

Baseball Cutoff and Backup Responsibilities - Pitchers

The ability to fulfill baseball cutoff and backup responsibilities is what separates the good teams from the bad ones, the great teams from the good ones. Very few execute properly.

Watch a typical youth baseball game when the ball gets hit into the outfield, and it's a free-for-all. A scramble. Infielders look around in confusion. Most stand around and do very little.

Young baseball players need to understand a very simple concept: ***No matter what the play, you always have a responsibility!***

If you aren't moving — barring very few exceptions — you are likely doing something wrong. Cutoff and backup responsibilities are teamwork in action. Nine players moving at the same time for advancing the team.

Here is a guide that covers 15 primary scenarios (five different hit types to each of the outfield positions). While this is oversimplified, it's important that we don't get bogged down in the details.

There are always exceptions. There are always gray areas. There are always crazy plays you don't expect. Sometimes a throw never makes it to a base, and instead stops at a cutoff man. We don't need to create a chart that covers every cutoff and backup scenario imaginable.

The goal is not for the kids to memorize these responsibilities. The goal is for them to reach that lightbulb moment when they understand ***why they need to be in a location at a particular time.***

Plays happen very quickly. Weird things happen. What we don't want is for players to be going through their memory banks as the play is unfolding, trying to remember where a chart told them to play.

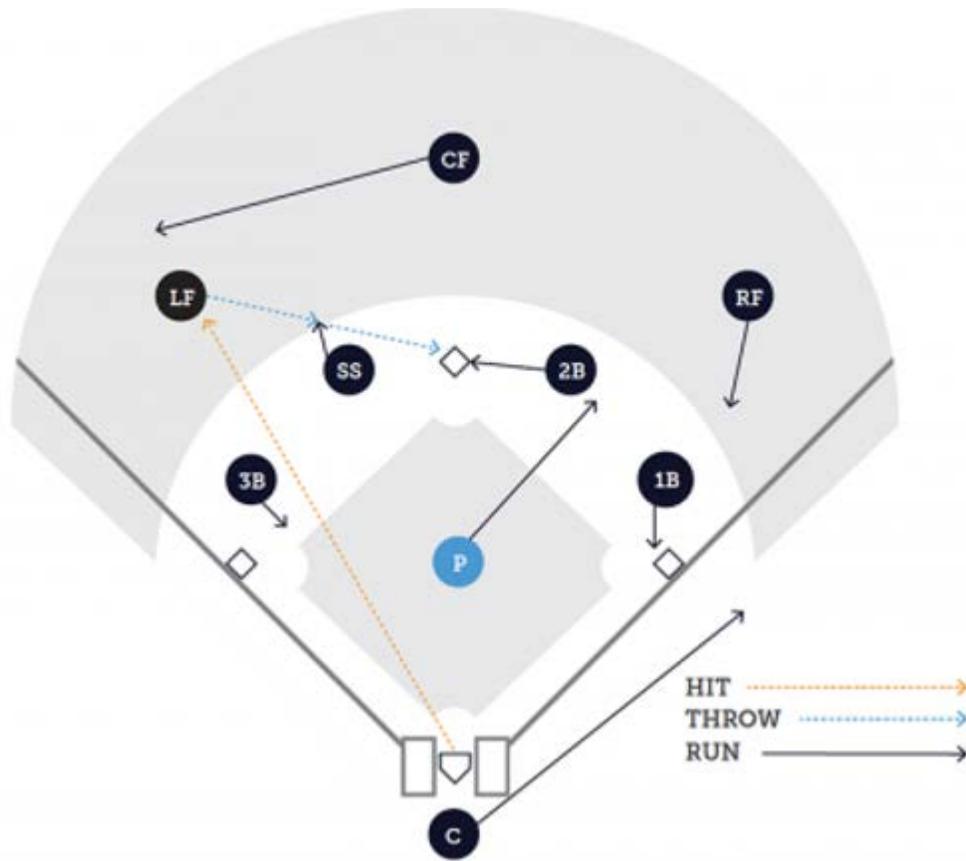
Instead, it's a matter of understanding that — based on how the play is unfolding — the runner may go here, and the throw may go there. One teammate is going here and another there. ***I need to be HERE!***

One of the most important, though ignored, positions for backup responsibilities in the game of baseball is the pitcher. Watch the typical youth baseball game, and you may never see a pitcher leave the mound area. That's a huge mistake!

The pitcher is likely the most critical for backup purposes. He can prevent one base from becoming two, three or four.

Because the pitcher is so important, I wanted to write a blog post to help dissect that player's responsibilities. I want to cover in more detail the potential scenarios and why he needs to be where he goes — as well as some variations to consider.

Single to Left (Bases Empty)

