



Basic Fundamentals of Infield Play

Infield defense can be broken down into two parts: catching and throwing. It's as simple as that. If we don't catch the ground ball, we certainly can't throw it. If you take that concept to its extreme form, a double play is five simple parts: a catch, a throw, a catch, a throw and a catch.

Fielding a Groundball

To catch a groundball correctly, three things have to happen:

1. You have to establish a wide base, meaning feet at least shoulder width apart. Sometimes wider; that's a personal preference.
2. The rear end must be down, allowing the head to stay up.
3. The hands must be out in front of the body.

If the fielder doesn't get the rear end down, the hands can't be out in front and it won't be possible to see the ball go into the glove. Establishing the wide base, with the butt down and the hands out in front gives the fielder the most freedom to react to a bad hop.



Throwing

Once the ball is caught, there are three key components to making accurate throws:

1. Creating momentum toward your target.
2. Pointing the front shoulder toward your target.
3. Using your momentum to follow the throw.

Keep in mind that every throw made by an infielder (or, for that matter, every throw made by any position player) should be made with the four-seam grip.

The Ready Position

The ready position is similar to the athletic positioning you would use in almost any other sport. For infielders the primary concern is going right and left. This can be accomplished by having the feet and shoulders square to home plate, the knees slightly bent, and the weight distributed evenly on the balls of the feet in a well-balanced position. To get comfortable an infielder can creep in a little bit or move from side to side as the pitcher is preparing to deliver the ball, but the ready position **MUST** be assumed as the ball enters the hitting zone.

The Basic Groundball

This groundball is the one hit directly at the infielder. It should be the easiest one for the infielder to catch, because the ready position provides for an easy transition



into the wide base, which is used to catch the groundball. The infielder now simply must get the rear end down and the hands out in front.

Throwing After the Catch

Thus far we've covered fielding a groundball (catching) and throwing separately, now let's talk about making the throw after fielding a groundball. We've caught the ball out in front in the center of the body, so the next step is a simple technique of bringing the hands into the center of the body. Once this is accomplished, we need to shuffle our feet toward the target (never crossing or hopping). By shuffling our feet toward the target, we create momentum and allow our shoulders to stay horizontal to the ground. This is important because our front shoulder should be pointed directly toward the target. By crossing your feet or hopping, the front shoulder has a tendency to point upward. With a consistent shuffle toward the target, pointing of the front shoulder and releasing of the ball, the infielder will find it easy to allow his momentum to follow the throw.

Balls Hit to Either Side

To start with an example, if the ball is hit to the right, we use the crossover step to move toward the ball. In this particular case we simply cross over with the left foot as our first step. This is the most efficient way to move laterally on the baseball field. Right now we are focusing on getting in front of the ball. The backhand will come into play later. The ball is hit three steps to our right, we see the ball, we read the ball, and we cross over. As we cross over we are pivoting on our right foot, and the crossover step is simply that — our left foot crosses over the right foot to get



going. When we do this the focus should be on maintaining the proper footwork. It's better to take a split second to read it to the right and make sure our footwork is properly done. That will help as we get older and play more baseball. The crossover step will become second nature and the movement will be even more efficient.

Good lateral movement will allow us to get in front of baseballs that normally we wouldn't.

So, let's work on the crossover step, concentrating on the proper footwork and not worrying about being in too big of a hurry. Cross over, try to get in front of the ball, and if we get in front of the ball, we establish our wide base with our butt down and our hands out in front.

Backhands

For the most part, the backhand is a more difficult play than the basic groundball or the groundball hit to the forehand side. The biggest problem with young infielders and the backhand is that they try to catch the ball behind them. We never catch the ball behind us in the game of baseball unless it's an extreme case. The backhand is still caught out in front of the body.

The three principles of fielding a groundball still apply to the backhand. Here's how: With a backhand the wide base seems to get a little wider than when a ball is hit right at you. With that in mind, it stands to reason that if your base is wider, your rear end is automatically going to be lower to the ground. This will allow your glove to be out in front of the body.



There are two types of backhand plays: Using the right foot as the lead foot or using the left foot as the lead foot. Let's first talk about using the right foot as the lead. This is a play in which we cannot comfortably get in front of the ball, so in a sense we are going to take our right foot into the path of the baseball. When we take the right foot into the path of the baseball, we have created a wider base. And, by collapsing the trailing leg, we have gotten our rear end lower to the ground, creating a lunge position and allowing us to have the glove out in front of the body directly in between the ball and the foot. Once the ball is caught it should be brought into the center of the body, allowing the basic throwing principles to take over.

