

# Catcher's Life & Handling Pass Balls

## The Most Wasted 20 Minutes in a Catcher's Life

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*Dave Weaver founded The New England Catching Camp in 1994 after realizing that instruction for the toughest position on the diamond was generally unavailable. Weaver teaches at numerous facilities throughout New England and conducts group clinics, team workshops, coaches clinics, and private sessions with catchers of all ages. Dave has coached athletes in a variety of sports for over 30 years, and has been a coach for catchers from youth through professional levels.*

It seems that many players and coaches recognize how little time is allocated during practices for catchers to work on their catching skills, like blocking, exchange drills, pickoff throws, and proper handling of pass balls with a throw to the pitcher covering home plate, just to name a few.

Often times it has been said to me that there just isn't enough time to fit it in a practice. I would like to challenge that idea by pointing out the most wasted 20 minutes in a catcher's life.

The time is called "Infield Practice." I've lost count of how many practices I have observed where a coach is hitting infield practice with often times the starting catcher standing beside them taking the throw from the fielders and then handing the ball back to the coach. WHAT A WASTE!!!

Now I know that some of the items covered during infield practice do require the catcher's involvement in a true game situation play. However I have seen at least 20 minutes go by when all they do is catch the ball and hand it to the coach.

I suggest that at the beginning of infield practice another player fill that role, and even maybe rotate with other infielders. During that time the catchers, all of the catchers if possible, are off to the side working on blocking, throwing, etc.

When it is time to do the plays that involve the catcher, call them back over and run them all at one time.

I saw this next quote on the baseball catchers web site about how much we depend on catchers to get it right, but how little time we provide for them to practice the skills they will need to get it right in a game.

"It will take a dozen outstanding plays by the catcher to make teammates forget a single disastrous E-2 that could have been prevented by practicing catcher skills."

I know that scheduling a meaningful practice is always a challenge. But the solution outlined above is an easy fix that will provide at least 20 minutes every practice for your catchers to work on their skills.

## Handling Pass Balls

It is certain that no matter how good a catcher is, balls will get past him and roll to the backstop. You can call them *wild pitches* or *passed balls*, but it doesn't make any difference at the time of the play. The important thing is that the catcher knows how to make the play correctly and how to minimize the damage.

There are two different game scenarios for a passed ball situation:

1. A lone runner on first or second
2. A runner on 3rd base

Both use the same technique for going to the ball and discarding the mask. The difference is in what the catcher does as he approaches the ball.

### The Approach

Catchers should always turn to their left as they head back to the ball, as shown in the illustration. This means that the catcher will approach the ball from the right side regardless of where the ball is located.

As soon as the catcher has made his movement left, he should remove his mask and hold onto it until he has located the ball. When the ball is reached the mask should be tossed to the side and towards the backstop, away from the catcher.

Picking up the ball correctly is very important. Failure to do so may result in high throws to a fielder. A catcher should NOT just bend over, grab the ball, and throw it to make a play at second or third base, all in one motion. This often results in a high throw because the catcher bent over and then stood up straight as he was turning back to the field. All of his weight was on his back leg and his release point never moves forward as it should.

### Getting The Ball

As the catcher gets close to the ball (having already discarded his mask), he should drop to his knees and slide to the ball.

The catcher is now in a better position to make a throw to the plate or a base and this technique permits him to attack more aggressively, especially if the ball is up against the backstop. A catcher's shinguards and chest protector will take the impact, if there is one, rather than his body. It also lets the catcher approach the ball without slowing up as he nears the backstop, which save precious seconds.

### A Runner On First or Second Base

Because this situation will seldom result in a play at home, the catcher should concentrate on the lone runner. As he gets to the ball he should rake it into his throwing hand with his glove and NOT grasp it with the glove.

The catcher will then pop up into his throwing ready position and quickly determine if there is a play to be made. If so, then the catcher should make his regular throw to second or third base in order to nab the runner.

### A Runner On Third Base

As the catcher gets to the ball he should rake it into his throwing hand with his glove and NOT grasp it with the glove.

Instead of popping-up, the catcher remains on his right knee and lifts his left leg up so that his left foot is flat to the ground with his thigh parallel to the ground. The catcher then makes a hard crisp throw to the pitcher's glove. It is important that the catcher throw to the GLOVE even if the pitcher has his glove too high for a good tag.

Too often a catcher will make the hard throw (from 20 feet away) to where the tag should be made and the ball just sails past the pitcher's knees because he cannot react quickly enough to the throw. It is far better to hit a chest high glove and miss the tag than let an errant ball travel through the infield.

Practice between catchers and pitchers with both getting into the proper position (catcher on his right knee and the pitcher down low with his glove 18" off the plate) will greatly reduce errors and increase tags at home on passed balls and wild pitches.

### Pre-Game Routine

Catchers should have a pre-game routine, especially on away games. They should practice sliding in a few locations behind the plate and up against the backstop. They should walk along the grass or dirt line along the backstop looking for debris or things like sprinkler heads.

They should search for anything that will interfere with their game play. This also means looking at the bottom of the fence for holes and poorly maintained fencing that may pose a danger to them.

A few moments spent in pre-game assessing the territory (sliding around and examining) will make a big difference during the game.