

A comprehensive fastpitch coaching guide with drills, tips, and insights.

Coaching Fastpitch Softball: Championship Drills, Tips, and Insights

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# **Coaching Fastpitch Softball: Championship Drills, Tips, and Insights**

By:

**JERRAD HARDIN**

## Chapter 10

### Defense: Special Situations, Special Plays

A person could coach softball his whole life and merely stick to the basics of the game and perhaps be very successful. I can think of two or three coaches within our league who play the game in a very basic way. They tend to make only subtle adjustments in their defensive alignments when facing any special situation. And they also tend to be fairly predictable in 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> situations. This doesn't mean that they aren't good coaches; it simply means they choose to play the game in a different way. For those of you who want some ammunition at your disposal that might give you an advantage, this section is written for you.

#### Bunt Defense and Coverage

*With no runners on, and a likely bunt-hitter at the plate*

The first thing we want to do is communicate that the batter at the plate is likely to bunt. At times your own kids can be your best scouts because often times they've seen players on other teams during the summer and understand their tendencies. After communicating the possible situation, our corners move forward 4-6 steps, anticipating the play. We also tell our middle infielders, who we typically play 3-4 steps behind the baseline, to move in even with the baseline. The shortstop has to be aware of the possibility that the batter may not bunt, but due to the batter's speed she'll need to charge anything in her direction and release it quickly. Our second baseman operates under the same idea but also has to be cognitive of covering 1<sup>st</sup> base if the bunt is attempted. We like to show two pitches in this situation to try to get the offense to tip their hand. Both pitches, we want thrown up and away. After the first two show pitches, if the batter doesn't offer or show

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anything, we then pitch her accordingly, but we remain in our standard defensive set for this situation.

We don't develop code words for situations, or play calls, but I know some coaches that do and their teams seem to execute well. We try to teach our players the situation in advance during practice, and then just call it what it is. For example, if nobody is on, then we say, "Bunt situation nobody on." I think either way you choose to do it is effective; the idea is that your team simply understands the situation and their responsibilities.

*Less than two outs, runner on 1<sup>st</sup>*

In our game, this is generally a bunting situation. It doesn't mean that you will always see a bunt, but this is the most common time that you will see an attempt. Our corners are even more aggressive in this situation, moving in a 6-8 steps from their normal positioning. Our middle infielders play within their respective baseline. In the event that the bunt is put in play, our shortstop covers 2<sup>nd</sup>, our second baseman covers 1<sup>st</sup>, and our leftfielder moves in to cover 3<sup>rd</sup>. Typically, we want our 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman handling the bunt, that's why we have her playing where she is. However, whoever fields it will be directed by the catcher as to what base to throw to. The catcher is the only player on the field who can see the whole field in front of her, so, to minimize confusion, we instruct that her voice is the only voice that is heard in terms of what base to throw to. We want to get the lead out if possible, but that usually requires fielding it quickly and smoothly.

If we throw to 1<sup>st</sup> base with the 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman covering, we always want to throw behind the runner. Make sure that your centerfielder knows that she has to cover the left-center gap, or an errant throw can end up in the opposition running for a long time. It's amazing, next time you watch a game take note of the advancing runner on a bunt situation, and you'll see that almost every time the runner will round the base at 2<sup>nd</sup>. Through the course of the season we get four or five kids out on this play, but that's not the only reason we do it. It's equally

effective at keeping that runner from being too aggressive; therefore, it slows her down, so in the event that we make a mistake, it may not cost us an extra base.

*Less than two outs, runner on 2<sup>nd</sup>*

You will also encounter this situation in a tie-breaker scenario. Our bunt coverage remains the same as the previous situation. Our corners are tight, and our middles are in the baseline. The only difference is in the responsibilities for base coverage. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman still covers 1<sup>st</sup> base, however, our shortstop will now cover third for a possible tag play. The centerfielder has to dart in from her position to cover second base so that all bases are then covered. The only time we throw to third in this situation is if the ball is bunted sharply at the pitcher or one of the corners. The exception to this is if the ball is deadened in front of the plate and the catcher is able to field it quickly. A lot will depend on the speed of the runner at 2<sup>nd</sup> base as to what you'll be able to do, but to avoid a big inning you should make the play at 1<sup>st</sup> unless you've got a high probability of an out at 3<sup>rd</sup>.

