

SCBA

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Majors

Fielding

Toilet, Alligator, Eggs, Dance

Two-Hands for Fly Balls (and Ground Balls)

Everyone moves on the sound of the bat!

COMMUNICATE

“Shading” a batter. (Adjust according to a right or left handed hitter.)

Cutt-off Man

Double Play / Double Play Depth

Pitching

4 step method

Location, location, location.

Catching

Stance – Protect Throwing Hand

Framing

Blocking (Replace feet with knees, don't go forward)

Throw-downs (ball transfer next to ear)

Hitting

Hold bat in fingers

Short stride (4-6 inches)

Swing Down on ball

Directional Hitting

Bunting

Base running

Run through First (turn right, unless first base coach instructs otherwise)

Sliding (Bent Knee, sit with legs crossed and extend top leg, front heel off ground, raise hands, slide on bottom – holding dirt in hands will protect fingers)

Primary Lead Offs (Eyes on pitcher, back edge of base, shuffle steps-don't hop)

Secondary Leads (two or three hops, timing – ball in hitting zone)

Safety Squeeze

Fielding

Ground Balls

1. Sit on the Toilet – “Toilet”
 - Good fielding stance, athletic posture
 - Keeps butt down, solid frame
2. Alligator Eats dirt – “Alligator”
 - Two hands, in front of body
 - Keeps glove down, react up
3. Collect Easter Eggs – “Eggs”
 - Soft hands, cradle towards body
 - Centers ball, prepares body for throw
4. Do the Dance – “Dance”
 - Feet always moving, able to react
 - Gets momentum moving towards target

Remember the triangle. Before you begin fielding, line your players up with some space in between them. Have them set up with their feet about shoulder width apart. Now, have them reach their glove out on the ground in front of themselves about the same distance as the width between their feet, as if they are fielding an imaginary grounder. Have them hold the position, and point out that the three things on the ground - each foot, plus the glove - form the points of a triangle. This is the ideal position for fielding a ground ball; feet too close together take away the ability to move laterally, a glove too close to the feet gives no room for error when scooping up a grounder.

Use both hands. This is possibly the most critical aspect of fielding grounders that you can teach, and is oddly enough, the one most often ignored by coaches. When set to field a grounder, the glove should be placed on the ground, and the other hand should be open, above the glove, with the heels of the hand fairly close together (the analogy used for younger players is that of an alligator's mouth).

When the ball enters the glove, the secondary hand should automatically close over the ball and gather it in; not only does this ensure that the ball won't pop out, but it places the fielder into a favorable position to make a throw. The further, and less obvious benefit, is that balls that skip off of the heel of the glove cannot pop up and hit the fielder in the face if this basic fundamental is employed; the top hand will simply deflect the ball back down into the dirt where it can then be recovered.

Start low, then come up high. Teach your kids that, when fielding a grounder, they should always begin with their glove all the way on the ground. If the ball takes a hop, they can bring their glove up to it; even if they misjudge, odds are excellent that their top hand and/or their body will block the ball and keep it from going past.

However, if the player tries to start with their glove high and then go down to the ball, they will invariably let grounder after grounder go between their legs.

Keep soft hands. Ground balls come in with so much velocity that they will frequently bounce out of even a perfectly placed glove. Bringing the second hand in will help this, but sometimes, the ball will still pop out in the time it takes to bring that hand down.

The best way to reduce this effect is by having soft hands. In other words, teach your players to not lock their elbows in, thus presenting a brick wall for the baseball to ricochet off of. Instead, they should "give" ever so slightly - this will reduce the energy of the baseball enough to prevent it from popping out. If you have a player who always seems to get into the right position for fielding, who uses two hands, who gets his glove down, and yet still seems to lose a lot of balls, odds are excellent that he has no idea what soft hands are.

Watch that footwork! The first instinct that many young fielders have when fielding a grounder not right at them is to turn to the side and run towards the ball. Unless the fielder is trying to make a stab at a ball deep in the hole (and even then they should give ground, taking a proper angle), this is the wrong way to do it.

