

CATCHER DRILLS

An old baseball adage says that pitching is 75 percent of the game. If that's true, then catching has to rank right up there in degree of importance. In fact, very few teams have won a championship without a catcher with leadership skills and defensive prowess.

Catcher is not the most glamorous of positions. It's hot, dirty, and mentally and physically demanding. A catcher's offense often suffers because of the fatigue from playing defense. But if a young man enjoys the challenge of being involved in every pitch, having the entire field in front of him, and running the show as the quarterback of his team, then he has the mental makeup to be a catcher. Unfortunately, this alone guarantees little. He must also be very skilled in all aspects of the catching position. To excel, the young man must practice and drill long hours, day in and day out, to be the best he can be.

This document on catching drills is designed to give the catcher and coach some tools with which they can improve catcher fundamentals and overall ability. Most of the drills can be done inside or outside and within limited space. All of them can be done with few participants, but some can be expanded to include other positions in game like situations. Keep in mind that repetition and proper technique are the keys to any drill.

Catching can be the most important and rewarding position on the field. And remember another old baseball adage – the quickest way to the big leagues is behind the plate!

DRILL NUMBER 1

BUNT ME ONE

FOCUS: To develop proper approach, footwork, and fielding of bunts and blocked third strikes.

SETUP: This drill is best done with a first baseman, a catcher, and a coach. The catcher is in full gear and gets into ready position behind the plate with the coach standing behind him and facing the infield. The first baseman takes throws at first base.

PROCEDURE: From behind the catcher, the coach rolls out bunts at various angles in front of the plate. Depending on the location, the catcher takes the quickest and most efficient route to the ball and puts his head and shoulders over the balls as he ‘rakes’ it into his glove. A ball that has stopped may be barehanded, but the glove still should be placed on the ground in front of the ball to keep the shoulders closed and head down. After cleanly grasping the ball, the catcher squares his shoulders up to first base, keeps rhythm by shuffling his feet, and makes a chest-high throw to the first basemen. The next catcher quickly moves to his ready position, and the sequence is repeated. All catchers involved should get work in all areas in front of the plate.

COACHING POINTS: Balls bunted from the pitcher’s mound over to the first-base line can be rounded off slightly as the catcher approaches the ball. This keeps the body squared and the front shoulder closed. A ball bunted to the left of the mound should be approached in a direct line, fielding the ball off the left of the body and the right foot planting just beyond the ball. The body turns in a reverse spin, and the throw is made. On balls near the first-base line, the catcher should shuffle his feet more aggressively to the inside or outside of the baseline to clear the runner. The catcher should always have knowledge of the runner’s speed as he goes after the bunted ball. The catcher can use his preference as to whether to keep the mask on or discard it. The catcher should always aggressively call for the ball (“Mine! Mine”) so the pitcher and infielders move out of the way.

MODIFICATIONS: The first basemen can replicate game conditions by charging as the coach rolls out the bunt. As he reads the catcher’s ball, he quickly stops, gets back to the bag, and sets up for the throw.

DRILL NUMBER 2

HOME TO FIRST DOUBLE PLAY

FOCUS: To develop and reinforce the catcher's positioning and footwork on home-to-first double plays; to teach catchers to recognize which throws to turn and which throws to take the force-out.

SETUP: This drill can be done with three catchers only, but is best performed when integrated with infielders fielding fungo from a drawn-in position. If using only catchers, one is on the infield grass 40 to 50 feet away with ball in hand. The second catcher is at first base receiving throws. The third catcher is in full gear behind the plate. If infielders participate, they play in a drawn-in position. Pitchers too can take part in this drill.

PROCEDURE: The drill is initiated either by throwing the ball from the catcher in the infield or by the coach hitting fungo to the infielder. The catcher sets up in an athletic position, facing the throw and straddling the back half of the plate. In this position he always has a feel as to where the plate is. He should give the thrower a good target by showing the mitt. When the ball is released, he'll receive the throw in front of the body, using the throwing hand to cover the ball as it enters the mitt. At the same time, he steps with his left foot toward the throw as he drags his right foot across the plate. His upper body quickly turns to first base so that his left shoulder is facing the bag and the ball is delivered to first base. You can run many repetitions in a short time, rotating catchers in and out.