*Less than two outs, runner at 3<sup>rd</sup>*

A lot depends on the inning, the hitter, the runner, and the score. It's hard to predict a squeeze play and when it might be used. Obviously, late in a game with the score tied or with only a run of separation, a good bunter at the plate with a fast runner at third, then there's likely a chance for the squeeze! However, the most effective squeezes are those that catch you by surprise. In the 2002 state championship game, we used the squeeze play in the 1<sup>st</sup> inning, with our cleanup hitter at the plate. Fortunately for us, it worked, but mostly because it caught the other team by surprise. Because of the element of surprise, we instruct our team to be aware of a squeeze every time a runner reaches third with less than two outs. We won't sacrifice positioning to defend this situation, but we make sure we communicate "squeeze" all over the infield, so if nothing else, it may make the opposition think twice about doing it.

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In the event that they do attempt the squeeze, we sell out to make the play at the plate. We don't want anyone to execute this against us, so we practice fielding the bunt barehanded and tossing on the move to the plate. We typically do this drill within our own bunting drills, so the drill acts as both an offensive and defensive drill. Corner spots, your pitcher, and your catcher have to be well drilled to execute squeeze defense. And with the number of close games good teams will play during the course of a season, having a good squeeze defense will prove beneficial.

### **Slap Defense**

We don't have a special alignment for a slap defense as I have seen some teams apply. The only thing that we do is basically have our infield in their basic bunt defense. We then play the situation the same, accordingly, with runners on. The only differences with a slap hitter are that we instruct our corners to not be overly aggressive in attacking the ball, and we have our middle infielders move one to two steps in front of their respective baselines. Additionally, if she's a true slapper, we will move our outfielders in near the edge of the infield.

### **Insights Regarding Defense v. Bunts / Slaps**

#### **Scott Howard, Liberty High School – Liberty, MO**

*Our philosophy on bunts and slaps is "thank you." In our players' minds, a bunt or slap is an out. Yes, we have given up a hit once in a while on a slap or bunt, but it is not very often. If it's a situation with a runner on 1<sup>st</sup>, our first priority is to get the force at second. If our fielders have to reset at all, then we get the out at one. One thing that we sometimes do with runners on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> is to have our third baseman play at the bag and let the pitcher cover that side on a bunt and try to get the force at third.*

*In terms of covering the slap, we simply pull our shortstop and second baseman in by the circle, first base is covered at the bag by the first baseman, third is creeping in some, and the outfielders come to the edge of the grass.*

**Ed Lantzer, Lake High School – Uniontown, OH**

*Depending on the score and situation, with a runner on 3<sup>rd</sup> base, we will ignore her to bait her, pump fake the throw to first, and then throw the runner out trying to score from 3<sup>rd</sup>. With a runner on first, we will throw the bunter out at first, and then quickly throw to our SS covering 2<sup>nd</sup> to try and tag the runner out casually rounding the base. Our leftfielder is responsible for covering 3<sup>rd</sup> base if the runner tries to go from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> on the bunt.*

*Versus a proven lefty slapper, we like to move our 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman in near the pitcher, keep our 1<sup>st</sup> baseman even with the bag, and also move our outfielders in a few steps as well to prevent the dink hit over the infielders' heads.*

**Amy Hayes, Portland State University / NCAA DI – Portland, OR**

**Slap Defense:** *SS stays home- if there's a runner on 1<sup>st</sup>, then the 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman will cover the steal. Everyone else plays normal "D" and reads the hitter for either a slap or bunt. 1B will have to get back if there's a slap and she will cover the bunt if there's a bunt. You must have a first baseman with good feet and an assertive/ communicative 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman.*

**Bunt Defense:** *Read the hitter. We will bring corners, pitcher and catcher in to cover the bunt. SS/2nd need to stay home until the ball is down. If we have a strong fielding pitcher then we may leave a corner back, but usually we bring them all.*

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**Glenn Moore, Baylor University – Waco, TX**

*In bunt situations, defensively we work hard on very aggressive corners and look to get the lead runner always. If we can't we will still have time to get the batter.*

*Our slap defense is determined by the position of runners on and the location of the pitch. We play the percentages and keep corners back in situations that make a bunt to them very difficult. That will allow for easier bag coverage on steals.*

**Terry Graver, Elkhorn High School – Elkhorn, NE**

*We always have the same bunt coverage; our 1<sup>st</sup> baseman and 3<sup>rd</sup> charge along with the pitcher. The catcher gets the balls directly in front of the plate. The catcher calls whose ball it is. The 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman always covers 1<sup>st</sup>. Our shortstop slides slightly to 2<sup>nd</sup> base but then works her way to 3<sup>rd</sup> in case the pitcher or 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman forget to cover third. We always throw the ball to first base to get the out. We never attempt to get a runner at 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> base. We want outs!!!*

