

DEFENSIVE POSITIONING: Part 1

Introduction

When Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball, I'm not sure anyone really knew how ahead of his time he really was. I find it fascinating that our game has changed very little since its' inception more than a century ago. The heights of the mounds have been changed, the fences moved in and back, the bats and balls have changed, but the baseball diamond itself has remained intact. It is truly amazing that the diamond dimensions have withstood the sands of time. The baseball diamond has to be the crown jewel of all sports.

Many coaches and players have, at times, adjusted the standard positioning locations. In my career, I have seen the likes of four outfielders and five infielders. I have seen the depths of outfielders and infielders fluctuate from program to program and philosophy to philosophy. It seems however, that the majority continues to use the basic positions with only slight adjustments. Mr. Doubleday had to have incredible insight in to the speed and timing of our game to have the dimensions of his diamond stay intact forever.

The concept of positioning is very simple, but the subtle adjustments can be very complex as they relate to the total defensive scheme. I am a firm believer that you must have a system and philosophy and be consistent with execution. First of all, I believe that you must convince your players to buy into the system and you must stress the importance of the team defensive philosophy. I try to make this statement with both a discussion and physical exercise. I always do this session as the very first baseball activity, each and every year. I use a pretty long discussion and physical practice period of time to get this point across. This stresses the importance of this part of our game with everyone associated with the team. They understand that for me to commit so much time and effort to team defense, that it must be an important ingredient. Over the years, this philosophy has proven to be somewhat successful. It has definitely sent a strong message

to my players and I seem to get their commitment back in return. The players always try very hard to work together and within the system.

The type of athletic ability that your athletes have will make a difference in the quality of the defensive coverage. Obviously, if you are loaded with quick and fast athletes, they will be able to get to more balls put in play than a less athletic team. This chapter covers concepts that maximize the defensive coverage, regardless of the athleticism of your team. We are all required; however, to make the most out of what we have on our team each and every year. Successfully recruiting outstanding athletes makes any system more productive.

Philosophy

The first point I like to make with my players is that they are going to have to learn how to play a zone defense. Just like some other sports, the defensive scheme would be very ineffective if we had some of the players playing a man-to-man scheme while the others were playing a zone. I do realize that in basketball and sometimes football, this mingling of concepts does become an effective defensive scheme. However, in baseball, the goal is to cover as much fair territory as possible. I stress with them that the majority of the balls that are put in play go towards the middle of the field. I want them to realize the reality of this and to most always emphasize the importance of the middle of the field. This keeps them from overplaying the lines and to have a chance on balls hit in the seams of the infield or the alleys in the outfield. There are exceptions to this philosophy that will be discussed later in this chapter. The ultimate goal is to have a defensive player in the area that the ball is hit. The key point to make here is that we only need one player in that area and we only need to defend against the fair ball. Proper orchestration between players will minimize overlapping each other or foul ground.

The importance of proper spacing is stressed to each defensive player. I believe that it is very difficult to predict exactly where on the field the ball is going to be hit. Certainly, we have scouting information that makes our predictions more accurate, but I don't think

that prediction is always going to be accurate. Because of the fact that we can not always be accurate with our defensive positioning, the proper spacing allows us to maximize our fair ball coverage. I like to have a system that gets information to the players from the dugout in a manner that allows them ample time to interact with the other defensive players and most of all allows them to commit to their responsibility. I don't want our players to be robots and rely totally on the coaches' input. It is very important to get them the information early. I would like them to make their own adjustments and have their own ideas. I believe that if we are too insistent on our information being correct, it eliminates their feel for the game and their instincts. Forcing your players to do it your way can be anti-productive. I like for them to be able to discuss their ideas with the coaches. Many times their instincts and information is valuable to the team effort.

One of our commitments on the defensive side is to establish a quick tempo. I believe that it is much easier to play defense if there is a minimum amount of time in between pitches. The defensive players can be on their toes. They won't be flatfooted because of idle time. I like for the pitcher to sprint to the mound as quickly as possible in between innings. I want him to get his warm-up pitches done quickly without sacrificing the quality that needs to be there. I want him to spend very little time off the rubber. Obviously, if he is throwing strikes, it compliments this theory. However, it is appropriate at times, for him to slow things down when the other team has created some momentum.