When the ball is hit farther to the backhand side, it becomes necessary to use the left foot as the lead. This allows us to have more reach than when using the right foot as the lead. The same basic principles discussed above for the right-footed backhand still apply. The main difference is that the ball is played outside of the lead foot and not even with it. Everything else essentially is the same, with the only real difference being that one foot is exchanged for the other.

A lot of young infielders attempting the left-footed backhand want to play the ball behind them. You still don't do that. At the most extreme case you may catch the ball even with the foot, but never behind. The backhand is a one-handed play. Catch the ball first, then bring it into the center of the body to set up for the throw.

Throwing Off the Backhand

When using the backhand you have the ability to stop your momentum from continuing away from your target. After successfully catching the ball with the



backhand, the fielder must use either foot to stop the momentum and then push off to create momentum back toward the target.

Troubleshooting the Backhand

When attempting backhands young infielders, even if they are in a position to catch the ball out in front, want to take the glove away from the ball too quickly. Gloves are designed well enough these days that the backhand is a one-handed play, period. Catch the ball first and bring the ball into the center of the body, but don't be in too much of a hurry. Do not take the ball away from the body.

Another big problem with younger players and backhands is balls bouncing off wrists and forearms. That means the fielders are trying to catch the ball behind them. If you set up with the glove behind the body you are going to see the forearm and wrist come into play a lot more often than if you catch the ball out in front. If you are playing catch in the backyard and the ball is thrown to your backhand side, you don't reach behind to catch the ball. You reach out and turn the glove to the backhand position. The same exact thing should happen on a groundball hit to the backhand side.

Forehand Plays

Once again, as with the backhand, if the ball is hit where we cannot get in front of it and it's to our forehand side, we should utilize our good athletic position. As with the backhand, we use the crossover step when going toward our glove side. Some extreme cases may arise in which this is not the case. The idea is to get to a position where the left foot is closest to the baseball. That's going to enable us to



reach out and catch the ball in front of the body. Once again, if we cannot get in front of the groundball, this becomes a one-handed play. You're really going to have to concentrate on keeping your eyes on the ball and the glove. The glove has to be out in front. The glove-side foot should be the lead foot on this play. Since we are on the run our stride is going to be a little bit longer, which is what establishes our wide base. Our rear end is going to automatically go down lower because the stride is longer. It is always preferable to use the second hand whenever possible, but much like the backhand, the forehand is a one-handed play. Because the second hand is not involved, we want to be careful to force the glove well out in front of the body so we can actually see the glove and the ball at the same time.

Throwing Off the Forehand

Sometimes I see young infielders, especially going up the middle from shortstop or going toward their left from third, catching the ball and throwing it with their momentum going out toward right-center field. They really don't get their bodies turned and moving toward first base. Once we catch the ball, half the play is done. Now the rest of the job is to make a good, accurate throw, and the best way to do that is get our momentum going toward the target. We must make a concerted effort to get the lead shoulder pointed toward the target. Once the throw is made, take an extra step or two toward the target. This will increase the accuracy of the throw.



Double-Play Depth in General

For this purpose, we are referring to the middle infielders. In order to actually talk about double-play depth, one thing must happen: There must be a man on first base and less than two outs. Let's throw out all the formulas for where to play. If, for example, I'm playing second base, I know that I have to come up and over somewhat toward second base to be in position to complete the double play if a groundball is hit. Now, let me look at my off infielders – the shortstop and the third baseman. Let me look at my first baseman. These are the guys who are going to be involved on a double-play. I ask myself, "If that ball is hit hard, a sharp two-hop groundball to my shortstop, can I get to second base in good position, be in my proper set-up position, and be a stationary target for my shortstop?" If the ball is a hard-hit two-hopper to my shortstop, if it's a firm two-hopper – not a rocket – and I can't get there, if I'm still on the move when he's ready to throw to me, then automatically I should tell myself that my double-play depth is not correct. I need to move in a little bit and over a little bit. There's a comfort zone for each infielder who plays the middle. You are an individual and this is an individual game. Even though it's a team game, you still have to do certain things individually, and this is a personal preference thing for the infielder. Somebody's double-play depth might be three in and three over. Another guy's might be two-in and two-over, so you must ask yourself as a middle infielder. "Can I get to second base, set up in the right manner and be a good target for my shortstop if he gets a firm two-hopper hit to him?" That's your simple formula for double-play depth. It's better to get there too early than too late.