**1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Situations**

So much of our game is contingent upon situation and score, so how we approach 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> situations are no different. We do implement a number of plays as the season transpires. Although we are fairly conservative in allowing the runner at 1<sup>st</sup> to advance to 2<sup>nd</sup>, but we don't always issue a free pass. We have three plays that we put in. The call is always signaled in from the dugout to our third baseman who then relays the play to everyone else. Typically, we use a color to signal what we're going to do. Here are our three calls v. a 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> situation:

**Purple** - The catcher will bounce up and throw hard back to the pitcher, who has already positioned her body, with her toes pointed to 3<sup>rd</sup> base, to make a snap throw behind the runner with our 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman covering.



**Gold** - The catcher throws towards 2nd base with the shortstop covering, giving the impression of a throw-down. However, our 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman will cut off the throw in front of the bag and then quickly throw behind the runner at 3<sup>rd</sup> if the runner is off the bag and not advancing to the plate, or she will throw home in an attempt to throw out the advancing runner from third.

**Green** - Again the catcher will throw to 2<sup>nd</sup> base with the shortstop covering, the 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman will still be in a cut-off position between the pitcher and 2<sup>nd</sup> base; however, she will allow the ball to travel through.

Each play has its own advantage and disadvantage associated with it. Whatever you use with your team to defense a 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> situation, it's best to know your personnel and understand what they are capable of doing. Whenever you choose to implement any special play, understand there is a chance things can go terribly wrong. The best advice is to always be mindful of the score and situation and make sure the gamble is worth the risk.

### **More Ideas regarding 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Situations**

#### **Janice Esses, Bethany College – Lindsborg, KS**

*We usually bring our second baseman in behind our pitcher to cut the throw from the catcher and have our shortstop cover second. Initially it is the catcher's responsibility to read what the base runner at 3<sup>rd</sup> base is doing. If the base runner at third has a big lead, then we want our catcher to pick her off at third. If the base runner breaks for home, then the second baseman should cut the throw from the catcher and throw the ball home or to the 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman, depending on what the runner does. If the baser runner at 3<sup>rd</sup> base does not break for home, then the second baseman should let the ball go through to the shortstop covering 2<sup>nd</sup> base.*

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**Keith Hauber, Lake Central H.S. – St John, IN**

*We throw hard to the pitcher (high), throw to second, fake to second and throw to 3<sup>rd</sup>, throw to second baseman behind the mound.*

**Amy Hayes, Portland State University / NCAA DI – Portland, OR**

*Our SS will cover the bag, usually, and the 2nd baseman will be expected to make the read on the runner at third. (Cut or no Cut) It will always depend on the game situation (inning/outs), but we leave the decision making up to the 2nd baseman who will also be tuned into her teammates' communication.*

*If there is a slapper up, we may swap that and then it becomes the SS decision to cut and 2nd will cover the bag. We encourage the kids to play the game and react to the situation with only a few basic rules to follow. Any time we over coach; we're in trouble as we've then made the athlete dependent on us as coaches.*

**Scott Howard, Liberty H.S. – Liberty, MO**

*Basically, we have four options that we will consider with runners on 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> (in terms of the ball being pitched). Which play we use is determined by the score, inning, and upcoming batters for both us and the opposing team. In most cases, the play is on only if the runner at 1<sup>st</sup> breaks for second. Our plays include: throwing straight through to 2<sup>nd</sup> to get the runner stealing; throwing the ball short to either our shortstop or second basemen (this varies depending on the players) who can either make a play on the runner between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> or on the runner at 3<sup>rd</sup>; throwing the ball back to the pitcher who can make a play on either runner (ideally, she'll be able to force the runner at 1<sup>st</sup> back to the bag, and keep the runner at 3<sup>rd</sup>); finally, we can snap throw the runner at 3<sup>rd</sup>.*

**Ed Lantzer, Lake H.S. – Uniontown, OH**

*We like to do one of three things. **Option #1** is for our catcher to snap throw a ball to our shortstop covering third base, surprising the runner at 3<sup>rd</sup>. **Option #2** is for our catcher to throw directly to our 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman playing her normal position with the hope that the runner on first will run directly into a tag. **Option #3** is for our catcher to quickly throw the ball back to our pitcher or our shortstop playing in to get the runner at 2<sup>nd</sup> into a rundown situation.*

