

Infield: Approach

Ready Positions

When you get in the ready position, you need to be ready to field a hot line drive AND ready to move. Many players forget the second part (ready to move). They crouch down with their feet very wide, their gloves almost on the ground, and their palms facing the hitter. When the ball comes, these players probably look like they're holding a skillet rather than a glove.

Just as a hitter needs to stay relaxed to be quick, the same also applies to an infielder. The ready position described above creates a couple of problems for the fielder.

1. It's not very comfortable to be that low, which can cause tension, not only in the legs, but in the arms and hands as well.
2. It's not the best position to be ready to move. You're certainly not going to stay that low as you go after a hard ground ball hit 15 feet to your right.

The ready position is an athletic position that allows you to move quickly in any direction.

- Bend your knees and back comfortably
- Place your feet a little wider than shoulder width apart
- Put your weight on the inside balls of your feet so you can push off in either direction easily
- Place your arms out in front of your body but comfortable and not too far away
- Extend your hands naturally; while you don't want the back of your glove facing the pitcher, you also don't need to have it completely open and facing the hitter.

Pre-Pitch Routine

Most players devise a pre-pitch routine that puts them in the ready position as the ball crosses the plate. This may be a shuffle of the feet or a little hop. Whatever method you use, make sure you're balanced, comfortable, and ready to move. Get your momentum moving forward. Don't sit back on your heels. You want to be aggressive and play the ball rather than have the ball play you. This can only be done if you're moving forward and ready.

I like the following Pre-Pitch Routine:

As the pitcher delivers the ball to the plate, all infielders (and even outfielders) are instructed to do the following:

- Take a Small Step with the Right Foot followed by a Small Step with the Left Foot (left should be slightly ahead of the right now).
- Hands are out front and weight is on the balls of the feet in an athletic position (knees bent, ready to move in any direction).
- For advanced players, you can even add a little "Alligator Hop" to get the player ready to move.

Verbally: "Ready Positions on every pitch" or "Right - Left, Alligator"

Fielding Ground Balls

Ground Ball Hit At You



Unless the ball is absolutely ripped at you and you don't have time, get in the habit of moving toward the grounder as you prepare to field it. Notice the word 'charge' wasn't used -- that word implies running towards it as fast as you can.

Unless it's a slow roller, you want to approach the ball in a controlled manner that is aggressive but not out of control. This allows you to make adjustments so you're not catching it off a short hop or taking it off the first bounce on the infield dirt.

As you get closer to the ball, begin breaking down to get into position to field the ball. To do this, shorten your steps and widen your feet. Bend not only at the knees but also with your back.

Put your hands out in front of your body and open your glove toward the ball with your bare hand on top.

Catching The Ground Ball

There are a few common problems that players make when catching a ground ball.

1. Not catching the ball out in front.
By doing this, you cannot watch the ball all the way into your glove; most likely you are bending either with your knees or back but not both.

When you catch the ball under you, you lose the ability to give with your hands. You want 'soft hands', a term used to describe a fielder who catches the ball out front of his body and seems to suck up the ball from that position into a position to throw. With soft hands, you can make last second adjustments to a bounce that was different than expected.

2. Poorly Positioned Hands
Your glove must be in a good position to field the ball: open and close to vertical. This gives you the most area to catch the ball.

Backhand

The backhand play is one of the most difficult to make. Poor technique and lack of practice are two of the biggest reasons why players struggle with the backhand play.

As you approach the ball you will either field it with your left foot forward or right foot forward depending on when you get to it. Many players will practice fielding a backhand only one way, but the fact is you will have to make the play both ways so make sure you practice both ways of fielding a backhand. Either way you want to make sure you keep your glove in front of your face. You want to watch the ball all the way into the glove.

Playing First Base

Defensive Position

You want to play deep enough that you can cover as much ground as possible, while being shallow enough to make it to first base prior to a throw being made from a position player. It would be difficult for a shortstop for example to have to make a throw to first base if you are still running there while he is delivering the ball. You need to get in position to give the position player a target to throw to.