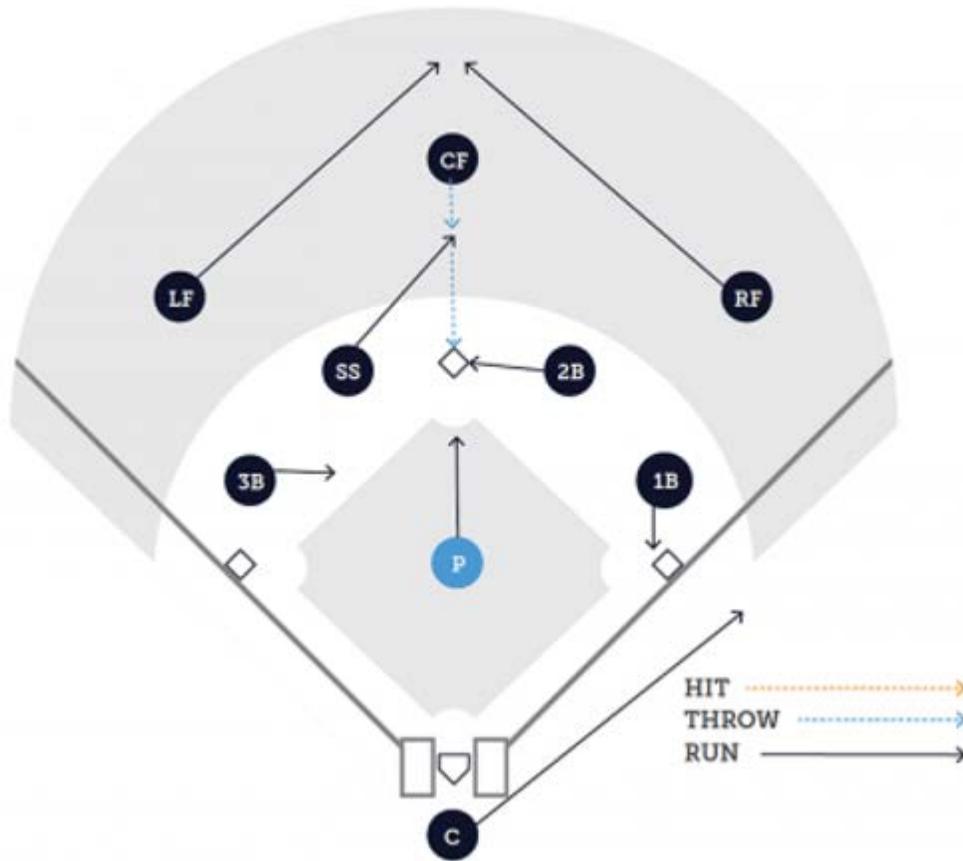


For the first three, keep in mind that “bases empty” also includes having a runner at third. On a single to the outfield, we concede that run.

In this situation, the pitcher is the primary backup on a throw to second from left field. As soon as the ball lands safely in left with the bases empty, the pitcher needs to anticipate and move into position to field a throw that gets by the second baseman.

Fail to do this? That batter is moving from first to second.

Single to Center (Bases Empty)



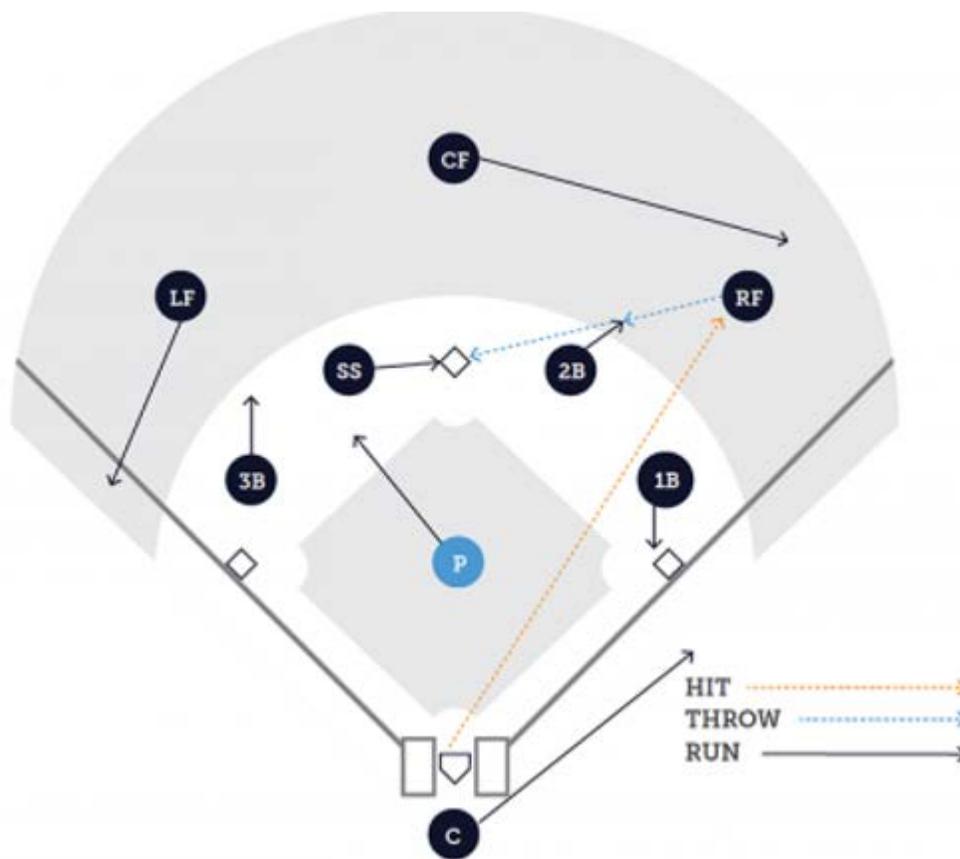
This is a good example of why it's critical that young players don't memorize their responsibilities, but also understand the logic behind them.

If memorized, it's easy to make a mistake and back up the wrong side of the bag. But when you are instead reacting to how a play unfolds, it all makes sense.

In this case, the ball is hit up the middle for a single. The pitcher knows that the throw is coming to second base from the center fielder, so he needs to position himself at a reasonable distance behind second (a bit behind the mound) to field a wild throw.

The pitcher will have help from the third baseman on this backup (and even the left fielder!), but we don't want the third baseman to be the one fielding a wild throw. His primary responsibility is to cover third.

Single to Right (Bases Empty)

