

Brent Mayne

The Art of Catching

The Secrets and Techniques of Baseball's
Most Demanding Position



Introduction

"Two hundred million Americans, and there ain't two good catchers among 'em."

—CASEY STENGEL

When asked about the shortage of quality catching, American League manager Ralph Houk replied, "There's a great opportunity for boys who want to catch in pro ball today." The odd thing is this comment was made fifty years ago, but it's just as relevant now as then. Why shouldn't you be the next person to take advantage of this situation to excel on your Little League team, earn a college scholarship, or even play in the big leagues? Someone has got to do it. It could be you.

This book gives you the most cutting-edge information ever presented on the art of catching. I'm passing on the secrets that allowed me to enjoy a fifteen-year major-league career and that will help you excel as a catcher or a catching instructor. I demystify the catching position and make the point clear that if I could do it, you can too. How am I so sure? I have been to the top of the mountain, playing with or against the best in the world, and I will tell you from experience there is plenty of room up there if you can *just play solid defense*. The techniques I show you, if practiced until they become second nature, will allow you to get the most out of your God-given talent and maximize your potential.

Another great thing about this information is that it's applicable to the youngest Little Leaguer all the way up to the oldest veteran in the big leagues...and everyone in between. In other words, these fundamentals are basic enough for an eight-year-old to grasp and apply but powerful enough to allow an athlete to excel at the big-league level. These simple ideas, founded on athletic truths, will make you a better player or coach.

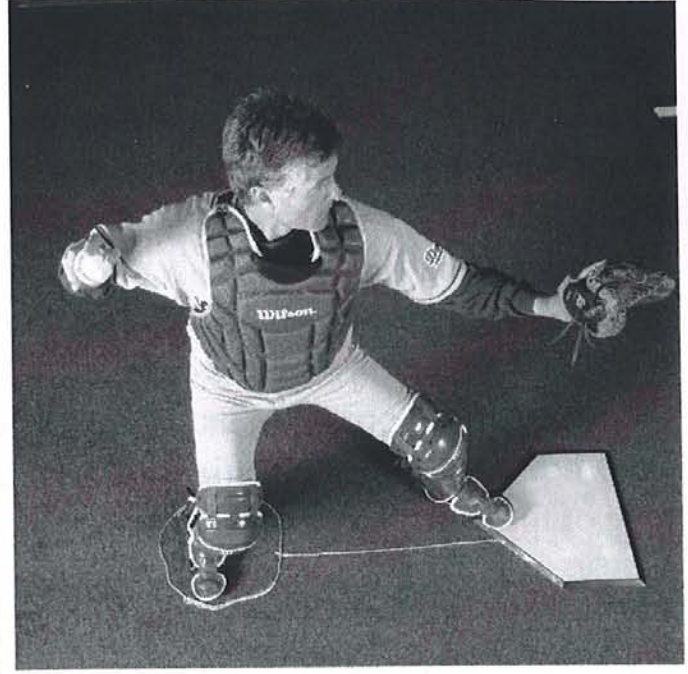
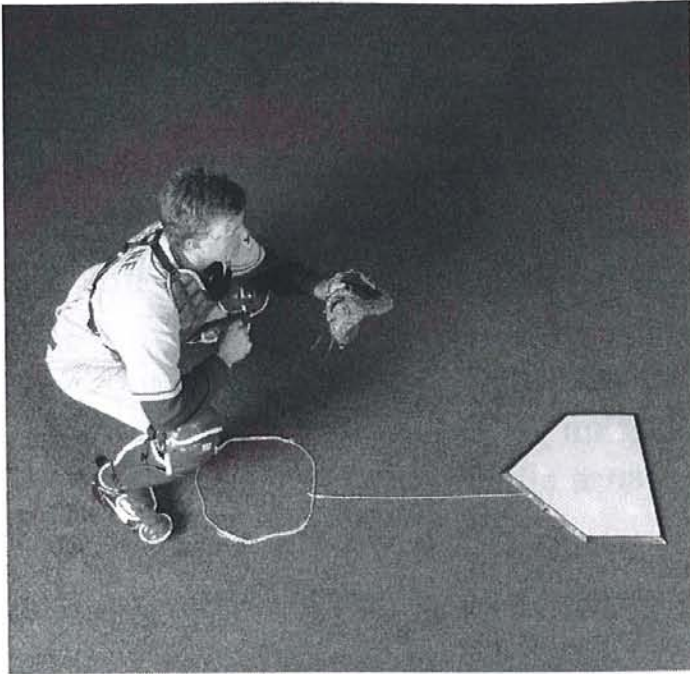
Time for a Change

