



Rolled Ground Balls

Objective

To help infielders become comfortable with the proper mechanics of fielding a ground ball; verbal cue: wide base, butt down, hands out in front

Setup

A bucket of balls and a coach to roll them

Execution

This drill is simple and appropriate for all ages. Balls can be rolled as soft or as hard as necessary; the type of hop the ball takes can be controlled. Players assume the ground ball position with a wide base, butt down, and hands out in front (the glove-hand wrist is relaxed so the coach can see inside the glove and the fingers are pointing down). Use a flat surface to prevent bad hops, and bad habits. At first, the ball should be rolled directly into a player's glove from about 10 feet away. Have players hold the ground ball position for five reps so that they can feel a little burn in their thighs. As players get comfortable fielding ground balls properly, the coach can move back and roll balls harder. For conditioning, older players can be asked to hold the position for more reps. The ball must be caught out in front so that the eyes can follow the ball into the glove.



Coaching Keys

If the ball doesn't stay in a player's glove or if the player seems to be getting handcuffed quite a bit by bad hops, check the player's glove positioning and angle. The glove should be out in front of the body with the wrist relaxed to the point that the fingers of the glove are pointing almost straight down. If a player is having trouble getting the glove into the proper position, have him or her reach back between the legs and scrape dirt forward with the glove until it's in the proper position in front of the body. If the glove is out in front and the wrist is relaxed, a player is more likely to see the bad hop early and move the glove to a position in which the ball can still be caught.





Throwing-Side Foot Backhand Drill

Objective

To learn and practice proper technique for backhanding ground balls to the throwing-hand side

Setup

A bucket of balls, a coach to roll balls, cones or markers (optional)

Execution

This backhand is used for hard-hit balls slightly to the player's backhand side. Just like a regular ground ball, the backhand is caught out in front of the body so the eyes can follow the ball into the glove and the wrist and forearm don't get in the way. Players also need to establish a wide base with the butt down. A player lines up in front of a coach with the right leg extended. Player pivots the right foot so the instep faces the coach and drops the left knee to the ground (opposite for lefties). This creates a wide base to help get the butt down, and the glove is placed in front of the right foot and toward the coach. Coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into the glove until the player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove, and bringing it to the center of the body. Ball is rolled directly toward the front foot. Glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so the coach can see into glove. Tell players to avoid twisting the glove so they don't close it too soon. After five repetitions, have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding repetitions can help with conditioning.

Make It Fun

See which player can hold the lunge position (without letting the knee touch the ground) and catch the most consecutive backhands. Also, small groups can be created and a tally of which group catches the most backhands successfully can be kept.





Glove-Side Foot Backhand Drill

Objective

To learn and practice proper technique for backhanding ground balls to the glove-hand side

Setup

A bucket of balls, a coach to roll balls, cones or markers (optional)

Execution

This backhand provides more reach for players ranging farther to their backhand side. Just as for a regular ground ball, the backhand is caught out in front of the body so the eyes can follow the ball into the glove and the wrist and forearm don't get in the way. Players need to establish a wide base with the butt down. A player lines up in front of a coach and crosses the glove-side leg over the other leg as if turning to walk. The throwing-side knee is dropped to the ground, much like a walking lunge. Player creates a wide base to help get the butt down and the glove in front of the body. Ball is caught off the front foot instead of in front of it (but still out in front of the body). Coach should be close enough to roll balls directly into glove until player gets the hang of catching the ball out in front with one hand, squeezing the glove, and bringing it to the center of the body. Ball is rolled slightly in front of the lead foot. Glove-hand wrist should be relaxed so coach can see into the glove. Tell players to avoid twisting the glove so they don't close it too soon. After five repetitions, have another player try. As players get more advanced they can raise the trail knee off the ground a few inches. Adding repetitions can help with conditioning.



(continued)

Adapted, by permission, from Ripken, 2007, *Coaching Youth Baseball the Ripken Way* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics).



Glove-Side Foot Backhand Drill *(continued)*

Make It Fun

See which player can hold the lunge position (without letting the knee touch the ground) and catch the most consecutive backhands. Also, small groups can be created and a tally of which group catches the most backhands successfully can be kept.



Coaching Keys

For all backhands, the most common mistake is the ball jumping up and smacking off the player's wrist instead of going into the glove. This happens when the glove is positioned behind the player's body, which creates a glove angle in which the wrist is actually forward of the glove. By placing the glove in front of the body, the wrist is naturally relaxed in such a manner that it doesn't get in the way if a ball takes a tricky hop. Again, just as with the technique for fielding a basic ground ball, the fingers of the glove should point straight down toward the ground.

An error frequently made when it comes to backhands is twisting the glove. This may happen because young players have gloves that aren't fully broken in or don't feel that they're strong enough to just squeeze the ball and keep it in the glove. The problem is that sometimes they start to twist the glove before the ball gets there, preventing the ball from entering the glove. Players should squeeze the ball when it enters the glove and bring it straight to their chest for the transfer and throw.



