



PLAYING THE OUTFIELD IN THE PONY LEAGUE

In Little League, the outfield was where coaches hid less skilled players. Few balls were hit out there, so if a ball was misplayed, it didn't matter all that much if someone was picking dandelions, watching the clouds or chasing butterflies.

Welcome to the Pony League!

No longer is the outfield a place to hide. I kept track one season a few years ago: over 35% of all batted balls went to the outfield. Not only do more balls go to the outfield, but the Pony League outfield is much bigger than the Little League outfield. And a team can only put three fielders out there. So, coaches want the fastest players with the best gloves playing the outfield. The outfield is where a lot of Pony League games are won or lost.

As with any position, there are three things you have to keep in mind at all times when you're playing the outfield:

- 1. KNOW WHERE THEY ARE IN THE LINEUP AND THE NUMBER OF OUTS,**
- 2. ASSUME *EVERY* PITCHED BALL WILL BE HIT TO YOUR POSITION, and**
- 3. KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE BALL *BEFORE* IT GETS THERE.**

When (*not* "if") the ball is hit to your position, you have to do every thing you can to be sure the ball comes to you! If it gets past you in the outfield, that hitter *for sure* gets an extra-base hit (a double, triple or home run). And if there are runners on base, *for sure* they'll all scamper home ahead of the hitter.

Here's how to make sure the ball doesn't get past you:

- 1. Before the first pitch in each at-bat, reposition yourself left-to-right and shallow-to-deep.**

With regard to **left-to-right positioning**, take into account both your pitcher and the batter. If your pitcher is a control pitcher, it's more likely he'll get pulled (a right-handed batter will pull the ball toward left field; a left-handed batter will pull the ball toward right field). This happens most frequently with the first five or six batters in their order. Batters lower down in the order won't be so likely to pull the ball. On the other hand, if your pitcher is a fireball pitcher or changes speeds very well, most balls will be hit to the right.

With regard to **shallow-to-deep positioning**, again take into account where they are in their lineup. The leadoff batter, if he is fairly short, probably doesn't have the muscle to poke the ball deep. His job is to get on base any way he can, then steal his way around the bases. You play him shallow. On the other hand, if he's tall and strong-looking (some teams bat their best slugger in the leadoff position to give him as many at-bats as possible), then play him deep. The second and third batters are generally strong hitters, so play them deep. Many teams have mountainous knuckle-draggers whose job as cleanup hitters (fourth position in the order) is to get extra-base hits and drive in lots of runs. Sometimes the fifth and sixth batters are equally huge: play all of them deep. Once you're past number six, generally play the batter shallow. But watch out for the "table setter"! Some teams deliberately bat a good hitter last in the order to set the table for the top of the lineup. Sometimes a good player shows up late and bats at the bottom of the order because of NSYBA rules.

Repositioning involves moving five to ten steps forward, backward, left or right. These aren't baby-steps, they're your normal stride length. If a coach repositions you, it's his or her call! He or she has seen something or knows something you don't, so do what he or she says!

2. Feint left or right *with every pitch*.

A pitch inside to a right-handed batter often is hit toward left field; a pitch outside to a right-handed batter often goes toward right field; and a pitch down the middle tends to go straight over the pitcher's head and into center field. (Reverse "left" and "right" for a left-handed batter.)

So, if you can see, watch to see where the catcher calls for the pitch. If the catcher doesn't call inside or outside, you can't see what he calls, or your pitcher is inaccurate, watch to see where the actual pitch goes. From your set position, feint to your left or right a step or so *with every pitch*. The object is to get your body moving *before* the ball is hit so as to give you more range: it's easier for a body to move faster or change direction if it's already in motion. If the pitch is not hit, then go back to your original position. Don't keep feinting further and further out of position!

3. Don't run *in* on a fly ball coming to you — run *out*.

It's difficult to gauge fly balls hit right at you. So, assume it's going to go over your head and go back on it. They're easier to judge if they're hit to your left or right, but the same principle holds. The purpose is to play conservative ball. It's better to give up a single than it is a double or worse, and the "double or worse" is what happens when the ball gets very far past you.

4. Get there *before* the ball does.

All too often you've seen an outfielder gauge a fly ball and then adjust his or her running speed so he or she arrives just as the ball comes down. This results in lots of dropped balls. Gauge the fly ball, then put your head down and run like crazy before the ball gets there! Then you have time to set and make a two-handed overhead catch, as the coaches have taught you. And don't pull up short and play the ball on the bounce — catch it on the fly! If you've done everything according to this handout, it's possible the ball will sneak past you, but it won't get past you by much.

You have the ball — what now? You have to know what to do with the ball *before* it gets to you.

This is where you need to know the number of outs.

If there are two outs and you catch it on the fly: trot in to the dugout: the inning is over. Most of the chances aren't this easy: much of what comes to you is grounders, or there are fewer than two outs. So, with fewer than two outs, *on every pitch*, check to see where the baserunners are. Don't rely on your memory! Besides, baserunners can advance via steals, wild pitches, passed balls and defensive indifference, all of which happen a lot in Pony League baseball. So your memory is most likely out of date.

If there are fewer than two outs and you catch it on the fly: think "double play." Here's where knowing where the baserunners are is important. If you're shallow enough, usually you can fire the ball to the nearest base that had a baserunner on it. If you're in right and the runner was on third, or if you're in left and the runner was on first, you're probably not going to make the out. Get the ball back into the infield as fast as you can: the ball is still live and runners can advance.

If you catch it on the bounce: get it into the infield as fast as you can! The general rule is to throw the ball two bases ahead of the lead runner's base when the ball was pitched. Thus, if the bases were empty, the ball has to go to second; if there was a runner on first, the ball has to go to third; if the lead runner was on second or third, the ball has to go home. Listen to your infielders; *do not pause to make the decision where to throw the ball!* You'll hear one of these calls: "two," "cut two," "three," "cut three," "home," or "cut home" (sometimes it's "four" or "cut four"). If you don't hear "cut," fire the ball directly to the base indicated. If you *do* hear "cut," throw the ball to the cutoff man, who will have his or her arms up, signalling that you are to throw the ball to him or her.

Throwing the ball: take the ball from your glove, *make certain of your grip* (otherwise your throw will most likely be inaccurate — use the rising fastball grip we show you in practice) then throw it as hard as you can at the receiving infielder's chest. Only if you are in the very shallowest part of the outfield and throwing to an adjacent base can you use an infielder's throw. In all other cases, crow-hop!