I am constantly amazed at the lack of quality information available to those interested in catching. The thing is, baseball has been dissected and taught from every angle. Every library offers great wisdom for aspiring hitters, infielders, pitchers, and outfielders. Expert coaching on these subjects is everywhere. Catching has no such treasure trove of information, and that is why so many people teach catching incorrectly; most of the time, they don't teach it at all. I am not just talking about the Little League level. I am referring to the lack of informed coaching from Little League all the way up to the big leagues. After spending fifteen-plus years at the highest level of baseball and crossing paths with countless coaches and managers, I can tell you there is but a handful of people able to articulate the art of catching.

Most of the information being taught is still from the Johnny Bench era. Although I acknowledge his greatness and contributions to the game, this style of catching is from the 1970s and severely outdated. Gone are the days when the majority of pitchers throw the ball in the 80–85 mph range. Today everything has sped up to the point where everybody throws 90–100 mph—with movement! This type of speed demands a different approach if one is to be consistently successful. This type of speed demands mobility and focus like never before.

Baseball is crying out for good catchers. It is the most critical defensive position on the field—who else gets to touch the ball just about every time it moves? It is the focal point of the infield, a lot of fun, and by far the easiest way to score a college scholarship or have a big-league career, even if you are not a great athlete.

It's my belief that the simple ideas in this book will pick up the subject, dust it off, and propel us into the future. I hope this information will provide you with a template to be a better player or coach and have more fun doing it. No longer are we just going to pick the biggest, most un-athletic kid and slap the gear on him! It's time to learn the art of catching. Good luck, have fun, and get after it.

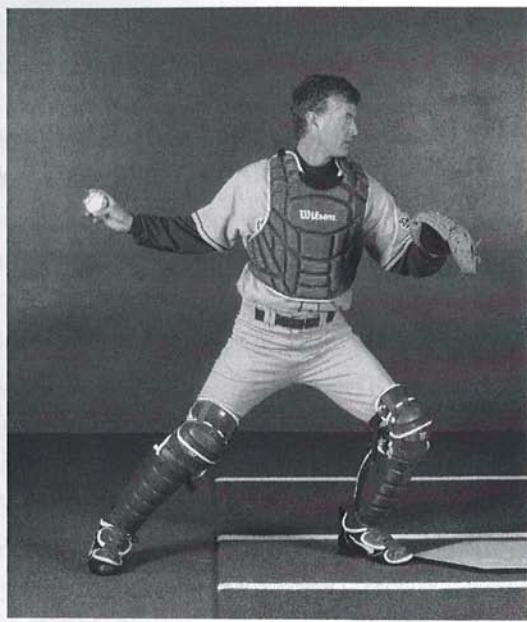
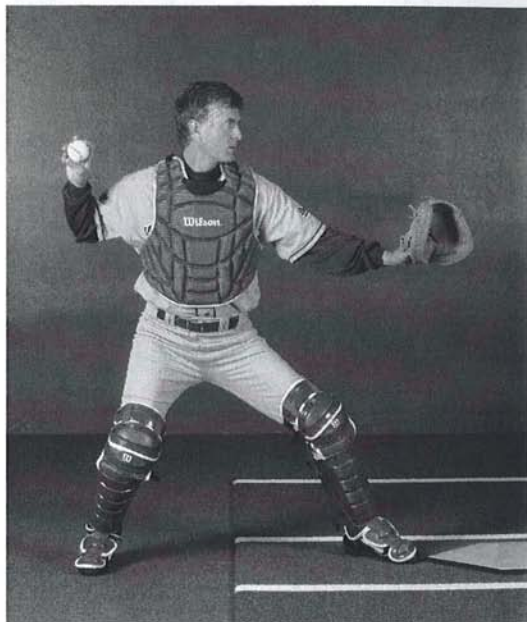


In a throwing situation, draw the circle and line shape in the dirt directly in front of the right foot. Come up to throw, making sure the right foot is in the circle and perpendicular to the line and the left foot is on the line pointed toward second base.

