

Winning with Defense

By: Dick Birmingham

In order to have championship caliber teams you must be able to beat your opponent's best pitcher. Normally when they throw their best pitcher, your team will not score many runs. To be successful in this situation you must be able to shut down their offense. You do this with pitching and defense. "The fewer runs they score, the fewer runs you will have to score to win the game."

The legendary college football Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant once said, "All championship teams begin on defense." I think this is more applicable to baseball than football.

How do we go about building a strong defensive unit? In general we must stay away from the big inning. A majority of the time, the winning team will score more runs in one inning than the losing team will score in the entire game. The best way to accomplish the goal of building a strong defense is to keep the double play in order at all times. To do this each player must understand his role. He must be trained through drills in the fundamentals and techniques of his position. When I was a young coach I listed all the things a player must do to play his position effectively. Then I prioritized those things into primary and secondary. I came up with three primary things that each player must be able to perform to play his position well. You as a coach must develop effective drills and training programs to ensure that you players can achieve those primary goals. I have enclosed my list of primary and secondary goals for each position. You can go to www.baseballdrillbook.com for some of the drills I developed and/or discovered to help train our defensive unit.

Closing thoughts on defensive baseball are the four major skill areas in the game: running, throwing, fielding, and hitting. Three of these are extremely important in playing solid defense. Let's examine the three.

Running:

A player can have good hands and a great arm, but if he cannot get to the ball they are of value. The late great Yankee scout, Tom Greenwade was a long time friend. He signed Mickey Mantle and many other Yankee stars. Tom taught me a lot about baseball. He once said, "The first two steps a player takes, both offensively and defensively, are the most important. They must be explosive and correct."

As a coach you must work hard to improve the range of your infielders and outfielders. You must position your players so that they can take advantage of their range, both to their glove side and their throwing side. Spend time on improving their ready position and their reaction out of the ready position. They must execute the proper footwork and take the proper footwork and take the proper route to the ball.

Throwing:

Baseball is a game of catch. To quote Hall of Fame Coach Bill Olson, "The team that plays catch the best will usually win." You must have a good solid throwing program. Remember, "Good enough is not good enough!"

Here are a few throwing tips:

1. Point the glove side shoulder at the target on as many throws as possible.
2. The toe of the striding foot should be pointed at the target on as many throws at the time of release.
3. The hat bill and chin should be pointed at the target from the start of the throw to the finish of the throw.
4. Backspin is a must. Any off spin slows the ball down. The index and middle fingers must be tall behind the ball at release and moving directly toward the target.
5. All baseball throws (except specialty throws, an example would be a lead throw on a double play and throws off a slow roller) should be on a straight line or a downward plane.
6. Remember you do not throw to the base, you throw to the player. Sometimes the player is at the base and sometimes they are not. Train your players to throw to their targets chest.

Fielding:

1. "Show the big pocket to the Ball." Players must break their gloves in properly. They must rotate their wrist so the palm of the glove faces all ground balls, fly balls, line drives, and thrown balls.
2. Good fielders have a wide base, bend their knees, and keep their chin pointed at the ball.
3. Balance is a must. Slow the game down. Be in control.
4. Good fielders have soft hands. Do not fight the ball, simply receive the ball.
5. Whenever possible players should field the ball with their momentum moving toward their target. Get around the ball.
6. Expect every ball to be hit to you. Want every ball to be hit to you.

Baseball Position Requirements

Primary Responsibilities

Secondary Responsibilities

Pitcher	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Throw to spots (control)2. Change speeds (change-up, breaking ball, fastball)3. Get the ball to move	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Field position<ul style="list-style-type: none">*Bunts (zones)*Pop-ups (zones)*Back-up responsibilities2. Hold runners Close
Catcher	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Handle the lowball/pitch in the dirt (blocking)2. Control the runners (throwing)<ul style="list-style-type: none">*Accuracy*Quickness*Strength3. Handle pitchers<ul style="list-style-type: none">*Soft hands*Framing*Psychological (control the pitchers, throw stikes, know pitching)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bunts (zones)2. Pop-fouls (zones)3. Run the club/field general
First Base	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Handle the slow roller2. Guard the line3. Move to the right	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bunts (zones)2. Pop-ups<ul style="list-style-type: none">*Communication with catcher*Sprint to the barrier and work back2. Cut-offs and relays3. Hold and tag runners
Second Base	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Quick to the glove side/left2. Make pivot on double play3. Handle slow roller	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Cover bag and tags2. Cut-offs and relays3. Pop-ups (zones)
Shortstop	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Make play in the hole2. Excellent in double play situations (lead throw and pivot)3. Handle slow roller	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Cover bag and tags2. Cut-offs and relays3. Pop-ups (zones)
Third Base	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Handle slow roller2. Range to the left3. Guard the line	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bunts (zones)2. Cut-offs and relays3. Pop-ups (zones)<ul style="list-style-type: none">*Communication with catcher*Sprint to barrier and work back
Leftfield	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Go back on the ball2. Quick to the line3. Hit cut-off man	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Execute deep-angle into power alley2. Back-up responsibilities3. Movement with the count and situation
Centerfield	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Go back on the ball2. Have excellent range to power alleys3. Hit cut-off man	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Back-up responsibilities2. Movement with the count and situation
Rightfield	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Quick to the line2. Hit cut-off man3. Charge the ball hard, under control, and make a quality throw to cut-off man to keep runner from going from first to third	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Back-up responsibilities2. Movement with the count and situation