

DEFENSIVE POSITIONING: Part 2

Positioning Basics

One of our first missions in the teaching sequence is to teach the defensive players the proper place to position themselves. We like to start with a session to show them where their home base should be with a right handed hitter and playing him straight up with nobody on base. Once we have shown them where we think this position should be, we ask them to step off the distance from the bases. A good example would be the shortstop and second baseman's positions. In his right handed straight up position with no one on base, if the shortstop stepped the distance off, he would be approximately 7 steps from the second base bag, toward third base, down the line and approximately 15 steps back from the baseline. With the same hitter the second baseman would be 5 steps from the second base bag, toward first base, down the line and 15 steps back from the baseline. As you might have noticed, the difference in the two positions is two steps in a lateral direction. The difference in the lateral direction is a reflection of the side the hitter is batting. We use this two step difference with positioning adjustments for infielders that will be explained later in the chapter. Stepping off the positioning spots is useful when we travel to different fields and the cuts of the grass vary from our home park. The bases are always going to be the same distances at every field where we play. Using this step system will prevent distortions in the positioning plan that could come from unusual cuts of the infield grass and from outfield fences that are not symmetrical or have a short porch. Many infielders position themselves on the back edge of the infield dirt. If they use the dirt as a guide they might in actuality be too deep or too shallow for our system. The outfielders sometimes base their depth on their distance from the fences. With some fields varying the depths of the outfield fences, this could distort the desired depths of the outfielders. The most accurate way to insure the consistency we would like from field to field is for all players to judge their depths on the distances from the bases.

Once we have established the proper spots for right handed straight up for all positions, we have the players practice the adjustments to different signs and types of hitters. We use certain rules to insure that the proper spacing is maintained when we make hitter adjustments. Our rule of thumb is that when an infielder makes an adjustment to slight pull or slight opposite, he moves two steps in the proper direction. The exception to this is that we have our corner infielders(1B/3B) only move one step when moving towards the foul line, once they have reached the 7 step position, to avoid overlapping the foul line. If the plan were to play a particular hitter to pull, then all infielders would move four steps in the proper direction except the corner infielder on the pull side of the field. That corner infielder would move two in this example. This system allows us to move and position the infielders with a specific sign. Also, with this system, we know they will be coordinated with their movements together, unless we would like to make a special positioning adjustment. This system also explains the two step lateral difference between the shortstop and second baseman, in our right handed straight up example previously discussed. As you can see, if the hitter at the plate was left handed, the second baseman would be 7 steps off the base and the shortstop would be 5 steps off the base.

In the outfield, our rule is for every slight pull or slight opposite adjustment, the outfielders move three steps in the proper lateral direction. If the adjustment were from straight up to pull, then the outfielders would all move 6 steps in the proper lateral direction. Again, this allows us to have the outfielders coordinate their movements and spacing. There are situations that happen quite often, especially in the outfield where we do not want all three outfielders to move together. This special alignment can be accomplished with a different set of signs.

This entire system is designed to allow a coach to give one sign to the entire defense and be able to count on the players to move to a very specific defensive spot. There are countless variables in the objective of the defense that would call for a few adjustments from this basic positioning system. Individuals could be move with a sign specifically for each player. It is very likely that the infield might play the hitter one way and the outfield play the hitter a different way. It is also possible that one side of the field plays one way

while the other side plays another. This is one reason that we like to have two coaches giving the positioning signs. The main point to keep in mind is that within this system we can communicate accurately with every player on the field and he should know exactly where to play with a hand signal.

Let's break this down with one example of the basic positioning for the infielders. Let's assume that we have an average running, no bunt threat, right handed hitter to defense. Let's assume there is nobody on base early in the ball game. Let's say we are going to play this particular hitter straight up. Here is how we would like for our infielders to be set up.

1B---9 steps off first base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

2B---5 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

SS---7 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

3B---7 steps off third base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

Now let's take the same game situation and put a left handed hitter at the plate. We are still going to play this hitter straight up. Let's see how this differs from a right handed hitter and see if our adjustment rules would apply.