Throwing After the Catch Drill

Objective

To understand and apply the concept of using the body's momentum to make a stronger throw; verbal cue: shuffle, throw, follow

Setup

A bucket of balls, a coach or player to receive throws, a coach or player to roll ground balls (optional), a target (optional), three cones or markers

Execution

This drill reinforces the concept of catching the ground ball first, generating momentum toward the target, throwing the ball, and following the throw. Set up three cones several feet apart, placed in a line toward the target to where the throw will be made (easiest to set up as a simulation of the 5-4 force out at second base). Cones should be placed so that the distance is appropriate to accomplish the intended result for the age group involved. A player sets up with the right foot next to first cone and assumes the ground ball fielding position (wide base, butt down, hands in front). A ball is rolled by the coach to the player, who fields it, or the player starts with a ball and simulates the fielding position. The player shuffles the feet to the second cone, releases the ball, and follows the throw past the third cone and toward the target. Emphasize the four-seam grip. Ball can be thrown to a coach or another teammate. The player should stay low and not stand straight up after fielding the ball. This drill can be turned into a contest by placing a chest- or head-high target at second base with a net or screen behind to catch errant throws. Players who hit the target stay alive, and those who miss are eliminated. If there's nobody to roll the balls, players can get a ball out of the bucket, assume the ground ball fielding position, and then execute the drill.

Keeping It Simple

If there is no coach to roll ground balls, players can take a ball and simulate catching a ground ball before making the throw.

Another Variation

The ground ball can be rolled to the backhand side, reinforcing the need for the player to shuffle back toward the target after making the play.

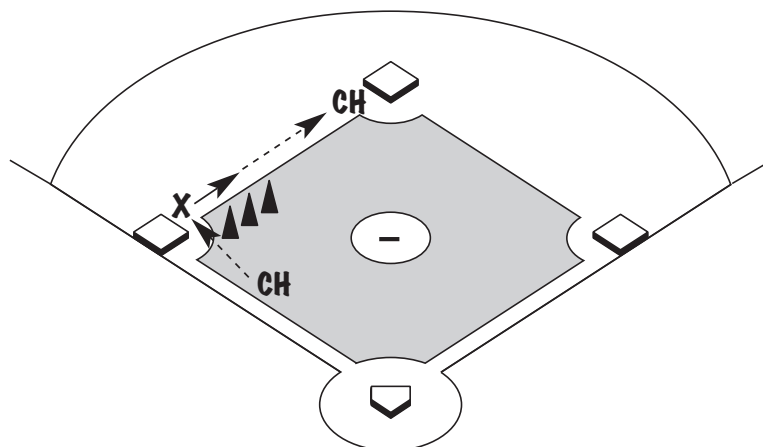
Making It Fun

A target can be set up and a point system established for hitting it. Or you can create an elimination game—those who hit the target stay alive while others are eliminated.

(continued)



Throwing After the Catch Drill (continued)



Coaching Keys

Players who aren't throwing the ball accurately are likely dropping the elbow below the shoulder or are peeling off away from the target before following the throw all the way past the third cone. For players making the latter mistake, set up another cone about five feet to the left of the third cone and make them follow the throw all the way through the last two cones before peeling off.

Players who are throwing the ball high or low are likely standing up before shuffling and throwing. Remember: Stay low and go low. The first movement upon catching the ball is toward the target. Players should shuffle in that direction, keeping the knees bent in an athletic position instead of standing straight up. This keeps the head, shoulders, and eyes level, which makes it easier to stay focused on



Hitting Ground Balls

Objective

To get a more realistic sense of fielding ground balls coming off a bat

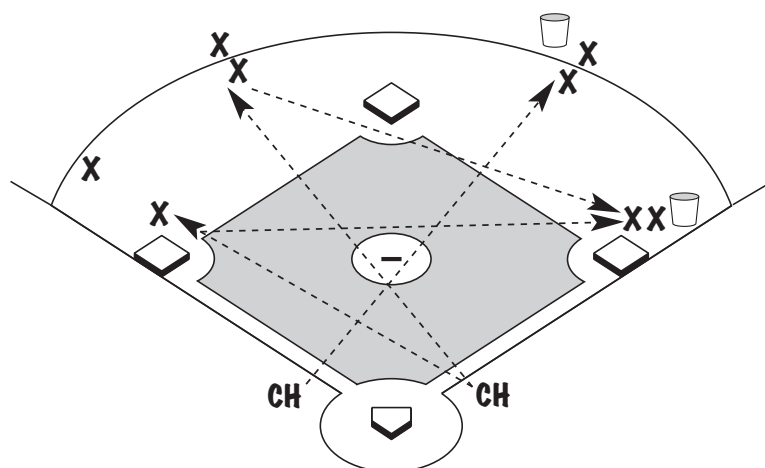
Setup

A bucket of baseballs, a fungo bat (or another type of bat), a coach to hit balls

Execution

At some point it becomes necessary to hit ground balls to your team. Before you do this—at any level—make sure you have introduced the players to the basic ground ball fundamentals and given them a chance to get comfortable fielding balls the proper way. Use common sense when hitting ground balls. If the field is not in good condition, take it easy. Adapt the speed of the balls to each player's skill level. Players getting beaten up with bad hops in practice are not getting better.

