

Playing the Ball in the Outfield

Seconds count during the game. What a defensive player does before she even fields the ball determines whether the opposing players will be out or safe. When watching games, I have seen many offensive players reach base safely and games lost because the defense has not prepared properly before they get to the ball.

The outfield is the last line of defense and, if the outfielder is slow or doesn't do the little things to cut seconds off the time it takes them to retrieve and get the ball back into the infield, the possibility of a run scoring is very high. First of all, the outfielder needs to be able to "read" the hitter. The outfielder needs to read the following parts of the hitter's approach to hitting:

Does the hitter have an open, closed or even stance? Open is where the front foot is a little behind a line drawn between the front and the back foot, even is even, and closed means that the front foot is in front of a line drawn between the front and the back foot.

Check the hands and see if the knuckles are aligned properly. The middle knuckles should be close to being in a line and the bat should not be jammed back in the hand between the thumb and first finger.

Check the bat being used: Is the bat long or short? Is it light or heavy? Is it end-loaded? Does the hitter drag the bat? Does she have a long front arm? Does she have an upper-cut swing? Does she try to pull everything or is she a spray hitter? Where is your pitcher throwing the ball (inside or out, up or down)? Can the hitter match up with the pitcher or is the pitcher overpowering the hitter? The hitter needs to be taught how to read these things on a hitter to be able to get a tip-off of where the ball will go if hit.

To really be able to get a tip-off, the outfielder needs to know how her own pitcher is throwing that day. Is she overpowering the opponents, or is she slower than they are used to hitting? Does she throw outside or predominantly inside? Once the outfielder determines that, she should be able to judge where to play in the outfield. As the hitter is swinging, she will be able to get a "jump" on the ball in the correct direction that it will travel.

Whenever we have a game, the first thing I look for during the pre-game practice period is how the opposing outfielders field a fly ball, or a ball on the ground, and how they throw the ball back in to the shagger. The outfielders should, during the warm-up period, practice what they will be doing in the game. Here are a few examples of what the outfielders should practice during their warm-up time:

If the fly ball is right at them, they should back up on the ball and run in to catch it. This gives the player momentum as they are throwing the ball to their intended target. If they just stand to catch the ball, they will not have as much power or speed on the ball as they would if they actually caught it on the run. If I determine that the player just stands to catch the ball, we will tag up and advance on that player every time.

If the ball is to one side or the other, they should practice circling the ball. Circling the ball means that the player—while the ball is still in the air—circles around to where she catches the ball on her throwing-hand side. The catch should be in a direct line with the target where the player will be throwing the ball. Here again, if we see that the player catches the ball on her non-throwing-hand side, we will tag up and advance.

If the ball is a grounder, the player should charge the ball and receive it with the glove- foot forward. The player will then be in position to give a little hop before releasing the ball. Again, the player should try to field the ball with the throwing hand in line with the target.

During warm-ups and regular practices, the coach should try to hit every type of ball possible, at the players. There is an art to hitting fly balls, especially from the home plate area. Hitting from the area a hitter hits from during a real game lets the outfielder see the ball realistically. If the coaches always hit the ball from the sideline to a group of outfielders taking their turns one by one, they never really learn how the ball comes off the bat and the angles they have to take to throw to the bases. I really feel that during their normal practice times, the drills should be as game-like as possible. If the coaches are all right-handed or left-handed, they should try to find someone who hits from the opposite side of the plate so the outfielders learn to read the hitters and the spin on the ball from both sides of the plate.

A typical practice would start with the coach throwing "football"-type throws.

Drill 1: The players line up by the coach in a large area and each player has a ball. One at a time, they give the ball to the coach, run straight out to a designated spot, about 20 to 30 feet from the coach, and cut left. The coach throws the ball to them as they are running. Next time through, they run to a spot and cut to the right.

Next time through, they go straight out for an over-the-head catch and immediately straight back in for a short one.

If the coach wants to make it an aerobic-type exercise, the player goes to all four areas for a ball during one trip. The coach has to have a bucket of balls and throw left, then right, then straight out, and then a short one as the player comes in hard for it.

Drill 2: With the players in their positions, or if the area is small and limited to hitting from the sideline, the coach needs to hit the following types of balls to them:

- high fly balls right at them
- line drives right at them
- balls over their heads
- fly balls that make them run to their right
- fly balls that make them run to their left
- line drives to their right
- line drives to their left
- pop-ups that are very high
- short bloop hits, both in front of them and over their heads

The short bloops in front of them and over their heads can be thrown instead of hit. It is a little easier to throw those accurately. A coach wants to put the balls in those areas that the batted balls always seem to go during the game. I know of a team, this year, that battled and battled to tie the game—only to lose it on a little bloop over first.

The players need to be led by the ball in all of these drills. The coach should have the skill to hit the ball just out of reach of the players to increase their range and be able to keep leading them, as they get better through the year. The coach should always try to challenge the players enough to increase their skill but also allow them to be successful sometimes.

Make sure that, during these practices, the players are told where their targets are and that they are corrected if they are not circling the ball or going back on the ball in order to run in on the ball enough. In order for the players to be really good on all of these types of balls, they need to hit hundreds of balls. One coach cannot hit that many balls to all of the players every day. Volunteers may need to be found to help—or what we used to do is use the outfielders to hit to the infielders and the infielders to hit to the outfielders. You may need to teach them how to hit a fly accurately, but it will be a good learning experience for them and will actually help them with their own swings.

The little things done during practices will make a huge difference during the games. Practicing everything perfectly and not allowing them to do things incorrectly will pay off. It will take time and patience, and the coaches will have to keep a positive attitude, but it will show in the win/lose column.