If the player turns his head and runs, he loses track of the ball. Since the first rule of pretty much every phase of baseball is some variation of "keep your eye on the ball," we know that this cannot be correct! Furthermore, even if the fielder can pick up the ball in time, he then must turn his body and reset his feet in an effort to get back to a good "triangle" stance.

Coaches are often tempted to ignore fundamentals in the case of a talented fielder who can make plays, even when doing it the wrong way. The fact of the matter is that you are doing a disservice to your player if you take this path.

Instead of turning and running, players should "slide step" to the side, allowing them to keep the eye on the ball. Further, this allows for a simple stop in motion to place the fielder into proper triangle form. Practice this by lining your players up with several feet in between them, and have them simply "slide" to the left, then to the right. Repeat this for a minute or so, until you have them breathing nice and hard.

The idea is that they should be stepping wide to the side, then following the other foot over until their heels almost click together. In younger players, this will be somewhat of a hopping motion, but as they become more accustomed, it should become second nature and more of a glide.

Throwing

The Bucket Drill – Throwing Accuracy

This is a fun, productive drill, especially for younger kids, though older kids can gain benefit from it, too. It focuses on the importance of getting rid of the ball in a hurry.

Split your squad into two teams. Line the first team up, one behind another, at the shortstop position. Take the second squad and place them behind first base. Next, place a five gallon bucket upside down on first base (a garbage can also works as a suitable target). Make sure that you have plenty of baseballs handy!

A coach rolls or hits a ball to the first person in line at the shortstop position, who then has three seconds to pick up the ball and throw it at the bucket. The coach should loudly count off the seconds; this will initially fluster some of your younger players, but will also help them to cope with pressure better in the long run.

If the bucket is missed, the player behind first base fields the ball and returns it to the coach. Regardless of the outcome, the player who made the throw rotates to the back of the line.

After several passes through the line, switch sides. As an added bonus, keep score between the two teams - it is amazing how much more effort you can get out of a kid if he's competing against his friends.

If you have enough coaching help, you can vary this drill by having both teams throw at the same time; the competition is a big hit with players.

This is a great drill for practice on throwing accuracy, quick release, and for encouraging quick decisions. Make it a part of your drill rotation.

Throwing Relay Race

In baseball, we tend to emphasize - as we should - the need to get rid of the ball quickly. Of course, that doesn't do us any good if the throws aren't good, or the other guy drops it. Use this little drill as a competition to practice good throws and good catches.

Start by splitting your team into two or three squads. If possible, have the same number of players on each squad, and certainly make sure to spread the talent out as equally as possible. Have each squad form a line, with a gap between each player roughly equivalent to the gap between the second baseman and first baseman on your infield. Have the first player pick up one ball, make a good throw to the next guy, then have him turn and throw it to the third player in line, and so on.

After they've done the drill a time or two, place three balls on the ground at the end of each line. When you give the signal, the race begins - the object is to move each ball to the end of the line. If a player misses the ball, due to a bad throw or a muffed catch, he must return to his place in line before throwing it again. Once the first ball reaches the end of the line, the second ball may be put into play. The winning team is obviously the one who finishes first - have the losers do ten jumping jacks.

Vary the competition by allowing the players to have all balls in play at once, but don't let them get carried away and whack one another in the head in a rush to win. For another twist, you could require any dropped balls to be carried back to the beginning of the line - really emphasizing the need for a good throw. Of course, you can always make the drill more challenging by increasing the gaps between the players, but don't let them get so far apart as to make the throws too difficult for your lesser-skilled players; this defeats the purpose entirely.

BATTING DRILLS

In any practice, you will do well to use stations - these "work centers" allow small groups of players to get many more skill repetitions than they ever would standing in line waiting for their turn to bat. Ideally, you will run at least three stations at any given practice; if you can increase this number to four or five, so much the better. If you have a well-run practice, it shouldn't take much more than an hour for each batter to get at least two passes through each station. If you take much longer than this, you run the risk of losing your players' attention spans.