Timing

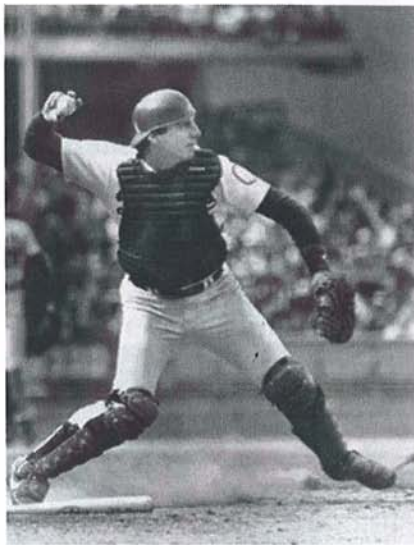
Far and away, the biggest wild card in all of this is timing—in other words, figuring out when to go forward and when to wait. Just like in hitting, proper timing is everything. There is a fine line between waiting too long for the ball and going out to meet it. Generally speaking, the ball can move more quickly than you can, so wait as long as possible before starting your footwork, making sure you still have forward momentum and are not starting from a standstill. It's a matter of finding that middle ground and effectively walking the razor's edge. I will say that slower with the lower body is usually better. Most good hitters generally put a premium on staying "inside" and driving the ball the other way because they understand that most problems occur not from getting jammed but from being too far out in front. Similarly, the catcher's natural inclination is to see the runner go and immediately start leaning, drifting too far out in front. This is a killer because it causes you to unstack, pulls you away from pitches to your right, and throws off your balance. You must learn to be patient, hang back, and attack at the right time. The sequence of events from moving your feet to squaring your shoulders to making the throw must unfold in the proper order. It all happens from the ground up.

The biggest problem next to not having your momentum going in the right direction is having the left foot touch down before the exchange has allowed your throwing arm to move forward. In other words, when that lead foot hits the ground, the ball must be in the throwing hand moving forward on the upper part of the throwing arc. If the timing is not right on this, the lower body will “slip” ahead of the upper body, robbing the throw of accuracy and power. Ideally, when the arm is ready to throw, the weight should be stacked 60–70 percent over the right leg in a power position. Again, visualize a power pitcher and the drive and balance of his legs. If you attack too soon, you’ll be “strung out,” too late, and you will be on your heels. The techniques I offer help, but only practice, patience, and experience allow you to navigate the razor’s edge of finding your personal timing.



Balanced and ready to deliver a powerful throw vs. the “strung-out” look of a mistimed sequence.

One last thing I would like to mention regarding throws to second is to pay attention to your throws back to the pitcher. Get into a habit of hitting him in the head every time. What does this have to do with pegging runners at second? Well, if you throw a ball back firmly at about head high to a pitcher standing on the rubber and



Strong throwing technique looks the same in every era. (top) Ernie Lombardi circa 1930 and (bottom) Mike Scioscia circa 1980.

he moves out of the way, guess where that ball will land. That's right, in the vicinity of second base. Your throws to second base in a steal situation have the same trajectory of a throw back to the pitcher. Since you are going to be tossing the ball back to him about 150 times a game, you might as well do it right and actually get something out of it. Aside from all of that, he will love you because he won't need to burn energy bending over to retrieve your lazy throws.

Back Picking

Back picking, or throwing behind base runners, can be a very effective weapon in a catcher's arsenal. It is important to understand that the biggest benefit to back picking is not getting outs per se, even though you will get a few. The biggest benefits are the tentativeness and fear you can plant in the minds of the opposition. Basically, it's a great tool to keep runners from getting aggressive leads and jumps. I don't know how to explain it any better than to cite Ivan Rodriguez. His biggest weapon isn't his arm. The *threat* of his arm is his biggest weapon. Trust me, you know exactly how far from the base you are when you play against that guy. The idea that he might embarrass you keeps you from getting any kind of secondary lead, much less trying to steal.