COACHING POINTS: The catcher should "find a seam" as his bare hand covers the ball and the transition to the throw begins. He should drag his foot over the plate, much like a shortstop does on a double play at second base. If the throw is off line, the catcher places a foot on the plate and stretches to the ball to ensure the force out. Because of the quickness of this play, the mask is usually kept on.

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 3

QUICK HANDS

FOCUS: To isolate upper-body throwing mechanics by eliminating foot-work.

SETUP: Use two catchers. If the drill is done indoors or on an artificial surface, no shin guards are required. If done on a dirt or grass surface, shin guards are recommended. The drill can be performed barehanded using a tennis ball, with a flat training glove and baseball, or using a standard catcher's mitt and baseball.

PROCEDURE: Catchers kneel on one of both knees as they face one another 15 to 18 feet apart. The catcher receiving the throw gets into ready position with the glove-hand extended and his bare hand positioned behind the glove-hand or against the chest in a relaxed manner.

His partner initiates the drill by tossing a tennis ball (or baseball) to him so that the catch is made in front of the body. As the ball contacts the hand (glove), the throwing hand covers the ball while the fingers find a seam.

Using "short" arm action, the ball is brought back under the chin while the front shoulder closes. Hands break, and the ball is brought straight back to the throwing position. Without hesitating, the catcher tosses the ball back to his partner, who has assumed a ready position. Each catcher should do at least 15 to 20 repetitions.

COACHING POINTS: The catcher concentrates on proper form and quickness from the catch, through the transition phase, to the throw and release. Hand quickness and short, efficient arm action are major components of this drill. Because the drill simulates steal and pickoff throws, the catcher should not receive the "pitch" too far out in front of his body but rather let the ball "travel" to catch it close to his body. Emphasize that the ball is *not* caught one-handed and brought back to the throwing hand. The throwing hand covers the ball as it enters the bare hand (mitt), and at least one seam is grasped by the middle and index fingers to ensure proper 12 to 6 spin. The glove hand goes back with the ball and the throwing hand until they break under the chin. This ensures that the front shoulder closes properly. Proper arm action takes the throwing hand straight back under the chin to extension behind the head and eliminates the downward "loop".

MODIFICATIONS: This drill can be done barehanded using a tennis ball, with a flat training glove and baseball, or using a catcher's mitt and baseball. Try a progression sequence using all three combinations.

DRILL NUMBER 4

SHADOW BLOCKING

FOCUS: To enhance both correct technique and quickness in blocking balls in front of and at the side of the body.

SETUP: Two catchers are in full gear. They assume a ready position, facing each other about six to eight feet apart. Each pair has three baseballs about two feet apart spread in front. This drill can be performed on grass, the dirt area, or artificial turf.

PROCEDURE: One catcher is designated to lead the drill. Both catchers set up in ready position facing the middle baseball. The lead catcher drives down into a blocking position to one of the three balls he chooses. His partner then shadows his movement. Both players again quickly assume their ready position, and the lead catcher repeats a block to one of the three balls; his partner again shadows. I recommend 8 to 12 repetitions.

COACHING POINTS: The glove should always lead the body into blocking position. The catcher should gain ground toward the block from ready position (cut the distance to the ball). His body should be relaxed and cupped toward the plate on balls either in front of or to the side of the plate. The chin tucks against the chest protector.

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 5

SOFT HANDS AND FRAMING

FOCUS: To develop the feeling of receiving pitches with soft hands while reinforcing proper framing techniques.

SETUP: Use two catchers or one catcher and a coach. No mitt or catching equipment is needed, but a throw-down plate is recommended. The catcher assumes a receiving stance with his bare left hand extended and his throwing hand behind his back or right heel. His partner or a coach faces him 10 to 12 feet away with 12 to 15 tennis balls close at hand. Any available area or surface can be used.