Shortstop

For the shortstop, the same rule applies. Look at your second baseman and look at your first baseman. Your first baseman in this situation, if there's a man on first base and nobody else on, is holding the runner. So this might be a little bit tighter for you. Let's look at the second baseman and say "If there's a two-hopper hit right at my second baseman, can I get to second base, set-up in the proper manner and be a good target for my second baseman?" A good target means stationary, of course.

Remember, defense is two parts, catching and throwing. Well, if we're having a catch in the backyard, we're not throwing to a guy who's running post patterns, running curl patterns, or running anything else. We're playing catch with a guy whose shoulders are square to us; we see his chest — that's the big part of his body right there — and that's what we want to throw to. The double play is no different. If we eliminate throwing to people when they are moving, we're going to be a better ballclub because we're going to play catch better. If we start running all over the place and trying to hit people on the move, we're not going to play catch as well and we're not going to be a good ball club. So, the simple formula in double-play depth if you're playing in the middle is to look at your off infielders then ask yourself, "Can I get to the bag, set-up and be a stationary target for my teammate if the ball hit to him is a firm two-hopper?"

Second Baseman: Executing the Double Play

Now we know what our double-play depth is. We feel comfortable we can get there when balls are hit sharply to the third baseman or the shortstop. Now, how do



we get to the base and how do we set-up? First and foremost, we make a straight line from where our position is to the bag. Let's eliminate rounding the base and any other path that deviates from going straight to the base. The quicker you get to the base, the quicker you can set up and the easier it is for the teammate to throw to a stationary target.

As second basemen, we are going to get to the bag and we are going to put our left foot on the bag. We're waiting and our shoulders are square to the fielder. The left foot is on second base. Don't straddle.

Wherever the throw comes from, if it's a perfect throw right over the middle of the second base bag, we can do a number of things. We can take our right foot and simply walk toward where the throw came from, catch it, plant our left foot and make a throw to first base. If the throw is to the left field side of the bag, we take our right foot toward the ball. Our right foot always goes toward the baseball. The left foot goes to the bag, then we check to see the flight of the ball. If the throw is actually toward the first base bag, we can cross over with our right foot and catch it. What that does is insure that every time we take our right foot to the baseball, which takes the center of our body to the baseball. That's where we want to catch the ball, because we're going to ultimately bring it back to the center of our body when we make a throw to first base.

Second basemen need to get to the bag early; get there as quickly as possible on a straight line. The left foot goes to the bag. Then you see the throw — don't anticipate a good throw; in fact, anticipate a bad throw. If it's a good throw it becomes very easy to receive. But if we anticipate a good throw and the throw is a bad one, then we have problems. Anticipate the bad throw, because if it's a good



throw we can do anything with our right foot. We can walk to it or we can kind of step back, but the left foot goes to the bag and the right foot goes to the baseball every time when you're playing second base.

Keep in mind (second basemen) that there are different ways to turn the double play. It is pretty much dictated by where the throw is coming to us. If we get to the bag with our left foot to the base and our right foot goes toward the ball and the throw is up the line, we cross over the bag, stepping to the ball with the right foot. If the ball is behind the bag on the left field side, the right foot goes out toward the ball so that we are using the bag as our friend to turn the double play. If it's a perfect throw, we can do one of two things: We can step across the bag toward the ball, or if the throw has good pace on it, we can just step back.

The three basic ways to turn a double play by the second baseman are:

1. Go across the bag to the ball.
2. Take the right foot to the outfield side, using the bag as your friend.
3. Step back.

These three different methods of turning the double play allow the second baseman to give the base runner a different look every time, but the throw actually dictates what the second baseman does on his double play. If he's in proper position — left foot to the bag, right foot to the ball — he can handle any throw. Remember, get there early and set up as a stationary target, taking the left foot to the base and the right foot to the ball.



Shortstop: Executing the Double Play

Once again, the first step in executing the double play properly is to look at your second baseman, asking yourself, “If the ball is hit hard, a firm two-hopper to my second baseman, can I get to the bag and be in position to be a good, stationary target for my middle infield partner?”

The shortstop is going to be getting to the bag early. There are two basic approaches to this. We are going to start off with the most basic way, for younger ages. Go ahead and get to the bag early. We put our right foot on the bag, once again with our shoulders square to our second baseman — not square toward first base, but square to where the throw is coming from. Once we are square to that player and we give him a good target, we read where the throw is going, because that dictates our movements as an infielder. If it’s a perfect throw, we take our left foot toward the ball, which takes the center of your body to the ball.

