



**THE
BASEBALL
ZONE**

DEVELOPING MOVEMENTS & ACTIONS FOR INFELDERS

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Developing Movements & Actions for Infielders

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His main passion, however, is seeing concrete, individual development in his athletes on, and more importantly, off the diamond. [See his bio here.](#)



Developing Infielding Movements Through Playing Catch

So what is the number one method of improving infielding movements? In my opinion, there is one place to start: ***Just play catch***. That's it. Throw the ball. Move the feet and catch the ball. How much more simplified can it be than that? Unfortunately playing catch is done at such a poor level that developing and acquiring skills needed for improvement go by the wayside. A simple routine of day in and day out catch, with purpose, intent and conviction will assist in the overall development of movements for any aspiring infielder.

How much time do players spend daily playing catch? The good ones will do it for 15 to 20 minutes daily, sometimes much longer than they will ever take batting practice. In daily throwing programs, players will have the ability to visualize how they want to make each catch, where the feet need to be positioned, how they will harmonize their hands (with their feet) and what type of position one needs to be in to efficiently make the catch and subsequent throw.

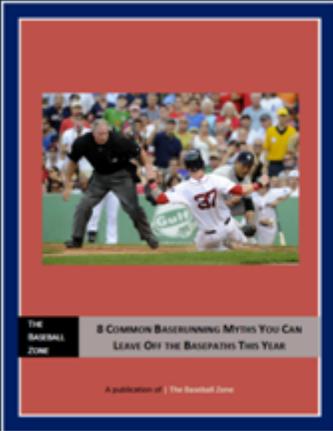


During your daily throwing time, players will be able to experiment with various glove and hand positioning; throwing from different or awkward arm angles; and even throwing the ball from positions that may cause imbalances. All of these types of development help the dexterity in the glove-hand relationship and relationship with the feet to improve lateral, forward and backward movements. Additionally, during this throwing time it is a good habit to have your partner throw balls that will bounce, whereby balls will take off from the ground and create long hops, short hops and in between hops. The infielder must change his thought process and visual cues of ball flight and determine what hop he

can take the ball on, field it cleanly and have flow when making the return throw back to his partner.

It is easy to see why playing catch is a great developer for infielding movements. One thing we know about infielders is that they don't always field ground balls in exactly the same spot each and every time, nor do they make throws with the exact same arm angle. In fact infielders, more than any other position, will not throw with the same arm angle from one throw to the next. Playing catch may seem to be infantile in its simplest form, but if the execution of each catch and throw is done with extreme precision and executed with intent and conviction, you can turn yourself into a confident infielder with good movement patterns.

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8 COMMON BASERUNNING MYTHS YOU CAN LEAVE OFF THE BASEPATHS THIS YEAR
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Getting “Ready” With a True Ready Position

A very untaught, undervalued and frankly underestimated critical infield fundamental is the “ready position” for all defensive players. Even though I will be emphasizing infielders here, the ready position actually will pertain to all defensive fielders, other than the pitcher and catcher. It usually is assumed for the most part that infielders (and outfielders) already have a basic understanding of the ready position and consequently, due to this assumption, this fundamental element is often left out when it comes to the teachings of fielding a ground ball. Instead, many coaches will go right into the underlying essentials of fielding ground balls, yet leave out what may be the most important one...that is the ready position.

Now, some may disagree that the ready position is not nearly as important as the angle of approach; or speed of approach; or the fielding position; or some other element of fielding a ground ball. There will always be things we will agree to disagree on, but it is safe to say that all coaches will agree that if defensive players are not ready, with good timing and in the best position possible to move, they will have zero chance of fielding a ground ball with the most efficient fundamental actions. Infielders need to be free flowing, smooth and loose and one of the best ways to improve on this is with the work that one would put into the simple ready position. Yes, I did say simple, because it really is simple, but as stated, very much undervalued as far as its importance goes.

