

BEHIND THE PLATE

with Patrick Jernigan



After junior college, I went to the University of North Alabama. There I really learned the importance of bunting and how you could win ball games by bunting in the right situations. We took pride in it. The reason it is such a great opportunity offensively is because it can be difficult for the defense to execute the play.

I want to show you how to use proper positioning to field a bunt so that you can make the play everytime. Whether the batter is safe or out, your job is to field it quickly, cleanly and make a good, accurate throw. More often than not, if you do this, the batter will be out.

- PROPERLY PICK UP THE BALL**
- SPLIT THE FIELD INTO THIRDS**
- THIRD BASE SIDE - ZONE 3**
- MIDDLE - ZONE 2**
- FIRST BASE SIDE - ZONE 1**
- PROPERLY PICK UP THE BALL**

Before you can learn how to field a bunt, you need to learn how to pick up the baseball. This technique does not just apply to bunts. This is the way you should pick up a ball at all times.

First, you want to straddle the ball with both feet in an athletic stance. Do not go down to pick it up by just bending your back. Bend your knees and get your butt down.

Next, never take your eyes off the ball. If you start thinking about the runner or anything other than the ball, you will not pick it up cleanly, so stay focused.

Now that you are squatted down and focusing, push the ball into the ground, getting a good, strong grip. One way to know you are down low enough is if you can push your glove down into the ground.

Finally, with your good grip on the ball, you can get up in a good athletic throwing stance ready to make the play.

Lots of coaches teach raking or scooping the ball. I find that this technique gives too many chances for error. Practice picking up the ball properly. Never pick it up with your glove, even if you are just out in your yard playing around. The more you practice doing this, the more natural and comfortable it will be when it is game time.

SPLIT THE FIELD INTO THIRDS

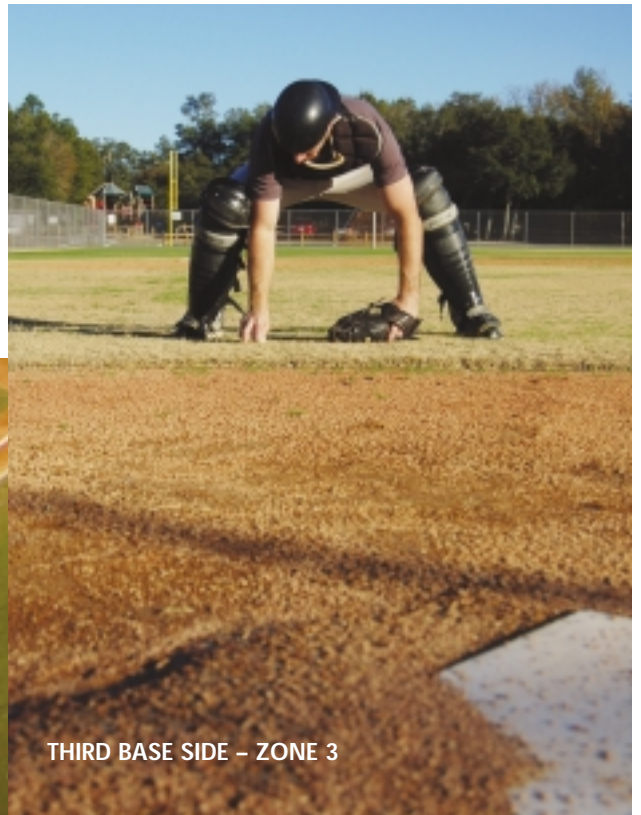
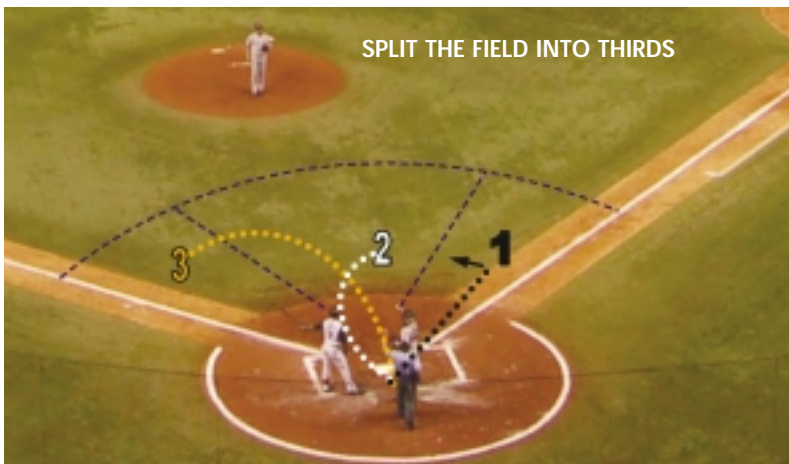
When a batter lays down a bunt, you must get to the ball quickly and set

