

SPACE-CONSTRAINED PRACTICE

One of the unfortunately realities of coaching in Brooklyn is that we are often fighting for space in the park. As a result, we need to improvise and find ways to practice in small spaces between fields and/or other teams and games. Included herein are a series of drills (some modified) that can be done without the need for an entire field.

GROUNDBALLS

Receiving (Basic):

Working barehanded, players break into pairs and kneel about 15' apart. Facing each other, one player rolls a grounder to the other. The player receiving the ground ball starts in a forward-leaning posture (shoulders slightly in front of knees) with the fingertips of his glove hand pointing down and his throwing hand above his glove hand palm down. The player receiving will field the grounder, pull it into his body and then flip it back to the player feeding. 20 reps then switch and repeat.

Receiving - Backhands (Basic):

Working with gloves on, players break into pairs and kneel about 15' apart. Facing each other, one player rolls a grounder to the other's backhand side. The player receiving the ground ball starts in a forward-leaning posture (shoulders slightly in front of knees) with his glove on the backhand side and the fingertips pointing down. The player receiving will field the grounder with

his glove moving forward then up. After catching the ball, he will pull it out of the glove and flip it back to the player feeding. 20 reps then switch and repeat.

Fielding (Basic):

Players queue in a line 30 or more feet away from coach. Player assumes a standard fielding position and begins with a prep step. Coach hits a ground ball to the player. (For a right handed player.) The player moves to and fields the ball; teach the mantra right, left, down, right, left, throw. First, the player steps into the ball with his right foot ("right"), then his left foot ("left"). The objective is to position the ball in the middle of the body prior to fielding it. Then, the player bends at the knees while maintaining a flat back and extending his arms so the glove is fingertips down with the throwing hand above and both hands out in front of the body ("down"). Lastly, receive the ball, pull it into the body and as the player pulls it up to a throwing position, shift the right foot to replace the left foot ("right"), step with the left foot toward the target ("left") and toss the ball back to the coach ("throw").

Tag Drill (Basic):

Position a bucket in front of a base, the defender at shortstop and the coach about 10' away on the second base side of the bag. The coach says "cover," the player sprints to base and the coach feeds an underhand throw to the player. Player works on proper position (straddling the

base) for the cover and receiving the throw without reaching for the ball (bucket prevents that). Upon catching the ball, player tags the front side of the bag and flips the ball back to the coach.

Short Hops (Intermediate):

Position players in pairs approximately 20'-25' apart. One player feeds and the other fields short hops. 10 reps each then switch and repeat. Receivers focus on starting in a standard fielding position, including a prep step, and working their glove from the ground up as the ball bounces.

RUNDOWNS

Rundowns (Advanced):

Position defenders at first base, second base and pitcher with a runner on first base. The pitcher starts with the ball and the baserunner breaks for second. Defense executes a rundown. Note the following:

- Defenders follow their throws and cover the just-vacated position; i.e., the pitcher throws to first, the first baseman leaves his position to chase the runner and the pitcher cover first.
- Fielders chase runners, carrying the ball in their throwing hand at ear height.

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- Defenders call “now” when they want the ball.
- Defenders without the ball should recognize when it is appropriate to move toward the runner and “close the distance”; shrinking the space where the runner can move makes it more difficult to change direction.
- Seek to tag runner as they are changing direction, as this is when they are at their slowest.
- Jog when the runner is moving toward the advance base and sprint when he is retreating to the back base.
- Do not allow the runner to take the advance base; forcing him to return to the back base is not a bad outcome.

DOUBLE PLAYS

Double Play Feeds (Intermediate):

Station players 25’ apart in a triangle. Working barehanded, player 1 rolls the ball to player 2. Player 2 fields the ball and underhand tosses it to player 3. Player 3 catches the toss and rolls the ball to player 1. Continue for 30 total touches. After 30 touches, repeat in the opposite direction. Field grounders with both hands and step in the direction of the underhand toss (making sure to step back afterwards for the

next rep). Receive the underhand toss with both hands, mimicking the catch and transition for a double play turn.

FLYBALLS

Retreating (Basic):

Standing about 5' away and facing a coach, outfielder begins in a ready position. Coach says go and the outfielder retreats to his forehand side. He turns sideways and runs away from the coach while looking up. Coach throws a fly ball and the outfielder runs under and catches it. The outfielder focuses on keeping his feet moving, outracing the ball to its ultimate destination, running sideways (never backpedaling), catching the ball overhead with two hands and shifting his feet to throw the ball back to coach. Complete multiple reps to the forehand side then retreat to the backhand side and repeat.

Charging (Basic):

Standing 50'-100' away and facing a coach, outfielder begins in a ready position. Coach throws a flyball short of the outfielder. Outfielder tracks the ball and works to catch it overhead, using both hands, while moving forward. This teaches the player to generate momentum in the direction of his throw and facilitate a transition from catching to throwing.

