

Defense

Mechanics for Infielders

Consistency is very important to being a great infielder. Getting to a proper fielding stance on each and every ground ball allows for the greatest consistency. A few key points on an infielder's stance:

- Feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart
- Back should be kept straight and players should bend at the waist
- Knees should be bent
- The player should be leaning slightly forward on the balls of their feet
- Hips should be square and feet parallel
- Players should keep their head down, watching the ball into the glove
- The glove should be out in front of the body on the ground
- The non-glove hand is open, pointing up and hovering at the base of the glove (this prevents a bad hop from hitting the player)
- Once the infielder receives the ground ball, he should step towards the bag with his back foot, plant and throw.

GETTING THE RIGHT HOP

Proper footwork assures that an infielder will rarely get a bad hop. Even on a field in poor condition, an infielder can limit the number of bad hops he receives. Infielders should field every ground ball on either a long hop or a short hop. To do this, the approach to the ball is very important. Avoiding the in-between hop will limit the number of errors an infielder makes.

GROUND BALL APPROACH/FOOTWORK

- Getting outside the ball: When a ball is hit directly to an infielder, his first move should be a shuffle or jab step to the right. This is called getting "outside the ball." With this tactic, the fielder can read the ground ball correctly and then field the ball on a long hop or a short hop. In addition, the fielder will maintain his flow to and through the ball, allowing for a smooth throw to first base.
- After the initial jab step, the infielder should move into the proper fielding position. Using short, quick, choppy steps, the fielder should move forward to the ball. The final steps will bring him to the proper fielding position with feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart, glove down and eyes on the ball.
- The fielder should always try to keep his feet moving to maintain his rhythm through the ball.

BACKHAND

- On balls hit to the infielder's right, there are two ways to field a ground ball back-handed. The most effective way is to cross-over with the left foot, fielding the ball in front of that leg. Once the infielder fields the ball, he should plant his back leg and throw. One should only use this quick movement when it is impossible to field the ball out in front. The second, somewhat slower way, is to field the ball off the back foot. The fielder should plant his right leg and shift his weight from back to front, bringing his glove through on the ground. Once he fields the ball, he shuffles to first base and throws.

Note: Third base may not have a choice of which method to use if the ball is hit hard enough. Middle infielders may also find themselves using the second method, based on the speed of the

ball. The objective is to get rid of the ball as quickly as possible with an accurate throw to first base.

FOREHAND

- On balls hit to an infielder's left, the infielder should field the ball with his left foot forward and glove in front of his left foot.
- Throws from second base: Depending on the distance from first base, either square your shoulders to the base and make the throw or under-hand the ball. You may even flip the ball with your glove if you're charging in to field the ball and close enough to make a controlled, accurate flip.
- Throws from shortstop: Field the ball, square your shoulders to first base and make the throw. Depending on how much time the shortstop has or how fast he is running when he fields the ball, this could be an off-balance throw. No matter the situation, the key is to square your shoulders to first base and maintain control of your body when throwing the ball. Trying to make a spectacular play without setting your feet and torso will often result in an errant throw.
- Throws from third base: Square your shoulders to first base by shuffling your feet and make the throw.

SLOW ROLLERS

- Depending on the speed of the ball, an infielder will use either two hands or his bare hand to field the slow roller. Use two hands if the ball is rolling with some speed. In either instance the same footwork is required. Once the fielder sees the slow roller off the bat, he should sprint (under control) in a straight line to the ball. Before reaching the ball, he

should slow down, such that he has full control over his body when bending down to pick up the slow roller. Typically, the fielder takes two "breakdown" steps, which allow him to both slow down and make sure of the correct footwork. With his bare hand, the fielder should push the ball into the ground when picking it up. This helps with grip and minimizes running past the ball. The fielder steps with his left foot, fielding the ball on his right side. Once he has secured the ball, the fielder continues forward with his right foot and throws side-arm to the bag. This play requires quickness and maximum body control. The best fielders make this play look routine. They accomplish this by never losing control and by practicing this play every time they are on the baseball field.

