

Building Blocks for Infield Play

Instead of introducing more difficult skills early in the season, spend several days or more on defensive drills such as these to get your players used to being outside, playing on fields that are in less-than-perfect condition and making the throws required by their positions and the fields on which they play. These drills will help their muscles remember the demands placed on them by the game of baseball and will help the players develop the muscle memory required to make the routine plays and to adapt to unusual situations.

Rolled Ground Balls (Basic Ground Ball Drill)

Objective: To help infielders become comfortable with the proper mechanics of fielding a ground ball

Setup: A bucket of balls and a coach to roll them

Execution: This drill is simple and appropriate for all ages. Balls can be rolled as soft or as hard as necessary; the type of hop the ball takes can be controlled. Players assume the ground ball position with a wide base, butt down and hands out in front (the glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so the coach can see inside the glove and the fingers are pointing down). Use a flat surface (if possible) to avoid bad hops and bad habits. At first, the ball should be rolled directly into a player's glove from about 10 feet away. Have players hold the ground ball position for five reps so that they can feel a little burn in their thighs. As players get comfortable fielding ground balls properly, the coach can move back and roll balls harder. For conditioning, older players can be asked to hold the position for more reps. The ball must be caught out in front so that the eyes can follow it into the glove.

Coaching Keys: If the ball doesn't stay in a player's glove or if the player seems to be getting handcuffed quite a bit by bad hops, check the player's glove positioning and angle. The glove should be out in front of the body with the wrist relaxed to the point that the fingers of the glove are pointing almost straight down. If a player is having trouble getting the glove into the proper position, have him or her reach back between the legs and scrape dirt forward with the glove until it's in the proper position in front of the body. If the glove is out in front and the wrist is relaxed, a player is more likely to see a bad hop early and move the glove to a position in which the ball can still be caught.

Throwing After the Catch Drill

Objective: To understand and apply the concept of using the body's momentum to make a stronger throw

Setup: A bucket of balls, a coach or player to receive throws, a coach or player to roll ground balls (optional), a target (optional), three cones or markers

Execution: This drill reinforces the concept of catching the ground ball first, generating momentum toward the target, throwing the ball and following the throw. Set up three cones several feet apart, placed in a line

toward the target where the throw will be made (easiest to set up as a simulation of the 5-4 force out at second base). Cones should be placed so that the distance is appropriate to accomplish the intended result for the age group involved. A player sets up with the right foot next to the first cone and assumes the ground ball fielding position (wide base, butt down, hands in front). A ball is rolled by the coach to the player, who fields it, or the player starts with the ball and simulates the fielding position. The player shuffles the feet to the second cone, releases the ball, and follows the throw past the third cone and toward the target. Emphasize the four-seam grip. The ball can be thrown to a coach or another teammate. The player should stay low and not stand straight up after fielding the ball. This drill can be turned into a contest by placing a chest- or head-high target at second base with a net or screen behind to catch errant throws. Players who hit the target stay alive, and those who miss are eliminated. If there's nobody to roll the balls, players can get a ball out of the bucket, assume the ground ball fielding position and then execute the drill.

Coaching Keys: Players who aren't throwing the ball accurately are likely dropping the elbow below the shoulder or are peeling off away from the target before following the throw all the way past the third cone. For players making the latter mistake, set up another cone about five feet to the left of the third cone and make them follow the throw all the way through the last two cones before peeling off.

Players who are throwing the ball high or low are likely standing up before shuffling and throwing. Remember: Stay low and go low. The first movement upon catching the ball is toward the target. Players should shuffle in the direction, keeping the knees bent in an athletic position instead of standing straight up. This keeps the head, shoulders and eyes level, which makes it easier to remain focused on the target.

Backhand Drills

Throwing-Side Foot Backhand Drill

Objective: To learn and practice the proper technique for backhanding ground balls to the throwing-hand side

Setup: A bucket of balls, a coach to roll balls, cones or markers (optional)

Execution: This backhand is used for hard-hit balls slightly to the player's backhand side. Just like a regular ground ball, the backhand is caught out in front of the body so the eyes can follow the ball into the glove and the wrist and forearm don't get in the way. Players also need to establish a wide base with the butt down. A player lines up in front of a coach with the right leg extended. The player pivots the right foot so the instep faces the coach and drops the left knee to the ground (opposite for lefties). This creates a wide base to help get the glove down, and the glove is placed in front of the right foot and toward the coach. The coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into the glove until the player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove and bringing it to the center of the body. The ball is rolled directly toward the front foot. The glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so the coach can see into the glove.

Tell the players to avoid twisting the glove so they don't close it too soon. After five reps, have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding reps can help with conditioning.

Glove-side Foot Backhand Drill

Objective: To learn and practice the proper technique for backhanding ground balls to the glove-hand side

Setup: Same as throwing-side backhand drill

Execution: This backhand provides more reach for players ranging farther to their backhand side. Just as for a regular ground ball, the backhand is caught out in front of the body so the eyes can follow the ball into the glove and the wrist and forearm don't get in the way. Players need to establish a wide base with the butt down. A player lines up in front of a coach and crosses the glove-side leg over the other leg as if turning to walk. The throwing-side knee is dropped to the ground, much like a walking lunge. The player creates a wide base to help get the butt down and the glove in front of the body. The coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into the glove until the player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove and bringing it to the center of the body. The ball is rolled slightly in front of the lead foot. The glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so the coach can see into the glove. Tell players to avoid twisting the glove so they don't close it too soon. After five reps, have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding reps can help with conditioning.

Backhand Coaching Keys: For all backhands, the most common mistake is the ball jumping up and smacking off the player's wrist instead of going into the glove. This happens when the glove is positioned behind the player's body, which creates a glove angle in which the wrist is actually forward of the glove. By placing the glove in front of the body, the wrist is naturally relaxed in such a manner that it doesn't get in the way if the ball takes a tricky hop. Again, just as with the technique for fielding a basic ground ball, the fingers of the glove should point straight down toward the ground.

An error frequently made when it comes to backhands is twisting the glove. This may happen because young players have gloves that aren't fully broken in or don't feel that they are strong enough to just squeeze the ball and keep it in the glove. The problem is that sometimes they start to twist the glove before the ball gets there, preventing the ball from entering the glove. Players should squeeze the ball when it enters the glove and bring it straight to their chest for the transfer and throw.

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