PROCEDURE: The coach or partner uses a short overhand toss to position the tennis ball in the location where he wants the catcher to receive the “pitch.” The catcher receives the pitch with a relaxed hand so that the tennis ball doesn’t pop out. The catcher drops the balls in front of him after each repetition. The coach or partner works the strike zone and also four to six inches outside the perimeter of the zone to develop framing skills.

COACHING POINTS: Remind catchers to think of “receiving” the ball, not catching it. Relax the left hand by dropping the fingers toward the pitcher at the release point (quarter turn). Track the ball into the hand with the head as well as the eyes. Use slight body sway without moving the feet on pitches that are either on the corners or outside the strike zone but frameable. When framing a pitch, the palm of the hand should face inward toward the plate. Don’t show up the umpires by trying to frame pitches that are not strikes and outside the framing area.

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 6

NO HANDS

FOCUS: To emphasize blocking techniques using a relaxed body and not trying to “pick” the ball cleanly with the mitt

SETUP: Use two catchers or one catcher and a coach. The catcher is in full gear. He assumes a ready position with his body but puts both arms behind his back. His partner or coach faces him 15 to 20 feet away with 10 to 12 baseballs close at hand. A grass or dirt area is recommended.

PROCEDURE: The coach or partner tosses each ball in front of the catcher, replicating a pitch in the dirt. The catcher should react by keeping both arms behind his back and driving his body down into a blocking position. The body should be “cupped” and relaxed. The coach can work balls in front of and to each side of the catcher.

COACHING POINTS: The body should be “cupped” and relaxed with butt between heels. Knees remain wide. Chin on chest protector. Catcher should develop the feeling of smothering the pitch with a relaxed body and not picking it cleanly like an infielder. Catcher and coach should not be concerned with balls that skip under his rear end that would normally be blocked with the mitt.

MODIFICATIONS: You can substitute tennis balls or Incrediballs for baseballs.

DRILL NUMBER 7

TRIANGLE FRAMING

FOCUS: To develop the proper framing technique both inside and outside pitches with the palm facing inward.

SETUP: One catcher works with two partners or two coaches. The catcher performing the drill should be in full gear. A plate is recommended. The catcher sets up behind the plate in a receiving position. Two “feeders” set up in a triangle position to his right and left, facing the catcher 12 to 15 feet away. Each has 10 to 12 baseballs close at hand.

PROCEDURE: As the catcher gives a simulated target to his pitcher, the feeder to his left (glove side) uses a short overhand toss across the plate to a framing position on the catcher’s throwing side. After framing the pitch, the catcher quickly drops the ball in front and returns to his receiving and target position. The process is repeated to the other side of the plate by the feeder on the catcher’s right. This is done in rapid-fire fashion until all balls have been used.

COACHING POINTS: Catchers relax the glove hand by dropping the fingers toward the pitcher at the release point. Track the ball into the mitt with the head as well as the eyes. Use slight body sway without moving the feet while framing inside and outside pitches. When framing, the palm of the hand should face inward toward the plate. When receiving the inside pitch on a right-handed batter (glove side), don’t chase the pitch with a high elbow. This “hardens” the hands and carries a borderline pitch out of the strike zone!

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 8

CATCHER'S POP-UP

FOCUS: To develop proper catcher mechanics and confidence in catching pop-ups in foul and fair territory.

SETUP: This drill can be run with one, two, three, or more catchers. It's most easily performed with an ATEC machine but is most realistic with the coach hitting pop-ups with a fungo bat. Catchers must be in full gear. If a machine is used, it's preferable to run the drill in the home plate area. If hitting fungos, use the outfield area.

PROCEDURE: Fungo hitter (or ATEC machine) is in front of home plate. The catcher squats in receiving stance in the catcher's box with his head down. When he hears the machine or bat meet the ball, he quickly turns and looks upward to the area he reads the ball to be. At the same time he removes his mask with his right hand. After gauging the flight of the ball, he moves quickly but under control to the spot where the catch can be made. He tosses the mask away from the catch area so he won't trip over it should the ball drift. He catches the ball with two hands above the head and in front of the chin.