The rest of this article deals with recommended stations and how to run them. For the sake of variety, you may want to change which stations you use from practice to practice. In every station, always emphasize proper technique - have the batters dig in for every swing, have them load up properly, make them swing hard and follow through each time. The idea is to build muscle memory; if they don't practice swings the way they will use them in game situations, the benefit of the drills are decreased or completely lost.

The Tee Drill

An absolute essential - you should use tee drills at almost every practice. Major league baseball players hit off of a batting tee every single day, and your players will reap similar benefits. All you need to run a tee drill is a batting tee and either a net of some sort or a nice section of chain link fence.

Make sure that your hitters do not contact the tee. If the ball pops up, the batter is likely hitching or dipping his swing. Adjust the tee every few swings to work the entire range of pitches the batter might see - inside and outside, high and low. The tee gives you a great opportunity to focus on particular holes in your players' swings.

Soft Toss

This is another excellent drill that allows you to work on fine-tuning the batter's swing without the pressure of live pitching. For the simplest variation, all you need is a net or a small piece of chain link fence. Soft toss should be a regular part of your drills; as an added bonus, any mom or dad can work with their player at home with this drill. Stand in front and to the side of the hitter, no more than six or eight feet away, and lob balls to him. For a variation especially useful for limited space, you can stand four or five feet away, directly at a ninety degree angle to the hitter. This also works for helping emphasize the need of watching the ball.

If you have a pitching screen, you can set up at about half live distance in front of the batter and toss from behind protection.

Live Pitching

All the drills in the world will only do such much good if the batter never sees live pitching. Of course, this station requires the most room of any; you'll need an actual batting cage or lots of open field space behind you. While this station will allow you to see the most in the way of results, it also offers the least amount of opportunity to analyze errors in a player's swing - if at all possible, designate a coach to concentrate on the player only, not the results of any hits.

You should be wary of letting a practice go by without hitting.

Practice Golf Balls

An absolutely outstanding hitting drill. Plastic practice golf balls can develop a hitter's hand-eye coordination like nothing else. This drill does not require a net, since the balls can't go very far, and are non-dangerous. Set up six feet or so in front of the batter at a forty-five degree angle and lob the pitches in. For a more challenging drill, substitute a length of broom handle instead of the normal baseball bat!

The Hitting Stick

This traditional baseball training aid can be found in pretty much any sporting goods store; they start at twenty dollars or so, and go up to around forty dollars. A hitting stick looks like a vinyl-covered ball on the end of, well, a stick.

You get similar benefits from a hitting stick as you do from a batting tee - you can move the ball up or down, in or out, and can even apply some motion to things. Hitting sticks make great additional batting stations or nice changes of pace for practice; young kids seem to particularly enjoy them.

Mix and match, and keep things new and interesting. You can always duplicate stations - have more than one batting tee, for instance - or put variations in them. Do chair drills, fence drills, or multiple tee drills. You might find other training aides, such as the "Hit Away" to be useful, as well. The main thing to remember is to emphasize proper technique on each and every swing. Practice makes perfect!

Use Colored Dots to Improve Batter Recognition

One of the biggest challenges encountered by youth baseball coaches is the difficulty that players have in following and identifying the pitch. In younger players, a common problem is that the batter doesn't pick up the ball until it is too close to hit. In older players, the issue is more that the batter doesn't identify the pitch until too late, leaving him at the mercy of his pitch guess.

The solution to both of these issues has a similar fix - get the hitter concentrating on the pitch as early as possible.

But how to accomplish this? You can tell the player to "watch the ball" until you are blue in the face, but odds are that they won't connect what you are trying to convey.

Take a selection of baseballs and, using a marker (colored sharpies work great for this), draw coin-sized colored dots on the surface of the ball. Repeat the process with at least one alternate color, making sure that it is clearly distinguishable (red and blue work well for this).

To begin with, pitch to your batter from regulation distance, but instruct them to not swing. Instead, have them call out the color of the dot on the baseball as soon as they can identify it.