Mechanics for Outfield

Before each pitch, the outfielder must know who is on base and to whom he will throw the ball if it is hit to him. He should know how to play the wall, where the sun is, how hard the wind is blowing and where the corners of the outfield are. An outfielder's movement should always be in the direction of where the ball is going to land, or in the direction that will allow the fielder the best possible angle for a throw to the infield. Getting to the ball quickly counts for a lot but so too does fielding it correctly. Keeping these factors in mind, here are some tips for outfielders:

COMING IN ON BALLS

On balls hit in front of the outfielder, he should break hard towards the infield. On a blooper, the outfielder should know that he can dive for the ball, since it has no chance of rolling too far past him. On the other hand, if he comes in on a line drive, the outfielder must remember he is the last line of defense. He can dive, but he must make sure not to let the ball go past him; his adjacent outfielder will likely not have enough time to back him up.

GOING BACK ON BALLS

An outfielder should turn, put his head down and run towards the spot he thinks the ball will land. As he is gaining ground to that location, he can turn and look over his shoulder for the ball, find the ball, adjust and make the catch. This is difficult and takes a good understanding of how to read the ball, but it is necessary for outfield play.

THE DROP STEP

If a ball is hit over the outfielder's head, then his first step should be a drop step. This term describes the first steps for turning and running for a ball batted overhead of the outfielder. The

player should pivot his hips so the first step is straight back or 180 degrees from the ready stance. Opening up the hips gives the outfielder a better chance to turn and run to where the ball will land.

WHEN IN DOUBT, TAKE THE FIRST STEP BACK

There are occasions when an outfielder needs an extra half-second to read a ball off the bat. Unless the fielder is sure the ball is in front of him, his first step should always be back. Outfielders often struggle most reading line drives right at them. If the outfielder takes his first step back, then he can more easily adjust to come in on the ball. Should the outfielder take his first step in, he will struggle to adjust on a ball behind him.

ON BALLS IN THE GAP

An outfielder should never take his eye off the ball when running down a ball in the gap. If necessary, an outfielder should dive for the ball, knowing that the adjacent outfielder will be backing him up. If he knows he cannot catch it, the outfielder should run at an angle to cut off the ball. If the outfielder cannot cut off the ball, he should run full-speed to the wall and pick it up there. Never give up on the play.

THE CROSS-OVER STEP

If a ball is hit to the outfielder's left or right, his first step should be a cross-over step and not a jab step. The cross-over step is a quicker, more direct movement towards the ball. This gives the outfielder more time to reach a fly ball or line drive.

FIELDING A GROUND BALL

- Always break hard for a ball, even if it is hit directly at an infielder. Get in the habit of backing up your infielders.
- With no runners on base, the outfielder should go to his throwing side knee to field a ground-ball. He should not be lazy and take too much time because the runner will take advantage.
- Always field the ball out in front of the body.
- With runners on base, a right-handed outfielder should charge the ball and slow down enough to field the ball in control and on his left foot (right foot for lefties). He should make sure he fields the ball before he comes up to throw. The outfielder is the last line of defense, so he cannot let the ball bounce over or under his glove. Field the ball, crow hop and throw the ball through the cut-off man.
- Stare down ground balls and low line drives. Do not take your eye off the ball.

FIELDING A FLY BALL

- Run full speed to a fly ball. Do not glide to the ball and time your catch. Unless he has to make a running catch, the outfielder should have enough time to get to the spot and wait to catch the ball.
- Set up about six-to-ten feet behind a fly ball. An outfielder never wants to be directly under the ball. Keep it at a slight angle. This allows him to move towards his target before he actually catches the ball. He should start his throwing motion when he catches the ball.
- Assure the catch by looking the ball into the glove.
- An outfielder should catch the ball with two hands above his head and on his throwing side.
- On a sliding catch, use the pop-up slide technique with your glove out to the side.
- A batted ball will always curve towards the foul lines.