The ready position is not the fielding position, as many young infielders think it is. In other words, the ready position is a movement; or a series of rhythmic steps that assist all defensive players to gather their timing to the pitch as the pitch enters the clay area of the plate. Infielders (and outfielders) are in the position, trying to get the exact timing to ensure when the ball is hit, they are in the most advantageous position to move in any

direction. This can only happen if the timing of the athletic position is achieved relative to the pitch.

The first key to understanding the ready position is when it will occur. It occurs at the completion of the resting phase (which is between pitches) and before the hitter swings the bat. In the resting position, defensive players may have their hands on their hips, knees or even just simply hanging by their side. This is the phase where all the thinking comes into play...pitcher, hitter, count, position, wind, sun, score, etc... Once the pitcher begins to go into their delivery, all defensive players must begin to create their prep steps or rhythmic tempo into their ready position. This movement must be controlled, but most important is the timing to the pitch. The hands will come off the hips or knees and each defensive player must create the all important movement to be ready to move! The better each defensive player is able to effectively perform their ready position, the better and quicker they can react to the batted ball.

In understanding the ready position and the prep steps, it is critical to understand that the ready position for each player will be different. However, there are some governing rules and absolutes that each must abide by. Let's first look at middle infielders:

Because they are further from the hitter, they should be much more upright, as they have more ground to cover. If they were to start low, their first movement would be up before they made any type of movement toward the ball. Thus, it is often best middle infielders simply walk in to their ready position using a left, right, left movement, staying fairly vertical, with the chest up and out, the



hands somewhere around the midpoint of the body (hip\belly button area) and the thumbs pointed up. The thumbs are pointed up, as this is the most natural position to have them, but more importantly, it is actually how athletes run. And, when fielding a ground ball, it usually means movement is needed toward the ball prior to actually fielding it. As the pitch enters the clay area, each middle infielder should time the last step, with the left foot coming down and the right foot following it, turning that step into almost a hop step or a de-cleating of both feet into the ready position. It is the timing of this hop or de-cleating that will pay dividends for all infielders when it comes to movement to the ground ball.



Conversely, corner infielders are much different; in that they generally are always closer to the hitter, and thus, they need to be much lower (see the difference in the ready position between the 3B and the SS). Corner infielders are more concerned about the rocket hit at them or a single step left or right. So depth does play a pivotal role for corner infielders. When closer, corner infielders may find a need to eliminate some footwork to their prep steps and simply, assume a

tennis player's return serve stance, by swaying back and forth. Or they may just move right foot and hop to their left as they de-cleat to the ready position. Corner infielders, will either have their glove slightly in front of them and around knee height (or sometimes lower) or they may have their arms to their side, thumbs up and around the height of their knees. The essential key is to be in the best position to move and react to that hard hit ball right at them or a step left or right.

Coaches: When working on ground ball fundamentals, it is absolutely critical each of your infielders clearly understand the importance of the ready position and the timing to the pitch. Infielders who take this position with a sense of urgency will find they will get better jumps and reads on ground balls. Do not let players take the ready position as a trivial component but as a component that sets them up to field ground balls.

A final note on the ready position...outfielders are much the same as middle infielders and as such, need to be more upright and get their timing as the ball enters the clay area. They too must work hard at de-cleating on time for the benefit of getting a jump on a fly ball or a ball hit into the gap that they can hopefully cut off. The better each defensive player becomes at the ready position, the better the jump and the better the read!

Good luck in teaching the ready position.

How to Read Hops (& Which One to Avoid)

Typically when learning how to play the infield, most of the instruction an infielder will receive will be centered on technical areas such as glove position, how far the feet should be spread apart, flexion in the knees and ankles, etc. However, an overlooked area when teaching young players how to field a ground ball is the ability of the infielder to read the hop and determine the hop that they should try and intersect the ball on. Reading hops is truly an art in itself and takes thousands of reps to garner the ability and "instinct" to understand. Notwithstanding the importance of the technical efficiencies necessary to field the ball, this article will briefly delve into a couple types of hops that can be expected and how an infielder should go about making the play on these hops - namely the "big, high hop" and the "short hop".