Shortstops have to be very conscious about really getting their feet pointed back toward first base once they receive the feed from the second baseman. When we catch the ball we should be square to the second baseman, so now we have to move our feet, and there is a long way to travel. So, once we catch the ball, we have to concentrate very hard on swinging our feet around and getting in line to first base to make the throw. Moving our feet will also point our shoulders in the right direction. Once again, when we talk about throwing the baseball — about playing catch — we want to point our lead shoulder toward our target. Again, the shortstop must get to the bag early, square to where the ball is coming from, take the right foot to the second base bag and then take the left foot toward the ball.



In the extreme case — and this is an extreme case, an advanced move — when the throw is to the inside of second base, the pitcher's mound side of second base, we'll take our right foot off of the bag. Take our right foot to the ball, step through with our left foot — our left foot will actually drag second base — and we'll be in perfect position to throw to first base. That is a very advanced move and usually happens with older kids and more advanced players. But let's remember to get to the bag early as a shortstop, set up with the right foot on the bag and take our left foot to where the throw may be except in that extreme case. If it's the perfect throw right at us, coming right toward our chest, we just step toward the throw, catch it and get our feet in position to throw to first base. If the throw is toward the outfield side, we must take our left foot to that side. That's the one where we have to catch the ball and really concentrate on bringing our feet and our lead shoulder back around toward the first baseman.

What happens when the shortstop is receiving the double play feed from the first baseman in a first and second situation with one or none out? If the first baseman is behind the runner, the shortstop is going to get to the second base bag in the same manner that he did when was receiving the ball from the second baseman. Now, if there is a man just on first base, and the first baseman is holding the runner on and he bounces off and is inside of the runner, the shortstop then can get to the inside of the bag and he can place his left foot on second base. When the throw arrives, he catches the ball and takes a step toward first base. If the throw would happen to take him on the outfield side and cross the runner's path, then he can move his feet and take his left foot to the ball, using his right foot to touch second base before getting his feet back into proper position to throw to first base.



The Pivot

The pivot guy on the double play should always try to use two hands. Middle infielders should get into the habit of using two hands and catching the ball out in front so they can see the ball entering the glove. The reason we use two hands is that we're going to have to make a transfer and a throw. So instead of reaching out with one hand then bringing that hand to meet the other, it makes sense that if we reach out with both hands and catch the baseball, the transfer is going to be easier for us to make. When receiving a throw to record even the third out of an inning, the second baseman and shortstop should get in the habit of positioning themselves as if they are starting a double play by getting there early, being a good target for the infield partner, and catching the ball out in front with two hands.

The Underhand Flip

The underhand flip is an important part of infield defense that often is taken for granted. In actuality, the underhand flip at the highest level can be used by the middle infielders to start 2/3 of all double plays. How does that relate to youth baseball? Well, it may not start the 6-4-3 or the 4-6-3 double play at the 12-year-old level, but it can be used as a valuable tool in eliminating errors that occur when trying to record a force out at second base. Most errors occur at second base at the youth level because one of two things happens: Either a bad overhand feed that is thrown too hard or a middle infielder who gets to the bag too late. When it's a combination of both, the end result is not good. By developing the proper technique



of the underhand flip, errors can be eliminated at the youth level, and double plays can be turned at higher levels.

The mechanics of the underhand flip can be broken down into three parts after the ball is fielded:

1. Take the momentum toward the target by using the feet.
2. Flip the ball, leaving the hand at the target's face.
3. Follow the ball.

Creating momentum can be done in two ways. The easiest way for younger players to do it is by shuffling their feet toward the intended target. A more advanced and the most efficient way to do it is by using a crossover step and exploding toward the target.

Differences Between Second and Short (Underhand Flip)

The shortstop has the advantage of being almost open to second base to begin with. Whether the shortstop is shuffling or using the crossover step, the underhand flip should feel more natural. The second baseman's underhand flip will be slightly more difficult and uncomfortable. The tendency of a young second baseman, even if the footwork is done correctly, is to bring the ball from in front of the body all the way to a point behind the body before actually executing the flip. The key thing here is to try to get the second baseman to basically flip the ball from where it was caught. If the ball is caught out in front, it makes sense to flip it right from that spot. This may result in an awkward feeling for the second baseman until this technique is mastered.



From either shortstop or second base, the principles are the same. We have to create momentum to the target, flip the ball and leave the hand to the face, and follow the flip. The underhand flip is a tool that can be used at the highest level, but it is a fundamental that should be introduced even to the youngest baseball players.

