

## **COACHING 1<sup>ST</sup> BASE**

*Prepared by Dick Anthony*

### Notes:

1. To avoid doubts, some terms have their meanings explained in brackets
2. If any terms, jargon, or statements are not understood I welcome your contacting and discussing it with the author.

The role of a 1<sup>st</sup> base coach is to get the runner safely to 1<sup>st</sup>, then to get her safely on her way into the hands of the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach. You must also accept that at 1<sup>st</sup> you are now primarily not the batting coach, pitching coach, or spectator. No matter what other responsibilities you may have, taking over duties at 1<sup>st</sup> requires full time concentration on coaching runners coming to and beyond, 1<sup>st</sup> base.

Just as you ask of players to improve their playing skills, you too share responsibility in improving your own skills in coaching 1<sup>st</sup> base. How often we say to youngsters “always expect the ball will come to you on every pitch, and know what to do with it before you get it!” Isn’t it fair to shift similar responsibility to you as a coach if we replace the word “ball” with “batter”?

Naturally some of the following points may not apply to the level or age of your team but it is an attempt to offer tips that a newly recruited 1st base coach may not presently know. For the more experienced, hopefully it is an opportunity for them to contribute further to this important topic. Also, for the sake of brevity, the details of skill techniques referred to as important to monitor are not fully explained in this summary type document.

### **Before the game**

Check base anchorages, Check the type of rebound the backstop has. After pregame raking of the infield it has only been smoothed,, not repaired. Check the quality of footing in the safety lane, and the “cut,” “braking,” and “leadoff” areas.

Be aware of the sun’s height and location, and the wind direction and velocity as it may effect your decision making.

If you also hit balls in pregame to the outfielders check out the grass length and

wetness effect on rolling balls. Ask your outfield what they know about the bounces of balls off the fence. If they can't tell you, remind them of that duty. If possible check the opposition outfielders and infielders during pregame practice. Note their individual aggressiveness, "jumps", quickness, fielding "range", and arm strengths/accuracies, abilities, how they handle ground and fly balls. Most importantly have a sound knowledge of the baserunning speeds, strengths and weaknesses both physical and mental ("game sense") of each of your own players.

## **In all Situations**

Always be certain that the "on deck" batter is aware of their duties at the plate with runner(s) on base. Also, keep the "bench" "in the game".

Monitor the on deck batter's behaviours on each pitch. Is she practicing hitting all the zones, or just an unlikely ball in the middle of at stikezone? Is her "timing", etc., acceptable?

## **No Runners on 1<sup>st</sup> Base**

Know the inning, run difference, outs, home team, and the batting "count" on the batter so that you are prepared to alter your coaching style to more or less aggressive according to the run difference, inning, home team, batting order, field conditions, and the defense abilities. If you are unsure, communicate with you 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach.

Know the sign from 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach. Give a "repeat" sign if unsure.

Know the speed of the batter, and always expect the batter will come to you on the very next pitch, and you have a strategy ready.

Position yourself at, or beyond 1<sup>st</sup> base.

During this time, make mental notes of the usual prepitch idiosyncratic and routine movements of the C, 1B, & 2B (see reason later).

## **Groundball Contacts**

Use consistent, clearly defined, and agreed upon commands for your visual and verbal commands. If you share coaching 1<sup>st</sup> base this is very important that you agree on the verbal and visual signs. Some suggested visuals and vocals are:

Right arm extended with fully open palm pointing to 2nd means *Make your “turn”! (to 2<sup>nd</sup>)”, and “pick up” the ball! (visually find its location).*

Windmilling wave toward 2nd means *Make your “turn” and “go!” (for “2”, “3”, or “all the way”).*

Point directly at the 1st base means *“Accelerate” through 1<sup>st</sup> and retreat “back!” to 1st.*

Check that runners form the habit of “picking up” the ball’s location after leaving batter’s box. This is easily done by the batter on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> landing of her left foot. Immediately as the left foot is about to land she turns her head to see the location and outcome of her contact. (The head is easily turned because the subsequent right foot stride will open up the left side of the runner).

Give vigorous verbal encouragement to runner to maintain full acceleration through 1st.

Watch for indications of how the runners; times to 1<sup>st</sup> can be bettered.

Watch for any break in stride length reaching 1<sup>st</sup>. Lunging can cause injury, besides being slower. If her timing is off, work on having her lengthen her stride and/or improve her quickness on her first 3 or 4 steps out of the box.

Encourage fully pumping the arms.

If the runner is to accelerate “through” 1<sup>st</sup>, note their route direction through 1<sup>st</sup> base, her breakdown, and how she retreats back to 1st. On passing 1<sup>st</sup> runners should have a quick breakdown, (approx. 1 ½ body lengths) followed by a quick left turn rotation of the body on the chalk line, “picking up the ball location as she retreats back to 1<sup>st</sup>. Never allow a turn into the foul area if the play is to 1st base. And at all times keep her in the game mentally!