As the hitter's recognition improves, call out a certain color and only allow them to swing at that color ball. In all cases, make sure to mix up the colors used (this is why three colors are better than two), and hide the ball in your glove until you actually begin to make the pitch.

What have you accomplished? Your players are truly watching the ball from the very instant it leaves the pitcher's hand, giving younger players more time to nail down their timing, and older players more time to recognize the movement of the pitch. It goes without saying that players of all ages can benefit from this drill.

How to Play First Base (the Right Way)

Requirements for the First Baseman

Your first baseman must have an excellent glove, able to catch anything thrown near him. Speed is not much of a factor at this position, though the fielder still must be quick to move and react. He must be fearless, unafraid to stretch out and make a difficult catch or scoop while keeping his foot on the bag.

Many coaches try, with good reason to put a tall, left-handed player at first base. Tall, because the larger the player, the longer his reach, and the fewer balls he will miss due to a lack of physical size. Left handed, because you gain a tiny bit more reach at first base with a left handed fielder - giving you an extra call or two per year on close plays.

Basic Responsibilities

On any contact, the player should know whether the ball is coming in his general direction or not. If so, he should attempt to make the play, just as should any fielder. If not, he **must** cover the bag, whether or not he believes that there is any hope of a play at first base.

Advanced Responsibilities

First basemen must be taught that their primary responsibility, above all others, is to get the sure out. Naturally, they should be able to think fast and to get lead runners whenever possible - but it is **always** better to get that sure, easy out at first base than it is to take an unnecessary chance trying to get a lead runner elsewhere and come away empty handed.

On bloop hits, or on grounders that pull him far off of his bag, the first baseman should know when to tag the base himself, and when to toss it to the covering pitcher (or second baseman).

In the event of a bunt, the first baseman will usually charge the ball, allowing the second baseman to field his bag. However, care must be applied, lest the batter pull back the bat and lay a grounder through the hole up the middle.

Once a play gets into the outfield, the first baseman should remain alert. It is always possible that a run down can occur, and he will need to either cover his base or back up a throw. The first baseman should always back up any throw coming in from left field to second base.

First base is always a center of action, and should be filled by one of the best gloves on your team. A team without a quality first baseman finds itself giving away outs on a routine basis.

How to Play Second Base (the Right Way)

Requirements for the Second Baseman

Your second baseman must be mobile and quick on his feet. While raw speed is not an absolute requirement, the faster he is, the more range he has; among infielders, only the shortstop has more need of speed. Naturally, your second baseman must have a solid glove, as must all of your infielders. Second basemen are rarely required to make throws anywhere but to first base or to the shortstop; therefore, arm strength is not a concern as it is at third or short. Above all, a second baseman must be able to make decisions and think on his feet, as he has many responsibilities.

Basic Responsibilities

On any contact, the first step should be toward the ball. The player's momentum will carry him either to the ball, or toward his base.

The right side of the infield is the second baseman's domain - anything hit between second base and the right foul line is his responsibility. If he can get to the ball, he should do so. If the ball is hit to the first baseman, it is his job to back up the play. If the ball gets into the outfield, he should sprint out onto the grass and act as a cutoff man.

If the ball is hit between second base and the left foul line, the player should always cover the bag in the event of a throw from short or third. If the ball goes into the outfield, he should be prepared to receive a throw at the bag.

It is vital that the second baseman and the shortstop communicate and clearly understand when each will be covering the base! If they get into one another's way, outs will be lost.

Advanced Responsibilities

With a runner on first and less than two outs, the top priority should always be to attempt a double play. If fielded near the bag, the player should know whether to step on the bag himself or to make the throw to second base via the underhand toss. However, the player should always bear in mind that the first responsibility is a sure out - make the throw to first if he does not think he has a chance to get the runner at second.

In the event of a bunt, the shortstop will be covering third base, where the third baseman will be charging the ball. This leaves second wide open, meaning that the second baseman must cover the bag at second.

