

Base Running: Home To First

- **Getting Out Of The Box**

Regardless which side of the plate you hit from, your first step out of the box is a crossover step. Drive out of the box as if you were stealing a base. Get in the habit of getting out of the box quickly; this helps you at the close play at first and may just turn that long single into a double.

As you take your first couple steps, pick up the ball. Assume there will be a play at first base on any ball hit on the ground or on a line. Once you know where the ball is heading, focus in on where you are going.

- **Run Every Ball Out! Hard!**

Few players in the Majors run out every ball. As with many things in the big leagues, it may okay to do it when you get there but you shouldn't do it when you're working to get there. Lead by example, run every ball out and run it out hard. It doesn't matter if it's a slow roller to the pitcher or a pop fly to the center fielder, get your legs going and hustle down the line.

- **Run Through First Base**

Once you've determined that the ball is going to be fielded by an infielder, focus on the front part of first base. As you hit the base, start breaking down. This gives the illusion to the umpire that you were at the bag sooner than if you breakdown after you pass the base. After you have crossed the base, slow down and look to your right to see if there was an errant throw.

- **Take A Turn**

If the ball is going to make it past the infield, get ready to round first base. Do this by moving off the line and into foul territory to set yourself up for the turn at first. Try to hit the inside corner of the bag. Be aggressive with your turn, put pressure on the outfield to field the ball cleanly and make a good throw. There's a fine line between being aggressive and being stupid. Put yourself in position to take advantage of any mistakes but don't get caught being too far off the base.

- **Coaching Advice**

Hustle is mandatory! As a team rule, every player must run hard on all hit balls. Make sure there is a penalty for breaking the rule (i.e. - Push Ups, Playing Time) and stick to it. Stand by the penalty, no exceptions.

Base Running: First To Second

- **Get Your Sign**

Once you have reached first base, your first priority is to look over to your third base coach for signs. There is nothing more frustrating for a coach than to try and give a sign and not have the player on base or at the plate looking at the same time. Get in the habit of looking to your coach for the sign right after each pitch.

- **Track Pitch Trajectory**

In Little League, we cannot lead off. So base runners need to track the trajectory of each pitch and be ready to advance on a low or wild pitch. The runner cannot leave the base until the ball reaches the batter, practice this in your base running, batting practice, situational or conditioning drills.

Each pitch should be timed with the intent to go on a ball that bounces in the dirt. Even if stopped by the catcher, most runners will be able to advance with the proper timing. This should be done at all bases.

You want your players to have the mentality that I am going unless the coach says "back".

Once players reach the level of our Minors (Age 9), base running needs to be a big part of your game and practice plan. I have been on the wrong end of too many scores because the other team played "small ball" better than we did. Bunting, contact and base running can put a lot of pressure on a defense.

- **Shuffle**

Once the pitcher has started his delivery, you want to take your secondary lead. The purpose of the secondary lead is to shorten the distance to second base and have some momentum going toward the base. To get to your secondary lead, you want to take 2-3 shuffle steps toward second base. The goal is to start the shuffle steps as the ball crosses the plate. If the ball is hit on the ground, you just crossover and continue to second base. If the catcher catches the ball, return to first base quickly watching for the throw from the catcher.

- **On Contact**

When the ball is hit, you quickly need to read the trajectory. If it's a ground ball, perform a crossover and run hard to second. If the ball is hit on the line, freeze and make sure it makes it past the infield before continuing on to second.

Base Running: Sliding

Don't assume because kids can slide that they know how to slide. That's like assuming a player can hit because he can swing a bat. The most important slide to teach is the bent leg slide. The biggest problem with the bent leg slide is that kids tend to slide on their side. The proper and less painful way to slide is on your butt. The second problem is that kids often want to put their hands down as they slide. This can lead to jammed fingers and wrists.

- **Bent Leg Slide**

A good way to teach a bent leg slide is to teach it the way you teach many skills, in steps.



