

## First Baseman are Important...

Which position on the field is most important to a team from a defensive perspective? Many times you will hear someone talk about the importance of being strong defensively up the middle. Certainly when you consider that the majority of balls are hit to what we like to call "the big part of the field," it makes sense to have some of your best athletes and defensive skill players stationed at shortstop, second base and center field. While that is true, I'd like to make the argument that first base could be just as important.

*"A good first baseman has the power to make all of the other infielders better."*

Even at the big league level I believe that having a good defensive player at first base is underrated. Take it from someone who knows first-hand, to have a first baseman who is skilled defensively takes a lot of the pressure off of the other infielders. Infielders who know they are throwing to a first baseman that they can count on are less likely to make poor throws, because they know that they don't have to be absolutely perfect every time. And, when they do make a throw that is slightly off line, a first baseman can turn that into a routine out. Fewer bad throws means fewer errors which in turn means fewer base runners and fewer runs allowed.

Fewer balls are actually hit to first base than any other position on the field. So the theory that your first baseman doesn't have to be the best ground-ball fielder on the planet does have some legs. But that doesn't mean that you should put the biggest, slowest guy who can hit the ball a mile at first base. The first baseman's primary job is to field throws from the other infielders and help his team record outs. If the first baseman isn't skilled around the bag – if he doesn't have good footwork and good hands – some throws that should result in outs are going to end

up landing in the dugout or out of play. At the younger levels and even into high school a first baseman who fields his position well can save his team countless runs during the course of a season.

Keeping all of that in mind, let's look at the primary defensive responsibilities for the first baseman. In doing this we must go back to the fact that probably fewer balls are hit in the direction of first base than any other position. That means the most important job for the first baseman is to field throws on all of the balls hit to the other infielders.

One thing that I always come back to when I talk about team defense is this: The better we play catch, the better we play baseball. Unlike a quarterback, baseball players are used to throwing to stationary targets. When we are playing catch to warm up before a game or practice our partner is facing us and standing still. Almost all of the throws we make on a baseball field in game situations are to teammates who are standing still and waiting for the ball. Our muscles and our minds are not trained to throw the ball to someone who is moving. That means the first baseman's number one priority is to make sure that he can get to the bag in time to set up as a stationary target when a ball is hit hard at one of the other infielders. If he can't get there quickly enough to be stationary, his teammate is likely to throw the ball to the spot where he last saw the first baseman. Also, if the first baseman is moving when the ball is thrown, it is much harder for him to execute the proper footwork and catch even a good throw. Finally, if the first baseman is moving when the ball is released, it will be that much more difficult for him to bail his teammate out if the throw is not right on target.

So, when it comes to positioning I would argue – especially in the younger age groups – that the first baseman should not be worried as much about covering balls hit to his part of the field. I would rather see the first baseman set up close enough to the bag that he is sure he can be a stationary target any time a ball is hit to one

of his teammates. Remember, a lot more balls are hit toward second, short and third than are hit toward first, and the first baseman's most important responsibility is to receive throws on balls hit to his teammates. There also is a concern when a first baseman plays deep, especially on a field with 60-foot bases, about putting more pressure on the pitcher to cover first base on a ground ball to right side. This is a difficult skill for young players to master, especially with shorter base paths, creating another argument for the first baseman to position himself closer to the bag.

The other golden rule of playing first base, in addition to getting to the bag early enough to be a stationary target, is to not stretch too soon. When the ball is hit the first baseman must get to the bag as quickly as possible, setting up with the heel of the throwing-side foot (the right foot for right-handers and the left foot for left-handers) on the center of the inside part of the base and the body square toward the person making the throw. By getting there early and placing the throwing side heel on the bag, the first baseman can slide that foot up and down along the base to adjust to throws that are up or down the line. It also is important to be as big of a target as possible for the fielder. While a slight knee bend is important for agility purposes, the first baseman should never crouch down and create a smaller target for the infielder. It is important for the first baseman to expect a bad throw – to be in a good, athletic position that allows him to move quickly from side to side if necessary. Keep in mind that there is a big difference between an athletic position and a crouch, however.

A lot of times young first basemen – and older, professional first basemen, for that matter! – will stretch before the throw is made. When this happens the first baseman must bring the foot he is stretching with back to its original position or “retool” in order to stretch toward the ball. Many times the player will stretch too soon and get locked in that position, which substantially limits the amount of ground that he can cover side to side. Often when this occurs a throw that should

have been routine for the first baseman to handle ends up in the dugout, up against the fence or in the crowd.

In summary, the key components of good fundamental first base play are as follows:

- Be able to get to the bag quickly to be a stationary target for the infielder who will be making the throw.
- Do not crouch down; set up in an athletic position square to the fielder with a slight knee bend, but be a big target.
- Put the throwing-side heel on the base and take the glove-side foot and glove toward the ball.
- Don't stretch too soon; see the ball travel and step toward the path of the throw.

#### A Note About Positioning

There will be times at all levels when a hitter who everyone knows well comes to the plate. At times there will be a need to shift fielders in one direction or another. When this happens, it is important for the first baseman to always remain the same distance from the bag so that he can still be a stationary target if the ball is hit on the ground to one of his teammates. To accomplish this the first baseman must think about more than just moving to the right. For example, let's say that a right-handed dead pull hitter is at the plate, and we want to shift our infielders two steps to their right. Well, if the first baseman moves only to his right, he actually will be farther from the bag than he was in his normal positioning, making it more difficult for him to get to the bag in time to be a stationary target for his teammates. Therefore, the first baseman really should move two steps over and about two steps toward the batter. To simplify, no matter where the first baseman plays he should always be the same distance from the bag. If you were to draw lines connecting the spot where the first baseman normally plays, where he plays for a

dead pull hitter and the bag, an isosceles triangle should be formed. The lines from the base to the spots where the first baseman sets up should be the exact same length no matter the situation. Likewise, as the first baseman moves closer to the line he sets up deeper. This will allow him to cover more ground but still get to the bag to set up as quickly as he normally would.

**By Bill Ripken**