I think from team to team or coach to coach, there will be a discrepancy as to whether you position your defense. The computer has made it possible to obtain and analyze quite a bit of information. This information can be customized into specific areas of emphasis. There are many quality software programs on the market that can be of great help in putting together a defensive plan. Some coaches like to position the defense based on where the hitter hits the ball most often. Others will place their emphasis on how they are going to pitch to each hitter. Another theory might be to look solely at where all hitters tend to hit the ball off each individual pitcher. These priorities have been and will be argued about as long as our game is played. I believe that you must stick by whatever

area of priority you establish and be consistent with your approach. This will enable the percentages of being correct and incorrect, to even out over the entire season. If you tend to switch around or go off of gut feelings, you may find that your predictions are very inconsistent. Our system places more emphasis on two main areas. How we pitch to a particular hitter and the opposing hitters' chart (see figure 1) we keep for each individual pitcher are the points of emphasis. This system can only be effective if two things happen; 1) The level that you are coaching is such that the pitchers have consistent control, which means that the ball is consistently going to an area that is called and 2) You have a system that is run from the dugout or you have coordinated the pitchers game plan with the positioning game plan and they both stick with the plan. We have found this to be a very effective way to be successful in being correct with our positioning over the years. Obviously, there are variables in any system because of situations and priorities based on the inning and score of each game. Situations and adjustments will be discussed later in this chapter.

I like to keep our system simple. I think that a lot of coaches tend to put too many things in their playbook. This makes the game much more difficult to play and accounts for the mental lapses due to confusion. What tends to happen is the players tend to perform the fundamentals of catch in a mediocre manner when there is too much to think about. Your system is only going to be effective if your team can play sound catch within the system. I prefer to do fewer things and try to do them extremely well. This philosophy can apply to any defensive scheme. Keep the positioning system simple. Do not put in too many pick-offs, bunt defenses, or first and third defenses. I believe in having the basic fundamental plays and repeatedly working on those fundamentals. This will maintain the confidence and efficiency in each player's part of the total goal. This will also slow the game down in each of your player's minds.

Another point of discussion is whether or not a coach calls pitches from the dugout. I have always believed in calling pitches and running the defense from the dugout. I know many coaches and analysts would disagree with this approach. I believe that in the college game, the coaches have the most experience, the most knowledge, and the most

information. That doesn't mean that we are always right, however. By controlling the games it allows for us to put the entire defensive scheme together from the dugout. This philosophy is not designed to eliminate the players from having input or thinking for themselves. We want them to have input and be able to discuss what they are seeing or picking up on. Another one of the knocks against this approach would be that we are not able to see little adjustments that the hitters make from the dugout. To help solve this problem we have adjustment signs from the catcher on the field. This gives us the valuable information that we can put in the formula to predict the outcome. Within our system, we also allow the pitcher to shake off what pitch is called from the bench. The main reason that we allow him to change what is called is that we do realize that he must feel committed and good about the pitch selected. The pitcher's trust and commitment to each pitch must be there. Some people may argue that there is no teaching being accomplished if the coaches are controlling everything. We work very hard to communicate with and explain to our players the reasons for doing everything. This serves the purpose of educating them on the finer points of playing defense and prepares them for when the time comes that they are calling things for themselves. It is a system that has been very successful for me over the years.

Goals of an Effective Defense

An effective defense is one that accomplishes many things. The defense uses a middle of the field priority system as was discussed earlier. Quality defense eliminates free bases or free base runners and makes the opposition earn everything they get. We try very hard to limit the opportunity for extra outs within an inning. We try and get every out that is available within an inning or play. We try to be perfect mentally and realize that we are on occasion going to break down physically. We realize that there is momentum in the game and try and capture or obtain that momentum from the defensive side. The three biggest defensive momentum builders or breakers are the double play, the successful extra base hit alignment, and the bunt defense. All of these defensive plays, when executed properly, are killers for the offensive effort. When you fail to execute these plays within an inning, it is usually devastating.