WHEN THE RUNNER TAGS

- When a runner is tagging on a fly ball, the outfielder should focus on catching the ball and making a strong and accurate throw. The fielder should get behind the ball and square his shoulders to the base. Crow hop for both power and control on the throw.
- Note: After the catch, each step the outfielder takes is another two steps for the runner or about five feet. Thus, using the correct footwork mentioned under "fielding a fly ball" is paramount to successfully throwing out the runner.

Mechanics for Catchers

SIGNAL STANCE

- Feet should be square to the pitcher about a foot apart.
- Body should split the plate in half.
- Left knee should point at shortstop position.
- Right knee should be closed enough so a runner on first base cannot see the signs.
- Glove should extend beyond left knee to guard against the third base coach.
- Throwing arm should rest in hip flexor crevice with elbow tucked in.
- Hand should be even with cup. Be aware not to give sign too high or too low.
- Catcher should check positioning of batter in the box and be aware of peeking.

RECEIVING STANCE

- After giving the sign, the catcher should shift into a comfortable but fundamentally sound receiving position.
- A quiet move to the proper location inside or outside should be at the right time so that the hitter cannot see it and runners on base cannot relay location.
- Feet should remain shoulder width apart with weight on the inside of the feet and toes turned slightly out.
- Glove arm should be slightly extended to give a good target.
- Glove positioning should be with fingers pointed to the sky. This will allow the elbow to remain tucked and give the pitcher an open glove target.
- Glove should be visible and not move until the pitcher releases the pitch.
- Position within the catcher's box will vary according to the hitter. Always stay as close to the hitter as possible without interfering.
- Bare hand should be behind right heel, behind the back or by the right groin.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE BALL

- A good receiver always follows the ball into the glove with his eyes.

ALWAYS GIVE A GOOD TARGET

- Proper positioning of the glove makes receiving easier. Remember to keep "fingers to the sky!"

BEAT THE BALL TO THE SPOT

- Anticipating where the ball is going to be when it crosses the plate and getting the glove to that spot before the ball gets there allows for a strong handle of the pitch. Failure to get the glove in position will let the velocity of the pitch dominate the glove. Catchers should not let the force of the pitch carry their glove out of the strike zone.
- Catching the outside parts of the ball for inside and outside pitches, top of the ball for high pitches and bottom of the ball for low pitches will put catchers in position to receive them correctly.

BE SOFT AND FIRM WHEN RECEIVING PITCHES

- It is necessary to have some softness and some firmness to receive correctly and efficiently.
- Catchers should be firm and "stick" pitches to present them to the umpire.
- Catchers should also be soft enough not to jab at the ball and drop the pitch.

CATCH THE BALL OUT IN FRONT OF THE BODY

- Give the umpire a good look at the pitch.
- More strikes are likely to be called the closer a catcher catches the ball to the plate.

BLOCKING CHECKLIST

A catcher should keep the following keys of blocking in mind:

- **KNEES**
 - Get both knees to the ground in the direction of the ball as quickly as possible.
 - Do not jump to the knees. Soft landings make for soft movements.
- **GLOVE**
 - The catcher should lead with the glove and cover the hole between the legs with both the glove and bare hand. The bare hand should be entirely behind the glove. The glove should remain open at all times. The catcher should not try to catch the ball.
- **ELBOWS**
 - The elbows should sink into the correct position when the hands are in the correct position. The ability to flare one's elbows out creates a bigger target for the ball to hit. In doing this, the catcher's shoulders will stay squared to the ball.
- **CHIN**
 - The chin should go directly down to the chest to locate the ball on the ground.
 - This movement will cause the shoulders to round and be over the ball, creating a good angle for the ball to bounce off the catcher.
 - The catcher needs to keep their eyes open to locate the ball quickly.