Sprint Drill (Intermediate):

Position a cone approximately 50’ away from the coach. Start with the player about 10' away from and facing a coach. Coach says go and the outfielder turns his back to the coach and sprints to the cone. As the outfielder approaches the cone, coach throws a fly ball (leading the outfielder); when the outfielder reaches the cone, he looks up, locates the ball and runs under it to make the catch. This drill teaches outfielders to chase and locate fly balls while running with their heads down. Doing that successfully will teach them to cover more ground and increase their range.

Spin Drill (Advanced):

Using the same setup as the Retreating drill, when the coach says go, the outfielder retreats to his forehand side. As he is running away, coach throws a flyball to the backhand side. Upon seeing the ball on the other side of his body, the outfielder spins to the outside, changes course, runs under the ball and makes the catch. This is a difficult skill and to do it properly, the outfielder should first turn his head to the outside and locate the ball, then turn his body and follow its trajectory. Turning to the outside requires the player to re-locate the ball but, turning to the inside makes it very difficult to retain balance and change direction. After completing multiple reps, repeat the drill by starting to the backhand side then spinning to the forehand side.

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OUTFIELD GROUNDERS

Grounders — Knee Drill (Basic):

Coach hits a ground ball to the outfielder. Outfielder charges the ball, squares his body to the ball, drops to one knee, fields the grounder and throws it back to the coach.

Grounders — Standard (Basic):

Coach hits a ground ball to the outfielder. Outfielder charges the ball, fields the grounder in a neutral posture (similar to an infielder) and throws it back to the coach.

Grounders — Charging Drill (Advanced):

Coach hits a ground ball to the outfielder. Outfielder charges the ball aggressively with his glove down. For a right-handed player, the fingertips of the left (glove) hand should be touching the ground as the left foot steps toward the ball. As the outfielder pulls the ball into his body, he steps with his right foot behind his left ("crow hop"), squares his left shoulder to the target and completes the throw back to the coach.

CATCHING

Receiving (Basic):

Working barehanded, player assumes a catching stance. From 20' away, coach tosses and catcher receives balls with only the thumb, index and middle finger of his catching hand. This im-

proves eye-hand coordination along with the player's ability to close his hand around the ball. For an added challenge, use a (bouncier) tennis or rubber ball.

Receiving Drill (Intermediate):

The catcher, wearing a mask and glove sets up approximately 30' away from the coach. Coach throws the ball overhand and the catcher works on receiving while looking through the mask and catching the ball in the web of his glove. The catcher should also focus on not blinking; a habit that should be reinforced when catching live at-bats.

Framing Drill (Advanced):

Using the Receiving Drill setup, position the catcher behind home plate and add framing; work on catching the outer half of the ball and rotating the glove toward the strike zone. Do not yanking the glove over the plate. Use a subtle movement that finishes with the glove around the perimeter of the plate for inside, outside and high strikes.

Low Framing Drill (Advanced):

For low strikes, the catcher should catch the ball with his glove moving upward. The goal is to create the illusion that he is reaching up to catch a pitch that might otherwise be seen as too low. Again, try to do this with subtle movement and stop the glove at the point of the catch. Do not yank the glove.

Blocking Drill (Basic):

Wearing full gear, the catcher starts in a blocking position: (i) on his knees, (ii) glove palm-up with the webbing touching the ground, (iii) throwing hand tucked behind the glove, (iv) shoulders rolled slightly forward, and (v) chin tucked against the chest. From 20'-30' away, coach throws short hops into the catcher's glove and/or chest protector. This teaches proper positioning, demonstrates blocking (and not catching) the ball, reinforces the need to keep the gear between the catcher and the ball, and mitigates any fear of being hit with a ball. For players overcoming a fear of the ball, this can be done with tennis, rubber or soft baseballs.

Blocking Drill (Intermediate):

Wearing full gear and starting in a catcher's stance, a coach approximately 30' away throws short hops and the catcher moves from a squat position to a proper blocking position to stop each ball.

Blocking Drill (Advanced):

Expanding on the Blocking Drill (Intermediate), the coach backs up to 40'-50' away and randomly makes the errant throws left and right of center, forcing the catcher to move laterally. The catcher must rotate his body and square his shoulders to the ball. If done properly, the ball will bounce and stop in front of the catcher. If the ball caroms sideways, the catcher was not square to the trajectory of the baseball.

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Blocking and Framing Drill (Advanced):

Wearing full gear and with the coach working from approximately 40'-50' away, the coach will randomize his throws. The catcher will frame or block each one as appropriate.

Throwing Drill (Advanced):

With a fielder covering either second or third base, the catcher takes a stance behind the plate. From 15' away, the coach makes an underhand toss to the catcher who receives the ball and works on transitioning and throwing to the covered base. This drill, meant to simulate throwing out a base stealer, develops quickness and focuses on sound mechanical movements. This should be practiced at low speed to reinforce proper mechanics.

(For right-handed players.) The catcher's movements can be divided into three steps. First, receive the ball and jab step with the right foot; the right foot should land perpendicular to the intended throwing line, start the catcher's momentum toward his intended target and establish the push off point for the throw. Second, point the left shoulder toward the target, pull the ball out of the glove, rotate the ball to a four-seam grip, lift the ball to ear height while pointing it opposite the target, and step toward the target with the left foot. Lastly, shift weight into the left foot and throw to the intended base.

