

torre's take

with Joe Torre

Stealing Bases

No matter the style of game you like to coach, keeping runners moving from base-to-base is always going to generate run scoring opportunities. Waiting for the big hit to drive in a lot of runs works for some teams, but most of the time it's the constant base-to-base movement and related pressure on the defense that really makes the difference. At the youth level in particular, with misplayed balls and errant throws, opportunities abound to score runs.

As part of your strategy for moving runners, I would encourage all coaches to work on the fundamentals of stealing bases. Even if your players are not the fastest at their current stage of development, runners can steal successfully on catchers who are still learning the art of throwing out base stealers.

I have always thought that stealing bases had both a mental and physical approach. One without the other can lead to being thrown out more frequently than is necessary. When I refer to the mental side, I mean that a coach and runner must be aware of the game situation, know something about the skill level of the pitcher, catcher and first baseman and the speed of the diamond they are running on. To make an obvious point, it's not advisable to attempt a steal with two outs in a late inning with your best hitter at the plate against a catcher who has already thrown out two runners and you are playing on a muddy field.

The physical attributes for base stealing are pretty obvious. A good base stealer must use sound footwork to establish an acceptable lead, have above average speed and perfect a sliding technique. With respect to footwork, always take a lead from the back of the base and try to get at least two strides off the bag. (see Screen #1) A good player must watch the pitcher and be aware of other players at all times—and be prepared to



Screen #1



Screen #4



Screen #2



Screen #5 side view



Screen #3



Screen #5 front view

dive back to the base when necessary. Make sure your player gets in a good athletic position with a balanced stance, poised to accelerate for the next base. (see Screen #2)

Once the pitcher commits to make the pitch, it's critical to begin the steal attempt immediately. Cross over with your left foot and drive with your right foot. (see Screen #3) This first step is really important as it begins your acceleration. If for any reason one of your players stumbles on this first step, it's always safest to return to the bag and await another opportunity.

Stay low as you run and look into the plate after four strides. (see Screen #4) If the ball is hit, be sure to react to the batted ball. Take special note of those lined or fly balls that could lead to double plays and always be prepared to return to the previous base.

Assuming the slide attempt continues, focus on the next base, run as hard as you can and begin to slide about two paces from the base. Avoid looking anywhere else or being distracted. Be sure to run hard all the way through the steal. If your player coasts into the next base, there is every chance he will be tagged out. As you slide, make sure to get into the proper Figure 4 position and keep your hands cupped. (see Screen #5) While proper sliding technique can be covered in another feature, please keep in mind that it's imperative to teach the proper technique to avoid injury or hesitancy.

Once you have successfully stolen a base, your player is not quite done. First, he must make sure he has a solid contact with the base with good balance. Otherwise, he may stumble off the bag and be tagged out. Additionally, he must be aware of the ball's location. It's not uncommon for a throw from the catcher to scoot into the outfield, so it's possible he can make it to the next base.

As you can tell, stealing bases is about more than having speed. As a coach, I would prefer a smart, aware and above average runner over a faster runner with questionable judgment. When you coach, focus on the mental aspects of stealing as much as the physical aspects. And be patient with your players. Mastery of this skill takes literally hundreds of attempts over more than one season. If you encourage your players and teach them properly, you and your team will reap the benefits of having good base stealers.