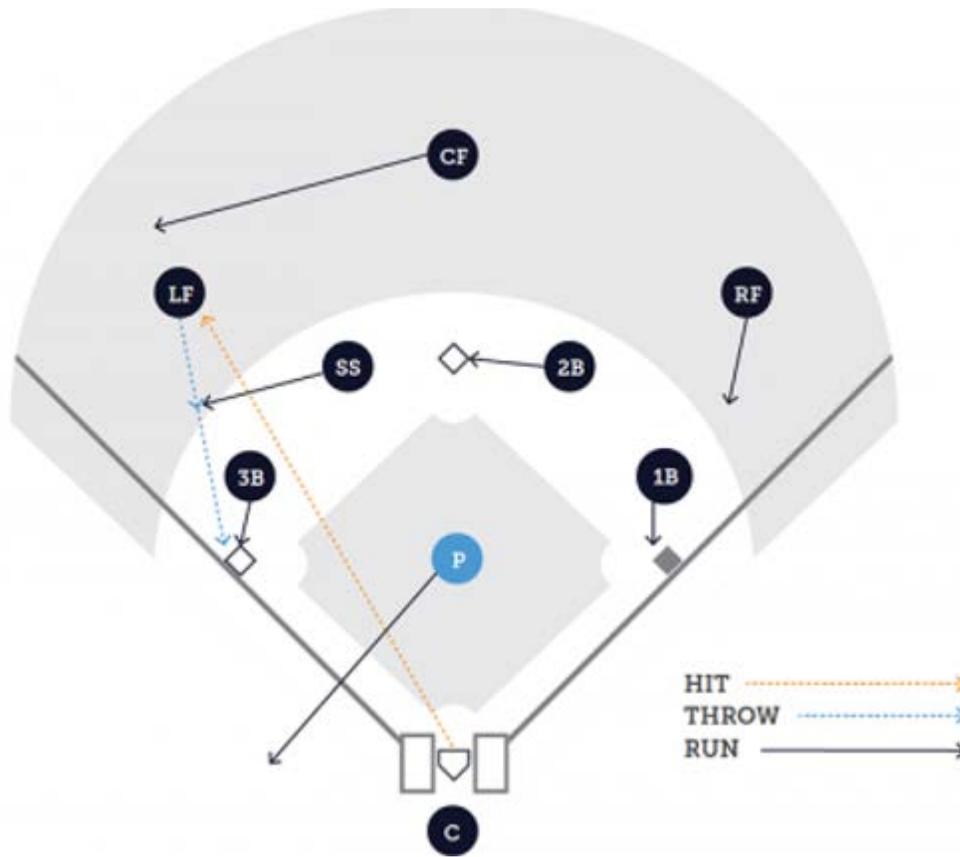


A pitcher is always moving!

In this case, the single was hit to right. The pitcher needs to be thinking about where the next throw will be coming from and where it will be going.

As a result, the pitcher should put himself in a direct line from the right fielder through second base, but with enough distance behind second base to allow for deflections and wild throws.

Single to Left (Runner on First)



As was the case for the first three, the next three scenarios will also include runners at the corners. We concede the run from third on a base hit to the outfield.

You may assume that a pitcher's responsibilities are the same on all singles — to back up throws to second base — but you'd be wrong!

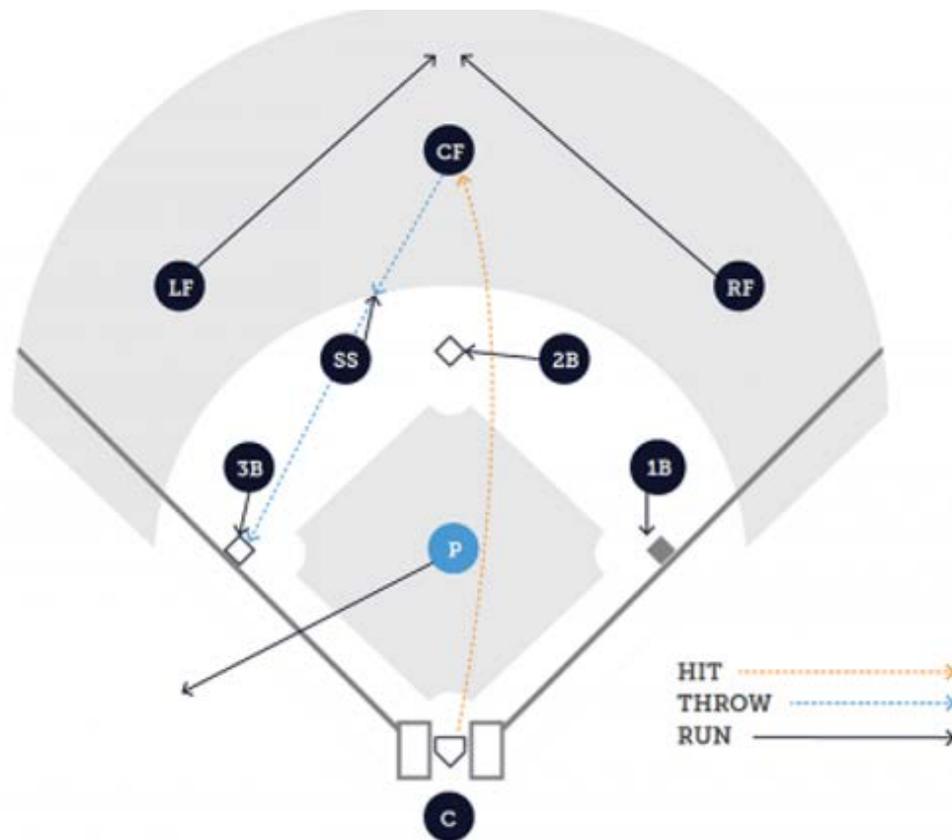
Young pitchers may make this mistake more than any other. A throw gets by the third baseman or catcher, and no one is there to back it up. No one seems to know whose responsibility it is.

We need to think ahead. With a runner on first and a single hit to the outfield, the outfielder will usually be making a throw one base

ahead of where the runner is going (barring the rare exception of an attempt at a force out). So, in most cases, that base will be third.