If a runner attempts to steal second, both the shortstop and second baseman should break for the bag. Usually, the shortstop will cover the base, while the second baseman will back up the play a good ten feet deep. However, if the shortstop does not make it (for whatever reason), the second baseman **must** take the bag.

Second base is absolutely vital, and should be filled by one of the best defensive players on your team. If coached correctly, it can be a keystone of your defensive effort.

How to Play Shortstop (the Right Way)

Requirements for the Shortstop

Your shortstop must be mobile and quick on his feet. While raw speed is not an absolute requirement, the faster he is, the more range he has; among infielders, the shortstop has the most need of speed. Naturally, your shortstop must have a solid glove - he frequently has the best defensive skill of any player on the team. Shortstops routinely throw to first base, sometimes from deep in the hole; therefore, arm strength is a big requirement, as only the third baseman has a longer throw in the infield. Above all, a shortstop must be able to make decisions and think on his feet, as he is the captain of the defense, and is responsible for setting the tone on the field.

Basic Responsibilities

On any contact, the first step should be toward the ball. The player's momentum will carry him either to the ball, or toward his base.

The right side of the infield is the shortstop's domain - anything hit between second base and the left foul line is his responsibility. If he can get to the ball, he should do so. If the ball is hit to the third baseman, it is his job to back up the play. If the ball gets into the outfield, he should sprint out onto the grass and act as a cutoff man.

If the ball is hit between second base and the right foul line, the player should always cover the bag in the event of a throw from second or first. If the ball goes into the outfield, he should be prepared to receive a throw at the bag.

It is vital that the second baseman and the shortstop communicate and clearly understand when each will be covering the base! If they get into one another's way, outs will be lost.

Advanced Responsibilities

With a runner on first and less than two outs, the top priority should always be to attempt a double play. If fielded near the bag, the player should know whether to step on the bag himself or to make the throw to second base via the underhand toss. However, the player should always bear in mind that the first responsibility is a sure out - make the throw to first if he does not think he has a chance to get the runner at second.

In the event of a bunt, the third baseman will be charging the ball, leaving third base vacant. The shortstop must wheel over to third to cover the bag, while the second baseman will likewise shift to cover second.

If a runner attempts to steal second, both the shortstop and second baseman should break for the bag. Usually, the shortstop will cover the base, while the second baseman will back up the play a good ten feet deep. However, if the shortstop does not make it (for whatever reason), the second baseman **must** take the bag.

Shortstop is absolutely vital, and should be filled by the best defensive player on your team. Even so, the shortstop should know his role, and play within that framework, or you are simply giving away outs.

How to Play Third Base (the Right Way)

Requirements for the Third Baseman

Your third baseman must be quick on his feet, and possess excellent reflexes. While he can of course benefit from raw speed, it is not an essential requirement for the position. Third base requires a very solid glove - most batters are right handed, and many of them love to pull the baseball. This means that third base gets many hits, and the fielder's position places him very close to the batter, leaving less reaction time than most other positions enjoy. The third baseman must have a strong arm if he is to have any chance of throwing out a runner at first base, so he will frequently possess one of the strongest arms on the team.

Basic Responsibilities

On any contact, the first step should be toward the ball. The player's momentum will carry him either to the ball, or toward his base.

The extreme left side of the infield is the third baseman's responsibility domain - anything hit between the shortstop and the left foul line is his responsibility. If he can get to the ball, he should do so. He should be prepared to cover third base if there is any possibility of a play there.

If the ball is hit between second base and the right foul line, the player should always cover third base, in the event of a throw there. He should be aware of what is going on with the shortstop; if a throw is made to second base front he right side of the outfield, he should back up the play.

Advanced Responsibilities

With a runner on first and less than two outs, the top priority should always be to attempt a double play. If possible, make a clean throw to the second baseman in an effort to "turn two." However, the player should always bear in mind that the first responsibility is a sure out - make the throw to first if he does not think he has a chance to get the runner at second.