Even though we want to be able to depend on the pitcher to cover first base on a ball you field to your right, we don't want to have to depend on him for every ball hit your way. Young pitchers will often forget to cover the base. Make sure you are shallow enough that you can catch the routine ground ball and tag the base yourself.

Receiving The Throw

When catching the ball from infielders, you need to get to the bag as quickly as possible. Once there, turn and face the direction the ball is coming from. Make sure you do not stand on the bag in a position that doesn't allow the runner room to run by. Place your throwing hand foot on the edge of the base. Make sure you are in an athletic stance ready to move (don't assume the ball will be thrown right to you). You shouldn't stretch for the baseball until it is well on the way.

The image below shows a first baseman waiting for a throw from second and from third. No stretch will be made until the ball is on the way.



Player Tip:

Two common mistakes are made by many players:

1. Stretching towards the ball too soon.

This puts you in a position of no return. Say for example a throw is made directly at you. You stretch out to catch the ball and realize that the ball is going to hit the dirt and it's not going to be an easy short hop. You are stuck. There is no adjustment that you can make other than trying to knock it down the best you can. If you would have waited, you would have options on how to field the ball.

2. Trying to stretch as far as you can on every play.

On a close play, stretching for the ball can be the difference between out and safe. On balls thrown off target it is necessary in order to keep your foot on the base. On plays that aren't close and the ball is thrown at you, stretching out only adds a level of difficulty that's not necessary to get the runner out.

Example: Ball Coming From The Shortstop

If the shortstop throws the ball directly at you or to your glove hand side, step out with your left foot (for a right-handed first baseman) in the direction of where you want to catch the ball. So, if the ball was thrown a few feet on the home plate side of first, you may need to step towards home (not directly down the line) to make the catch.

On a ball thrown to your throwing hand side, step across your body and catch the ball backhanded.

The image to the below shows an example of stepping towards each type of ball described.



Coaching Advice

Work on balls being thrown to the side of the first baseman. Make sure he does not step in the baseline on either side of the bag. It's a sure way for the runner to end up colliding with him. It's a dangerous situation for both players, so make sure all your first basemen know where to step to receive the ball.

Pulled Off The Bag

Sometimes the throw is so off line that the first baseman must leave first base to catch the ball. Many times just catching the ball will be difficult enough, but in some cases the first baseman may still be able to make the play.

Pulled Off Towards Home



If you're pulled off the base towards home, you may be able to catch the ball and make the tag on the runner as he goes by. When making this play remember the following:

- Don't get in the base line.
- As you catch the ball, place your throwing hand in your glove over the ball to secure it before making the tag.
- Try to tag the runner in the hip area as he goes by.

Balls In The Dirt

It would be great if you always received the ball chest high from the other fielders on a throw to first. Unfortunately there are many times when the ball hits the dirt before it hits your glove. As a first baseman, this play has the greatest impact on how coaches, teammates, and fans judge your defensive ability. While you won't have an error under your name if you can't come up with the ball in the dirt, it still reflects on your ability. Although you won't field all these "dirt" balls cleanly, it is a skill you should master to the best of your ability.

The Short Hop



When fielding a throw that is going to hit the ground, you will be forced to make the best of a difficult play.

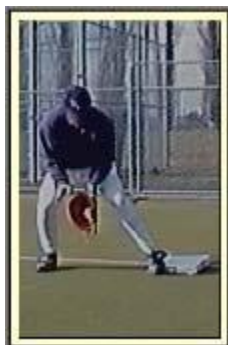
When fielding a ground ball you can move up or back to keep from fielding the ball on a short hop. When fielding a thrown ball you are limited in your ability to move since you are trying to keep your foot on the base.

As the ball comes toward you, quickly determine where it will hit the dirt. If you cannot stretch out far enough to catch it in the air, stretch out toward the ball or stride out at an angle that puts your glove in a position to catch the ball just after it hits the ground. The closer you can get to catching the ball as it hits the ground, the easier it will be to catch.

As the ball hits the dirt, move your glove forward and at a downward angle toward the ball. This allows you to catch the ball right after it hits the ground and most importantly keep it in your glove. When catching the ball in this manner, you don't want to stretch out and then have your glove give or have it angled up. This most likely will result in the ball bouncing off your glove.