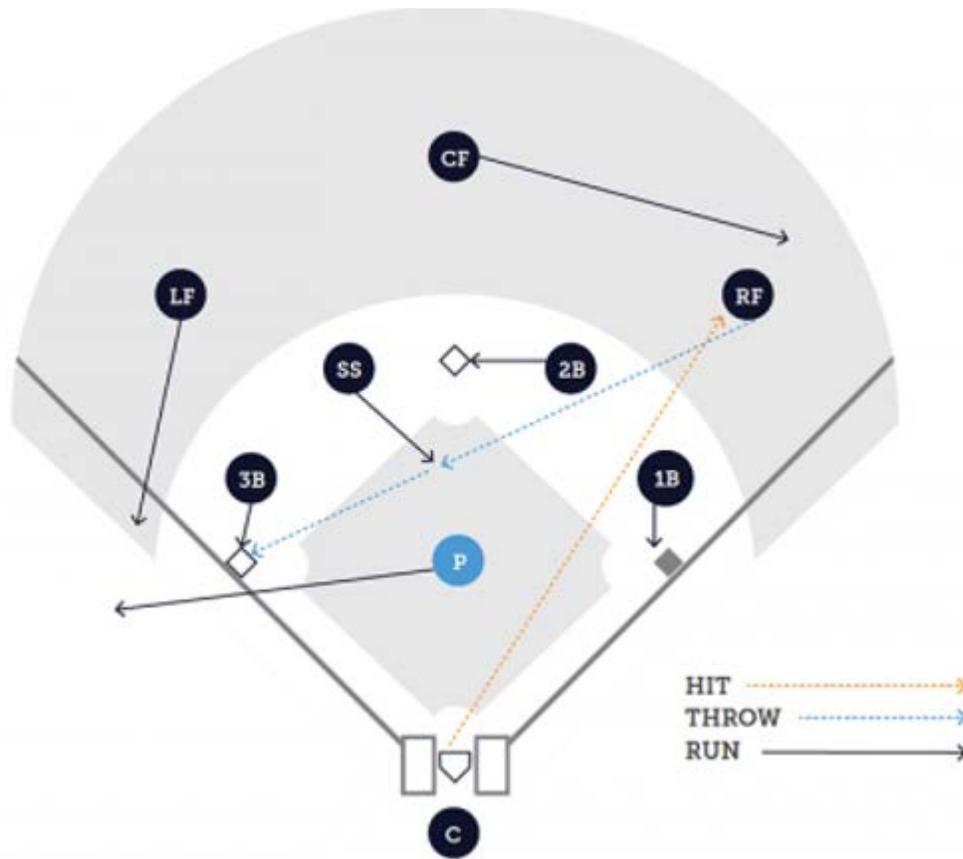
Considering the angle of the throw from the left fielder to third base, the pitcher needs to be positioned in foul territory to grab a wild throw. Fail to be there? That run will probably score!

Single to Center (Runner on First)



Quite similar to the prior scenario, but we need to account for a different angle. With the throw coming from center field, the pitcher now needs to be in foul territory closer to third base.

Single to Right (Runner on First)

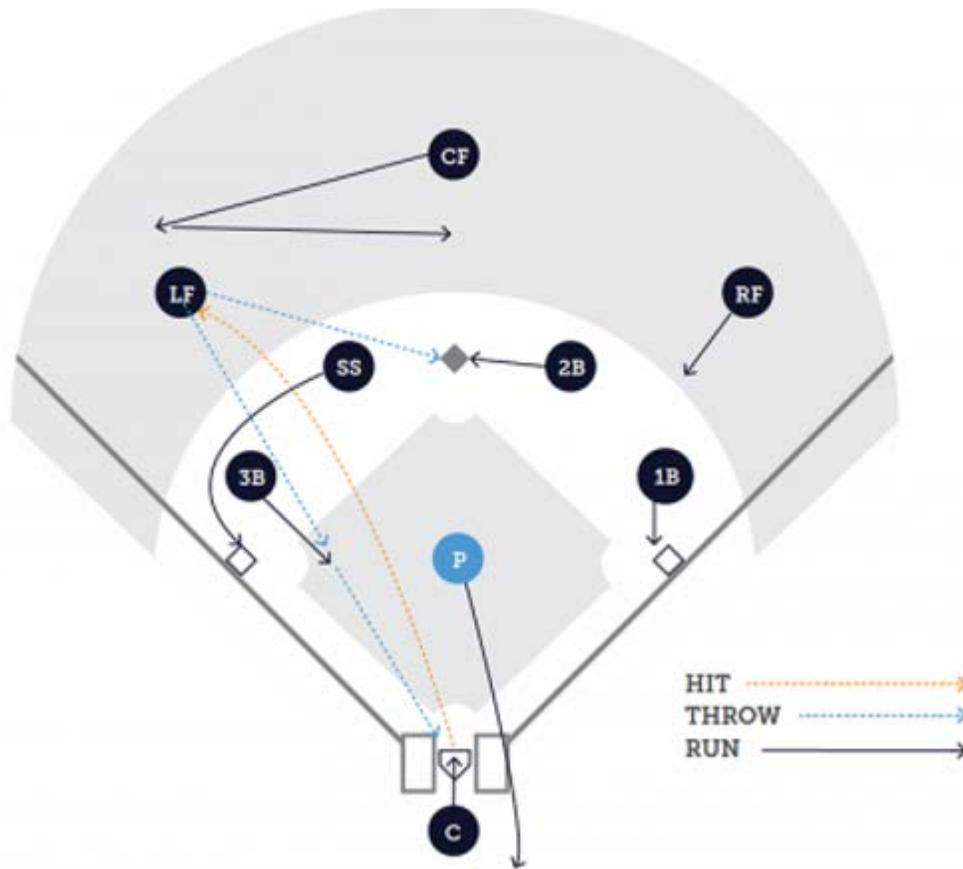


If this backup is missed, the ball will sometimes go out of play, resulting in extra bases for each runner. Don't let that happen!

The pitcher needs to be further up the third base line in foul territory, lined up with the cutoff man from the outfield (typically the shortstop).

The pitcher does have help from the left fielder in this case, but it is still important that the pitcher is here!

Single to Left (Runner on Second)



