

Coaching the Runners on the Bases

I am a firm believer that the coach in the box at third has to pull the strings to create runs and win the game. I am not a proponent of just letting the players do what they feel is best or what they want to do while at the plate or on the bases. The coach should be the person to dictate what the players can or cannot do on the bases.

I love for the players to be aggressive at the plate and on the bases. I want to put as much pressure on the other team as possible by the way we play the game. We won't say a word to the other team unlike some teams that try to intimidate by talking trash to the other teams. We do it with our actions.

1. Lead offs—have them break off the bases each time like they are going to steal the next base. If they do that, the focus of the catcher shifts to the runner instead of the pitcher and the hitter. When that happens, the pitcher and the infielders see that the catcher's mind is somewhere else and they will feel the pressure of the runner, fear that they will steal and generally become uneasy.

After their initial breakoff, if the breakoff isn't as far as you (the coach) would like it to be, have a signal for them to go a little farther off the base. My signal was simply waving them farther off the base with my hand. It was no secret that I wanted a bigger lead off. I wanted them to take a bigger and bigger lead off to basically bother the catcher and hopefully have her throw the ball on a pick off and do nothing. If she did nothing, we would take a bigger lead off. If they threw down to pick the players off, we were prepared to dive back into the base or take off for the next base.

The feet of our players are never still. On their leadoffs, they are always facing the catcher who is the one with the ball. Their toes are in for quickness, hands in front of their waists for quickness, knees are slightly bent and their body is open to the catcher. The knees cannot be so bent that the player has to rise up before they can move nor can the legs be straight either. Their feet are never stopped, they are taking little steps, bouncing a little or taking little strides sideways just to keep the body in motion. Dead motion is a catcher's dream since it takes the runner a lot longer to get back into motion once it is stopped. Keep the player moving on the base path until they see the catcher isn't going to do anything, then it they should get back to their base quickly and do the same thing on the next pitch.

2. Huge lead off for trailing runners—if we have a runner on first and second, first and third or base loaded, we will have the trail runners take a huge lead off. Here again, the catcher's focus is on the runners instead of the pitcher, hitter or on calling the correct pitch.

That may cause the catcher to move more than normal on the pitch to be quicker to pick a runner off. It also may lead to blocking the umpire's view of the ball which means a strike could be then called a ball since the umpire cannot see the pitch, it could lead to a passed ball or at the very least, it unsettles the pitcher and fielders. The fielders then may shift a little more than usual to cover a base because they are thinking the runner may steal or the catcher may throw down to the base they are to cover. That could lead to leaving a huge hole for the hitter to hit through.

When a runner or two keep breaking off the bases more than half way to the next base, it takes a very disciplined team to handle that situation.

3. Getting into a rundown—if the catcher decides to go after the runner, the runner has to keep moving either forwards or back to the previous base. The runner on the lead base needs to be ready to go to the next base as soon as the opportunity arises. If the runner on the lead base gets caught off, she needs to keep going in a rundown to try to get at least three throws from the defense (now the advantage goes to the runner since the more throws the more chances of throwing it away). The runner should also try to get a defensive player to obstruct her in a rundown. To do this as soon as the defensive player who is close behind the runner throws the ball, the runner should immediately turn around and touch the defensive player if she is close to her. That is obstructive on the defense and the runner gets the base she is going towards. This is very important-the trailing runners upon seeing the lead runner in a rundown should sprint to the base closest to the rundown. For example, the rundown is between third and home, the trail runner gets over to third base, does not put her foot on it but she puts it close to it. If it is obvious that the lead runner will make it back to third, the trail runner takes off to second base. If the defense goes after her, the lead runner takes off for home again and if need be, gets in another rundown.

The advantage goes to the runners since all they have to do is keep running away from the person with the ball. The defense has to throw, catch, stay out of the way if not receiving the ball and rundown the runner.

My philosophy on running the bases is to be very aggressive and push the defense to make mistakes. More games are lost on errors than anything else. As the coach on third you should be able to read their defensive position, the skill of the defenders and the look in their eyes. The eyes will show either fear or dominance in a player. When the coach decides what those things are, he/she can direct the offensive players on the bases when to be aggressive and when to be conservative.

To practice this with your runners, have your infield practice with runners sometimes. Set up situations that you want and let the runners be aggressive. It is not only good for the runners to be “turned loose” but good for the defense to be pushed. The defense will be tougher for being put under a lot of pressures as will the offense for being allowed to be aggressive.