

Reading the Defense

I love coaching third base. I love being able to run the offensive side of my team. And I love analyzing the other team's defensive positioning. It is so much fun to read the defense, signal your hitter or baserunner(s) to do something to beat that defense and watch it work. The players love being aggressive on the bases and at bat. When players are happy and having fun, the team bonds well and they are excited every time the team plays a game and also excited to try things against the opposing teams defense.

Before anything will work though, a coach needs to know what their own players can do in certain situations. Other things that need to be in place are the skills to execute what the coach wants them to do. During the practice season, all of the skills needed to accomplish this goal need to be taught thoroughly to every player. Skills like bunt to the correct spot on the first try, hit to the opposite field, execute the type of slide needed, keep the feet moving on the bases and so on. Then it is time to practice, practice and practice. If a player does not understand how to do a certain skill, the coach should take the time to explain it again and also explain why the skill is needed. Hopefully the team will be ready with the needed skills by the start of the season but continual teaching and positive reinforcement throughout the season is extremely important. Every situation in preseason and the regular season is a learning experience that hopefully will allow the team to peak during the post-season tournaments.

During the games, it is good to have certain hand or audible signals to give to the players discreetly. You never want to telegraph to the other team what you are about to do. So, the team needs to keep their eyes on the third base coach for those simple little signals that the coach will give in a way that cannot be detected easily by the opposition. Some prefer to go through a bunch of touches with an indicator or by counting the touches, etc. I found that to be confusing but if it works for some, do what you are comfortable doing. Now a lot wear the armbands to eliminate the other team from stealing the signals. The better the competition, the more sophisticated the signal stealing becomes. But it does slow down the game and I wonder about the spur of the moment steal or bunt when the coach on third sees something. When I wanted a bunt on the run, I might go through some signals and touch the one for the bunt and run. But a lot of times, I would wait to see what the defense was doing since sometimes a defense will move after a right handed hitter especially turns her back on the left side of the infield. That is where a verbal signal is good. We had around 3 different verbal signals meaning the same thing. That made it harder for teams to pick up what we were doing.

On base, we might have hand signals or verbal ones. Most of the time I would not even be looking at the runners when I gave a steal or delay steal. The players would pick up the signal since they were watching me until the pitcher was in her motion. Our signals were very simple but I would give fake signals. Sometimes the real one was embedded in those fake ones but a lot of times, the real signal was after I had finished the fake ones and was looking away from the player I was signaling.

Reading the defense as a coach can really be fun so here are some occurrences in the opposing teams defense that can be exploited by your offense.

-watch the feet of 1B and 3B-if they are flat footed, their toes are pointed outward, they are playing deep at their position or they do not have a pre-movement (feet glued to the ground), it would be a good time to do a bunt on the run. When performing a bunt on the run, the offensive player has to be on the run when the ball meets the bat. Learning to get the ball down in the exact spot wanted takes practice and an understanding of the techniques. The coach can also call a squeeze with a runner on third if the infielders are flat footed or back too far for the speed of your runner.

-watch the way the catcher throws the ball back to the pitcher. If the catcher continually goes to her knees when throwing the ball back to the pitcher and your team has good to excellent speed on a base, try a steal. Watch the catcher's throws back to the pitcher. Again with some speed on the bases, if the catcher is lobbing the ball back to the pitcher especially from her knees or not paying attention to the runner, do a delayed steal. The runner should not turn her back on the next base but do a side shuffle back to the base so she can easily run to the next base.

--the defensive pitcher cannot throw overhand to a base, try a bunt and make her field it.

-watch how the outfielders set up to catch the ball, catching on the glove side of the body takes more time to transfer the ball to the throwing hand side. Depending on depth of the outfielder, good time to run on her.

-runner on second base with the SS playing in front of the baseline and the 3B is up toward the plate, good time to steal 3B with a fade away slide to the outfield side of the base. Can be a straight steal with or without a fake bunt to cover the runner.

-runner on 2B with the SS shading to 2B, good time for a fake bunt with a steal of 3B.

-2B is shading toward 2B, signal hitter to look for an outside pitch and drive it through the right side of the infield or pop it over the infield to the right side.

-putting pressure on the defense and catcher.. The runners on base need to be very active on their break offs. Their feet should never stop moving and their break offs should be more aggressive and bigger on every pitch. If the catcher is watching the runners, the other defensive players are watching the catcher especially the pitcher. This could make the pitcher lose focus and groove the ball, throw a wild pitch, walk the batter or hit the batter. The catcher could have a passed ball or throw wild on a pick off attempt.

-Anything is possible when the runners are threatening to take the next base. With runners on first and second and less than two outs, try sending the runner on first at least half way to second on every lead off. This runner has to keep her feet moving and go back to first if nothing is happening during the play. With bases loaded, try having the runner on first and second do the same break off. These runners have to be on their toes and in motion back and forth. This action really puts pressure on some defenses and could create many miscues by the defense. The defense especially the catcher is watching the runner instead of worrying about the hitter.

-watch how deep the outfielders are playing. If the ball is hit deep and it looks like it will be caught, the runner on first could tag on the play and advance to second. This would help get a runner into scoring position and keep out of a possible double play during the next at bat.

-watch the defensive players eyes and mannerism. If they tend to break a certain way on the pitch, it will tip off what you might be able to exploit. If they look scared, keep the pressure on the defense.

These are just some of the things that a third base coach can look for and use against the defense. The coach should be watching the defense constantly and conveying these things to the players. The coach should also teach the players what things to look for while they are looking at the defense. That will teach them to be better players and future coaches. Fastpitch can really be a fun game when strategy is used and executed. The players love to do the little things to create runs. Please teach your team the strategy of the game. I know the fans like to see the home runs and everyone likes to hit a home run but the players and fans will love to see the players run wild on the bases. When I say run wild, I mean it is a very calculated running wild by being extremely aggressive. This all starts with the coach reading the defense and attacking it.

