

Catching: It's More than the Physical Skills

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As the Director of Scouting at the Baseball Factory, I have the opportunity to read and evaluate the written assessments of hundreds of catchers each year. In our evaluations we rate the receiving, blocking and throwing skills of each catcher. Unfortunately, there is a lot about catchers that we do not have the opportunity to review. More than any other position on the field, the physical skills alone do not make the player.

Below are listed what I believe to be the main aspects of a top defensive catcher, and why I believe each is important.

1. Ability to give the pitcher confidence to throw his pitches: Receiving and blocking are two major responsibilities of the catcher. There is a play made on each pitch that the average fan does not notice unless there is a mistake made. To the trained eye these plays make or break many games. A sure handed catcher that catches pitches in the strike zone, gets the pitcher a few borderline calls during the game, and keeps the pitches in the dirt in front of him helps remove any doubt in the pitcher's mind about whether or not to throw a certain pitch in a certain situation. The pitcher knows he can throw his best stuff to get hitters out even with a runner on third base in a tight game, or he feels like the strike zone is huge and is more confident to pitch to the corners of the plate.

2. An understanding of the game: There is a reason that a lot of current coaches were catchers during their playing days - you have to have an understanding of how the game is played to be successful behind the plate. This requires a working knowledge of all areas of baseball - hitting, types of hitters, pitching, how to work with pitchers, defensive positioning, how to get hitters out, and situations...among other things. This is one of areas that takes the longest to develop for young catchers, but once it develops it is one of the most valuable traits.

3. Leadership and confidence: One player behind the plate cannot control the game, however, there are many plays and times throughout the game when the catcher has to make a crucial decision. A successful catcher must then be vocal to his teammates about what to do regarding cutoffs and relays, bunt plays, first and third plays, and conferences at the mound. In each of these situations the players on the field look to the catcher to make the call in order to execute the play. This requires confidence and conviction from the catcher for he is the player involved in the most defensive plays and certainly has the opportunity to set the tone for the rest of the team on the field.

4. The ability to throw out base stealers: Too many times this is looked at as the main measure of a catcher's ability. It certainly is valuable to have a catcher that can slow down the running game of the opposing team, but I still believe the items listed above are more important. Ideally the catcher throws out the runners he is supposed to throw out - not the guys that make a career of stealing bases, but the guys that try and steal the base to take the double play out of order or to get into scoring position. Please see some important terms below:

a. Steal Time: the amount of time it takes for the runner (with a lead off of 1B) from his first movement to get to the 2B bag. We would like to throw out the runners with Steal Times of around 3.5 seconds, the top base stealers have Steal Times of around 3.3 seconds.

b. Pitcher's Release Time: the amount of time it takes for the pitcher in the stretch from his first movement (that the base stealer would react to) until the ball reaches the catcher's glove. Pitchers are generally expected to have release times of less than 1.4 seconds, and in some cases closer to 1.2 seconds.

c. Catcher's Release Time: the amount of time it takes for the ball to get from the catcher's glove (pop of the mitt) to the infielder's glove (pop of the mitt) covering 2B on a throw from home plate to 2B. This is often referred to as a "pop-to-pop" time.

I am often asked about the ideal release time (or pop time) for a catcher. Most people would expect to hear an answer such as 1.85 seconds, or anything under 2.0 seconds. In reality the ideal Release Time for a catcher is based on the Pitcher's Release Time and the runner's Steal Time - and in most cases the answer ends up being around 2.1 seconds on the bag. If the throw is off line it will take more time for the catch and tag. I do not want to downplay the ability to catch and throw, because it is highly sought after in catchers. I only want to make clear what it takes at minimum to throw out a good number of runners - remember throwing out 25% of base stealers is good.

EXAMPLE: The pitcher's release time (1.4 seconds) is subtracted from the Runner's Steal Time (3.5 seconds), this leaves 2.1 seconds for the catcher's throw to 2B and for the tag to be applied...therefore, an accurate throw with a release time of 2.1 seconds will throw out a runner with a 3.5 second steal time (above average for the high school level, about average for the college level) as long as the pitcher gets the ball to the plate in under 1.4 seconds (slightly above average for the high school level, about average for the college level).

There is certainly more to the position than what I have mentioned above, and not all of these things are expected of a high school catcher, but it is important to remember these things as you train. One of the goals for an aspiring catcher during the college selection process should be to try and find a program that will help you develop into a player with these skills, as well as many others that are not listed here. More than any other position on the field, the catching position is demanding both physically and mentally - and those up to the challenge will have the opportunity to play the game of baseball for a long time, as there is always a need for good Catching and good Pitching.

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