1B---7 steps off first base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

2B---7 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

SS---5 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

3B---9 steps off third base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

If we were going to adjust to the same left handed hitter and go to a slight pull defense in the infield, here is how that would translate.

1B---6 steps off first base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

2B---9 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

SS---3 steps off second base bag/ 15 steps from baseline

3B---11 steps off third base bag/ 12 steps from baseline

I hope this gives you a good understanding of the system we use. Obviously, this does not account for all the variables in positioning that the game situations or particular hitters call for. It does, however, give us a basic system to work off of to make more adjustments when necessary.

Now we have the decision making process in front of us as to how we are going to defense a particular hitter given the situation. As I mentioned earlier, there are choices as to where you put the most emphasis in the scouting information that you have accumulated. When we put the plan into action, we always keep in mind that we can not accurately predict where the ball is going to be hit all time. No matter what our information tells us, we realize that the ball could be hit anywhere on the field. This means that we try and avoid overloading one part of the field and weakening the less predictable part of the field. Our philosophy is to play to the scouting information collectively, without totally giving up the least predictable areas for that particular hitter. In other words, we like to avoid extreme defensive alignments.

The two areas of information that we put the highest emphasis on in deciding how to align our defense are; the way we are going to pitch the hitter, and where the particular hitter has hit the ball off our pitcher or other similar hitters have hit the ball off our pitcher. Over the years, we have found this to be the best criteria to follow in developing a defensive plan. There is no way to be one hundred percent accurate. We are just trying to make the percentages of being correct go up with a solid plan. No matter what system you use, you must be consistent.

Priorities

I believe that it is very important to convince young defensive players that they must establish and understand that they have priorities in their positioning alignments and decision making. This would apply to their alignments in regards to many special defenses and situations such as; the double play, base coverage's for stealing, holding runners at first base and at second base, bunt defenses, first and third defenses, playing the infield in with a runner on third base, and taking away the chance for an extra base hit. What I have found with young players is that they try and accomplish too much. When they play double play depth they tend to play too deep and the middle infielders get too far away from the second base bag, trying to cover the hole between them and the corner infielder. When they have base coverage for steals, they try and hold their ground too long and are unsuccessful at beating the baseball thrown by the catcher to the bag. When they play in to attempt to throw a runner at third base out at the plate on a ground ball, they play half way in and are really in what I call 'no man's land'. In bunt defenses they do not commit to their responsibility well enough, because they are trying to do too much. When they guard the line, they end up too far away and inevitably a ball goes between them and the line.

It is crucial that they are taught that they cannot accomplish everything with their alignment scheme. They must sacrifice some coverage in most cases to position themselves for their individual responsibility. You must make it acceptable to get beat by a ball hit in an area that is priority three or four. You must make it acceptable for a ball to go through a hole created by them leaving their spot to cover a base. They must understand that sometimes you just have to give the hitter some credit. I like to use the term; 'you must give up something to get something'. This will make your defense more efficient when the batter hits the ball where you are trying to get him to hit it or bunt it.

The priority system can apply to decisions made by the players on defense. Many time's young players get things out of sequence because they are trying to trick the

offensive players. They tend to think and prepare for the special play or trick play instead of committing their thought process to the most probable play. I've had some difficulty in my coaching career with some of the more cerebral players in this area. When this occurs, it is important to get those players to understand why I don't want them to operate that way. As I indicated earlier in the chapter, I want them to keep the game simple in their minds.

Double Play Depth

The priority for the infielders is the double play. When they position themselves versus the hitter, the infielders must understand that they have to give up some coverage to have a chance at the double play. This priority would also apply to the middle infielders over playing the hole instead of being close enough to the base to allow for them to turn a double play. In a case where we are playing a hitter to pull, the middle infielder on the pull side would not allow his lateral adjustment to take him too far away from the base, so that he would not be able to beat the first throw to the second base bag. Therefore, we are putting the hole coverage second to the priority of being at the base.

Here are some of the rules that we use for our infielders;

The first baseman is no deeper than 7 steps behind the baseline, if he is playing behind the runner. This would always apply with runners on first and second or the bases loaded. This is 5 steps farther in than with nobody on base, or a two out situation. The hitter and pitcher would determine his lateral positioning.