If you cannot stretch out in order to catch the ball on a short hop, then modify your approach. Instead of stretching out and trying to catch the ball just after it hits the ground, you will want to stay close to the base. This will give you extra space after the ball has bounced before you have to catch it. In this case footwork is very important. You want to put yourself in a good position to field the ball and at least knock it down. Try to position your body in front of the throw. You are going to act like you are fielding a ground ball, with the difference being your foot is on the bag. The image above shows an example of fielding this type of throw.



If you're a right-handed first baseman and the ball is thrown to the outfield side of first base, you may want to switch your feet, placing your left foot on bag. This will allow you to get in front of the ball thrown to the outside. The same footwork is required for a left-handed first baseman catching the ball on the home plate side of first.

Playing Second Base

No Runners On Base

Since the throw from the second base position is fairly short, you will be able to play fairly deep with no runners on base. Make sure you are not so deep that you have to hurry on a routine ground ball in order to make the out, or you can't get to first on time if the first baseman has to field a bunt.

Runner On First

With a runner on first you will want to take a few steps in toward home plate and a couple of steps toward second base. This will put you in position to cover second on a double play, force out, or steal attempt if you are covering on the play.

Covering Second on a Steal Attempt

Normally the second baseman will cover second on a steal attempt with a right-handed batter at the plate and the shortstop will cover second when a left-handed batter is up. Try to position yourself so you can still cover your area, but not so far away from second that you have to sprint to second to get there ahead of the runner.

Because in Little League the runner cannot leave the base until the ball reaches the batter, the SS can normally cover second base on steals - this is the way most will cover on a steal.

The Second Baseman will usually sprint to the outfield grass behind second base to back up a bad throw.

Double Plays

When the ball is hit in your direction and you believe you have a chance to turn a double play, make sure you don't rush. While a double play can be a savior for your pitcher and your team, you must make sure you at least get the lead runner. An error that results in no outs and possibly a runner on third can lead to a big inning for the opposing team. Concentrate on fielding the ball cleanly and making a good throw to the shortstop. If you can do this quickly but under control then you have given your team at least one out and the opportunity to get two.

Most important part about turning a double play.... get the first out.

Ball Hit Directly At You

When the ball is hit at you, you will want field the ball with your right foot slightly behind your left. This will allow you to easily pivot and throw because your hips will already be slightly open.

Once you have fielded the ball cleanly, you have two options for delivering the ball to the shortstop:

- With the first option, you will rotate your hips open toward second base as you bring the ball up from your glove. Your right foot will drop back to allow you to rotate farther and get more on the ball. Many players will move both feet at the same time to quickly open up and deliver the ball.
- The other option is rotate your hips open toward second, dropping your left knee to the ground in the direction of second and throwing from your knee. Younger players may find that they are more accurate using this method. It will probably take you longer to deliver the ball using this method, but if you can make a more accurate throw to the shortstop then it's worth the extra time.

Coaching Advice

Younger players may have difficulty with both methods, so it may be necessary for them to shuffle their feet in order to make this throw accurately. Make sure that you emphasize the importance of making a good throw and getting the out at second.

Ball Hit To Your Right

On this play you will normally be close enough to underhand the ball to the shortstop. Since you are going to your right, you should naturally be in a position where your right foot is slightly behind your left. This is the position you want to be in. Once you have fielded the ball, you will pivot on your right foot, clear your glove (this will give the shortstop a clear view of the ball), and deliver the ball. When tossing the ball underhanded you want to keep your wrist stiff, your arm motion will provide the power behind the toss. As your arm makes the underhand throwing motion, you will want to follow your throw with your left leg. This will help you deliver an accurate throw to second.

With both of the plays described above, it's important to remember that they should look seamless. Which in these cases means they should be performed from the crouching position. You don't want to catch the ball, stand up, and then rotate and underhand it. Simply field the ball, rotate from that position and deliver the ball.

Ball Hit To Your Left

On this play, you want to judge if you will have a play at second base on the lead runner, this will usually depend on how far and how hard the ball is hit.

When a Second Baseman fields the ball going to his left, the player should turn his back to home plate, plant the right foot and throw to second base with a strong overhand throw.