**Terry Graver, Elkhorn H.S. – Elkhorn, NE**

- 1. Have our catcher turn her back so the runner at third can read her numbers and then make a quick throw right back to the pitcher. The pitcher then takes a quick look to see if the runner is leaning towards home. If she is, throw the ball to third and tag her out. (This play worked for us in the state championship game, you just never know.)*
- 2. We have the shortstop cut off a throw to 2<sup>nd</sup> base and attempt to get the runner leaning towards home.*
- 3. The catcher fakes a throw to 2<sup>nd</sup> base, while at the same time have the 3<sup>rd</sup> baseman slide back and receive a throw from the catcher in an attempt to catch the runner leaning.*

**Defending Rundowns**

*When facing a rundown or “pickle” situation, we want to adhere to a few rules that should result in an out or, at worst, no harm done.*

**Rules:**

- 1. Only three people involved, one of which is always the pitcher.*
- 2. Stay in the same ditch as your partner(s).*

3. Be Visible, But Never Pump-Fake.
4. Communicate and close the distance.
5. Preferably make the play at the safe base!

### **Rule #1 “Only Three Can Play”**

We want only three people involved when defending the rundown. How many times have you seen four or five defensive players involved, running amok, and eventually all over one another? I’ve seen it many times, and that’s why I think these rules allow for the most organized and effective defense against any “pickle” situation.

We employ our pitcher, and her rule is to always go to the base where the rundown was initiated. For instance, if a throw is made to 1<sup>st</sup> base behind a runner and an opponent was then caught in a rundown, we would want our pitcher to sprint to 1<sup>st</sup> base. Then our 1<sup>st</sup> baseman, shortstop, and pitcher would execute our rundown defense, adhering to all of our other rules.

### **Rule #2 “Stay In the Same Ditch”**

To continue our example, our 1<sup>st</sup> baseman now is chasing down the runner, the shortstop is eagerly awaiting a throw in front of second base, and the pitcher has filled in behind the first baseman at 1<sup>st</sup> base, and the runner is somewhere in between! Whew... Okay, now in order to keep from throwing through the runner, our 1<sup>st</sup> Baseman (running) and our Shortstop (waiting) must be in-line with each other, or in other words in the “same ditch.” Typically, we want them on the inside of the diamond, but that doesn’t always happen. It’s more important that you stress that they are facing one another, in the same ditch. We have to always keep this as a rule, so that the runner doesn’t impede any throw.

### **Rule #3 “Be Visible, But Never Pump-Fake!”**

Demonstrate this element with any of your kids. Ask that one of them stand about 30 feet away from you, you grab a ball, start running at the kid, hold the ball high and pump-fake ten times before you release it. I'm going to bet that they cringe on at least half your pump-fakes and more times than not when you do release it, they'll miss it. Therefore, we implement a rule that you must show the ball, hold it high, but never pump-fake it. It's too distracting, and the only person that you'll fake out is the person you want to catch it!

#### **Rule #4 “Communicate and Close the Distance”**

In our previous example I stated that the shortstop was awaiting the throw “in front” of 2<sup>nd</sup> base. The idea is to close the distance as much as possible, and with each throw we continue to close the distance. The pitcher, covering 1<sup>st</sup> base, likewise is actually standing off the bag, closing the distance for any return throw. The other important ingredient here is to communicate. We make it a rule that the receiver calls for the ball and steps to it upon receiving a throw. This is more of a directive than anything. It also makes sure that the receiver is ready for the throw, because after all, they've called for it.

#### **Rule #5 “Get the Out at the Safe Base”**

We will take the out at any base, but we'd rather get it at the safe base. The premise behind creating this rule lies in the fact that our game is a game of mistakes. Therefore, we want to be overly cautious on any play being made to an advancing base. So back to our example, we would rather our first baseman throw early than late to our shortstop so that we can turn our runner and point her back to where she came from. Now if there happens to be a bobble, a drop on the tag, or any other malfunction, then hopefully we can at least put her back where she started.

*Jerrad Hardin*

***Tips for Rundowns:***

- Other players can be used as backups, or safety valves, but never as active participants in our rundowns. We truly want to keep it to three individuals; otherwise, we lose track of responsibilities and all breaks loose!
- When making a tag, make it with both hands. The ball should be firmly in the pocket of the glove-hand, and the throwing hand should be in-on-top of the ball, holding it in its place. In addition, we ask that after the tag is made that we pull the ball out and show the umpire.

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