The third baseman is no deeper than 4 steps behind the baseline. This would be whenever the double play is in order. This is 8 steps farther in than with nobody on base or a two out situation. The hitter and pitcher would determine his lateral positioning.

The shortstop and second baseman are both, no deeper than 12 steps behind the baseline. This would be whenever the double play is in order. This is 3 steps farther in than with nobody on base or a two out situation. The hitter and pitcher would determine

their lateral positioning. We do not allow them to move so much laterally that they are unable to turn the double play. The exception to this rule is when we put on a special defense that eliminates them from that responsibility. Once in a while we decide to commit to defending the hitter and how we are going to pitch to him. This requires a special defense where only one middle infielder is going to be in position to turn the double play. We do this very seldom and try and avoid these exaggerated defenses.

Ideally, what we are trying to get is a ground ball hit in the middle of the diamond. When we accomplish that, we would like to have a defensive player in that area and get the double play that we worked so hard to create.

Special Coverage's

Let's discuss three special situations that require special positioning schemes. The three situations are; defending against the extra base hit, playing the infield in to attempt to throw out a runner trying to score from third base, and what we call our flight of the ball defense.

We go in to a defense that we call, 'no doubles'', beginning with the 8th inning of a one run game, as a general rule. There are variables that might change the timing as to when we actually defend against the extra base hit. The key is the percentages or chance of an extra base hit and what that means as to your teams chance of winning or losing a ballgame because of an extra base hit.

In defending against the extra base hit, the two adjustments are with the outfielders and the corner infielders. We like our outfielders to play 4 steps farther back as a general rule. The only thing that would prevent them from taking the five steps back would be the depth of the outfield fence. If moving back 4 steps takes them too close to the fence, then they would only go back far enough so that they are not overlapping a home run ball. Keep in mind that if all three outfielders move back 4 steps, this will distort the proper spacing that they should have in the gaps. Consequently, the corner outfielders should pinch the gaps with 2 steps closer to the center fielder. It is important for the outfielders

to also put this defensive plan into their decision making process. When we are in ‘no doubles’, they are not to dive to catch a ball unless they are 100% sure that they can catch or keep the ball in front of them. This must be talked about before the ball is hit.

The corner infielder’s adjustment is to play close enough to the foul line so that no hit ball could possibly go between them and the foul line. This means that the farther back they play the farther off the line they can play. If they are shallow, they should be very close to the foul line. If the first baseman is holding a runner on first base, he should not move very far off the line on the pitcher’s delivery to the plate.

When we defend with the infielders to allow us to throw a runner from third base out at the plate, we make the following depth adjustments. The first baseman and third baseman align themselves 3 steps behind the baseline. The exception to this depth would be to defend a potential bunt play or when there is an exceptionally fast runner at third base. The lateral adjustments would be based on how we have decided to play the particular hitter. The middle infielder’s depth would be even with the baseline. If there were an exceptionally fast runner at third base they would move in 2 steps. Their lateral alignment would be based on how we are playing the hitter.

We have a defensive alignment that we call, ‘flight of the ball’. In this defensive situation, there is one out and the double play is in order. There is a game winning or game tying runner at third base. The goal of the infielders would be to either get the double play if the ball is hit hard enough (‘flight of the ball’) or if not, get the out at the plate. The speed of the hitter becomes a huge factor in the pre-pitch decision making process, but the positioning is crucial as well. In this, ‘flight of the ball’ defense the infielders make the following alignment adjustments. The third baseman plays 2 steps behind the baseline and determines where to throw the ball based on how hard it was hit. The first baseman either holds the runner at first base in a first and third situation, or plays 2 steps behind the base line. In our scheme the first baseman always throws a ball hit to him to the plate. We think that it is too difficult to turn a 3-6-3 or 3-6-1 double play with the game on the line. The middle infielders would align themselves no deeper than 4 steps behind the baseline. They would base their throw on how hard the ball was hit.

Their lateral adjustment would be based on how we are playing the hitter. It is important that they stay close enough to the second base bag to allow them to turn a double play, as we discussed in the double play depth paragraph.

