

BASERUNNING

“Baseball is a game of inches” goes the popular maxim, but often those inches are better described as microseconds. According to scouts, the best way to tell if young players are big-league material is to time them running the bases. The feeling is that you can teach hitting and pitching skills, but you can’t teach foot speed.

But running the bases involves much more than pure speed. Like baseball’s other skills, good base running is a combination of physical prowess and heads-up play. Even if you’re not a sprinter, you can effectively run the bases and help your team if you use the proper techniques – shaving microseconds from the time it takes you to circle the diamond.

RUN STRAIGHT, RUN FAST

The shortest, and quickest, distance between two points is a straight line. On a ground ball in the infield, run up the baseline as fast as you can. Don’t jump at the base, run straight through it, and don’t slow down until you’ve passed it. With one exception, don’t slide into first, either. Sliding doesn’t get you to the base faster; it helps keep you from overrunning. As long as you don’t attempt to advance to second you’re allowed to overrun first.

You can turn toward your left or right to return to first, but don’t turn sharply into foul territory (your right) either. If the ball is overthrown you’ll be in a better position to go to second if your turn back to second is short.

About that exception: If the first baseman has the ball and is coming toward you to tag you as you run to first, a good slide may help you avoid the tag.

A Special Note

In running the last half between home plate and first base, run on the right side of the foul line. If a thrown ball hits you in fair territory in the last half you can be called out if you’re running in fair territory.

GOING FOR TWO

If a ball goes through to the outfield, about two thirds down the line, start a small arc into foul ground. You can see where the ball is and, without looping too far out into the infield, decide whether to try for second. If the ball has gone past the outfielders, you will be able to make second easily. If the outfielder bobbles the ball, with a good turn you’ll also be in a good position to stretch a single into a double.

When you hit a fly ball you know there won’t be a play at first (unless you’re dogging it to first). The only question is whether the ball will fall in or be caught. As soon as you hit a fly ball, start running in a small arc into foul ground. Keep your eye on the ball, round first hard, and be ready to take second, if you can.

THE WRONG FOOT

When all is said or done, there is no such thing as the “wrong” foot. Ideally, you want to step on the corner of the base that is facing the infield with your left foot. This helps you change direction and reduces the time it takes you to round the bases. But the fact is that if you have to break your stride to step on the base with this “correct” foot, you aren’t saving time. Step on the base with whichever foot is easiest.

WHEN THE BATTER BUNTS

One of the dangers in bunting with runners on base is the potential for a double play if the bunter pops up. Instead of having a runner on second and one out, you end up with no one on and two outs.

Avoiding the double play is the base runner's responsibility.

You know the batter is going to bunt. As the ball hits the bat, shuffle off first base by bringing your left foot to your right. Then slide your right foot toward second. Keep your weight equally on both feet so you can move quickly in either direction. When you're sure the ball has caromed down off the bat, take a crossover step and run as fast as you can toward second. Don't look to see where the throw is going, and always slide. Crafty shortstops will pretend the throw isn't coming to second, to try and get you to slow *down* or overrun the base. If you run straight for the base and slide every time, the shortstop's decoy won't work.

THE GOLDEN RULE

NEVER MAKE THE FIRST OR THIRD OUT AT THIRD BASE

Here's why: If there are no outs, you have nearly as good a chance of scoring from second as you do from third. If there are two outs, you won't be able to score from third on a sacrifice fly anyway, and you'll score almost as easily from second as from third on a base hit to the outfield. In both cases the advantage of being on third isn't worth the risk that you'll be thrown out. Because you can score from third on a fly or ground ball, going from second to third with one out is worth the risk. And of course, even if there are no outs or two, if it's absolutely certain you'll make it to third safely, go ahead. You'll then be able to score on a wild pitch, and infield single, or an error.

MIND YOUR COACHES

The decisions you make when you run the bases depend on the score, how many outs there are, what inning it is, and where the other runners are, as well as on what the fielders do. The first – and third-base coaches are there to help you. They will tell you whether you should slide, take the extra base, or stay put. There may be times when the coach will tell you to hold up then you want to run, but you should always obey. The coach has a better view than you of what's happening on the field and therefore knows what's best for the team.

TAGGING UP

Tagging up on a sacrifice fly is more or less a routine play; but you must execute it precisely. If the ball is hit in the air, the runner must wait until it's touched by the outfielder to advance to the next base. Be careful. If you leave third too early the other team will appeal, you'll be called out, and your run won't count. If you leave third too late you'll be thrown out.

If you're on third base, there are less than two outs, and the ball is hit in the air, return quickly to the base and get set in a sprinter's starting position, facing home. If the ball isn't caught, you'll score easily anyway, but if the outfielder makes the catch you'll have to race the ball to the plate.

Look over your shoulder. As soon as you see that the outfielder has touched the ball, take off and run as fast as you can straight for home. Always slide into home when tagging up from third, unless you hear the coach tells you not to do so.

If you're on first or second, with less than two outs, when a fly ball is hit advance to midway up the baseline. If the ball is caught, return to the base you started from. If the ball is dropped, or falls in, advancing half way will give you a head start in advancing to the next base. One exception to this rule is if you're on second with no one out a deep fly ball is hit to right field. Tag up just as you would do from third, and pay attention to your base coach.

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