First and foremost, ground balls will take a variety of hops as they move toward an infielder. Typically, there are three types of hops a ball can take: a big, high hop; a short hop and the dreaded in-between hop. The goal of every infielder is, at all costs, to try and avoid the in between hop. This is the hop that will absolutely place every infielder in a position that they simply do not want to be in. That is, fielding the ball on your heels, deep against the body while backing up. Instead of talking about the negatives of fielding an in between hop and sending the wrong message, after all, the best way to avoid an in between hop is to turn it into a big, high hop or a short hop. Let's examine the big, high hop and the short hop and consider these hops as our priorities when fielding ground balls.



Big, High Hop: This is the ball that every infielder desperately wants to try and get. It is fashioned by first recognizing and reading the ball off the bat, then moving quickly and fluidly toward the ball while creating an angle of approach. Once the infielder has ascertained the directional angle to take toward the ball, the next key is timing the momentum into the fielding position so that the ball can be intersected in the desired hop. A good key to reading these types of hops is “if

the first hop is high, come and get it”. Big, high hops are not necessarily above the waist, they can be below the waist around the mid thigh area or knees.

Short Hops: The short hop is also considered an advantageous hop to field ground balls, as the ball will be fielded shortly after the ball has hit the ground for the last time. The infielder will simply move his glove in a downward plane and take it through the ball while continuing to maintain his body momentum. The glove should never be shifted in a backward direction when taking a short hop, as a backward move of the glove will only cause the hop to extend further, thereby giving the ball more time to bounce upward and turning the hop into an in between hop. Always get the glove lower than the hop and work toward the ball.



8 Types of Ground Balls You Need to Practice Fielding

The art of fielding a ground ball successfully takes years and years of fundamental practice of learning how to read balls off the bat; creating angles; learning the pursuit speed toward balls; using the feet to take the glove to the ball; manipulating the glove to ensure it is squared up to the ball; and creating rhythm and flow amongst numerous other fundamental factors. When training your infielders in the development of fielding ground balls, don't ever neglect the numerous classifications of types of ground balls. No matter what the fundamental concept is, the eight essential ground ball classifications are the following:



1. Right at the Infielder...the routine play; must be made as often as possible; it is the ball more infielders boot simply because it is routine. Infielders can become very complacent when a routine ground ball is hit at them. They often will take for granted this will be an easy play and then OOPS, the clank happens. Become a master at the routine play. Build

confidence and self-esteem that will lead into making a show-stopping play later.

2. Left and Right...many times infielders will work only to their strong side, i.e. the glove side. Think of taking grounds balls to both sides like a switch hitter. If the switch hitter takes 100 swings from the right side he must do the same from the left. Well if an infielder is taking 25 ground balls to the left, make sure they take 25 to the



right.

3. Flats... these are ground balls that take the infielder out toward the outfield, causing them to have to fight to get some depth, then re-direct their body toward the direction of the throw destination. At 3B, the flat would be to the left, out in the 5/6 hole; at SS, to the left, out toward and possibly behind second base; at 2b, out to the left, in the 3/4 hole. Each one of these “flats” will require the infielder to “right the ship” to make a throw to first base.



4. Deep...this is considered deep to their back hand. These are very difficult balls to get to and even more difficult to get off a throw with any type of velocity or accuracy. Infielders need to see how much range they have; how much arm strength and ball carry

they can get on their throws. They also need to decide when making these long throws how to use the ground to bounce the ball over to first base.

5. High Hopper...these are balls that when the infielder reads the first hop down sharply off the ball, they must move aggressively at the ball. Sitting back on this type of ground ball will only lead to fielding balls at incorrect hops and placing massive amounts of pressure on the infielder to get rid of the ball. Remember, first hop high...GO and GET it!

6. Slow Roller...similar to the high hopper, the infielder must move aggressively toward the ball and decide on a bare hand or two hand pick up. If using the bare hand, the infielder must avoid slapping or picking the ball but instead almost using the arm and hand



as a pendulum to scoop the ball up off the ground.

