get to the ball quickly and scoop it using both the glove and bare hand - a sweeping motion should be used.
- ✓ The catcher should take the time to line himself up with the base that he is throwing to, and use proper throwing technique to make sure he gets off an accurate throw.
- ✓ If the third baseman gets to the bunt first, the catcher should continue on to cover third base so that no runner can advance there unimpeded.

Backing up first –

- ✓ If the bases are empty or there is a runner on first, the catcher should back up the first baseman on any throws to first.
- ✓ This is a pure hustle play that calls for the catcher to position himself on the line of the throw.
- ✓ If the ball is hit past the first baseman, the catcher should trail the runner and be prepared to receive a throw at first to catch the runner if he takes too big a turn. (Skip Bertman, Coaching and Playing)