Coaching Advise

In most situations (ball hit at you or to your left), if the ball is bobbled, go ahead and just pick it up and get the out at First Base.

If the ball is hit to your right and you bobble the ball, stay with it and make a short underhand toss to second to get the lead runner out.

Playing Third Base

Reflexes

As a third baseman, you won't need the quickness of a shortstop or a second baseman, but still must have quick reflexes. The ball often is hit very hard toward third base and the lack of distance doesn't give you much time to react. In addition to quick reflexes, you need lots of courage and toughness. When a hard hit ball comes to third, you often only has time to knock the ball down... with your body.

Ready Position

Since the ball can be on top of you so quickly, it's important to position yourself a little lower to the ground than the shortstop or second baseman needs to. You must have your glove lower as well. Be ready for the hot shot hit right at your feet. Remember it's easier and quicker to bring your glove up than it is to drop it down.



Movement

Fielders at other positions often have the time to round the ball and play it in front of them. For the most part, the third baseman doesn't have this luxury. At third base you must be able to cross over quickly and get to the ball hit to either side. Work very hard on your lateral movement and fielding ground balls, both backhanded and to your glove hand side.

Backhand Play



The backhand play down the third base line is one of the most difficult plays in baseball to make. Even if you just manage to knock the ball down, you certainly can turn a double into a single. When making a backhanded play a ball hit to your right, make sure you keep your glove in front of your face. Watch the ball all the way into the glove and try and catch it in the webbing. On a backhand, if the ball hits the palm of your glove, it can pop out since you don't have the benefit of using your throwing hand while fielding.

You can field the ball with your left foot in front, your right foot in front, or while diving. No matter how you field the ball, position yourself to make a good throw after the play. Once you have caught the ball take a step or two to slow yourself down and then plant your right foot. Once you have planted, take a shuffle step toward first and make a strong throw. Make sure you throw the ball overhand with good 12-6 rotation. Throwing the ball sidearm causes the ball to tail and can make it difficult for the first baseman to catch it.

Slow Roller

Whether a bunted ball or chopped ball on a full swing, the slow roller is one of the most difficult defensive plays in baseball. This ball can be fielded one handed or two handed, as determined by the speed of the ball and the speed of the runner. No matter how you end up fielding the ball, charge the ball hard and then break down with short steps for proper timing, prior to fielding the ball.

If you have time, the surest way to field the ball is two handed. The next best method of fielding the ball is catching it on your glove hand side while running. You should time it to catch the ball with your left foot planted and your glove out in front. Once you have fielded the ball, quickly transfer the ball and make a throw to first. The final method of fielding the slow roller is to use your bare hand. It's essential that you watch the ball all the way into your hand. Don't pick up your head prior to fielding the ball and leave the ball on the ground.

No matter how you field the ball, make sure you are balanced. Without balance, it is difficult not only to make the catch, but to make the difficult throw to first. Practice fielding the slow roller using all the methods described above. It's a difficult play and as a third baseman, it's one you have many opportunities to make over the course of a season.

Playing Shortstop

The shortstop position is one of the most important positions on the field. Many balls are hit in the direction of the shortstop and that player is normally the best defensive player on the field. He must have good range, a good glove, and a strong arm. This combination of skills and athletic ability are a tough combination to achieve. For a shortstop to continue playing that position as he gets older, he must possess a desire to continually improve his fielding and his arm. This section focuses on some plays specific to playing shortstop.

Position

Where you position yourself will depend on a number of factors. The basic shortstop position is one in which you are close enough to field an average ground ball to your left and right and still have time to throw out an above average runner at first.

Arm strength is the primary consideration for determining depth. From there you will need to adjust your position depending on the speed of the hitter and whether or not you will need to cover second (double play; steal attempt).

If a faster player comes up to bat, move in to compensate. It does no good to field a ground ball if you can't throw the runner out.

Coaching Advice

Don't position yourself so deep that you have to make a perfect play in order to get an out. Sometimes a clean transfer of the ball from your glove to your throwing hand doesn't happen. You don't want that to cost you an out. A good way to check yourself is to track how close the play is at first base. If you are barely throwing out a runner on a routine ground ball, you are probably playing too deep.