7. Line Drive Hops...this is the one hopper, where the infielder needs to try and get the eyes below the flight of the ball. Getting below the ball with the eyes assists in the visual read. Often times on these one hop LD's, the infielder will need to get the body turned slightly sideways to set the position of the body as early as possible. Moreover, it will help them decide if they will field the ball on a long hop or a short hop pick.

8. The Dreaded In-Betweenner...very tough one to work on. In fact, the infielder is actually trying to avoid this hop. But due to poor reads off the bat, poor angles or poor pursuit speed toward ball, they will turn routine grounds balls into 'tweener hops. Even though this is considered the avoidance hop, it's going to happen, so work on the recovery movement.



Want to be a better infielder than you are now? Better than the competition? Then make sure you are practicing fielding each of these 8 types of ground balls! You'll be sure to see each of them every season.

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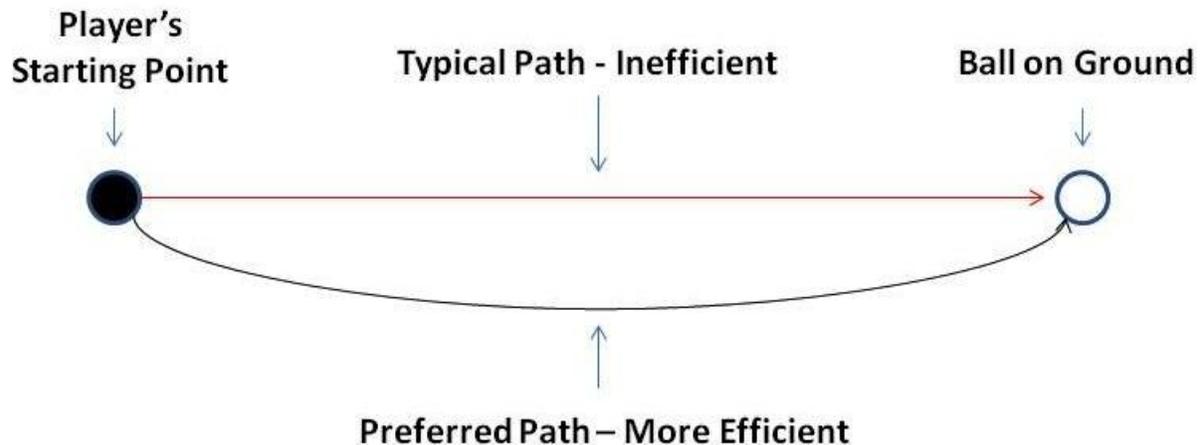
How Infielders Can Create Angles to the Ball

Do you ever wonder why great MLB infielders always appear to make infield plays very routine? Have you ever wondered why MLB infielders rarely get bad hops when fielding ground balls? Have you ever really watched how MLB infielders prepare their bodies to field ground balls? We can talk all we want about instinct, positioning, range, hands, arm strength, etc. all as critical components of infield play, but this article will be designed around the infielder's ability to create angles when fielding the routine ground ball.

The first major difference between an amateur infielder and a MLB infielder is the way in which they approach a ground ball. Most young players take a straight "B" line to the ball, thus when they get their feet set up to field the ball, they typically have the glove on the wrong side of their body. For example, as a right handed throwing infielder, most young players have the glove positioned in the center of their body or toward their throwing side when the ball is fielded. Conversely, a MLB infielder would generally place their glove to the left of center or directly underneath their glove hand eye. So, now the question...why do MLB infielders position their glove differently than the young player? Simple answer...they create an angle to the ball, ensuring their movement pattern approach places the ground ball outside their glove shoulder. When the MLB infielder moves and approaches the ball, they always work from the outside of the ball to in - or put another way, for the 2B, SS and 3B the movement would be from slightly right to left.

The approach should always be to try and keep the ball outside the glove hand shoulder, thus, when the infielder is preparing to field the ball, they can fluidly and smoothly transition into their last two steps (right, left) prior to fielding the ball. At this point, the

glove will be presented to the ball slightly left of center and in front of the glove hand eye.



