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Collegiate Baseball News
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The Mechanics of a Great Angle Pick Off Move

In the first part of this series along with how to control the running game, we discussed the rule governing the left-handed pickoff move and how umpires interpret it. We constantly see players that have learned a great pickoff move and the umpire views it as a balk. The tragedy here is your hard work is for nothing. That being said we as coaches cannot cater our instruction to each individual umpire, it is in our best interest to use the rule book as a guide and assume the umpires are adhering to and interpreting the rule as it is stated in the NCAA rule book:

The pitcher must step directly and gain ground toward a base in an attempt to pick off a runner. "Directly" is interpreted to mean within a 45-degree angle measuring from the pivot foot toward the base the pitcher is throwing to or feinting a throw.

Let the Debatin' Commence

When I was 13 I picked off 7 runners in one All Star game. Being the target of "discussion" I realized from that day forward that umpires and coaches will continually argue about whether or not a LHP is balking when they pick to first base. Since then it has been my experience that few people truly understand all of the aspects of the argument unless they have a direct relationship with a LHP on a team and work with him on his move on a continual basis.

There are many aspects of the argument:

- Did he lift leg go past the rubber?
- Did he stop at the top and pause?
- Did his arms move before his leg?
- Did he go too much toward the plate?

It is my position that a great move does not violate any rule, except the silly concept that a move cannot be "deceptive" to the runner... really? The very basis of everything we do in pitching is to be deceptive. But easily the most debated, least understood, most misread or seen incorrectly from a different angle on the field, occurs with the "45* Angle" move to first.

As we all know there is no mark on the mound or field that gives the umpire a physical mark to determine this angle, making this a pure judgment call. However the geometry of the field adds an even larger discrepancy that only some coaches and umpires know about and therefore do not consider when teaching the pickoff move, or using this information when making a call. As coaches teaching the angle (45*) move this information comes into play largely when the LHP is making the throw and stepping to first base.

Field Geometry

You have to hand it to the architects of the modern day baseball field, I don't think it is a coincidence that a routine ground ball hit to a shortstop who makes a perfect throw to first base beats a runner (that is running at full speed) by just a step or two. The angles and dimensions of the field present opportunities for quite dramatic, at times nail biting plays. The scripted movements performed by the defense on a ball hit into the left-center gap as a runner from first tries to score, culminate in a dusty crescendo that have provided the birth of some legendary moments.

But there is one imperfection that has been overlooked for years. When I was in high school I read a popular legend that stated the measurement of the distance from home plate to the pitcher's rubber being 60' 6" was an honest handwriting mistake, apparently the original measurement was supposed to be 60' 0". As baseball progressed in the 1880's pitchers dominated, in an attempt to increase offense the pitcher's box was moved back and the scribe that penned the plans had sloppy handwriting and the measurement was read as 60' 6". Whether this is the actual reason for the current measurement or not is irrelevant, but I am sure my fellow pitchers and coaches would love to have that extra 6 inches when facing some of the today's hitters.

As the rule book states the pitcher must step with in a 45* angle measuring from the pivot foot toward the base, where this comes into play is the base is not 90* directly to the left of the mound if you are standing on the rubber. If you draw a line from first base to third base the pitching rubber is approximately 2 feet closer to home plate, thus making the pitching rubber not exactly in the middle of the diamond. What this means in the grand scheme of things is:

- 1) The pitcher must take this into consideration when stepping toward first base while executing the so called 45* pickoff move.
- 2) The throw to first base is actually a throw that is made 2 feet to the left of the pitchers throwing arm.
- 3) Plus the width of the base and an additional 2 feet to get the throw to the desired tag target which is to the left side of first base.
- 4) (This is massively important when teach footwork to a RHP turning to 1st)

So the angle measurement itself can be misinterpreted in many ways. For the sake of eliminating confusion I refer to this as the Angle Move, or the Leg Lift Move. These angles are something that is frequently overlooked while teaching the move, LHP's assume the throw is made at a 90* angle so instead of throwing the ball low, to the right field side of the base, they make a throw that draws the first baseman off the bag to his left or worse.

Coaches, this can also effect RHP's and their pickoff moves, if they do not align their feet to the appropriate angle they will be throwing the ball across their body and not getting the throw to the desired location. It is the same consequence as if pitcher were to throw home in that manner; you would not want them throwing across their body making it difficult to locate up and in or low and away. It is imperative when teaching this move off the field to replicate this geometry otherwise you will be shaking your head as to why every time your pitcher attempts a pickoff move the runner is all the sudden at third base. I spent hundreds of hours practicing my move on the field to better get acquainted with this geometry, but as many of you know it is hard to get on the field in January when there is 2 feet of snow on the ground. When working inside do your best to reproduce this angle.

Common Mistakes of the Angle Move

Along with the inability to make a quality accurate throw there are a couple of mistakes LHPs make when attempting the angle move. Now that we have a better idea of the geometry we are allowed to use, USE IT! A large percentage of LHPs are fearful of getting called for a balk, in large part because everyone in the ball park is looking at you when a runner is on first. This is natural especially if you have a reputation for picking runners off. I constantly see LHPs not using the angle described, to their advantage. They tentatively step well within the given angle thus negating any advantage they have been given by the rule book. The largest reason for LHPs tipping off their move is the lack of body movement along the angle, this not deceptive, invokes no fear in the base runner, when runners have nothing to fear they get comfortable and have more confidence in their secondary and their ability to steal second.

