

# Baserunning 101

Many times young athletes are looking for a set formula. They want to know exactly how to react to any situation before it actually occurs. One of the hardest lessons to teach young baseball players is the idea of reacting to the game situation as it unfolds.

This concept is especially important to get across in baseball. While a base hit is a base hit in the box score, the reality is that there are all kinds of base hits: rocket line drives, slow infield dribblers, bleeders that barely make it to the outfield grass, bloopers that land between the infield and outfield. A routine groundball early in a tie game with a runner on first may be handled in a totally different manner than the same ground ball late in a game in which the team is ahead by several runs. Positioning, strategy and decision-making can change from batter to batter and even pitch to pitch.

When it comes to running the bases, while we like to introduce certain baserunning rules that take some of the thinking out of the game and eliminate bad and costly decisions, baserunning truly involves reading the play and reacting. Teaching players about baserunning isn't as simple as saying that you should always try to score from second on a base hit to the outfield.

Base coaches exist as extra pairs of eyes on the field to help runners know when to advance on balls that are not in front of them. Coaches also are less likely to get caught up in the action of the game, and they have more of an opportunity to think potential situations through ahead of time and to analyze plays as they unfold than a baserunner who might be worried about getting picked off prior the pitch or trying to advance to the next base as quickly as possible once the ball is put into play. But, while base coaches are important and often provide the voice of reason that can mean the difference between a run and an out, there are times when a runner has to make a decision on his own – situations where a split second of hesitation to wait for advice from a coach can mean the difference between a huge inning and an out that helps the defense wiggle out of a jam.

Unlike football, and to a lesser degree basketball, baseball players do not benefit from surges in emotion. In fact, emotion can be detrimental. Baseball is a sport in which

maintaining an even keel is important. High levels of concentration and focus are essential, as is an ability to think clearly and understand every type of situation and the possible fallout from every possible decision. Batters who are overly pumped up tend to swing at bad pitches. Pitchers who are fired up struggle with their control. Fielders who are wound up might try to make a spectacular play when all that is needed is for the ball to be cut off to prevent an extra-base hit. Or they might overthrow a cutoff man or a base, allowing runners to advance into scoring position or to score.

When a baserunner feels the adrenaline pumping he might attempt to steal a base on his own at the wrong time or try to take an extra base late in a game when his team is trailing by several runs and in need of multiple baserunners. Those types of decisions can erase a potential big inning before it even has a chance to get started.

Coaches are supposed to be immune to those types of emotions and adrenaline rushes. Because of that, one of the base coach's jobs is to understand the situation and be able to slow or hold a runner who is on the way to making a bad decision. But, the fact of the matter is that coaches are human, too.

Sometimes a coach's competitive nature and other factors such as the intensity or importance of a particular game can get the best of him. The fact that at the big league level there seem to be more baserunning blunders early in the season when teams are trying to impress national television audiences and big crowds and in the postseason when the stakes are highest is proof positive that baseball is a game that is best suited for players – and coaches – who can maintain a level head.

An example of a questionable baserunning decision by a player and coach took place in baseball's season opener between the Cardinals and Mets. Let's take a look at the situation and all of the implications of that decision.

## **The Situation**

Bottom of the sixth inning. David Eckstein is on second with one out after doubling home St. Louis' first run to cut New York's lead to 5-1. Preston Wilson is the batter with the

dangerous Albert Pujols on deck. Tom Glavine is the Mets' pitcher. The atmosphere is electric in this rematch of last year's seven-game NLCS. A sellout crowd is on hand to see the Cardinals receive their world championship rings and begin defense of their crown. Glavine has stymied the Cards, and the fans are getting impatient.

### **The Play**

Wilson lines a base hit into center field, and third base coach Jose Oquendo waives Eckstein home every step of the way. New York center fielder Carlos Beltran charges the ball aggressively and fires a bullet to the plate, cutting down Eckstein for the second out. Wilson alertly advances to second as the ball shoots past cutoff man Carlos Delgado.

### **The Analysis**

You can come up with all kinds of excuses for Oquendo. Maybe he was trying to jumpstart the team and the crowd or maybe he assumed that Beltran simply would toss the ball into second, conceding the run and trying to prevent a big inning by St. Louis. None of those explanations justifies the decision, and here's why:

First, that run was not going to decide the game. At that point in the contest, the Cardinals should have been trying to get runners on base for the middle of their lineup and to minimize opportunities for New York to record outs. The Mets, on the other hand, should have been concentrating on getting outs. Every out they record moves them one step closer to victory. By attempting to score on the play the Cardinals gave New York an opportunity to eliminate one of their remaining 11 outs.

Had Oquendo not sent Eckstein, St. Louis would have had runners on first and third with one out and the game's most feared hitter, Pujols, coming to the plate. At that point the potential tying run moves into the on-deck circle and suddenly the pressure on Glavine and the Mets' defense increases infinitely. Maybe Glavine gives up a hit and gets pulled from the game, allowing the Cards to get into the New York bullpen and possibly setting up a huge inning. As it turned out, the veteran lefty simply had to record one more out with only a runner on second.

Second, as a coach you are not playing the percentages if you make a decision based on

what the other team should do or what you expect them to do. You've heard the old expression about assuming. You must be able to see the big picture and understand what your team needs to do to have the best chance to win. Should Beltran have thrown the ball to second base to keep the double play in order and stay out of the big inning? Absolutely. But he didn't. Instead he took the opportunity presented by St. Louis and tried (successfully) to record the out.

### **The Moral of the Story**

The baseball season is a marathon, not a sprint. Decisions on the bases should be made based on percentages and taking into account the complete game situation. When trailing by multiple runs late in a game, it is never worth the risk of giving up one of your valuable outs just to take an extra base or score a single run – especially if the heart of your lineup is coming up. Attempting to steal a base, stretch a single into a double or score from second on a hard-hit ball under those circumstances are decisions that are not going to help you win ballgames. When you are down by three runs, you need at least two baserunners to have a chance to tie the game. One run scoring or one runner moving into scoring position is not worth risking an out or taking the bat out of a top hitter's hands by opening up first base. Baserunners not only give you a chance to win the game, but they also increase the pressure on your opponent to make pitches and plays.

As a coach make sure you understand the total picture – score, number of outs, speed of your runners, where the fielders are positioned, which part of your lineup is due up and so on – and the options you might be presented with before the pitch is delivered. By having a firm grasp of the entire situation you will be less likely to get caught up in the excitement of the moment and make a decision that literally runs your team out of a potential rally.

**By Bill Ripken**