COACHING POINTS: A general rule in game situations: For balls fouled off on the inside half of the plate (right-handed hitter), catchers look first over the left shoulder for balls fouled off on the outside half of the plate, they look over the right shoulder. Watch for the catchers overrunning the ball when they first locate it off the bat. Foul balls above or behind home plate have reverse spin and will move back toward the infield area (infield drift). Many catchers now use the hockey-style mask that does not require being removed for bunts, plays at the plate, or pop-ups. During the setup under the ball before the catch, watch the catcher's feet – they should be at a slight angle on the balls of the feet so he doesn't get back on his heels should the ball drift. On balls directly over the plate or in fair territory, the catcher moves quickly out onto the infield grass so that the ball drifts to him and the catch is mad with his back to the infield. Tell your catchers to be aggressive on balls to the first-base and third-base side and balls in fair territory. They should plan to make the catch until they are called off by an infielder.

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 9

30-SECOND QUICKNESS DRILL

FOCUS: To develop quickness and proper mechanics in all aspects of the receiving and throwing phases.

SETUP: Use at least two catchers, but you can make the drill competitive by using up to six pairs of participants. The drill is best performed in the outfield or an enclosed area with adequate throwing room. Each pair of catchers is about 60 feet apart and at least 10 to 12 feet from the player next to them. It's helpful if the catcher or line of catchers begins on the outfield foul line. A coach stands off to the side with a stopwatch. It's desirable but not necessary for catchers to be in full gear. Each pair of participants has one baseball. If more than one pair of catchers (or middle infielders) is participating, the drill begins with all the baseballs on the same line.

PROCEDURE: On the coach's command to "Go!" the catcher with the baseball throws with accuracy and velocity to his drill partner. With quick footwork, the partner positions himself to catch the baseball in front of his body. As the ball is received and the transition to the throw begins, the partner loudly calls out "One!" Using quick and efficient footwork and mechanics, he then returns the ball to his partner who calls out "Two!" and the process repeats until, after 30 seconds, the coach yells "Stop!"

COACHING POINTS: The drill emphasizes receiving the throw in front of the body, the transition phase, proper arm extension, quick feet with proper footwork, and making accurate throws with good velocity. This drill is made more enjoyable through competition with other catchers or middle infielders. All throws should be aimed at the partner's chest and should be made using the same footwork that the catcher uses in game situations. The receiving partner should use "quick feet" to position in front of the throw. The throw should be received with two hands, "finding a seam" as the mitt and ball are taken back to the chin. "Short" arm action is used, eliminating a downward loop with the throwing hand. A pair (or pairs) of participants attempt to make as many throws as they can during the 30-second time period. Competition with other catchers or middle infielders makes the drill more enjoyable.

MODIFICATIONS: ...

DRILL NUMBER 10

WILD PITCH

FOCUS: To practice techniques of retrieving a wild pitch and getting the ball to the pitcher covering home plate.

SETUP: This drill can be run with catchers and a coach only but works best when catchers and pitchers do it together. Its best done at home plate using your field's backstop or wall. Catchers are in full gear. The catcher sets up ready position behind home plate; the coach (or another catcher) faces him about 45 to 50 feet away.

PROCEDURE: If pitchers are incorporated into the drill they simulate a delivery to the plate. The coach skips a ball to either side past the catcher and to the backstop. The catcher turns to the side of the wild pitch and quickly moves to a location where he anticipates the ball to be or rebound to. At the same time, the pitcher (or the other catcher) sprints to the plate and prepares for the throw. As the catcher approaches the ball, he goes into a controlled slide to the right of the baseball with his left knee on the ground and his right leg extended toward the backstop. The ball is barehanded and, staying in the same position, a snap throw is delivered to the pitcher covering the plate.

