

Teach Your Players to Think on Defense

Teaching players especially younger ones to move their feet as the pitch is being delivered instead of after the ball is hit is a challenge at times. Some players do that instinctively, but a lot do not.

So, coaches teach them to:

- * turn the toes inward which puts them on their toes and makes them quicker
- * give a small pre-hop to put the body in motion as the ball is getting close to the plate
- * keep the feet moving before the pitch to keep the body in motion

But sometimes they just do not grasp the concept.

So, let's think of a different way. Have a scrimmage in practice but take one or two players off the field from the defense. Just like taking a defender off the field to see if a hitter can place the ball in that empty spot. Let's see when taking a player off the

field if the players around the empty spot can cover that area to limit the damage.

For example:

- * right fielder CF and 2B cover
- * center fielder SS and 2B cover
- * left fielder SS and CF cover
- * first baseman 2B and RF cover
- * second baseman 1B, SS CF and RF cover
- * shortstop 2B, 3B, CF and LF cover
- * third baseman SS and LF cover

The pitcher can also cut off some balls if possible.

Those players have to be ready to cover those areas and catch the ball or get to it quickly so that the batter cannot take extra bases. The fielders responsible for covering those areas have to

THINK AND COMMUNICATE.

They will soon learn that they have to be quicker to cover the ground and cannot afford to have their feet flat on the ground versus moving them constantly. They do not have to move far, just keep

them moving or shuffling to be in motion and not at a dead stop when the ball is hit.

Teach them:

- *to read the hitter's hands, body and bat swing.
- *to read if the hitter's body is going to the outside or pulling the ball
- *to read the bat angle to the path of the pitch, upward swing or downward swing.
- *to read how the bat is being held at the knob or choked up.
- *to assess the ability of the hitter and the speed of their pitcher.

Learning to assess all of this will tip them off to the area the ball will probably be hit.

Practice with them over and over the following skill:

- *Diving for grounders going to either side of them so they can learn to catch it before it hits the ground or to knock the ball down to keep the ball close to them

*As they progress, add getting up quickly to throw the runner out at each base not just at first base

*Diving for a low pop up over the infield

*catching the ball going over their head with a over the shoulder catch

*diving for a ball in front of them especially for the outfielders

*to realize where they teammates are and if they can get to a certain area

*to communicate with their teammates

These skills are needed even with all nine players on the field. It allows the outfielders to be able to play deeper if they know the infielders are capable of doing these skills.

Hard? Yes, but it will teach your players to be ready, to think ahead, to keep their feet moving and be on their toes at all times.

More to consider:

*Outfielders should stand up more during the game with their hands held waist high and in front of them. This makes them quicker to the ball if hit their way

*Outfielders should pump their arms going for the ball and only reach the glove out as they are catching the ball. Too many run with their glove out which slows their speed to the ball

The teaching of strategy and awareness of the plays happening at the time is such a vital part of the game.

Too many players and coaches just accept that the batter got a hit when in reality they can be taught to be agile enough to dive for the ball, get up and throw them out. They accept it if the ball drops out of reach on a bloop hit instead of diving for it.

All of those little things before the ball has even been thrown or hit, is the difference between a hit and an out.

All of these things will prepare the defensive players to get to the ball as efficiently as possible.

All of these things should be talked about and practiced in earlier practices and continued and expanded upon as the practice season goes forward.

If during the season, players are not doing this, it is time to reemphasis and review again. Too many hits are allowed when they could be outs or the damage of a hit be limited. Those add up to losses and not wins.

Little things and preseason teaching in practices are so important for the success of the season.