

Rundowns: Slam Dunks of Defensive Baseball

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A team unprepared to deal with rundowns might panic at the sight of a runner caught off base. In reality, few situations favor the defense more. Once your team masters the following strategies, they'll view rundowns as "slam dunk" outs.

The keys to successful rundown defense are as follows:

1. Conduct the entire rundown *far away from the lead base*,
2. *Stay out of the runner's path* when not in possession of the ball,
3. Force the runner *full speed back to the original (trail) base*,
4. Hold the ball steady, *don't pump fake*,
5. *Tag as soon as you can*, throw only if you must,
6. Limit to *one throw at the right moment*.

Apply these six fundamentals to all rundown situations, regardless of which players are involved, or which direction you instruct them to peel off after releasing the ball.

Before a tag is even attempted, infielders must establish proper coverage of the lead and trail bases. All nine defenders take part. The two most important roles to fill are those of the ball handlers.

They position themselves at least 10-15 feet in front of each base in order to herd the runner into the middle of the base path. A third infielder stands adjacent to the lead base. The pitcher and catcher, if not already engaged in the play, provide back up, as do the outfielders. The value of back up cannot be overemphasized.

Start the rundown by getting the ball as quickly as possible in front of the runner-- into the hands of the fielder ten feet in front of the lead base. If no one is there to accept a throw, whoever has the ball must run and occupy that position. Guarding the lead base is the first priority.

The next priority is to stay out of the runner's way. Anyone who blocks the progress of a base runner while not in possession of the ball and not in the act of fielding the ball will be called for obstruction.

Some coaches teach their players to throw and run to the inside of the base path. Others prefer that their defense remain to the right side, since most infielders are right-handed. Either way, crisscrossing the base path is asking for trouble. If the runner tries to obscure your fielders' throws or vision, they should move further to the chosen side.

The ball handler sprints toward the runner forcing him to abandon his shuffle steps, square his shoulders, and retreat at full speed. Speed is crucial. It exposes the runner's inherent vulnerability in rundowns. While sprinting, the infielder holds the ball steady beside his ear ready to tag or release at any instant. The trail base fielder presents his glove as a visible target and is poised to move toward an arrant throw, just in case.

As the runner approaches within 6-8 feet of the receiving fielder, the ball handler gains control of his body and throws. The baserunner will consume precious seconds coming to a complete stop and changing direction.

During this maneuver, he is an easy mark. A synchronized throw will allow the receiving fielder to administer the tag with only a stride or two toward the runner. After releasing the ball, the fielder peels off either to the inside or the right side. Whichever method you teach, employ it consistently on all throws. The fielder then curls back behind the base and assumes a back up role.

With two runners on base, the defense must cover the lead and trail bases of both runners and prepare for simultaneous rundowns. If the lead runner is in a rundown, the defense focuses on the greater scoring threat. At the play's conclusion, if both runners occupy the same base, tag them both and you still gain an out.

Runners at 1st and 3rd pose yet another challenge. The trail runner may stray off base hoping to draw a throw and permit the lead runner to score. Institute a verbal signal for the infield to shout, such as "Going" or "Step Off," when they see the trail runner leaving early.

Upon hearing the signal, the pitcher steps off the rubber to prevent a balk. He'll then launch the basic rundown defense already described. While attacking the runner on 1st, whoever has the ball must remain in control and be ready to throw home. Again, a verbal signal is in order when the runner on 3rd makes his break.

Anytime a rundown begins with the trail base fielder possessing the ball, like after a pick-off attempt, he momentarily stands his ground. He won't want to force the runner toward the lead base. Nor can he leave his post until backup arrives. Instead, he waits for the lead base fielder to charge in and then throws to him to begin the standard scheme.

During rundown drills in practice, allow all potential ball handlers to play the part of the runner. Have them draw on this experience the next time they're on defense. From the runner's vantage point, they can best sense the optimum moment for the fielder to throw the ball to secure the out.

Baseball offers few occasions where the outcome is certain before a play is over. But, the next time your defense encounters a rundown, the only unknown may be how to record the out in your score book. All you need is the right strategy and the repetition of practice to make it so.