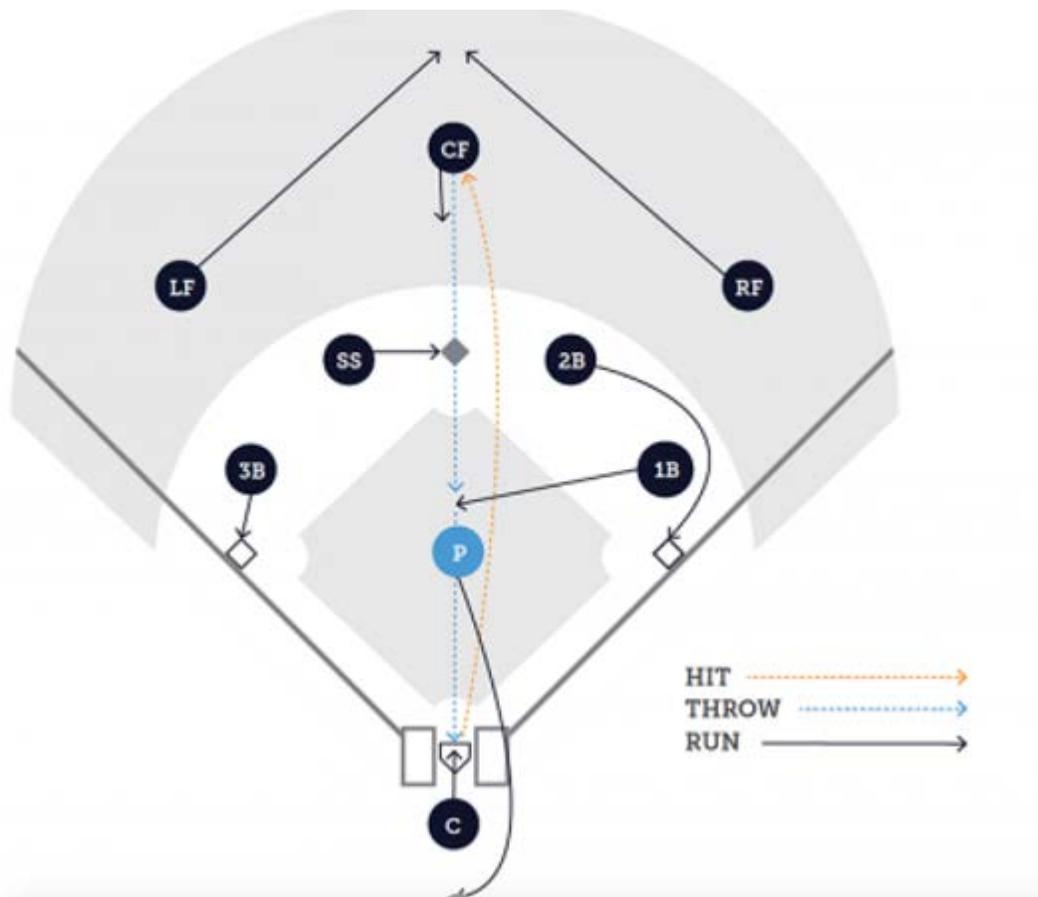
The next three also include runners at second and third as well as bases loaded. In all cases, we will concede the run from third on a hit to the outfield and the pitcher will need to prioritize the remaining lead runner.

Remember that the outfielder will be throwing one base ahead of where the lead runner is going. So with a runner on second, an outfielder's first option will be to throw home on a single.

Of course, if the runner will score easily, that throw should go to second base instead. Luckily, we have the right fielder to cover that responsibility.

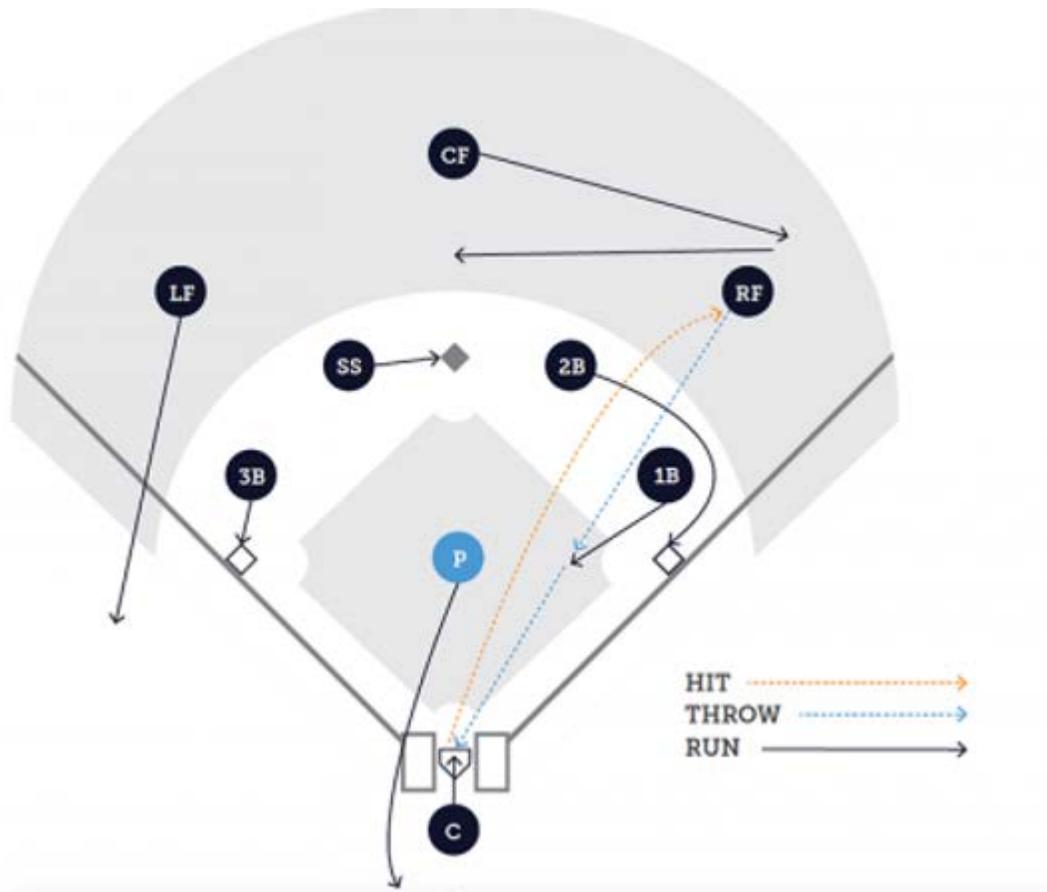
In this case, the pitcher will line up behind home plate — always allowing himself enough room to keep the play in front of him. The batter is likely already trying to advance to second on the throw home, so a failed backup will likely turn a single into three bases.

