

An Infielder's Guide to Good Defense

Developing a Defensive Mentality

By Jeff McGaw with Rob Picciolo

You don't have to study Eastern religions to have a Zen moment as a ballplayer.

You only have to listen to former major league shortstop-turned-professional baseball coach **Rob Picciolo**. "Peach," as many know him, is a firm believer that good infield play is a mind-body experience.

"The mind can be a great asset to you," Picciolo said. "And the mind can work against you," he added. "Negative thoughts and not paying attention," are the chief sins.

"If a ball is hit to you and you don't realize it's coming your way until it's halfway to you or by the pitcher's mound, and you start reacting—well, it's too late to react. Keeping your focus and keeping positive thoughts in your head is a great advantage."

Anticipation Pitch after Pitch

Playing good defense requires both athleticism and mental toughness. If an infielder gets five ground balls in a game where the pitcher has thrown 125 pitches, he's had a busy night. Yet an infielder needs to anticipate a ground ball every time a ball leaves the pitcher's hand.

"Staying focused and ready on every pitch is vital for first step quickness and getting good jumps," Picciolo said, adding, "It's a mental grind." Playing "smart" could fill an entire chapter in a book about good defense, according to Picciolo.

Working the Finer Points

Taking pride in defense and understanding "you don't have to make a play to have a good game defensively," are important points. Relaying pitches to the corner infielders (and outfielders), holding runners close, pop fly communication, shouting outs, knowing first and third defenses, being in the right place for a bunt play, are vital.

A scenario cited by Picciolo serves as an example: A shortstop relays the catcher's signal to the third baseman. The third baseman then makes a great play down the line because the shortstop told him what pitch to expect.

That shortstop, Picciolo points out, "had a lot to do with making that play."

General Principles

Enjoy Defense: Whether coaching professionals or amateurs, virtually all of the maxims of defense apply, Picciolo said, none more so than this: Enjoy playing defense. "If you're going to get better at something you'd better enjoy it," said Picciolo. "That's true in anything you do."

Anticipate: Anticipation is a huge part of playing infield defense. "Any time you are surprised on the baseball field, something bad is going to happen to you... a lot of errors are committed due to the element of surprise—not being mentally prepared for a ball to be hit your way," Picciolo said.

Explosive first step: "I can't stress how important that explosive first step is," Picciolo said.

Repetition is king: "We try to get in front of as many baseballs as we can in practice," he said. "We want players to learn how to explode and try to get as quickly as they can in front of a baseball." It all starts with the very first explosive step.

Consistently make the routine play: "That's what's going to help your team win," Picciolo said. "The great play is nice, but if you can make the routine play on a consistent basis you give your team a better chance of winning. We really try to stress that with the players."

The bare-handed recovery: If you boot a ground ball, always pick it up with a bare hand. Spread the feet, get your chest over the ball, and push it to the ground with the throwing hand. Then set your feet to be able to make a throw. "It'll save you a lot of costly mistakes," Picciolo said.

When in doubt, go: When you get that "uh-oh" feeling and aren't sure whether to charge a ground ball or stay back, there is only one answer, Picciolo said: "Go."

"You'll be right more than you're wrong if you go," he explained. Conversely, "if you stay back you'll be wrong more than you're right."

It's not a foolproof method, but if you're going to make a mistake you want to make it aggressively by going forward and trying to catch the short hop.

Mechanics

Good Feet: It starts with the feet. "To me the feet are more important than the hands. The feet are going to create the hop. The goal is to catch the short hop or the long hop and to me the only way to do that is by reading the ground ball with your eyes and setting up your feet for the catch."

Picciolo's Checklist

While there is no one way of getting ready for a play, "there certainly are a few basics that you need to have which I look for," Picciolo said.

1. Both feet are on the ground, feet are slightly pointed outward slightly wider than shoulder, and toes gripping the ground. Thumbs should be up.

2. Carry the glove low and present the glove early. "We don't want to carry a glove high and have to go down to a ball (where we have)

About Rob Picciolo

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 the third base coach for the San Diego Padres—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 2008 issue of *HardBall Magazine*) 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."



that stabbing feeling... we don't time it, pat our glove, and go down and catch it. We place our glove where we think the ball is going to be while we're still moving our feet and let the ball come into a ready glove."

3. The fielding triangle: The feet are apart, glove slightly ahead and out on the ground in front of you forming a triangle. The top of the triangle is more on the glove side which keeps your elbow—your shock absorber—bent for better reaction.

4. The funnel: Once the ball is received, "we talk about the funnel," Picciolo said. "We take the ball and glove into the stomach or belly button and that is where we separate our hands. We don't separate them low and we don't separate them high. We bring them to the core of our body and we separate our hands there. Usually the glove hand is at seven o'clock and the free hand is at one o'clock," he said. That is, "if a big clock was right in front of you that's where your hands would be."

5. Get the short or long hop. The short hop is ideal because the ball has nowhere to go but into the glove. The long hop bounces well in front and is usually coming down when you catch it making it an easier play to make. "The hop that is still going up is the one that is going to handcuff you," Picciolo said.

6. Angles are vital in infield play. Getting the proper angle depends on the velocity and how far away it is from you. Fielders—especially third basemen—can draw what almost looks like an asterisk on the ground. Each point of the asterisk is an angle you can take. It's not just straight across. "Angles are vital, depending on speed of the runner and speed of the ball and how hard it's hit."

7. Crossover step: "If you're going a long way, you have to make sure to turn your shoulders with your crossover step because if you keep your chest square to home plate when you cross over, you won't be as quick."

8. Flashing leather: A good infielder uses different parts of the glove for different things. For backhands, use the web. For pop-ups use the pocket. For quick transfers use the heel of the glove, especially to make good feeds. "If you're talking about a double play pivot, you're not really catching the baseball; it's hitting the heel of your glove and ricocheting to your bare hand," Picciolo said. "It's the same thing on a good relay throw." On a bad relay or bad feed, you try to catch the ball the best you can and make the pivot or the relay.

TIPS FOR COACHES

False Breaks: Every time a swing is made by a hitter there is a reaction—a false break—from the infielder, who is reading hands, reading the velocity of the ball, reading where the head of the bat is, and anticipating where that ball is going to be hit before it's actually struck. A coach can benefit from observing what his infielders do on a foul ball, Picciolo said. "See if they have reacted. If they're flat footed, they probably weren't mentally prepared for that ground ball. If there was a flinch of some kind, you know that mentally they are into the game and watching."

Button Down: "Fungo hitters should see the button on the top of your cap when you field a ground ball. They talk about it so much in hitting: if your head pulls off your whole body is going to pull off. It's the same thing in fielding. If your head comes up your hands are usually going to go with them and the ball is going to go underneath your glove."

TIPS AND DRILLS

Even the smartest and most alert players need repetition in order to achieve defensive enlightenment. Picciolo advocates various drills that can help isolate the various mechanics of good infield play. These drills will be presented in detail in the next issue of *HardBall*.



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