

Infield Tips and Drills

by Jeff McGaw with Rob Picciolo

Even the smartest and most alert players need repetition in order to achieve defensive enlightenment. In Part 2 of our series on Infield Play, Rob Picciolo shares ten tips and drills that can help isolate the various mechanics of good infield play.

1. One-Armed Bandit: Believe it or not, this drill is designed to focus attention on footwork. The fielder can either hold a baseball in his throwing hand, or put his throwing hand behind his back. "It's amazing how the concentration goes to the feet, because they know they don't have a safety valve in there with their bare hand so they really concentrate on which hop to catch and whether to get that long hop or that short hop," said Picciolo. When you go back to using two hands, nothing changes with the feet. "I want them to get the feeling of how to create that hop with their feet. It's a really good drill."

2. Line Drill: Draw a line four feet in front of the fielder. The fielder's goal is to field every fungo in front of that line. "When the ball is hit, they have to go forward and catch the ball in front of the line. What you find is they play more aggressively and once they get in front of that line they can slow down and they can create hops with their feet. It's a really good drill to get infielders out of slumps," Picciolo said. "Once they get in front of that line then all of the sudden they slow down and maybe use a stutter step, which is valuable in infield play."

3. On Your Knees: The fielder kneels on the grass and the ball is hit at or near him. "Now it's just your hands. You can't use your feet and you've got to use your hands. There are occasions when your hands can create a hop by going forward or staying back a little bit. It's a great drill to test hand reaction."

There is another benefit of the drill from a coaching standpoint. "A lot of times people will



Drill 1: ONE-ARMED BANDIT: This drill is designed to focus attention on footwork. The fielder can either hold a baseball in his throwing hand, or put his throwing hand behind his back.

say 'he's got bad hands,'" Picciolo said. Then, he added, "you put him on his knees and he catches all the balls so you know the problem when he gets up is with his feet. He's not creating good hops with his feet."

4. Hop Counting: This is a concentration drill. "The player has to focus from the initial contact point to get the right number of hops. That makes you focus on the first hop off the bat and they've got to count while they are still moving their feet." In more advanced forms of this drill, the player not only counts the hops, but has to tell the coach whether or not he got a good hop or a bad hop. If you don't get a good hop, try to figure out why not. "Ninety percent of the time

About Rob Picciolo

Rob Picciolo, 55, a Pepperdine University Hall of Famer, played for the A's, Brewers and Angels from 1977 to 1985. His first major league hit came against Nolan Ryan. He accumulated a .970 fielding percentage as a shortstop. After retiring as a player, Picciolo spent 15 years as a coach, the last three as third base coach, for the San Diego Padres. This was the longest tenure of any coach in that organization's history.



In 2006, Picciolo became the roving infield instructor for the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. "Defense," he said, "is my job." Picciolo is a regular coach at the Pro Ball Baseball Clinic (see Summer Issue 2008) each January in Peoria, Arizona.

He appreciates the Yin and Yang of baseball. "They say pitching and defense win you ballgames; well, that's true, but home runs help a lot too, don't get me wrong. The only way you're going to beat other teams is to score runs."

(when it's a bad hop) they stay back when they should have gone forward to create the short hop."

5. Visualization: On deck hitters do it all the time: they watch the pitcher throwing to the hitter ahead of them, or watch him warming up. They anticipate the velocity, they time the



Drill 2: THE LINE DRILL The Line Drill helps infielders develop a more aggressive approach to ground balls. In the drill, a line is drawn 4 feet in front of the fielder. The fielder's goal is to field every fungo in front of the line.



Drill 3: ON YOUR KNEES: The purpose of this drill is to focus all of the attention on the hands, without any involvement with the feet. It is a great way to measure hand reaction, says Picciolo.

pitch, they swing, feel the contact, and imagine themselves hitting a line drive. “We take that into defense,” Picciolo said. “Between pitches we visualize a ground ball being hit to us. Mentally you’re fielding 200 or 300 ground balls a day if you’re doing it properly. Nothing surprises you. You’ve seen that play and you’ve rehearsed it mentally.”

6. Live BP: “Players can take live balls off the batting practice hitter rather than fungoes a lot of times just to get reads and jumps,” Picciolo said. “They have to react and take steps toward every place the ball is hit and react toward the baseball. It’s a great drill,” he added. “It’s as game-like as you can get.”

7. Have a Plan: “We talk about every infielder having a plan when they’re out there taking ground balls so they aren’t just out there waiting. There’s something in mind, whether they are working on a rhythm, a crossover step, a backhand, a forehand, a double-play feed, a pivot. There’s got to be something you are working on.”

8. Backhand or Forehand: This drill stresses early glove presentation. The fungo hitter should stand at or near the mound. Rather than a normal starting position, the fielder begins the drill already in the crossed over position with the glove presented. When the ball is struck, all he has to do is move his feet and the glove is already set to catch the ball. It’s the same for a ball hit to the glove side.

9. Catch and More: “When you’re fielding a ball in batting practice (or off a fungo) and there’s no one to throw to, never just field it and throw it back into the fungo hitter,” Picciolo said. “We always field a ground ball, look to the base you will be throwing to, set your feet, and then throw it back to the fungo hitter.” The goal, Picciolo said, “is to set up for that last hop so you have to see the ball off the bat immediately.” Repetition helps you learn how the ball will move. “When a ball is struck and you see that first hop you’ll have a pretty good idea where that last hop is and that’s what you’re setting your feet for. It’s vital to keep your eyes on the baseball and get that initial reaction off the bat.”

10. Ground Up: A basic maxim of infield play is that you work from the ground up. The fielder starts in the basic fielding triangle with the glove



Drill 8: BACKHAND OR FOREHAND: In the Backhand Drill, the fielder should begin in the crossed-over position with the glove presented. As in some other drills, this shifts the focus to moving the feet in order to get in the best position to field the ball. You can do a similar drill on the glove side by starting out with the glove extended.

on the ground when the ball is hit. The goal is to keep the glove on the ground as long as you can as the feet shuffle back and forth. The last reaction of your glove is from the down to up. “That isn’t a starting position,” Picciolo stressed. “It’s really only a drill.”



Drill 10: GROUND UP (the fielding triangle): The fielder starts in the basic fielding triangle: the feet are apart, glove slightly ahead and out on the ground in front of you, forming a triangle (see photo left). The goal is to keep the glove on the ground so that the last reaction of your glove is from down to up. This is not a starting position, Picciolo warns, “It’s really only a drill.”