

Speed Kills

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There are players who are just born fast. Then there are players who seem to be running in place. That's just the way it is, right? Maybe or maybe not? I agree that some players just will not beat others in a foot race even if they are spotted 10 feet. But every player can be faster by working the techniques of sprinting, how to break off the bases, how to cut the bases and how to do an avoidance slide.

1- Teach the techniques of sprinting

Proper mechanics and good technique allows for smooth and coordinated movements that in turn create faster speeds. Proper running mechanics starts with good running posture which is the alignment of the body. Posture during the acceleration phase of breaking off the base or out of the box, the runner has a pronounced lean of about 45 degrees. Acceleration is being able to go quickly from a stationary state to maximum speed in a short time. Acceleration happens by increasing the length of the stride and the frequency of the stride. When the player reaches their maximum speed the body is more erect, like 80 degrees. Check their toes to see if they are pointed slightly inward or outward. Have them turn their toes inward, this puts their weight forward on the balls of their feet, into a sprinting position. Have you ever seen a sprinter in a track meet run on their heels? If so, I doubt if they won the race.

The use of the arms is extremely important. The arm angle should be at 90 degrees and the arms need to be pumped forward and back not side to side. Watch the arms of the players to make sure the hands are coming straight up to nose level and straight back passing the buttocks in the back. Many players think they are doing that but are barely pumping them at all. A good drill to show them is to use a full length mirror in the locker room if at a school so that they can see for themselves what their arms are doing. Another is to have them sit on the ground with their legs straight out. Have them start pumping their arms and forcefully with the hands going by the ears and straight back. It is important that you are their eyes and correct them if not doing it efficiently. Check their hands and if they are held tightly in a fist, have them open their hands to a relaxed position. Making a tight fist tends to restrict the arm and chest muscles making it harder to sprint efficiently. The thumb side of the hand should be pointed forward and the wrist does not move.

2-Getting a good jump off the bases

I like a rocker start which means the runner's left foot in on the outfield side corner of the top of the base or against the outfield side pressed against the side of the base. Sometimes if the base is really hard, it is more comfortable to put the foot on the side of the base instead of the top. The player needs to time her break off so that she is in motion before the pitcher releases the ball. Even though they are in motion the left foot is still on the base before the release of the ball. The break off needs to be forceful. If she breaks off the base every time the same way as if she is stealing, the defense will think she is stealing and react. When she does this time after time, it lulls the defense into thinking that she is bluffing a steal. So, she is not only getting a good forceful break, she is taking the attention of the defense off of the hitter. This leads to the pitcher grooving the ball to the hitter or walking her in a lot of cases. It also gives her a little more time to steal since the defense will think she is bluffing.

So, one little move of breaking off the base forcefully does the following:

- Makes the defense watch her.
- Pulls attention away from the hitter making it easier on the hitter.
- Lulls the defense into thinking she is bluffing IF she does it every time a pitch is thrown.
- She is getting a great jump which will help her stealing or advancing a batted ball.

- She may even draw a throw from the catcher which always could go wild or be dropped.

3- Dive backs

When getting the good jumps, be able to get back is imperative. The break needs to be a three step (right, left, right) with the body then facing the plate and the feet continuing to move. Make sure the feet do not stop or they will have an excellent chance of being picked off. Keep the feet moving and do a side slide back to the base. If they turn their back on the play, they may be picked off against a good team. If they do a side slide back, if the ball is dropped by the defense it makes it easy to advance to the next base. When diving back, have them dive to the back side of the base with their head turned toward the outfield if the first basemen is covering. If the second baseman is covering, they may have to go to the front of the base.

4-Cutting the bases

The most important thing is to get a sharp cut to the next base. Opinions vary whether to hit it with the inside or outside of the foot, so maybe try with your runners to see which way is better for the individual. I prefer to not break stride and hit it with whichever foot hits at that stride. The runner has to make sure that if they hit it with their left foot that they pull the body around to make a straight cut to second versus going towards the outfield. They can take a path while running to first that cuts out a little in order to get an straight angle to second. However, they can do the same thing IF they pull that leg around in order to take a step directly to second.

5-Head first avoidance slides

It is really frustrating to watch a game either softball or even professional baseball and see the runner who is stealing slide directly into the base and be called out. An avoidance slide is when the runner slides to the opposite side of the base from the defensive player who will be receiving the ball and touches the base with their hand on the closest part of the base towards them. On a steal, they slide towards the outfield, from an outfield throw they slide towards the infield. The runner should only give the defensive player their fingers to tag.

6-Practicing to develop speed

- Work on developing speed at the beginning of the practices when everyone is fresh.
- Work on proper technique with a lot of repetitions done perfectly
- Work on running longer intervals
- Incorporate sprinting in a lot of drills while working on other skills

7-Don't be afraid to be aggressive

Don't be afraid to be aggressive as a coach and to let you players know that you want them to be aggressive. That means they may be thrown out at times but you know the saying, "you cannot steal second with your foot still on first".

Remember Speed Kills. So Be Aggressive!