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Collegiate Baseball News
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March 2011

Editors Note: Patrick Pinkman has been a teaching professional for 10 years. In his college career as a LHP at Virginia Tech and Co-Pitcher of the Year in the Cape Cod Baseball League, he became nationally known for his outstanding pickoff move. He shattered the career pickoff record at Tech in just a year and a half; 19 picks in one season, (twice as many caught stealing) 48 in his career. Mike Roberts in his recent base stealing speech at the ABCA Clinic in Nashville said, "Pat had the best move I ever saw!" This is the first of a three part series on how Patrick teaches picks.

It is our opinion that 70% of LHP are living off the reputation of the 30% that have outstanding moves! That opinion comes from (my brother Jeff a LHP pitcher and my dad, John) teaching hundreds of LHP's for many years. As you all know, a great LHP move can dramatically change the tempo, strategy and execution of any game. Teaching a LHP a better move gets outs and psychologically affects your opponent!

With that said I thought this would be a great opportunity to shed some light on how we teach the left-handed pickoff move and how it is not a balk. I will present the information in three parts, with the first being what I refer to as The Foundation for Holding Base Runners. The second and third parts will be a detailed description of the mechanics of the two pick off moves that can be most effective in picking off base runners. The famous 45 move (which has never been 45) where the pitcher lifts his leg and steps in a direct not toward first base to pick, and the step off move or Gunslinger move, as I like to call it, where the pitcher steps off the back of the rubber and makes a quick throw to first base; an absolute skill to prevent running on first motion. Having a devastating pickoff move is great, but first you must know some key pieces of information.

To begin with, a left-handed pitcher that does not possess a great pickoff move generally has: 1), not been taught a move and 2), not devoted the necessary time to master the move. That is all! It's not genetic. It is assumed that LHPs have this innate sense of what to do when a runner is on first merely because they are left-handed. Often times it is the exact opposite, LHPs are cast aside to figure it out on there own because a large majority of coaches are right handed and have little knowledge of the similarities

and differences between lefties and righties. Both must have a working knowledge of all the components necessary to hold base runners, by making sure all your pitchers know this information, lefties in particular, will put themselves in a better situation to pickoff more runners. Teams with great LHP moves also have an opportunity for their *runners to increase their skill*, and study the move in practice. The list below is what we have found to be very helpful at all levels of baseball and will hopefully help you and your pitchers better control the running game.

Know the rules

It is unbelievable how many players and coaches have never, yes never, read the rule book! Coaches and especially LHPs...Read the rulebook! If an umpire calls you for a balk and you concisely and respectfully give the umpire the definition of the rule and how you are not breaking it, you will gain credibility. Umpires would ask me all the time about my pickoff move, I would explain it, then ask the umpire what their interpretation of the rule was, it will surprise you how little some of them know and how that effects their confidence in calling a balk. I would be willing to bet my ability to explain the rule, and how I wasn't breaking it was an enormous help in me gaining credibility and therefore not getting called for many balks. If you know the rules you will have better understanding of how to use them to your advantage and not be limited by them.

For example: the famous 45 degree rule, even the new rule, has been based presumably on assumption and incorrect geometry. Full disclosure in Part 2 of this series!

Priorities When a Runner Is On Base

We have redefined the entire conversation - The pitchers job, the team's job, is to *increase the time* it takes for a runner to go from 1st to 2nd, 1st to 3rd and 2nd to home. A runner at full speed covers about 20 feet per second --- 5 feet in .25 of a second. This conversation is all about time and distance. Delaying a runner only a half of a second will give an outfielder 10 feet to make a better throw and a second baseman more room to avoid the runner and perhaps make a stronger throw on a double play.

Throw a Strike - We have found it amazing to discover how many pitchers do not know the definition of a stealing situation. They are constantly fearful and distracted because they think the runner is about to steal and as a result do not throw a good pitch. They do not understand that runners do not always steal when on first. They do not consider the difference in score or the inning. If a pitcher loses focus of the main goal he won't have a problem on first base, he will have a problem on first **and** second. The pitcher's #1 priority with no runners on base is to throw quality pitches and get the batter out, this does not change when you have a runner on base. It just means you have to multi-task.

We use the general rule that a stealing situation occurs when there is a difference in the score of three or less runs late in the game and a competent (not necessarily fast) runner on base.

Disturb the Runners Lead. The most effective way to disturb a base runners lead, for lefties and righties, is to vary your timing from set, to the plate. Most pitchers get into a rhythm that is very predictable (and you are charting this.... right) and the runner gets very comfortable with his lead, which turns into a better jump, which leads to the catcher having little to no chance at throwing the runner out. If you vary your time from the set position to the time you lift your leg to deliver the pitch you become less predictable and the runner has less of an advantage when trying to steal. Using a simple 1, 3, or 5 second hold in a mixed order can thoroughly disrupt the runners jump. And if you vary the time significantly enough your catcher will thank you for at least giving him a chance at throwing the runner out. A lot of youth, high school, college and even pro pitchers fall into a comfort zone when runners get on base and make it very easy for the runner to steal if not get a great secondary to advance two bases on a single. Remember, if you can't pick off the runner you are at least attempting to prevent them from stealing, getting huge secondary leads, and possibly scoring with ease. Increase his time!