If there is a force play at third (runners on first and second), the first option is usually to step on third base to begin a double play - either to second or first, depending on the judgment of where the best chance for an out is. Preference is always given to the lead runner - that is, if it is possible to get the lead runner out (at third or at second), then do so before getting the runner at first.

With the base loaded and two outs, the third baseman may pursue whatever out is easiest to get - this may be stepping on his own base, or making a throw to any base. With less than two outs, the call may be for a double play, unless the coach has decided that runs cannot be sacrificed (tie game late). In this case, the only priority is to attempt to force the runner at the plate.

In the event of a bunt, the third baseman will be charging the ball, leaving third base vacant. Usually, the only play here is to throw the runner out at first unless you are dealing with very slow runners at other bases.

Third base requires a smart, heads-up player with great hands, great reflexes, and a strong arm. Even more, third base requires a coach who understands the variety of requirements, and can convey them to his players.

The Catcher

Pop Up to catch those Pop ups

You see it in every single game - the pitcher delivers, the batter gets a little under the pitch, and look out! The hitter has popped it almost straight up. If the catcher makes the play, the out is nothing short of huge... but many times, especially in the younger levels of youth baseball, the ball will fall to the ground within easy distance of the catcher, and the batter suffers nothing more than a strike.

Take five or ten minutes per practice early in the season, and your team can easily realize a few extra outs over the course of the year.

The drill itself is simple. Get your catcher in full gear, and have him squat in his stance. Have a coach stand a couple of feet directly in front of the player with his back to the catcher. Give a signal (I like to have the coach yell "ping", like the ball coming off of the bat) and toss the ball directly up into the air. Obviously, the object is for the catcher to keep the pop up from hitting the dirt.

Make sure to emphasize the importance of ripping off the mask in the same motion as the catcher comes to his feet - if the mask stays on, the chance of catching a pop are drastically reduced. He should be looking up, and balanced, in order to move to the ball. Have the coach vary the location and height of his tosses - a catcher that can effectively cover not only the area between himself and the pitcher, but can also patrol the foul areas well, is a huge defensive boost to your team.

Don't forget that, if the catcher makes the catch (even in foul ground), runners can advance at their own risk, so don't let your catcher mentally "check out" just because he makes the play!

Pitching

FOUR STEP APPROACH

This step system is used primarily for mental imaging. I will talk about mental imaging in another drill. It became so well adapted to my staff, that we just went ahead and incorporated it into our scheme of things. Keep in mind that this system is from the windup. Here it is in a nutshell:

Step 1:

To set up, both feet need to be in or around the middle of the rubber. What I mean by this is that your insteps should be on the rubber. At most you will want the ball of your big toes to be hanging over the rubber. Now this first step is so important. It is called the "Rocker Step". This involves your left foot (RH pitcher) to come back off the rubber to start your motion. The key to the rocker step is to make sure that it is NOT a weight transfer, it is merely a momentum shifter. So at no point should your weight be transferred completely over your left foot. This momentum then creates the rest of the motion.

Step 2:

The second step is minor. It is the requirement of the right foot to go in front of the rubber to be used as a push off and stability in the next step.

Step 3:

This step is probably the most important of all. This is the post position. At this position, the pitcher's left leg is raised at about a 90-degree angle from the knee. What is crucial at this point is the balance. The pitcher should be able to stand "A post" at this point for any period of time. If he cannot then his balance is not good enough and he will either have a tendency to rush his delivery or his arm will drag. You want all motion to be gathered and ready to explode all at once into the fourth and final step.

Step 4:

Step four is the explosion of the hip and release of the baseball. This is where you want to make sure that the left leg is on line with the instep of the right foot on the rubber. If it is to the left, then the pitcher is opening up too much and his arm will not catch up to his front side causing high pitches. Just the opposite is true if the left leg lands to the right of that instep line. The arm will have a tendency to be ahead of the front side and will more than likely adjust by throwing across the body.

As discussed in other drills, you want to keep the front side of the pitcher closed until he begins to touch the ground with his left foot. At that point the pitcher may begin to explode his hips to bring his arm through.