### **Balls to Outfield**

On sure base hit, check that runner shows an early arcing action, and tight rounding turn. (As the left foot lads against the front left corner of 1<sup>st</sup> base the left shoulder dips toward the pitcher’s circle, and the navel turns to “fire facing 2<sup>nd</sup>”).

Give visual sign for *round and brake!*, and *round and go!*

On rounding, give verbal for ball location if in left centre or left. Check that on balls to centre and right side of field the hitter visually “pick up” the ball for themselves.

On *round and brake* check lead of your runners’ distance, stance, and positioning from base. In any outfield contact aggressively get your runners to get off 1<sup>st</sup> approaching 2<sup>nd</sup> to a maximum lead distance which allows them to retreat back safely if a play is made on them, or reach 2<sup>nd</sup> base safely if an error or misplay occurs.

Watch for, and correct runners who run looking into ground. Remind them that “There are no holes in the infield!”

On heading for 2<sup>nd</sup> base the runner must “pick up” the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach for a sign **before** they are  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their way to 2d.

(Know that if the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach has taken a position down the line toward homeplate, it may be a disguised movement that is not recognized by the defense as a “windmill“ movement to for the runner to not break step but continue on 3<sup>rd</sup>).

If a ball is “live”, and the runner is not in the act of running, they must always be in an “athletic stance” position, keeping a low centre of gravity, with feet wider than shoulder width apart, ready to explode in any direction.

In all live ball situations, when no play is being made on your runner and they are routinely returning to 1<sup>st</sup>, do not allow her to turn their eyes from the ball until the ball is actually secured by the pitcher in the pitching circle.

### **Runner on 1<sup>st</sup>**

Make certain her “leadoff” the base is “on time” with pitcher’s release, and that both her feet contact the ground in an athletic position when the ball enters the strikezone. Be aware that more than 3 aggressive strides off 1<sup>st</sup> base is an invitation for a quick, strong am catcher to “pickoff” the runner.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> step the runner should have 2 feet down in athletic positioning looking at the strike zone ready to “go” or “retreat explosively.

Check it every pitch until you can be confident the runner will be off “on time”. Practicing lead off time should be performed only with actual pitchers .

### **Other Duties and Strategies**

Remind runners the number of “outs”, situational running role, tips re field footing conditions, catcher’s tendencies. If there is a slower advance runner on base, caution your runner about how that can influence her own baserunning aggressiveness.

If your runner represents a critical run instruct her if she should be aggressive, or when in certain situations it is necessary to simply prolong her life (remain alive) on the base paths,... for a later hitter or runner to tie or win it. In other words, if your run can't win it, don't take high risk chances and lessen the chances of later runners ever getting to the plate.

Be certain you communicate with the runner and check her understanding of her strategic role.

Obviously this could constantly change during a game.

If you are in doubt regarding strategic principles, discuss strategies with your manager before the game or inning gets under way.

Always advise runner(s) if the count is a “running” count. Does she “go” on pitcher’s release, batter’s contact, or “wait and see”? With a poor fielding catcher does your runner automatically “go” on any pitch thrown in the dirt, without your prompting? Advise your runners of the catcher’s ability.

Advise runner when infield fly rule is in effect, and state to runner her expected behaviour. In “infield fly” situations the front runner’s actions is one key to her decision to advance or not.

Monitor timing of leadoff, distance, and technique of runner leading off 1<sup>st</sup>, and her steals of 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Confirm she takes a lead safely matching the catcher’s ability and the 1<sup>st</sup> baseplayer’s depth. Remind her that you will watch the 2<sup>nd</sup> base player. Check your runner positions her lead a few feet to the outfield side of the base line (not *on* baseline). (This narrows the 2<sup>nd</sup> base player’s path back to 1<sup>st</sup> base).

On a batted ball to 2B your runner should never just “give up an out” to her in situations where she is a likely a certain out. She should prolong the “out” on herself so that the batter doesn’t become the 2<sup>nd</sup> out of an easy DP.

In a sacrifice situation give verbal instructions to your runner to go or hold on bunts that may not be clearly visible to her.

On all foul flyballs always give a quick verbal “*tag up!*” until they get the habit. (*If they don't get the habit, they will be too late tagging up in situations where they actually can tag and go*).

On low linedrives, hold the runner. (better, pre inform all players) that you don't “go” (from a safe lead distance) until you see the ball go “through” the infield.

In counts favoring the pitcher, (i.e., pitcher can afford to pitchout), when the catcher sits, watch if 2B or 1B player repositions. (It may be a signal for a *play* being put on?). Sometimes it's easier to notice the acknowledgement sign than the actual initiating sign being flashed.