Single to Center (Runner on Second)



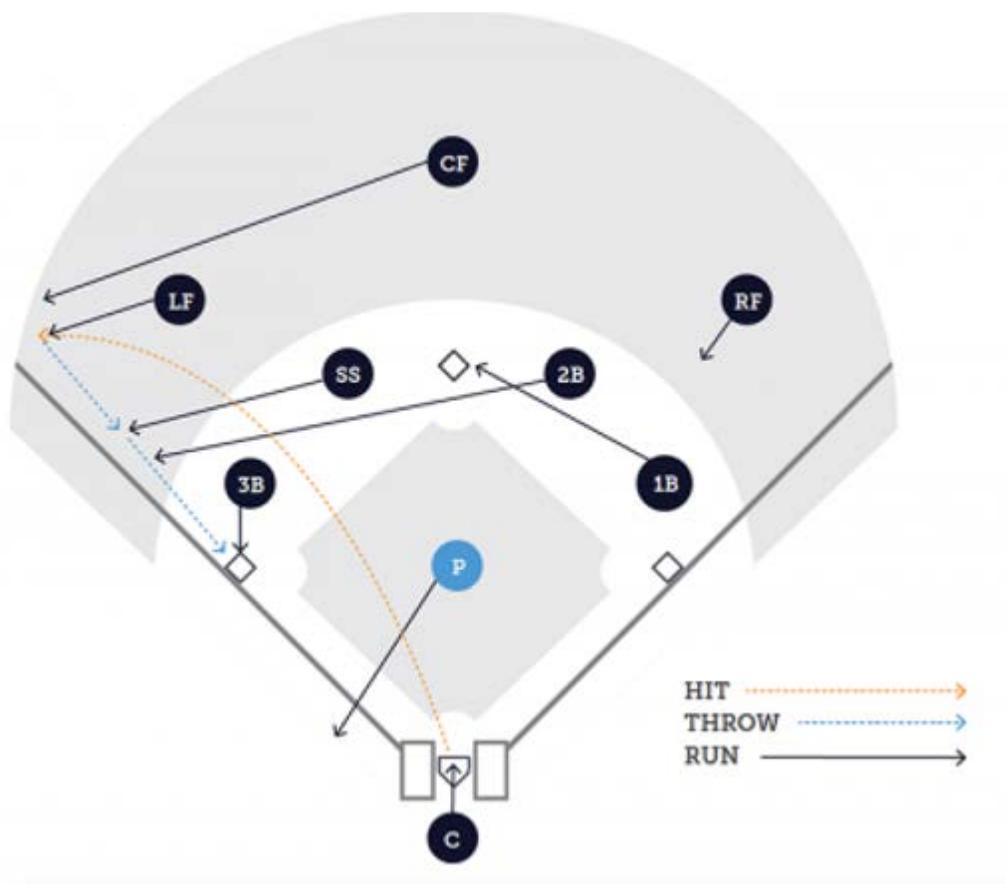
It's important for young players to understand lines and angles. The pitcher again needs to be lined up behind the catcher, but it should be in a straight line from where the center fielder or first baseman (who should be the cutoff man) are throwing the ball.

Single to Right (Runner on Second)



Once again, we're expecting a throw home to cut down a potential run from second, so the pitcher needs to immediately head behind the plate. This time, he should set up more on the third base side, accounting for a different angle.

Extra Bases to Left (Bases Empty)



We can also include runners at second and third in the next three scenarios. If it's a clear extra base hit, we know that runners on those bases — barring something ridiculous — will be scoring.

The pitcher needs to be aware and he needs to think quickly on his feet. This backup scenario could have him quickly move from backing up second base to third.

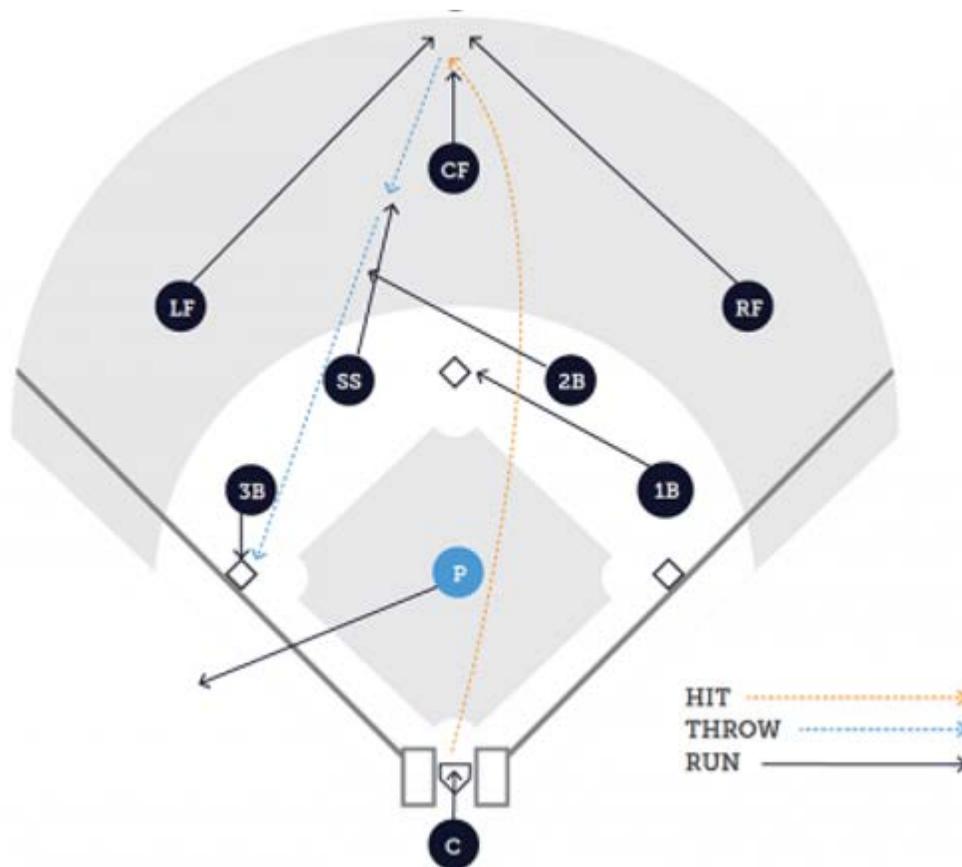
Initially, a hit may appear to be either a single or double. In that case, the throw may be going into second, and the pitcher should be prepared to back up the throw to second base.

However, if we have a clear extra bases scenario, there shouldn't be a throw to second. Instead, the throw should go one base ahead to prevent the runner from advancing to third.

So, the pitcher needs to back up third base in this case, anticipating a throw to third on a clear extra base hit. But again, that may not be immediately evident, so he needs to react.

It's important that the pitcher is there if a throw is made to third since he won't have any backup help.