1. Start by finding out which leg is going to be bent during the bent leg slide. With the player standing have him stand on one leg and bend the other leg at the knee, bringing it behind the other leg.
2. Have the player raise both hands over his head.
3. Have the player start to squat, while he keeps his bent leg up, then sit down. The player will naturally roll back on his back and his feet will come up in the air. Although this won't happen when he slides, it will during this stage. When he has rolled back to a seated position, he should still have their hands up and his front leg should be bent not straight.
4. Once comfortable with this, have him take a couple steps and slide (I always practice sliding on grass). Then have them jog and slide and finally run full speed and slide.

Checkpoints for each step:

- Hands should be above head not on the ground. Don't worry too much about how high the hands are. Keeping them above the head is used to avoid the natural reaction to put them on the ground.
- Player should be sliding on his butt, not side.
- Front leg should be bent to allow for give when sliding into the base.

For Little League players, the head first slide is not allowed for anything other than diving back to a base.

Practice sliding in grass and check the stains on your pants. If they are on the side of your leg, you're not sliding properly. Another common problem in sliding is putting your hand down during the slide. This is often the cause of jammed fingers, wrists, and sometimes shoulders. Get in the habit of sliding with your hands up. If you can remember to slide on your butt with your hands up, you will be sliding pain free from that point on.

Base Running - Stealing

- **First Steps**

There is no substitute for a good jump when stealing base, but many runners lose time with the first few steps they take toward second base.

- **Crossover Step**

The first move towards second should be a crossover step. Often a base runner will move their right foot first, picking it up and moving it an inch or two. All this does is take time and gets you no closer to second base. Whether stealing a base or playing defense, picking up and putting your lead foot back down will cost you time. It's a bad habit and one you need to break.

- **Stay Low And Use Your Arms**

Want to be more explosive towards second? Start with your arms. As you pick up your left foot to start your crossover, also use your arms to get your movement toward second started. Take your left hand and throw a punch toward second base. This will get your upper body twisted quickly toward second base and get you moving quickly. Stay low as you start, standing straight up will only slow you down.

- **If you hear the ball hit: Take A Glance**

In Little League, the runner cannot leave the base until it reaches the batter, so most runners who are attempting to steal will know if a ball is hit or fouled off as they are taking off in the steal attempt. However, many good base runners will be off on a straight steal with their head down. If a runner is attempting to steal and hears a ball has been hit, the runner should immediately find his Third Base Coach who will tell him "back" or "come on, three", "get down, slide" or "freeze" - as the coach points to a fly ball.

- **Slide**

The main thing to realize is that the quickest way to second base is a straight line and slide that is straight into the bag. Many players learn to hook slide in addition to a straight slide, in reality the only reason to use a hook slide is to avoid being tagged when you are sure to be out if you slide straight in. If you are sure you are going to be tagged out, you may find a straight slide to the back side of second base is your best chance to get in safe. This works best when the infielder covering the bag is not straddling the bag but is to the inside.

Base Running - First To Third

- **Make Sure The Ball Gets Through The Infield**

After you determine from first that the ball will land safely in the outfield or make it past the infield on the ground, you need to analyze your chance of making it to third base on the play. Start to flair out on your way to second to prepare yourself for the turn towards third.

- **Ball Hit To Center Or Left Field**

If the ball is hit from center to left field, you will have the play in front of you and it will be up to you to determine if you are going to attempt to make it to third or not. Remember, by making it to second, you are in scoring position. Do not take chances going to third if an average to good throw will get you out.

If you determine that you are going to try and make it, make sure you focus on hitting the inside part of the bag as you turn the corner. Once you have made it past second look up and pick up your third base coach. If you look over your shoulder trying to pick up the ball, you'll only slow yourself down. The third base coach will let you know whether to slide or go in standing.

- **Ball Hit To Right Or Right Center Field**

If the ball is hit from right center to right then you must rely on the third base coach to let you know whether to stay at second or go for third. This often happens after you have rounded second base! When you're about 3/4 of the way toward second, you should have already picked up the ball and the position of the outfielder and determined whether you will try for third on the play. Since you only get one chance to take a look, you will want to pick up the third base coach. He may be giving you a sign to stay on second, or to keep running, or he may not know at that point. If you get no sign before getting to second, you must use your determination from the picking up the ball. If it looks like it was hit hard and directly to the right fielder, you will want to go straight in to second base and pick up the right fielder or third base coach as you do so. If the ball was hit down the line or in the gap and you are anticipating trying for third, take an aggressive turn. You must pick up the third base coach immediately after touching second. He will be able to let you know whether to continue on or to stay at the bag. The big difference between scenarios is in the first, you plan on staying at second unless the coach lets you know otherwise; in the second scenario, you plan on going to third unless the coach signals you to stop.