In checking 2<sup>nd</sup> base players, watch them up to the time the pitcher is releasing. This will still allow you time to see the ball enter the zone.

Notice if the catcher or 2<sup>nd</sup> base do a different, uncharacteristic pre ready/setup move (is a sign putting a *play* on, or is a sign acknowledging one has been signaled?).

Watch where and how 1B or 2B base player covers 1<sup>st</sup> on pickoffs. What part of the base does their leg favor taking away from your runners? Some change their methods so as to set up their best positioning in crucial pickoff tag.

Watch where and how your runner retreats back to 1<sup>st</sup> on pickoffs.

Watch where and how 2B base covers 1<sup>st</sup> base and the shortstop covers 2<sup>nd</sup> base.

Watch which side of 2<sup>nd</sup> base the catcher's throw to 2<sup>nd</sup> favours. Remind your runners of those technique differences.

Alert your runner if a present hitter has a tendency to pull hit through the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> area.

Check with 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach which of you, and in which situations, will help the 2<sup>nd</sup> base runner get her proper lead with timing, distance, verbal assistance on 2B, SS, CF getting behind her from her blind sides. It is common that the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach consistently accepts that responsibility, and nearly as common they don't always. Also, in your 1<sup>st</sup> base position your angle of vision relative to the ball trajectory of flares (low weak flyballs) to centre and right centre field is better positioned, and thus better for you to verbally assist the 2<sup>nd</sup> base runner's decisions.

Make it a habit to constantly “scan” the outfield during a game to check lateral and depth positioning of the fielders.

On foul balls give the umpire’s visual stop sign to your oncoming runner.

Advise the runner whenever you have noticed that the opposition does not have a "cutoff" taking her position on a consistent basis. Give verbal assistance to your runner as she reads a throw through the infield to the plate. Better that she does this on her own, but know who are not that perceptive or decisive.

Be proactive in noting any mental defensive lapses by all opposition players.

If a preceding runner is trapped in a rundown, you have to assume that she will be put out, since a rundown statistically favours it will be an “out”. Don’t be a spectator. Immediately get *your* runner at the very least to the base first vacated by the trapped runner. Explain to the team the decisions to make as they near that base whether to continue or retreat a base.

On any foulball which involves the 1B, be quickly and observably active in avoiding an interference call made on you. Don’t give the player an opportunity to intentionally get a “call”.

Any long instructions regarding frequently poorly executed baserunning techniques or lack of understandings should be discussed one on one with the runner after the game, or latest, at the next practice or pre game. Or, if urgent to the game in progress, at latest between innings. Consider some instances might require the whole team being included.

When your players are running, check and insist they exhibit sound linear running mechanics and efficient base turning mechanics.

Check that the On Deck Batter is ready and out of the dugout on time, and doesn’t misuse her time talking with the bench players, or just spectating.

Check that she verbally and visually assists runners coming home. Proactively remind the OD hitters of that role.

And of course there are the other time honoured things to remember such as never allowing a runner to be the 1<sup>st</sup> out at 3<sup>rd</sup> base. Cautioning your runners not to go on linedrives through the infield until the ball is seen as going through. Reminding them to always “pick up” their 3<sup>rd</sup> base coach early without breaking stride. Checking the shoelaces. Checking that they touch the

base as they round (if on a game winning, out of the park homerun, call them back to retouch). And the list can go on as far as your research and imagination.

Coaching a base includes constant reminding, reinforcing, and teaching. To balance what may seem by runners as sometimes tiresome mentoring, it is vitaly important at every opportunity to congratulate your runners. Praise the solid hit, working hard in getting a walk, having good acceleration through 1<sup>st</sup>, showing a good breakdown, a quality baserunning behavior from a previous time after they left your care,...to name a few. And reinforce the praise when in the dugout, as that provides you a teaching opportunity to stress to the other bench people the importance of the skill the runner had demonstrated.

There are many other on field duties a 1<sup>st</sup> base coach might have to assume if the team is short of coaching staff. Naturally some of the above duties may be shared as responsibilities among the bench coaching staff. Always check with your manager how you will perform those duties.

An excellent time to test practice your base coaching duties is during live batting practice which has players running the bases. It puts you in the coaching box anticipating and reacting to actual game like situations. It also provides you the opportunity to enhance your runners' baserunning skills, as well as correct their mistakes before they may repeat them in a later game.

Another suggestion has merit. Pass this handout (or a copy edited appropriate to the to age level) to your players. It will reinforce for them what you expect of them, and what they can expect of you. Stress that idea as a two way street, and encourage their ongoing input.

Naturally this outline is a list of suggestions. Player age, maturity, and level of play influence how much of it will be of use, as well as the reader's own experience. I therefore welcome receiving any edits, deletions, or additions.

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