Covering Second on a Steal Attempt



Normally the second baseman will cover second on a steal attempt with a right-handed batter at the plate and the shortstop will cover second when a left-handed batter is up (Normally in Little League, the SS will cover the base on all throws and Second Baseman will back up the play).

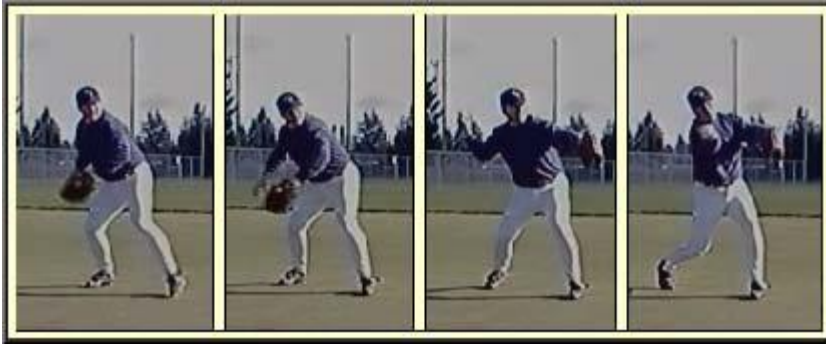
Try to position yourself so you can still cover your area, but not so far away from second that you have to sprint to second to get there ahead of the runner.

I coach my players to position themselves in front of the bag so they can catch the ball earlier, field short hops better and stay out of the way of a stealing runner.

The SS will then catch and sweep the tag or slam the tag down in front of the bag.

Double Play - Delivering the Ball

When you are starting a double play, you want to get the ball to the second baseman quickly and accurately. You should be aiming to put the ball on his glove hand side at chest level. This will allow the second baseman to start his momentum moving toward first as the ball is coming. Make sure you don't try to lead him off the base, your throw should be in line with the inside of the bag.



Quickly delivering the ball to second shouldn't be mistaken with rushing. You want to make sure you get that out at second. We've seen, at all levels, the fielder that makes a fielding error or a throwing error because he was in such a rush to get the ball to the second baseman. Make sure you field the ball first, then throw. The image above shows a throw being made from the shortstop. This throw is being made from the "shirt sleeve". This is a short throwing motion that allows the player to quickly deliver the ball a short distance.

Ball Hit At You

On any ball hit directly at you or to your right that you can get in front of, catch the ball as you normally would and instead of moving your feet and body like you do when you're throwing to first, you will want to throw from the fielding position. As you bring the ball up, step slightly toward second with your left foot and use a small arm motion to deliver the ball to second.

Ball Hit To Your Right

On a ball hit to your right that you have to field backhand, you will want to plant your right leg after you make the catch and make a strong accurate throw to second. You may be tempted to jump and throw in one motion after catching the ball, but for most players the arm strength and accuracy aren't there to make this play. It will be quicker and you'll have a better chance if you plant and make a good hard throw to second.

Ball Hit To Your Left

On a ball hit to your left that you can get in front of, you will want to deliver the ball underhanded to the second baseman. As you field the ball out in front of you, turn your hips and clear as quickly as you can your glove hand to the left of your body. This will allow the second baseman to clearly see the ball as it's being delivered. As you underhand the ball step with your right foot in the direction of second base. This will help you follow through as you deliver the ball.



Sometimes you will field the ball behind second and won't be able to get in front of it. Fielding the ball off your left side will put you in a position that makes it difficult to underhand the ball. In this case you will need to make a backhand toss to the second baseman. This is a difficult skill and must be practiced over and over again to become good at. With the backhand toss you will turn your thumb towards the ground and with your elbow, toss the ball across your body.

Coaching Advise

The SS is playing short stop for a reason, he is one of your better players.

If the ball is hit to his left and he is moving when he fields the ball, instruct him to take it to second base himself, touch the bag and make a strong throw to first for the double play.

The SS should verbalize "I got it" so the second baseman knows to get out of the way.

The SS should take it himself when running toward second and fielding the ball, not if he has to stop his feet to field the ball - then we want an underhand flip or toss to the second baseman.