- **Player Tip**

It's essential that you remember to pick up your third base coach once before touching second base and once immediately after touching second base.

Base Running: From Third to Home

- **Secondary Lead**

Get the signs from your coach while you are standing on the base. This is more critical than at any other base because your back is toward the pitcher. The biggest difference in taking your secondary lead from third base rather than from first base is your need to stay clear in foul territory. You don't want any question if you are hit by a batted ball, you are in foul territory and it is a foul ball, if you are in fair territory and hit with a batted ball, it is a dead ball and you are out.

The goal of the secondary lead is to get your momentum moving toward home plate to maximize your jump on a batted ball or a wild pitch. Make sure you don't move into fair territory when taking your secondary lead.

Strive to be leaving the base as the ball reaches the batter. Keep in mind that we want the mentality that we are going on a wild pitch unless the coach says back. Always watch the ball all the way from the pitcher's hand to the plate. The trajectory of the pitch will give you a good indication of what might happen.

Another important point when taking your secondary lead is to make sure you keep your hips and shoulders square to the field so you can easily continue towards home or get back to third quickly if necessary. A good catcher who sees the shoulders squared towards him will make a throw to third. This position therefore will not only cause the runner to be slower getting back to third, but will encourage more throws from the catcher.

- **Getting Back**

Once the ball has entered the hitting zone, it will either be hit, fouled off, get by the catcher, or be caught by the catcher. If the catcher catches the ball, have your weight on your right side. Push off your right foot and crossover back towards third base and fair territory.

Even though you took your lead in foul territory, you want to return to the bag in fair territory. The reason is if the catcher is going to attempt to pick you off, he has to throw the ball accurately to the inside of the bag. This makes it more difficult for the third baseman to make a quick tag and it may result in a bad throw that either hits you or ends up in left field. Whatever the end result, you have placed more pressure on the catcher by returning in fair territory.

Any ball hit in the air, you should start back towards third base. The general rule of freezing on a line drive doesn't apply at third. If it's a line drive that gets through the infield, you'll score easily even if you start back towards third. If it's a fly ball, then you need to return to third to tag up.

Many times in Little League games, you will see the runner at Third playing cat and mouse with the Catcher after a pitch has been caught. I really do not see too much to be gained in all of this, if the Catcher catches the ball and moves out in front of the plate, tell your runner to get back and let's keep the game moving along. If you think the Catcher is lobbing the ball back to the Pitcher and not paying enough attention to the runner at Third, have your runner time the throw and steal home but please stop all the back and forth - it kills the game.

- **Ground Ball**

Knowing when to run home on a ground ball with 0 or 1 outs is very difficult. The depth of the shortstop and second baseman will let you know if they are willing to give up a run for the out or not. If they are deep you should be able to score on any ground ball hit to them. Most third base coaches will let you know what to do depending on the situation, he may tell you to hold if it's hit to the pitcher or third baseman and run if it's hit anywhere else. Even if those instructions are given, you must still read the play and determine what you will do.

Base Running: Scoring on a Wild Pitch

It gets more difficult and happens less often as players get older, but in youth baseball a wild pitch or passed ball often presents a great opportunity to score a runner from third. In one game this year our 11-12 year old team won a game 5-4, scoring four of our five runs on passed balls, three of them with two outs. I watch many youth baseball games and I'm amazed at how many scoring opportunities are missed because players don't take an aggressive lead and aren't prepared for the ball to get away from the catcher.

It can be a difficult decision for a player to decide whether or not to try and score on a passed ball; that hesitation is often what takes away the opportunity. The first thing I try to do is take the pressure of making that decision away from the player. Our philosophy is that we're going on a passed ball until we see that we can't make it. The player is to look to score on every opportunity and as the third base coach I will help him in determining when NOT to go. Obviously there are situations where we are going to be more conservative, but I can handle those on a case by case basis from the third base box.