A simple indoor or outdoor drill (see above) to see if your kids are creating angles is to simply place a ball on a line in the gym or on the field. Have your players back up about 10 feet from the ball. Once they have backed up, have them walk toward the ball. What you will generally see is a direct path or "B" line to the ball. What they should be doing is moving so that they approach the ball with it slightly outside their glove shoulder. This will then create the angle toward the ground ball and enhancing momentum for the throw to first base.

In summarizing angles, it is very important that infielders find a way to create angles to ground balls. When they can do this on a consistent basis, infielders will find their "flow" and "transition to throw" improves in addition to their ability to read hops. We all should know that reading the best hop to field the ball is a by-product of how we create the angle to the ball.

Getting Infielders Outside of Their Comfort Zones

Now, you may be wondering what the power of your comfort zone refers to when it comes to fielding a ground ball. Simply, the next few times you go out and hit ground balls to one of your players watch the position they go to on the field. Many times you will see an infielder move to a comfort zone to take his ground balls. Why? It is simple - they are in that comfort zone (certain position on the field or indoor facility) and only want to take ground balls from that exact position.



For example, a SS sprints out to his position to begin his work taking ground balls. Most likely he will sprint to a standard infield position and then the coach will begin to hit ground ball after ground ball at him. Now from a repetitive perspective this is great, but the problem lies in that if the fungo hitter is consistent, then it is safe to say the SS (in this case) will receive fungo after fungo at generally the same speed and often times the same number of hops (yes, a good fungo hitter can usually manipulate the bat to hit balls with a certain amount of desire hops and velo's). Again, I have no issue with this, but, the primary issue I would have is we are not allowing, or better yet, forcing our infielders to take ground balls **OUTSIDE** of their comfort zone.

Now what am I saying we should do?

- First, you must always remind infielders (OF's are no different) that they must be able to become comfortable in uncomfortable situations or in situations **OUTSIDE** of their comfort zone.
- Once this has been addressed, begin to hit ground balls at your infielders from shorter distances essentially the same way you

would hit them if they were playing at regular depth (avoid hitting rockets from close distance).

- Next, have the infielders move back to regular depth and observe how they react and move to the opposite of the shorter ground ball.
- Then, have the infielder move to a different depth, while the fungo hitter maintains the same type fungoed ball.



In each one of these positions the infielder is now persuaded to take ground balls outside of his comfort zone and work on reading hops and movements to each ball. If time is spent at getting out of that comfort zone, combined with the actual fundamental breakdown of the body, feet and glove, you should find that infielders will become more in tune with feeling comfortable in an uncomfortable position.

I will take a shot in the dark and say that a world class tennis player, when working on returning serves, does not always stand in the same spot and get comfortable returning serves from that position all the time. So why should we train our infielders any differently? There is a definite randomness to where and how they will field balls in a game, so it certainly makes sense to me to implement a level of randomness in their practice, which would include getting them outside of their "Comfort Zones".

Good luck.

Conclusions

While this is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to all facets of developing movements and actions for infielders, it is a great starting point and fundamental anchor for any coach at any level. It is a base from which you can develop your own coaching plans as well as one to come back to for resetting priorities. By this I mean that we can often get ahead of ourselves with things we work on with our players when we might all be better served staying focused on the fundamentals put forth here.

Often I will talk with pro guys when they drop in during the offseason and ask them what they are currently doing to prepare for a season or before a game. Their answers are often things as simple as creating games when they are playing catch with one another, but games that provide points for doing the kinds of things discussed in the “Developing Infielding Movements Through Playing Catch” entry. Great players and athletes with advanced skill sets, yet still spending most of their time on fundamental, routine (so we think) skill development and reinforcement. We can learn from this.

So if you keep your players working on fundamental skills, seeing different ground balls and hops, while keeping things fresh and pushing them outside of their comfort zones, you should see better and more consistent movements and actions from all of your infielders.

Yours in Baseball,

Rick Johnston