

Catching Basics

In many ways the catcher is the quarterback of the baseball team.

A complete catcher has enough knowledge of his team's pitching staff and a comprehensive enough understanding of the game's various situations to call pitches and team defenses. The complete catcher also has the luxury of being able to see most of the action that occurs on the field during a game. This allows the catcher to give his or her teammates direction about whether or not to cut off throws, which bases to throw to and who should field bunts or pop-ups.

This alone sets the catcher apart as a leader, but what really makes the catcher stand out among his or her teammates is the unselfishness that it takes to be a good catcher. By far, a catcher's body takes more abuse than that of any other position player on the team.

When it comes to catching, the most important thing to remember is that a catcher who can catch and stop pitches effectively can prevent the opposing team from advancing base runners. One who throws well is an even bigger bonus. A good catcher makes the other team earn its runs instead of giving the opponent opportunities to score, which often makes the difference in a game's outcome.

Although the importance of the catcher is undeniable, most coaches don't feel they know enough about the position to spend much time instructing their catchers. If they can find a kid who is willing to sacrifice his body for the good of the team, that's enough for them. Once the catching position is filled, that's one less headache for them to concern themselves with.

But look at it from this perspective: If someone is willing to squat behind the plate and get beaten up, that player probably has the mentality to want to become the absolute best catcher that he or she can. Finding somebody with the right personality traits and unselfish attitude is half the battle. If you can find that person and provide them with even a little bit of insight about the position, you'll be amazed at how much better it makes your team.

Here are some basic key points that can help your catchers improve:

The Gear

Catcher clearly is the most dangerous of all positions on the baseball field. Therefore, it is imperative that your team's catching equipment be in good working condition, be the proper size and be worn properly. All players – not just catchers – should wear an athletic supporter and a protective cup. In addition, catchers need a helmet that covers the ears and has a mask strapped to it or a hockey goalie-style mask. The helmet and mask should fit snugly enough so that the player can move his or her head up and down and from side to side without having parts of the helmet or mask obstruct vision. The throat area must be protected – either with a throat guard or by a mask that has a throat extension.

For younger players, the chest protector should have a flap that covers the groin/upper thigh area. Older players usually prefer a shorter chest protector that extends to the waist and provides more mobility, but this is only safe for experienced catchers who, of course, are wearing a cup. Make sure that the chest protector isn't so loose that it leaves certain critical areas exposed or makes it too difficult for the catcher to throw.

Shin-guards are always worn so that they are hooked on the outside of the leg. You don't want hooks on the inside of the legs rubbing together and coming undone. The shin-guards should cover as much of the top part of the foot as possible without restricting movement.

Catcher's mitts can take a long time to break in. The catcher should find a glove that he or she is comfortable with during the off-season and spend some time breaking it in before the season starts. Using a brand new glove during the season can lead to a lot of dropped pitches and frustration on everyone's part.

Basic Stance

Even young pitchers might have signals for two-seam and four-seam fastballs and/or change-ups. For a catcher, the basic stance is how you set-up before the pitch is thrown.

- Get in an athletic position (feet shoulder-width apart, weight on balls of feet, knees slightly bent) and squat.
- Foot width in squat to be determined by comfort.

- Squat should be comfortable, balanced athletic position with knees just far enough apart for pitcher to see signs
- Give sign with hand placed close to protective cup. Legs too far apart or signs held too low can allow opposing team to steal signals.

Receiving Stance

- Be comfortable.
- Find a relaxed stance so that you can receive the pitch with soft hands.
- Elbows outside of shinguards and wrists loose.
- Weight on insteps, not toes; keep weight out in front.
- Turn glove slightly counterclockwise to receive pitch.
- Throwing hand protected behind the mitt or along the outside part of the leg, keeping weight more forward.

Runners on Base/Two-strike Stance

- Adjust stance to get in good throwing position; athletic position with weight forward on balls of feet.
- Rear end up higher so you can throw or drop to block a pitch; if rear end is down, first movement has to be up and not toward where the throw will go.
- Knees pointing toward second base.
- Left foot slightly in front of right.
- Throwing hand placed behind mitt, balled up loosely to protect fingers.
- Follow the ball as it travels with both hands; watch the ball travel all the way into the mitt.

Blocking Pitches

- Separates good catchers from great catchers; toughest skill for catchers to master.
- Anticipate the ball in the dirt, especially with two strikes on a batter or runners on base.
- Throwing hand behind mitt and glove placed between legs to keep balls from rolling through.
- Butt as close to the ground as possible.
- Curl shoulders and swing hips around to create angles parallel to the plate and help

guide the ball in front of you.

- Try to smother the ball with chest protector; mitt stays in position on the ground between the legs.
- Keep chin down to avoid getting hit in neck.
- Take your mask over the spot where the pitch bounces.
- Try to block ball into fair territory.
- Whichever direction you have to move to block, turn that shoulder in toward home plate.
- Block wild pitches to the sides of home plate at 45-degree angle to deaden the ball around home plate.
- Move forward and down on balls in the dirt; get to knees as quickly as possible.
- Pick up ball with the bare hand after blocking.

Throwing

- Footwork is key; anticipate a steal on every pitch.
- Catch the ball first, but don't reach for the pitch; get the call for the pitcher first and foremost.
- Catch the ball as close to body as possible so you can get it out of the glove more quickly.
- Use a four-seam grip.
- Get momentum toward the base you are throwing to, pointing front shoulder toward target.
- Release the ball as quickly as possible, but try to stay balanced.

That should give you a good start toward helping make your catcher – and your team – better. Come back next month and we'll talk about how catchers should receive throws for plays at home, blocking the plate, catching pop-ups and fielding bunts.

By Cal and Bill Ripken