A goal that I have in the learning phase of the defensive concepts is to be detailed and teaching orientated enough to have the players actually learn enough defensive schemes and there complexity to teach them offense. I believe that if you can successfully break down the difficulty in covering certain offensive plays, it serves as a motivator to encourage your players to try certain things while on offense. If a player believes that he can be successful with a certain play or skill his chances of executing that play or skill go way up. Your players will be more likely to try things on their own. In simple terms, defense teaches offense and offense teaches defense.

Another huge goal that I have is to get my players to commit to the defensive effort. This is sometimes a very difficult task to accomplish. So much of the credit to the success of a baseball team goes to the players that do well offensively. The media is notorious for recognizing the top offensive players and mentioning nothing about the defensive effort the team or individuals have produced. Year end awards and honors are based mostly on offensive successes. In most cases, this distorts the commitment that we tend to get from our players on defense. I believe that games and championships are won on the defensive side of the ball. You play defense, within a game, much more often than you hit. My mission is to convince my players of the importance of their defensive commitment to the outcome of the game. Usually, one of the biggest challenges for them is to play defense when they have just had a bad at bat. I would like them to put that bad at bat behind them and totally commit to the defensive effort, mentally and physically. This is much easier said than done. It takes a disciplined team and individual to adhere to this principle. There is time available to release their offensive frustrations. I just do not want them to be thinking about offense when they are on defense. I want them to leave their offensive frustrations in the dugout.

Practice Format

The real tricky part of my job is to create the right learning environment for my team to progress defensively. I try and accomplish this mission using the whole/part/whole system. In other words, I try to teach everyone what the team is trying to accomplish in

whatever defensive system they are learning. After introducing the concept to the team, I then will address the individual fundamentals necessary to accomplish the system. I then like to go back to the team interaction and hopefully it all comes together with quality execution. This philosophy usually holds up well with all defensive goals that my program uses. My team can not be effective in executing a team defensive concept until they have a handle on the defensive fundamentals individually. However, even the most fundamentally competent individual can not be effective within the team unless he has a total understanding as to the interaction with his teammates. Competency with both individual and team fundamentals is crucial for consistency in performance. I have found with this type of lesson plan you end up with confident players.

Whenever possible and when time allows, I try designing my practices so that the individual position fundamentals are worked on first. I like for each player to go through some routine and/or session designed to help him with his physical mastery of defense at his particular position. Each position would be unique as to the type of routine they might go through. I then like to bring them all together for a quality catch session. Then there would be a session designed to work on a fundamental that is position specific. The fundamental for that day usually is consistent with the team session that follows. This takes the individual player and allows him the opportunity to work on and hopefully master his part of the total picture. Within this system, the individual's chances of controlling his part of the team interaction go way up. This system has been very productive in leading to a positive practice session. It is very important as it applies to the confidence level talked about in the previous paragraph. Most importantly, it paves the way for the team to compete at a high level of confidence in their capabilities.

Sequence and Timing

This is how we implement our system with our players. We always try and keep our goal of establishing a quick defensive tempo in mind. We want our system to be simple and efficient. We want our system to work when the noise level is such where hand signs are the only way to communicate effectively. We use three different coaches to signal to

the defense. One-coach signals for the outfielders, one coach signals for the infielders, and the pitching coach signals for the catcher and pitcher. We use three different coaches because of the time element and because there are too many players for one coach to effectively handle all three areas. This system gives each coach a maximum of 4 players to manage and communicate with at any given time. It is important in our system to give the information to our players early, so they are allowed ample time to communicate and adjust with their teammates and go through their own mental routine prior to each pitch.

When the first hitter, or a new hitter is coming to take his at bat our system calls for all defensive players to pick up the appropriate coach with his eyes. The exact timing is when the hitter reaches the dirt surrounding home plate. After each pitch, the defensive players are taught to get eye contact with the appropriate coach when the ball is returned to the pitcher and the ball hits his glove. This allows for any adjustments to be made quickly and still allows for ample time for the defensive players to interact. This is something that needs to be practiced. As I indicated earlier, it is our first lesson plan, each and every year. The players are constantly working on this system when we scrimmage so they become very comfortable with the routine and the sign system. We would like to get all the tension or distractions out of the way, so they can get comfortable and commit to the baseball.

Defensive Positioning, Part 2, coming March 2014.