Adjustments

Many programs teach and believe in the infielders and sometimes outfielders making alignment adjustments according to the pitch being thrown. This can be accomplished by the middle infielders relaying the pitch verbally or with a hand sign. We have gone away from this system because of the fact that it allows a smart team or player to recognize the pitch being thrown by the pitcher. What happens is the defensive player moves in one direction or another, which indicates what type of pitch is being delivered. We believe in relaying the information to the infielders, but do not move physically in any one direction. Instead we ask the infielders to anticipate in the proper direction. This will not allow the smart team or player to know what we are throwing.

Another form of late adjustments are what we call, ‘cat and mouse’. ‘Cat and mouse’, would be where an infielder shows one depth and moves in or back while the pitcher is in his delivery. This is done for three reasons: One, for a corner infielder to show the hitter that he is taking the bunt away and actually be deeper for better coverage. Two, for a corner infielder to bait a hitter into thinking he can easily bunt in his direction, and that infielder gets an easy out on a bunted ball. Three, for a situation with a runner at third base and less than two outs, where the concept is to show one depth and end up in another depth to confuse decision making process of the runner at third base. If the infielders started back and ended up in, they might get an easy out at the plate on a ground ball hit to them. If the infielders started in and moved back, they might get the runner to hold at third base on a ground ball hit to them. Our philosophy includes the ‘cat and mouse’ with the corner infielders, but we don’t believe in the ‘cat and mouse’ with the runner at third example. We like to keep things simple and think that the ‘cat and mouse’ with a runner at third makes playing defense more complicated and the benefits are not worth the complexity.

Dugout Communication System

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, we use two types of communication with the defensive players on the field. We use physical signs and verbal signs. During most games, both can be used interchangeably and effectively. Typically, in the most important games however, verbal signs are useless because of the inability of the players to hear those coming from the dugout area. Therefore, we have found it essential to develop our physical signs to a point where we can communicate almost everything to the defense. This approach has served us well when we are fortunate to participate in regionals and the College World Series. Although this chapter is about defensive positioning, we have both types of signs for all of our defensive systems. This would include bunt defenses, first and third defenses, base coverages, pick-off plays, pitching around hitters, walking hitters intentionally, and game winning situations. We also have quite a few signs that allow the catcher and our pitching coach to communicate valuable information back and forth to form a team working together to get the hitter out.

Here is an example of the type of information that we find necessary to get to our defensive players;

- Positioning alignment
- Individual defensive player adjustments
- Power/lack of power
- Slice
- Pinch
- 2 strike adjustment
- No doubles
- Hit cutoff man
- Throw directly to second base on a base hit for outfielders
- Nothing over your head
- Nothing between you and line
- Shade line

- 1B play behind
- No throw sign to any individual infielder and catcher
- Infielders must go long way on ground ball due to full count
- Back side runner when double stealing
- Cat and mouse with corner infielders or base hit bunt coverages
- Infield depths
- Speed of hitter
- Type of base stealing threat
- Coverages for stealing between middle infielders
- Stall for time
- Pitch the hitter fine
- First and third defenses (identifying the fastest runner on base)
- Bunt defenses

As you hopefully can see, we have the ability to communicate a vast amount of information that we think is important to the defensive players. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, it is crucial to use this system properly to be effective. The information must be relayed at the proper time. The players must be trained to get eye contact at the proper time. The players must be allowed time to interact with their teammates and still be able to commit mentally to their individual responsibility.

Conclusion

Although many have played with different successful systems, not much has changed over the years. Some have fiddled around with exaggerated defensive alignments for certain situations or hitters. Usually, we all get back to an alignment that is virtually identical to the days when the players left their gloves on the field. The more the game progresses with modern technology, the more it stays the same. The most athletic and best defensive players are most likely going to end up in the middle of the field. The players that are defensive liabilities are going to end up on the corners of the outfield. The slow heavy kid with a good arm is going to end up behind the plate. If you can hit,

the coach will find a way to get you in the line-up even if the designated hitter position is already taken. Abner Doubleday must have really known what he was doing.