COACHING POINTS: This is usually a "do or die" situation so the catcher cannot be too deliberate in his approach and mechanics. The mask can be kept on or discarded on approach to the ball, as a catcher prefers. If the ball is stopped or is moving slowly, it should be barehanded. If it's rolling fast, it should be raked into the mitt with the throwing hand. The catcher should not try to pick up the plate area too quickly. He should keep his head and eyes down on the ball during retrieval.

MODIFICATIONS: This drill can be rough on the grass area behind home plate. Another area such as a softball field with a clay surface in front of a backstop might work better.

DRILL NUMBER 11

BLOCK AND RECOVER

FOCUS: To reinforce correct blocking techniques and develop quickness in retrieving blocked balls and throwing to bases.

SETUP: You need one or more catchers, in full gear, and a “feeder” to throw balls into the dirt. This drill is best done using infielders covering bases and making tags. The catcher assumes the ready position behind the plate. If other catchers are involved in the drill, they stand off to the side, ready to replace the catcher after his block and throw. The feeder stands facing the catcher about 15 to 30 feet away with a bucket of baseballs. If infielders participate, they hold their normal positioning until after the block.

PROCEDURE: Using adequate velocity to make the ball skip (not bounce), the feeder throws the ball into the dirt. The catcher drives his hands and knees downward into the correct blocking position. His body is cupped and relaxed. Immediately after the block, he locates the ball as he quickly scrambles to his feet, getting his body into position to barehand the baseball and make an accurate throw. His head stays over the baseball, with his shoulders closes he picks the baseball up. Using quick feet and short arm action, he makes the throw to this target base. The next catcher rotates in, and the drill is repeated for 8 to 10 repetitions each.

COACHING POINTS: After the block, catchers never glance at the runner to see if he’s attempting to advance before they first initiate the retrieval of the ball. The catcher should always assume the runner is running. Teammates will communicate what he needs to know. If the body is relaxed during the block, the ball will be cushioned and will not carom far from the catcher. The feeder should work the catcher with balls in front of him as well as to his left and right. Catchers should always try to hit the infielder in the chest with his throw.

MODIFICATIONS: You can use other position players as base runners in this drill to work on recognition and reaction. This is a good base-running drill.

DRILL NUMBER 12

1, 2, 3 RAPID FIRE

FOCUS: To develop technique and quickness on the snap throw behind the runner at first base, the throw to second base on a steal, and the throw to third base on a pickoff or steal attempt.

SETUP: Along with catcher(s), you need a feeder to throw pitches and players at first base, second base, and third base to receive throws. This drill is best performed with infielders working on holding their positions until the ball passes the hitter and then breaking to the bag and applying the tag. Another catcher should stand in the batter's box and swing "through" the pitch to keep the catcher back. The catcher assumes his ready position behind the plate, with the feeder 30 to 40 feet in front (with three baseballs in hand). Another catcher stands in the right-handed batter's box during the first round of the drill.

PROCEDURE: As the catcher receives the first pitch, he drives his left knee downward and toward the first base as he rotates his upper body to first base. Using a short snap throw, he delivers the ball to the first basemen breaking behind the imaginary runner. As quickly as possible, he recovers and returns to ready position. The next pitch is delivered, and he throws through to second base, defending the steal of that base. The jump pivot, jab step, or rock and fire method is used according to the catcher's preference and abilities. Again, he returns to his ready position and this time makes the throw to third base, replicating a steal or pickoff attempt to that base. With the exception of a pitchout, the catcher should dropstep with his right foot behind the right-handed hitter to create a clear throw to the bag. All three throws are done in rapid fire fashion. The next catcher jumps in and repeats the drill.

COACHING POINTS: The pickoff at first base is most successful with quickness and surprise, not with great velocity. Depending on his arm strength and quickness, the catcher, along with his coach, should identify and perfect the footwork that is most efficient and successful for him in throwing to second base. The catcher standing in the batter's box should rotate from one side to the other, giving each catcher a different look each time they perform the drill. All throws, regardless to which base, should be thrown to the infielder's chest.

MODIFICATIONS: ...