Shorten The Lead. Visit the base often. Make a quick, sudden and unexpected throw. Perhaps the single most over looked asset to a good move is accuracy. A quick move with no accuracy surely will get a safe call; even if he was out. There aren't too many base runners that enjoy diving back to the base, dusting themselves off, and shaking the dirt out of their pants. The normal reaction of most first base coaches when there is a close play due to a pick is usually, "shorten up a step, don't get picked". Varying your time from the set position, attempting a serious pick will make the runner uneasy and usually result in the runner taking a step back toward the bag or at least taking a safety step as the LHP lifts up his leg. In order to do this you have to practice the pickoff move(s) and have the ability to make an accurate throw. If the runner is casually walking back to the bag as soon as you lift your leg to pick, the move is ineffective, there is no threat, and you are not successfully holding runners. The best way for a LHP to separate himself from other quality pitchers is to consistently increase the runner's time and better yet... remove them from the base. (Which will be detailed in Parts 2 and 3 in upcoming issues of CB)

Know Your Enemy

“Who’s on First?” Now you have equipped yourself with the tools to hold runners you have to know which ones are threats on the bases. When I was at Virginia Tech we had a very simple system of identifying the type of base runner as I’m sure most teams do. We labeled them with a simple 1, 2, or 3 based on their speed, number of steals, and their smarts on the bases:

#1 Runner - Base stealer, quick, aggressive, usually took bigger leads.

#2 Runner - Average to above average speed, situational stealer, average lead.

#3 Runner - Usually power hitter, no speed, never steals and small lead.

ALL CAN BE PICKED OFF

Everyone Can Be Picked

Now you know “Who’s on first.” When do you pick and with what move? The size of the lead doesn’t always determine whether or not you attempt a pickoff but it can be very helpful in deciding what move to use. Like pitchers, base runners are creatures of habit and their leads can be a good indicator of what their intentions are. Again this is not always the case but what I have learned through experience, trial and error, and in discussion with base runners and coaches.

Big lead – Typically team’s best base runners will take larger leads, they are aggressive early in the game and will take a large one way lead bating the pitcher to pick with a “45* move”. These runners won’t necessarily steal but want to see the pitchers move. Inexperienced pitchers will likely see the size of the lead and their eyes will get real big and think they can pick with the move. And as the runner safely walks back to the base the pitcher is thinking “why did I waste my move”. The Gunslinger move or step off move early in the at bat will usually catch the runner off guard as they are looking for the move, don’t fall into the trap of picking to first base when the runner is expecting to go back to the base.

Short lead – When a base runner takes a short lead they are generally not going to steal, they are not a good base runner, and are terrified of getting picked off. They will routinely make up for their short lead by taking a big secondary too early, and at the right time they can be very susceptible to the move. During the at bat you can pay little to no attention to this runner making him feel at ease, when the runner feels comfortable they will usually get more aggressive with their secondary and start to shuffle toward second base earlier in the delivery, that is when you pick. It is very easy for the pitcher to see a runner taking a small lead and not think he is capable of picking him off. That is not always the case, even after picking a runner off earlier in the game you can take advantage of this runner.

Medium Lead – The smartest base runner, not necessarily the fastest runner, will often feel comfortable enough to take a medium sized lead because he is confident enough in his ability to read the pitcher’s move and not get picked. The pitcher can’t be quick enough to use the step off move and the runner is smart enough not to take his secondary too early therefore will not likely get picked off by the move. In one sense this can be frustrating for the pitcher, but as long as the runner doesn’t get a good jump to steal he has done his job in effectively controlling the running game.

Pitchers need to understand that while picking runners off can be a valuable weapon in the scheme of the game, they must have their priorities in order. You are a pitcher first who is counted on to get batters out and control the running game. I had tremendous success at the high school and collegiate level using this information, and now as an instructor and coach I stress these strategies before we work on the pickoff moves themselves. This is not something that comes easy, the proper amount of work is needed to successfully control the running game or as we say *increase the time* the runner takes to go to the next base. No one is gifted with a great pickoff move, it’s not a talent. It can be a learned skill. Growing up we worked at what I called my craft, we studied other lefty moves. At an early age of 11 I learned from my older brother, I watched him compete and his great move. After all it is a family business. We videoed games, videoed practice sessions from the prospective of the runner at his full lead.

As a player at Virginia Tech I talked with runners on my team, when I was in the Cape Cod League playing for Mike Roberts I listened to what he taught our runners. And as an instructor I continue to study the opposition, just recently I purchased Mike Roberts and now Brian Robert’s contribution in their new book, *“Can’t Steal Second With Your Foot on First.”*

Baseball is the world of opposites, Yin and Yang; if you are doing one thing it greatly pays off to know the opposite. Whether it is how to steal, how to steal against lefties, or better yet, how not to get picked off by them, find out what they are looking for and then use that information to defeat your opponent. Perhaps more importantly, use it as a system of learning. Using this information will allow your pitchers to control the running game. In the forthcoming articles I will present the specific mechanics of the pickoff moves that will make every lefty on your staff a threat to pickoff more base runners.

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