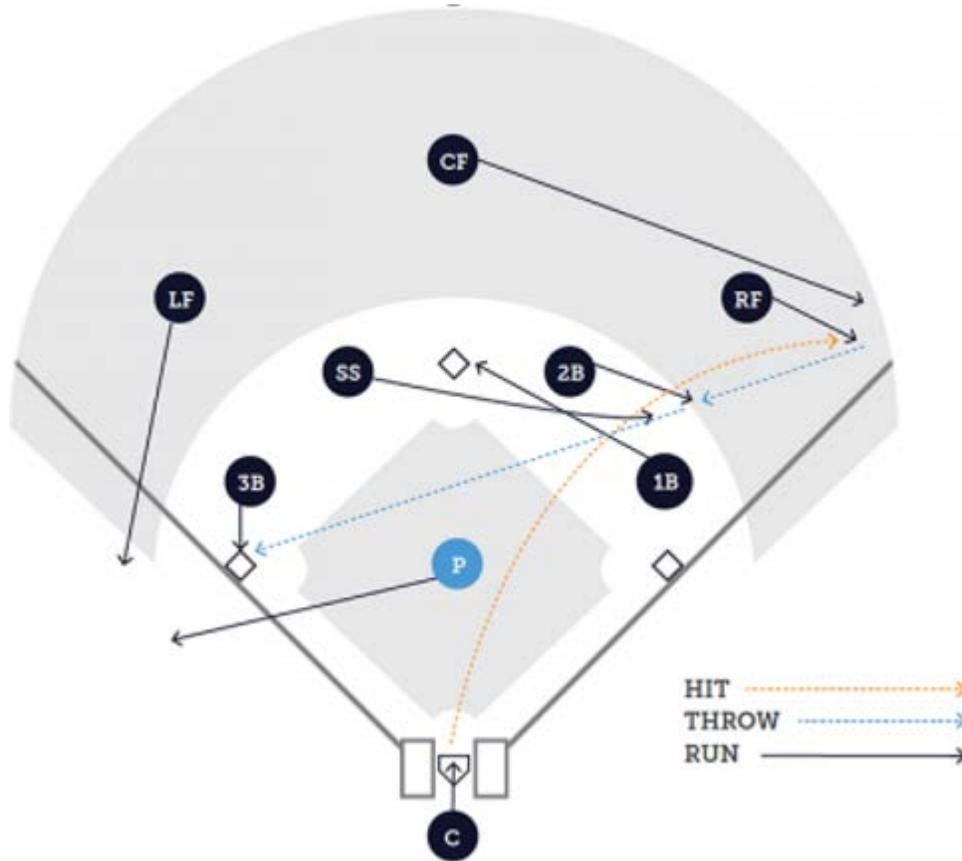
Extra Bases to Center (Bases Empty)



Same as above, the backup of third may not be immediately clear. But the primary scenario will be when the ball gets by or over the

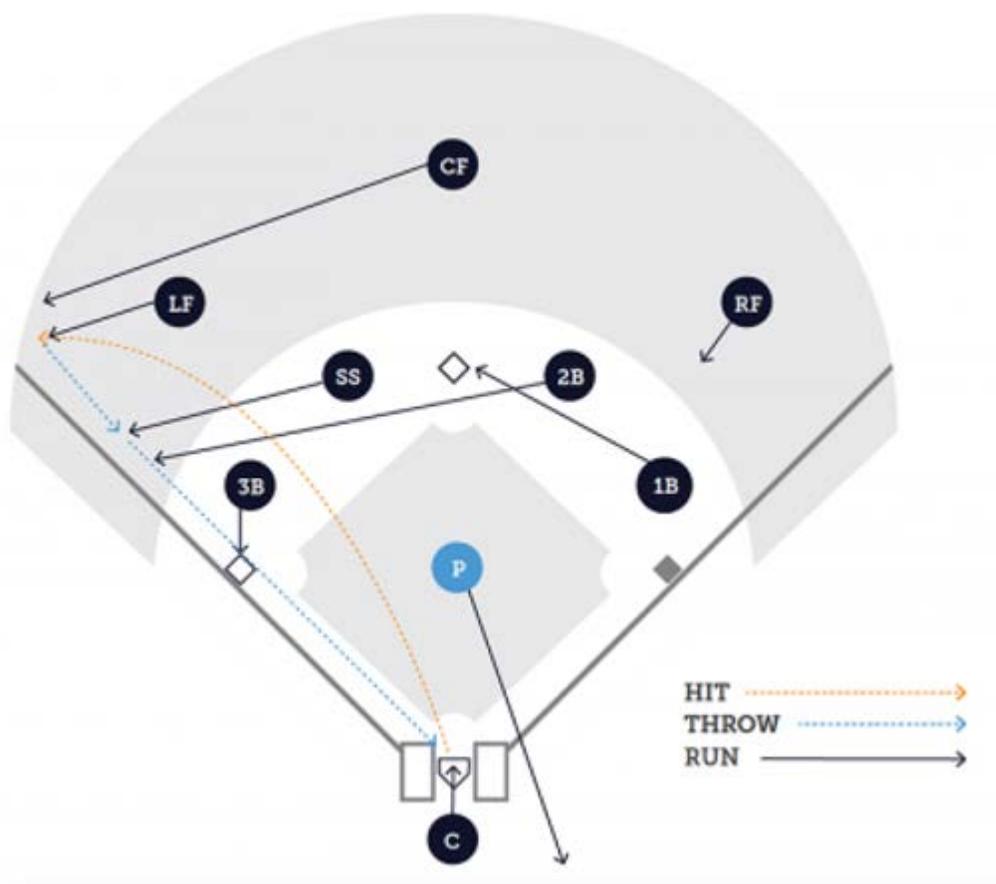
head of the center fielder. The pitcher should then immediately head to back up third base.

Extra Bases to Right (Bases Empty)



Same as the prior two scenarios, but further up the third base line in foul territory. In this case, the pitcher has a bit more time to make a decision because he should have help from the left fielder on a backup.