If you have more than one coach who can hit ground balls accurately, here's a way to maximize repetitions: One coach hits to the third basemen and shortstops from the first-base side while the other hits to second and first from the third-base side. After a few minutes, one coach goes "live," with the players fielding his or her balls throwing to first. The other players just lob the balls back to their coach on one hop or place the balls in a bucket. The first basemen take throws and stop fielding ground balls at this point. Each position gets to go "live" before the drill ends. As players get older, they can hit ground balls to each other if there aren't enough coaches. Having one person hit to each position is ideal but not always possible.





Machine Backhands and Forehands

Objective

To work on getting to a spot quickly and catching the ball in front of the body on backhands and forehands

Setup

A bucket of balls, a pitching machine aimed to the same spot, cones or markers

Execution

Set up a cone in one spot; position a pitching machine to roll hard ground balls straight at the cone. Have players line up to the right or left of the cone so if they break when the ball is fed, they'll have to backhand or forehand the ball without getting in front of it. Players should break as the ball is fed through the machine, focusing on catching the ball out in front of their body at the cone. Alternate from one side to the other so players get both backhands and forehands. This drill can easily be turned into an elimination contest. Players should switch lines after catching a ground ball.

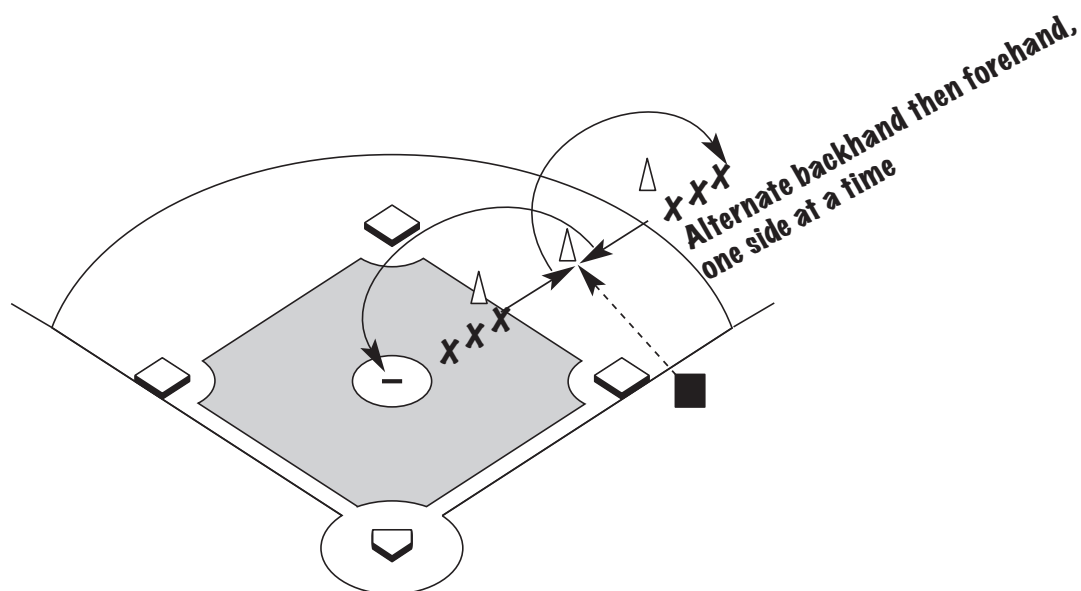
Make It Fun

Turn this game into an elimination contest. Those who field the ball cleanly stay alive, while those who miss take a break.



Coaching Keys

If players struggle to field balls cleanly because they're still on the move, allow them to break before the ball is fed and to set up in the backhand position before the ball arrives. Once they get comfortable making the play correctly with their gloves out in front of their bodies, have them break as the ball is fed to make the play more difficult.





Machine Short Hops

Objective

To develop soft hands and a proper glove angle; to work on catching the ball out in front of the body

Setup

A bucket of balls (soft or sponge balls or real baseballs) and a pitching machine

Execution

This drill can be done outdoors or indoors. You can make the drill even more challenging by having players field soft or sponge rubber balls with their bare hands. Set pitching machines so that players must field fast-moving balls on short hops. Make sure players assume and maintain a good fielding position (wide base, butt down, hands out in front). If using gloves and real baseballs, they'll need to relax their wrists and catch the ball out in front. Have them try to catch the ball with only one hand to promote proper glove angle and softer hands. (This is especially important when using softer balls and no gloves.) See who can catch the most short hops out of 5 or 10 attempts.



(continued)

Adapted, by permission, from Ripken, 2007, *Coaching Youth Baseball the Ripken Way* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics).



Machine Short Hops *(continued)*

Make It Fun

Turn this drill into an elimination contest or see who can catch the most out of 5 or 10 tries.



Coaching Keys

Players who have trouble fielding these balls cleanly are probably not getting their gloves or hands far enough out in front, and their wrists might not be relaxed. Have them assume the proper hand and wrist position before the balls are fed to force them to watch the ball travel all the way into their hands. The relaxed wrist makes their hands “softer” and allows them to field the balls more cleanly.