This is an extremely difficult skill, as each of the

three steps has several components. When done properly, those components happen simultaneously (the key to quickness is no wasted movements). It is recommended that the catchers learn to do this in steps by doing it without regard for quickness until the motion can be repeated consistently well. Players will tend to rush the mechanics and try to throw the ball too hard. A shorter but quicker throwing motion is preferable to a long, slow motion that produces more velocity. For those that struggle with the distance of the throw, teach them to throw the ball to the base on one long bounce. This produces the desired trajectory and eliminates the need to wind up before making the throw.

Older players are now taught to catch the ball and executed 90-degree jump-turn to a throwing position. This requires greater arm strength as the catcher initiates the throw with a pivot move instead of a full step. While in some ways the mechanics are easier, we do not recommend this for younger players. Moreover, the technique that utilizes the step is also the proper form for a pitchout so it remains worth mastering.

Backstop Drill (Basic):

Place nine balls behind home plate (3 forehand, 3 center, 3 backhand; 10', 15' and 20' from home) and position the catcher, in full gear, behind the plate with a coach covering home. Alternating forehand, center, backhand, the catcher sprints to a ball, slides on his right knee to

stop (for a right-handed catcher), and tosses a ball (over or underhand) to the coach covering home. This will help to develop speed, fitness and coordination.

Backstop Drill (Intermediate):

For an added challenge, the coach will call out forehand, center or backhand for each try and the catcher will retrieve the appropriate ball until all balls are returned to the coach.

SLIDING

Sliding (Intermediate):

Queue the players halfway between first and second bases. One at a time, players sprint to second base and slide (this can be done head-first or feet-first depending upon the skill being taught). If the players are having difficulty identifying where to start the slide, coaches can mark the general vicinity with a glove, cone, etc.

For feet-first sliding, focus players on a fully-extended lead leg with the off leg tucked underneath (i.e., left ankle behind the right knee) and the hands away from the body (either to the side or up in the air). To illustrate the proper position, have players sit on the ground, "make the number four" with their legs and extend their arms up and away from their bodies.

For head-first sliding, focus on arms extended with the player landing on his chest when he hits

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the ground. The most important thing for all slides is that hands and spikes do not get trapped under the player's body, as that is where injuries occur.

DIVING

Dive Drill (Intermediate):

Queue the players in a line about 15' away from the coach. Players start in ready position and the coach, positioned on one knee, throws balls low to the ground to the player's forehand side. The ball should be thrown no higher than a player's waist and it should be far enough away that the player must dive to catch it. Players need to focus on starting low, staying low, diving with their arms out and landing on their chest. This will teach proper ready position, good reaction times and proper technique for diving and head-first sliding. Begin the drill with tries to the forehand side, then move to backhand tries. When the players become adept, randomize the throws to both forehand and backhand side.

RELAY DRILLS

Relay Lines (Basic):

Separate the players into groups of three. For each group, position the players in a line approximately the length of a base path apart (i.e., if your team plays on a 50/70 field, the players should be 70' apart). Starting at one end, have the kids play catch, focusing on good relay me-

chanics. The relay (middle) position should provide a good target, positioned with both hands in the air. The player receiving the relay should concentrate on moving toward the ball, receiving it on the glove side, turning to the glove side and making a throw to the other end of the relay line. Do this continually back and forth for a few reps then have the lines rotate so each player has an opportunity at the relay position.

PITCHING

Bullpen (Basic):

Set up as many pitching stations as space will allow. With catchers in full gear, pitchers throw bullpen sessions. Depending upon player age and development, work on windup, stretch and slide steps and/or fastball versus offspeed and breaking pitches.

Catchers should use this as an opportunity to home framing and blocking skills (especially if pitchers are throwing breaking pitches).

When working with pitchers, challenge them to throw a certain percentage of strikes (say 6 or 7 out of 10) and don't throw anything other than four-seam fastballs until they can consistently meet the goal.

For more advanced work, challenge the pitcher to throw strikes to one side of the plate (e.g., inner half to a right handed hitter).

For all bullpens, take note (you can even chart) how frequently and where pitchers miss. Consistent misses are often indicative of something mechanical and they will give players an opportunity to focus on a particular area of improvement.

BUNTING

Live Bunting (Intermediate):

With a pitcher, catcher (in full gear) and batter, the pitcher throws live pitches and the batter attempts to lay down a bunt.

Batters should focus on proper technique. For a sacrifice bunt, the batter should "square around" when the pitcher starts his windup. This means separating his hands, sliding his top hand to the middle of the bat (around the bottom of the trademark) and holding the bat gently in the thumb, index and middle fingers. The end of the bat should cover the outside corner of home plate and the bat should be held parallel to the ground at the top of the strike zone.

From a proper setup, anything above the hands is a ball and should be taken. Pitches below the top of the strike zone should be approached by bending at the knees, not lowering the hands. The bat should be pushed slightly forward into fair territory and the batter should try to "catch" the ball with the bat. This means softly making contact and trying to deaden the ball, not swatting or stabbing at it.