Beating the Bunt

up in a good position to make the play. When handling a bunt, remember there are three zones, each with its own technique. From the catcher's viewpoint, split the field into thirds. Up in the grass, about six feet from the first base line will be Zone 1. The middle section will be Zone 2. Six feet from the third base line will be Zone 3. What? There are three different techniques just to pick up a bunt? Yes, and these three techniques are very important because every second you cut by lining your body up, gaining momentum in the right direction, and getting in a good position to throw, could be the difference between a win and loss.

THIRD BASE SIDE - ZONE 3

Let's start with the third base side because it is the most difficult of the three. Start from your receiving stance. The batter has just laid down a bunt in Zone 3. Immediately come out of your squat and remove your mask. Be vocal and start telling your first baseman, "ONE, ONE, INSIDE". This tells your first baseman to step inside of fair territory to receive the ball. You will do this as you are hustling to the ball. Run directly over the plate and start rounding to the ball in a right to left curve. You must move quickly, because



THIRD BASE SIDE - ZONE 3



FIRST BASE SIDE – ZONE 1



ZONE 1 STEP



ZONE 1 THROW

when you reach the ball, you need to be facing home plate. Your back should be facing the third baseman, not the shortstop. This means that your body is now lined up in a position to throw to first base and you are ready to properly pick up the ball. Don't forget, your focus is on the ball, not the runner. If you are fourteen years old or younger, I would suggest taking one shuffle step to make your throw to first. Do not cross your feet when you shuffle. A shuffle is when you click your ankles together. If you are fifteen years of age or older, I would suggest picking the ball up, loading up on your back leg, and throwing without taking a step. The older you are, the faster the runners will be, which means the less time you have. Get the ball out of your hand and to first base as quickly as you can. Make a strong accurate throw, hitting the first baseman in the chest. If you throw the ball over the bag, you are going to get your first baseman run over, so focus on the target.

MIDDLE – ZONE 2

This is the easiest technique of the three. From your receiving stance, once again you will go directly over the plate. Be vocal and yell, "ONE, ONE, INSIDE." This time you will go in a left to right curve. Make sure your direction to the ball is lined up with first base. You do not want to change angles after you pick up the ball. When you get to the ball, pick it up properly. Since this throw is closer and your momentum is going towards first base, you can take one shuffle and make your throw to first.

FIRST BASE SIDE – ZONE 1

This technique takes a little getting used to. You are in your receiving stance, and the batter has bunted the ball down the first base side. Do not round on this bunt. You run straight to the ball. Be vocal and yell, "ONE, ONE, INSIDE." Go ahead and position your body in the correct angle to throw to first with your back facing the third baseman. Pick up the ball properly. BUT WAIT, YOU CAN'T THROW THE BALL YET! There is a runner right in your path. You must take a step directly back.

Be very careful with this step; it is very important. Step back towards the third baseman. If you get your momentum going too fast toward first base, you are going to step toward the second baseman, not the third baseman. The reason you step back is to clear yourself from the runner so that you can make an accurate throw. If you step towards the second baseman, you will not have cleared yourself as much, still leaving the runner in your path. This takes practice, so really concentrate on your step back.

BONUS TIP

I do not suggest that you do this, but it is a part of baseball that you need to know. The runner must stay in the runner's lane. If he comes to the inside of that lane, which is inside the foul line, and your throw hits him, he is out. Like I said, I do not recommend doing this, but if you put your focus on not hitting the runner, you will throw the ball into right field. If the runner gets hit, that is his fault, not yours. Your job is to let your first baseman know where to be, pick up the ball using proper techniques, and make a strong, accurate throw.

Fielding bunts should be practiced every day. Do not take this lightly. Treat it like a game situation. I see so many catchers throw bunts away during practice and they just blow it off like, "Oops". Well, that guy is standing on third base because of your "Oops". The only way you will be prepared in a game is if you react the same way in practice as you would in a game. So hustle out to the ball, field it, and throw it like the game is on the line. You will be prepared and able to relax when the real thing happens.

For more detailed instruction on these and many other techniques order your copy of "Simplicity of Catching" at www.simplicityofcatching.com.