I try to get my players to expect a passed ball on every pitch. I find it's much easier to stop a player from going home than it is to get them started. Communication is essential from the third base coach and needs to happen on each pitch. Once a player gets to third base I remind them of the situation and I let them know how aggressive we're going to be in trying to get home on a passed ball.

In situations where I want to be really aggressive I remind them on each pitch to anticipate a passed ball and to be aggressive in taking their lead.

- **Pressure on the Coach**

Being aggressive on passed balls will put pressure on the third base coach in knowing when to have a player go home and when to stay. If you're not confident in making that decision then it may be tough for you. What I have found is that you will pick it up quicker than the kids because you're there every inning. No matter what player is on third you'll be learning when you can score and when it's better to stay. It takes practice and you'll probably have some kids thrown out at home, but you'll also score some much needed runs during the season.

At practice put a pitcher on the mound with a catcher behind the plate and runners at third. Take the third base coaching box as you would during the game. Instruct the pitcher to throw pitches and every couple of pitches, to throw one in the dirt. This is good practice for the catcher on trying to block the ball; the pitcher on covering home; the runner on being aggressive; and for you in making a decision on when to go. Run this drill at a couple of practices and you and your players will be more confident in these situations during a game.

- **What to Look For at the Field**

- ❖ Pay attention to how the ball comes off the backstop. Some backstops that have wood will bounce right back to the catcher and make it difficult to advance. Others will bounce to the sides or stop dead at the fence. Make a mental note as you see pitches get by the catcher for either team what happens when it hits the backstop. This will get you prepared for having a runner on third.
- ❖ On most of the fields we play on, the backstop is pretty close behind the Catcher. Look for balls that kick off the shin pads (player or umpire) and go towards the side or dugouts, these are the best to attempt to score on.
- ❖ Try to determine how quick the catcher is at getting the pitch that gets by him. Obviously a catcher that doesn't have much "spring" behind the plate will provide you with greater opportunities.
- ❖ Does the catcher like to snap throw to the bases in an attempt to pickoff a runner? If so, make sure your runner is aware and have him take a little shorter secondary and get back quickly.

- ❖ Pay attention to the pitcher, not only his control but his reaction after the ball is in play. Is he backing up bases? Does he run to cover first on a ball hit to the right side? Or does he simply stand and observe when the ball is in play? This will give you an indication if he will likely be quick to cover home or not before the situation arises.

- **What's the Situation?**

Of course the game situation will have much to do with how aggressive you're going to be on third base. With no outs and the heart of my lineup coming to the plate, I will be rather conservative because I'm counting on those hitters to drive in the runner. The last thing I want to do is give them an out at the plate and then watch my number three or four hitter drive one in the gap.

On the other side of it, if I have someone at the bottom of the lineup coming up with two outs, I may look for any opportunity to score the run and will be more aggressive than normal. Also keep in mind that if the runner is thrown out at home for the third out, the same weaker hitter will be leading off next inning. You have to consider the score of the game, the inning, how hot or cold the current batter is, and how fast the runner at third is in addition to the other items listed.

- **Older Players**

Older players must take more responsibility in determining when to go as being too aggressive on a ball handled by the catcher can lead to an easy out at third. For older players it's important for them to watch the trajectory of the pitch to look for opportunities. When they read the pitch as one that's going to hit the dirt, they can be more aggressive in taking a secondary lead and reading the opportunity. Here is a drill you can use to help develop that skill: Pitch Trajectory

- **Conclusion**

Good things can happen when you put pressure on the defense. If a pitcher is worried about a runner taking home on a passed ball or wild pitch then some of his focus is taken away from the batter. So even in situations where you can't score on a ball that gets by the catcher, the aggressive nature of your runners will provide a benefit to the hitter. In addition you'll simply score more runs by learning when to take advantage of opportunities when they are presented. There is no substitute for practice and by the end of a season you'll see how confident you and your players will become at being smart and aggressive base runners.