

Outfield Strategies

By Amanda Freed

Many times you'll see good infielders transition into the outfield. Good outfielders are generally great athletes but the best outfielders are smart, quick, and always anticipating their next play. The most difficult part about playing the outfield is keeping your head in the game every pitch of every inning. Falling asleep for one pitch could make a huge difference in a close ball game. Great outfielders are always thinking ahead. If the ball is hit to me, where is my play?

For infielders, knowing the play when the ball is hit can be pretty obvious because most decisions are instinctual and either you have the play or you don't. Outfield is a very strategic position and all plays are circumstantial. Where you make your play depends on a number of things including if runners are on base, the speed of the runners, how many outs, the score, and the speed and distance of the ball hit to you. Because it would be impossible for me know every situation off the top of my head, let alone to cover them all in an article, I'll talk about a few that come up quite often but can be overlooked.

- Situation #1: Line drive hit down the left or right field line. Knowing when to leave your feet and when to take a deep angle is important as a corner outfielder. I think the easiest outfield position to play is center field. You do have a lot of responsibility as dictator of the outfield, but you have a more direct view of the hitter, angles are easier to read off the bat, and most balls hit towards center field have true spin (they don't curve). The corner outfielders have to make more judgment calls. You might be thinking, when is it not a good time to attempt a diving catch? Unfortunately, there are times when too much hustle can hurt you. As a corner outfielder, you have to be aware that if you dive for a ball down the line, you are running the risk of missing the catch and the ball rolling past. Because the center fielder cannot be there in time to back you up, a single has now turned into a multiple base hit. Unless it is a game-winning situation, diving for a line drive down the line is risky. Now, if it is a pop fly on the line you have a lot more leniency. Because the ball is coming down from a higher trajectory, if you miss the catch, the ball won't roll very far so chances are you can recover and keep the runner to one base. Balls in the gap are almost always an all out effort as long as your other outfielders are there to back you up.

Remember, this is not a rule etched in stone. Depending on a number of situations including the score, 2 outs versus less than 2 outs, speed of the runner, and who's on deck, your decision to dive down the line will change.

- Situation #2: Runner on second base, 1 out, and there's a fly ball hit directly between the right and center fielders. The center fielder always has priority over right and left field but in a case like this, the right fielder could possibly have a better angle coming through the ball to throw the runner out tagging from second to third. If you are a right-handed right fielder, you will be catching the ball over your throwing-shoulder and thus creating a more efficient throw to third base. The right handed center fielder would have a much more difficult time getting around the ball and would also be catching it over her glove side forcing her to take time to set up for a good throw.

Think about who would have priority if the same ball is hit and you are a left-handed right fielder playing with a left-handed center fielder. The center-fielder has priority and also has a better chance of creating a more direct line to third. Obviously the number one priority is making the catch so whoever can get to the ball needs to take control. Communication is key.

- Situation #3: Runner on 3rd base, less than 2 outs, tied score, and a deep FOUL fly ball is hit to the left fielder. As difficult as it might be, resist the urge to catch the ball. If you're at a distance where the runner would not tag, or if she does you can make a strong throw home in plenty of time, then make the play. But if the ball is hit deep enough for the runner to tag and score, let the ball drop and give your pitcher another opportunity to get the hitter out. When a play like this happens, get to the line, know where it is, and be sure that ball is foul. If the score is lopsided one way or the other and it's late in the game, especially if your team is ahead by a significant amount, catch the ball and take the out.

Every play in the outfield depends on what's happening in the game at that time. This is why it is essential for outfielders to be mentally tough enough to be in the game every pitch of every inning. Each time a hitter steps to the plate, the outfielders should have something to communicate to each other about. "I'm shifting toward the line. Deep fly ball we're throwing to second. Deep foul, let it drop. She hit it hard to you last time. Let's play a little deeper, wind's blowing out." As simple as this sounds, communication between outfielders could be endless. You may not get a ball for two games, but when you do, best be prepared!