

BASERUNNING 101



Base-running changes ballgames. It is one of the aspects of baseball that is most neglected by coaches. Good, crisp, aggressive base-running can be devastating to the defensive team, creating errors on routine plays and a psychological advantage for the offensive team.

Base-running is a skill that shouldn't be confused with foot-speed. Often, faster players run themselves into outs if their judgment and discipline aren't sharp. You've got to have a "next-base" mentality, and that mind-set must be grounded in good judgment and discipline. That means you must practice situational base-running with game-like intensity. No lollygagging.

Players who know the game and situation should be their own coach on the base paths as long as they can see the baseball. When you lose sight of the ball, then you trust your coach's eyes and judgment. You must know the situation -- how many are out, the score, speed of the lead runner, defensive positioning, the strength of fielders' arms. You must know when to be aggressive and when to play it safe. Getting to first base is a good beginning, but touching home plate is what changes the scoreboard.

HOME TO FIRST

Base-running begins in the batter's box. Good balance at your swing's finish adds points to your average because you get to first quicker. Do not watch your hits. Move! Run *through* the bag, not to it. As you are making your final stride, take your head forward so it's directly above the foot that hits the bag. A forward-

leaning helmet often gets you a safe call on a bang-bang play at first.

Look over your right shoulder after crossing first base to see if the ball has gotten away from the first baseman. Make a decision whether to go to second. Don't let your coach make that decision! By the time he does, it's too late. Don't worry about running to first base on the foul side of the line. That just slows you down. Get there!

Run everything out hard! Hustle causes errors. You send a message to your team by hustling. On a high pop-up, think second base! The distraction of hard-running creates havoc for fielders.

ROUNDING FIRST

The base coach should point to second base when the ball goes through to the outfield. This means round first *aggressively*. Round it sharply, hitting the inside corner of the bag. It's a "next-base" mentality! Good teams have it. When the ball goes through to left field you can round first wider to gain a better angle to read whether the throw to second is on line. You can be a lot more aggressive on balls to left field, a little less on balls to right field. Rounding first aggressively with the intention of taking second can hurry an outfielder and cause a bobble or a total whiff out there.

ROUNDING SECOND & THIRD

When rounding second take a wide angle into the base to make the turn tighter. You want to be almost on a direct-line course to third after hitting the bag. If you've lost sight of the ball, pick up your third-base coach as you near second base.

When rounding third, your coach will be down the line, almost halfway to home, to allow him an extra half-second to decide to send or stop you. Realize that *coaches are there to stop you*, not send you. You ought to be thinking "next base" until you see the coach's stop sign.

TAGGING UP

Tag up with your back foot toes touching the base, heel raised, cleats dug in the ground. Wait for the ball to touch the fielder's glove. Simple? It cost Nova Scotia the tying run against us at

the Nationals in 2000. The kid got too excited and bolted a moment too early. We appealed the play and got the call. Wait for the ball to touch glove or ground, then go hard, and slide.

With less than two outs you're tagging at third on a fly ball. You should stay put on a line drive as well. If the line-drive goes through you should score easily. Avoid being doubled off. Listen to your coach's directions for what to do on a grounder when running at third. He should provide you clear instructions prior to each new batter stepping in. Remember it's his job to stop you, so use your judgment on passed balls unless the coach tells you otherwise.

ANTICIPATION

You'll learn pitching patterns and can begin to anticipate off-speed pitches on certain counts. You can even read the ball out of the pitcher's hand. Off-speed pitches are harder to control, so be alert, read the curve and start off the base the moment it hits the dirt, retreating only if the catcher snares it.

STEALING

There is some stealing in Little League, though not as much as in lead-off baseball. Runners usually take second when there is a runner at third. I've seen teams use a delayed steal when the catcher is lazy in his throws back to the pitcher. As a runner, drive off the base the moment the ball is at the plate. Stay low while building speed. Run with elbows tight to the body to be more aerodynamic! Run hard and slide hard!

SLIDING

Commit 100% to your slide! Half-slides cause injuries. Leaping in your last stride to first base causes ankle injuries. Stay relaxed when sliding. Get dirty. Slide on both of your *cushions*, one leg crossed under the other, hands up in the air. The front foot touches the base. Slide early enough so that you don't sprain an ankle by jamming hard against the base. Practice popping up, too, so that you're quicker to the next base on an overthrow! Good pop-up slides are part of the "next base" mentality that winning baseball teams show every chance they get. Good

aggressive slides are vital and tell the other team you mean business.

BEING A STUDENT

If you're a student of the game, base-running begins on the practice diamond. It continues in the dugout prior to and during games. You can have fun AND pay attention at the same time! Discuss what you see with your teammates. Does the center-fielder have a weak arm? Is the other team failing to cover behind bases on throws from the outfield? Is the right-fielder coming toward foul territory to back up first base on infield throws to first? Noticing these things is all part of winning baseball. Study how deep the outfielders play. You can make better judgments on balls hit to them if you know where they are positioned.

Note whether the catcher is a good blocker, if he is willing to throw behind retreating runners after a pitch. Know the sun field, check the wind, note how close the backstop is, how the ball rebounds off of it. There is so much to notice!

When at bat, you can help your base-runners by timing your taking of the signals with the runners. Check that the runners are ready before looking to the base coach. Make it quick. If you have a take sign on a steal, you can fake bunt. When pulling the bat back, draw it back toward the catcher to distract his view, lifting the bat out of the strike zone at the last moment. This gives the catcher a poorer view of the pitch and creates passed balls. We're talking competitive edges. Know your teammates' speed or lack of same. If they are running in front of you, this keeps you from getting in trouble by running up their back and creating unnecessary rundowns.

When diving back into a base, grab it firmly with your hand so that a hard tag will not dislodge your hand. Hustle back to the base, and slide if necessary. Get dirty. Some catchers will fire the ball behind runners. Get quickly back.

If your team has runners at first and third with two outs and you're stealing second, look to the plate as you reach the halfway point. If they throw to second, get in a hotbox until the runner from third scores. If you're in a rundown between third and home, prolong it if possible until trailing runners can move up a base behind you.

You'd be surprised how many games are decided by smart, aggressive base-running. I can think of dozens of games that I coached that were decided by the pressure our smarts and hustle created on the base paths. A lot of fielders like to play the ball like they do in practice. Ah, but this is a game now, and they've got to make plays while runners are charging hard, while people are cheering. It's a different ballgame. Many errors are caused by hustle and "next base" mentality. Team hustle on the base paths can ruin another team's confidence, take pitchers off their game! Be alert and aggressive, and use your positive base-running skills to contribute to run creation. It's a fun part of baseball.

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