The second most prevalent mistake I see with LHPs is a combination of what they do with their hands when they lift their right leg and how their shoulders turn when stepping to throw to first base. Consistency with their glove hand and throwing hand as they lift their right leg is absolutely necessary in disguising their intentions. When the LHP is throwing a pitch to the plate, the glove hand and throwing hand remain still until the right leg moves toward the plate, at this point the hands separate and the glove moves in coordination with the right leg. However when the pitcher decides to pick to first, the pitcher feels the need to move the glove and throwing hand **not down but up in** order to turn their shoulders to make a strong throw. When they do this, the shoulders turn prematurely regardless of whether they are stepping along the angle or not. This is a mistake that telegraphs a LHPs intention. They feel they have to make a high velocity throw. A great angle move is predicated on confident, poised, **deception - not quickness.**

Avoiding these two common mistakes will greatly increase your chances of picking more runners off. Dedicated video analysis of pitching mechanics has changed the way pitchers view their own fundamental throwing motion. Using video from the perspective of the runner will give you feedback and physical evidence of what the pitcher is doing well and what he needs to improve on.

Keys to a Great Angle Pickoff Move

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Again, the most important ingredient for a good angle move is consistency. The first part of that consistency is the rhythm in regards to the pitcher's head, what I call "looks". Second, the pitcher's right leg, or lift leg and hand separation must be in sync as well. In doing this the pitcher delay's the runner's ability to read whether he is going home or picking to first base. Once that is done, the pitcher will only need an accurate throw to first, not a fast throw. If the pitcher is consistent with his looks and lift leg, in spite of pitch or pick, he will have a solid foundation for a lethal pickoff move and at times will have runners diving back to the bag as the pitch is delivered to the plate. When teaching a LHP, I spend a lot of time on the rhythm of their hands, their looks, and making sure they create a visually deceptive body movement that steps out (stride) along the angle. If they do not, it is a huge tip to the runner that the pitcher is about to pickoff.

The pitcher can have some personal freedom with his looks. But regardless of where he directs his vision, before or after taking the signals, he should be looking at the plate when he comes to the set position. When he lifts his right leg to throw the pitch he should look at the base runner. As the right foot begins to stride toward the plate the head should look to the plate to pick up the target, I refer to this as leg up, head up, leg down, head down. Attention needs to be paid to this facet. The pitcher should never throw a ball to first, until he can adequately and comfortably perform this series of moves. Teaching this technique to pitchers has proven to be extremely effective over the last 10 years.

In order to make this an excellent move the pitcher absolutely must to use the same sequence of movements when he picks as he does when he throws a pitch to the plate. Now that he has achieved a consistent rhythm delivering the pitch to the plate we can work on performing the pickoff move. The sequence is the same as above, when the right leg comes up he looks at first base, when the leg starts to come down at the angle he looks at the plate. As he is striding toward the angle the hands separate in line with his front foot as if he is throwing a pitch in the direction of the angle. As the pitcher's right foot hits the ground he should look to first base to make an accurate throw. This is where the supposed "45* angle" comes into play, as I noted before, pitchers tend to not step on the angle, and this is where the biggest advantage is created. Not only should the pitcher step **ON** the angle, but he should step as far down the angle as reasonably possible. There is nothing in the rule, as we have seen, that states the pitcher can only step a certain distance on the "45* angle". By stepping further down the line it gives the appearance that the body is going more toward the plate than to first base. This is the best way to use your knowledge of the rule to improve a LHP's pickoff move. The more their center of gravity is moving along that angle the greater advantage the pitcher has in delaying the runner's decision of whether the pitcher is picking or not — ***particularly from the runners angle with a lead.***

Once you have created the consistent body movements required to perform a great angle move, there becomes a necessity to work on the accuracy of the throw. At times LHP's will struggle with making an accurate throw due in large part to their head not looking directly at the base when they start their throw and the geometric discrepancy we discussed earlier. I will almost always have our pitchers make several throws to first while looking directly at the plate. As they do this you will find their perception of where to make the throw is immeasurably wrong. Some students have actually put holes in our academy walls with their inability to make the adjustment necessary to throw the ball

approximately 2 feet or more to the left of their throwing arm. It is important to note, I DO NOT TEACH PITCHERS TO THROW THE BALL LOOKING AT THE PLATE WHEN THEY ARE USING THE ANGLE MOVE IN GAMES. This is merely an attempt to make them more comfortable with the throw when they turn their head toward the base as their lift leg lands on the angle. This practice will give the pitcher confidence in his move and his throw to the base which is vital. I have seen many pitchers balk merely due to their indecision and lack of confidence in their move.

How the pitcher separates his hands and uses his looks during their normal delivery to the plate needs to be exactly repeated in the delivery of a pickoff move. Performed correctly, while stepping along the angle as much as possible, will give the base runner the impression a pitch is being thrown to the plate and the runner will act accordingly and begin his secondary lead. There is no genetic predisposition, no secret movement that needs to be learned to achieve a quality move. If the pitcher can create a pickoff delivery that mimics the delivery of a pitch he will pick more runners off or increase the time it takes the runner to go to second. It is worth your team's practice time.
Period.

In the next article I will talk about the components of the deadly "Gunslinger Move", which if done correctly in coordination with the angle move can all but eliminate a teams ability to steal and have them resorting to a little league style of base running.

Instead of incorporating pictures for this article I thought it would be best illustrated in video form. To see the series of drills we use at our Academy to teach the angle move please visit our YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/PinkmanBaseball>.