First Base Play

When nobody is on base, the first baseman is like any other infielder. Thus, the main responsibility is the same as any other infielder; the first baseman must be ready to field a groundball if it is hit in that direction. A misconception is that because a first baseman's glove is different that things are done differently at that position. Not true. Catching a ground ball is catching a ground ball, and the same fundamentals apply to the first baseman that apply to any other infielder.

When the ball is not hit to the first baseman, the priority changes. The first baseman must get to first base in time to be a good, stationary target for the off infielders. At the younger ages it is more important for a first baseman to play more shallow, because it is even more crucial for him to be able to receive throws from other infielders than it is to actually field groundballs himself. We still don't want the first baseman to play on the bag, but at the younger ages it's better to err by positioning the first baseman too close to the bag instead of too far away.

When the groundball is hit to another infielder, the first baseman must get to the bag early and set up to be a good target. A good target is one that is stationary, square to the infielder who is making the throw, and big (don't squat or scrunch down).



First basemen should set up with the heel of their throwing-side foot on the center of the inside part of the base. They should then see the ball coming across the infield, making sure they have determined the flight of the ball before committing their stretch. The stretch should result from the first basemen seeing the flight of the ball and then taking their glove-hand foot to the baseball. A stretch should not be defined by going necessarily toward the player who threw the ball, but by the glove-hand foot and glove going directly toward the baseball. In simple terms, you can stretch up the line toward home plate, in toward the fielder who threw it or up the line toward the right field corner. If you are able to catch the ball at the same time your glove-hand foot touches the ground, this will prove that you've seen the ball cross the diamond and have taken the proper step to catch the ball.

Two golden rules of first base play are:

1. If the ball is not hit to you, get to the bag and set up as soon as you can to be a good target.
2. Don't stretch too soon.

For some reason, people want to make the first baseman the big guy with bad hands who can hit for power, but in reality the first baseman handles more balls than anybody on the field except the catcher. So, the better the first baseman handles the receiving of thrown balls by the other infielders, the better the team will be as a whole.

Something to Watch For

When watching a big league game, look at the proper fielding position when the ball is hit like a rocket at the infielder. Note how wide he gets, how low his rear-end



gets and how far his hands get out in front. By the same token, on the ball hit at a lesser speed, the infielder at that level realizes the more times the ball hits the ground the greater the chance it will bite him. The routine ball, every now and then, is one that comes up and bites the major league player, because he is used to seeing the ball hit that way and just expects to make the play. That's a time when he gets a little lax and might not be in as good of a fielding position as he would if it was a rocket or if the ball is hit a little bit slower.

Treat every groundball as if it is the game's most important out and you will always be in the proper position. Just keep in mind when the ball is hit harder at an infielder, almost inevitably his concentration goes up, the base gets wide, his rear-end gets down, his hands get out in front and he makes the play.

Infielder's Checklist

Prior to assuming the ready position:

- The type of pitch has been signaled.
- The positioning of the infielders has been adjusted – based on the hitter, the pitcher and the game situation.
- Fielders have made each other aware of the number of outs.
- Second base coverage responsibilities have been discussed if necessary – for stolen base attempts and balls hit to the pitcher.
- Bunt defense options have been considered.



As the ball enters the hitting zone, the fielder assumes a ready position:

- Feet spread a comfortable width apart.
- Shoulders square to home plate.
- Weight shifted forward and distributed evenly on the balls of the feet.
- Knees bent slightly.
- Head up, eyes focused on hitting zone.

General guidelines for infielders:

- Anticipate that the ball will take a bad hop, and if it does you will be ready to field it.
- Create a wide base with the butt down and the hands out in front.
- See the ball and the glove. Watch the ball into the glove.
- Use two hands whenever possible.
- Field the ball in the center of the body.
- A crossover step is the first movement side to side. Practice this when the ball comes off the bat in batting practice until it is second nature.
- Practice backhand plays in practice. An infielder can't get in front of every ball, and the ability to backhand is a weapon. The backhand is caught out in front of the body off of either foot.
- Know your arm strength as well as the speed of the batter and other runners.
- Always be aware of the game situation (outs, runners on base, inning, score).
- Always try to know as much about hitters as you can. Learn from earlier at-bats.



- Be aware of the pitch being thrown and be ready to move one way or the other accordingly.
- In a double play situation, make sure to get the first out. Double plays are rare at the youth levels, so avoiding errors and getting the lead runner should be a focus.
- Middle infielders should perfect the use of the underhand flip. If utilized properly, the underhand flip can be used to start 2/3 of all double plays.
- When throwing, create momentum toward the target, point the front shoulder and follow the throw.
- Always use a four-seam grip when throwing.