Extra Bases to Left (Runner on First)



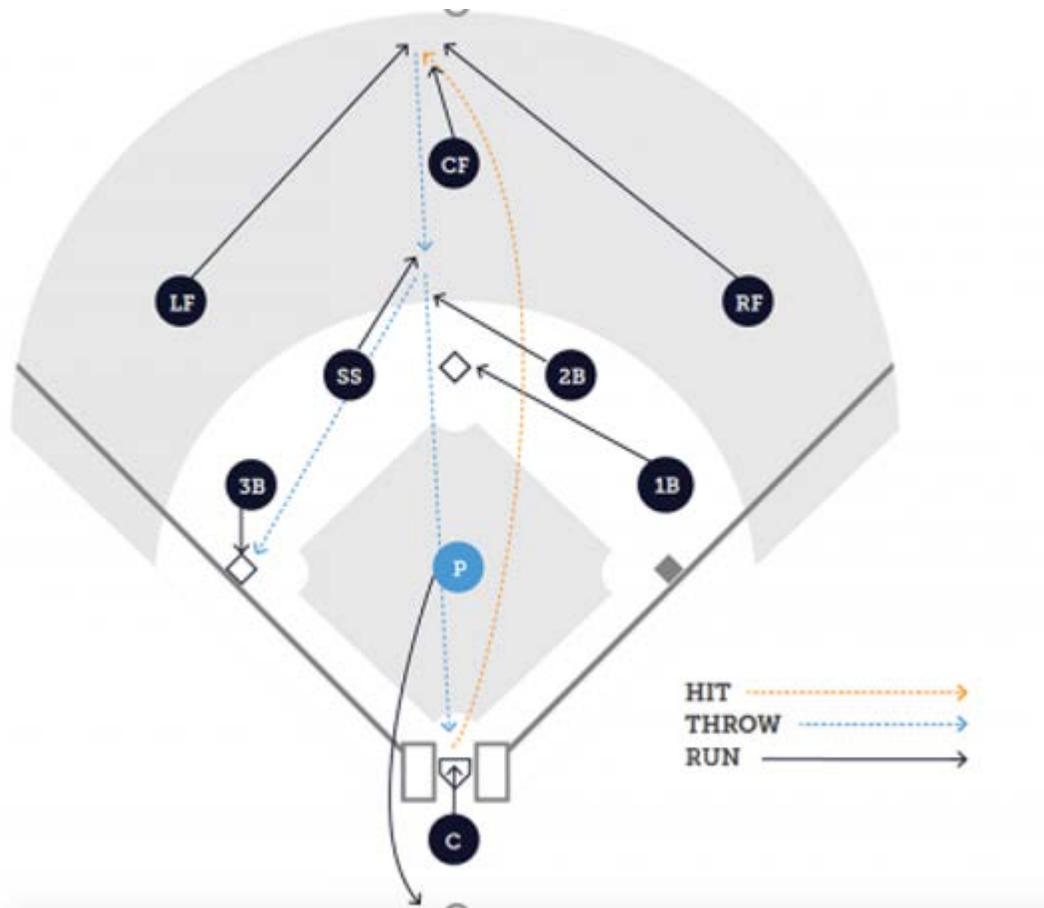
We say the next three are for scenarios where a runner is on first, but the reality is that this includes any combination of situations that include a runner on first (bases loaded, first and second, first and third). But we know that any runner at second or third will score.

This is where a pitcher's responsibilities tend to get a bit more complicated. The play will change and develop quickly.

With a runner at first and an apparent extra base hit, the initial instinct should be to back up home for an expected play at the plate. But maybe that run will score easily. Maybe the throw will go to third instead!

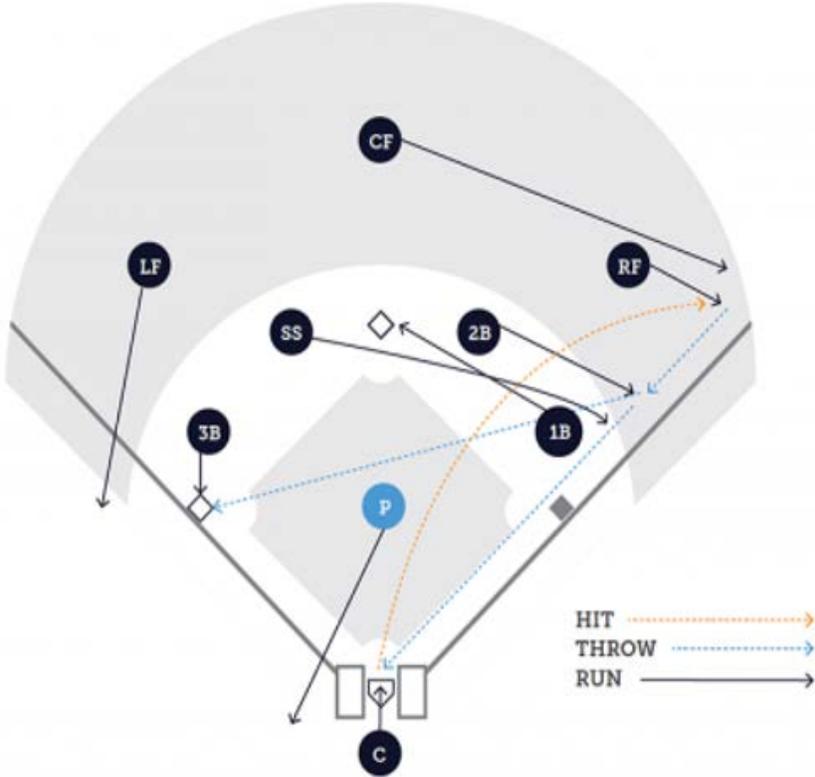
The pitcher needs to be ready to react quickly and shift from behind the plate to down the third base line if necessary. In this case, he doesn't have any help!

Extra Bases to Center (Runner on First)



Once again, the primary throw will be to the plate, but it may instead go to third base, depending on how the play develops. And as was the case above, the left fielder will not provide help on a backup of third, so the pitcher needs to be aware of how the play develops.

Extra Bases to Right (Runner on First)



This is a bit easier for the pitcher for two reasons: 1) there is help backing up third base from the left fielder, and 2) due to the angle of an expected throw from right field, the pitcher will already be on the third base side behind home plate.