Youth Baseball First Baseman Drills: Footwork and Picks

Drills | Coach Nick & the YSC Coaching Team

Two springs ago our 11U shortstop made a clean play deep in the hole, set his feet, and threw a strike to first. The ball sailed past our first baseman, who was already stretched as far as he could reach toward the shortstop before the ball left his hand. The ball went to the fence, the runner ended up on second, and we gave up two runs in an inning we should have gotten out of. After the game the shortstop asked me, quietly, if he should throw softer. The throw wasn't the problem. The kid at first was.

First base is where most infield outs end, and in youth baseball it's often where coaches put the player they're trying to hide. We think that's backwards. A first baseman who can catch, find the bag, and read a throw makes every other infielder better.

The short answer: good youth first base footwork means sprinting to the bag, setting your heels on the infield edge of it, squaring your chest to the thrower, and **not stretching until you've read the throw**. At most ages the throwing-hand foot stays on the bag and the glove-side foot strides toward the ball. Below about 10U, catching the ball with any foot on the bag is the whole job. The footwork details come after that.

Why First Base Gets Under-Coached

A good first base footwork breakdown we watched recently makes the same point we see on our own fields: the stretch, the crossover, and the drop step back to the bag get almost no practice reps in youth baseball. Infielders get dozens of ground balls a practice. The first baseman just catches their throws, with nobody coaching how. The seven drills below fit into a 25–30 minute station.

The Fundamentals Every Drill Builds

1. **Get to the bag early.** On any ground ball to the infield, the first baseman's first move is to the bag, not toward the ball, unless the ball is clearly theirs.
2. **Set up on the inside edge.** Both heels touching the infield-facing edge of the base, knees bent, glove up at chest height as a target.
3. **Square to the thrower.** Chest faces the infielder making the throw. From second base, that's a different angle than from third.
4. **Read, then stretch.** Wait until the ball is in the air and you can see its line. Then stride with the glove-side foot toward the ball. Stretching early locks the player in place.
5. **Ball first, bag second.** If the throw is off-line, catch it, even if that means leaving the base. Then tag the runner or get back to the bag.

Which Foot Goes on the Bag?

The answer depends on age.

- **6U–8U:** Any foot. If the ball is caught and a foot touches the base, that's a win.
- **9U–10U:** Throwing-hand foot on the bag, glove-side foot strides to the ball. A right-handed first baseman keeps the right foot on the base and stretches with the left. That's the default we teach.
- **11U and up:** Add the switch. On a throw well to the backhand side (toward foul territory for a righty), advanced players switch feet so the glove-side foot is on the bag and the throwing-side foot crosses over to extend their reach. Only teach this once the default is automatic.

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The 7-Drill First Baseman Practice Block

Run these in order. The first three build the footwork without a live throw. The last four add the ball, speed, and decisions.

Drill 1 — Find the Bag (3 min) Player starts in fielding position about 10 feet off the bag, even with the infielders. Coach yells "ground ball" and points to an infielder. Player sprints to the bag, finds it with the heels without looking down, squares to the infielder the coach pointed at, and shows a glove target. No ball. Ten reps, pointing to a different infielder each time. Coaching cue: "Eyes on the thrower, heels find the bag."

Drill 2 — Stretch and Mark (3 min) Player stands with the throwing-hand foot on the bag and strides as far as possible toward an imaginary throw, then sets the glove on the ground at the farthest reach. Coach drops a cone at the glove. Repeat straight on, to the glove side, and toward the home plate side. Players are almost always surprised by how far they can reach without leaving the bag, and it teaches them that there's no need to stretch early. Coaching cue: "That cone is your range. Trust it."

Drill 3 — Read-Then-Stretch Tosses (4 min) Player sets up on the bag. A partner 30–40 feet away throws at chest height, but the player may not stride until the coach (standing behind the thrower) sees the ball released. After 10 throws on target, the partner moves throws left, right, high, and low. If the player strides before the ball is in the air, the rep doesn't count. Coaching cue: "Let the ball tell you where to go."

Drill 4 — Knee Picks to Standing Picks (5 min) Player kneels with the glove low. Coach, 10 feet away, bounces tennis balls or soft balls in front of the glove: forehand, backhand, and straight on. Glove starts on the ground and moves forward through the ball, never stabbing down at it. After 15 reps, the player stands in the stretch position and repeats with real baseballs. Coaching cue: "Glove down early, push through the hop." Pair this with a youth first base mitt at theranchsports.com, since the longer, deeper pocket makes short hops much easier to pick.

Drill 5 — The Pick Competition (5 min) This one has been widely shared among youth coaches, and it's worth stealing. Rotate up to six players through first base. Coach throws or fungos short hops to the player at first, five per turn. Clean pick = 2 points, knocked down and kept in front = 1 point, ball gets by = 0. Highest score after three rounds picks the team's next warm-up game. Kids who dodge pick reps will fight for this one. Coaching cue: "Keep it in front and you still score."

Drill 6 — Off the Bag and Tag (4 min) Partner throws deliberately off-line: up the line toward home, and wide to the outfield side. Player must decide in the moment: stretch and stay on the bag, or come off it, catch the ball, and swipe-tag a coach jogging down the line. Celebrate the right decision even when the tag misses. Coaching cue: "Ball first, bag second."

Drill 7 — Live Infield Throws (6 min) Coach fungos ground balls to third, short, second, and the pitcher. First baseman starts off the bag in fielding position for every rep and has to get there, set up, square, read, and receive. Add runners once the footwork holds up under pressure. Every few reps, hit one to the first baseman's right so the pitcher has to cover (see below). Coaching cue: "Bag, square, read, catch."

If you're running a full practice with multiple positions, this block fits right into a station-based baseball practice. For the rest of the infield, our youth baseball infield drills give the throwers better throws to receive.

The Plays Most First Base Guides Skip

Most first base articles stop at footwork and scoops. In our experience, these three situations cost youth teams more runs than a bad stretch.

1. The feed to the pitcher

On a ground ball to the first baseman's right, the first baseman fields it and the pitcher covers the bag. At 10U and 11U this play falls apart constantly, because nobody has practiced the feed. Teach it this way: the first baseman gets the ball out of the glove

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early and shows it to the pitcher, then makes a firm underhand toss chest-high, a step or two before the pitcher reaches the bag. The pitcher runs toward the foul line first, then turns up the line so they aren't crossing in front of the runner.

2. Trailing the runner

A short coaching clip from Coach Dan Blewett covers something almost no youth coach teaches: on a clean single to the outfield, the first baseman shouldn't just stand at the bag and watch. They should trail the batter-runner toward second, staying a few steps behind and inside the runner. If the runner takes a wide turn and the outfielder throws behind them, the first baseman is there to receive it and tag. At 12U and up, this play gets outs.

3. Working with the double first base

Many youth leagues and complexes now use the double first base (a white bag in fair territory and an orange bag in foul territory), and more leagues add it every season. The first baseman uses only the white bag. The batter-runner uses the orange one. Players who learned on a single base drift toward the middle, so run Drill 1 on a double base until their heels find the white side.

How First Base Footwork Should Change by Age

Age	Priority	Add when ready
6U–8U	Catch the ball, any foot on the bag	Sprinting to the bag on every ground ball
9U–10U	Throwing-hand foot on the bag, read before stretching	Short-hop picks, feed to the pitcher
11U–12U	Backhand switch, off-the-bag tags	Trailing the runner, cutoff on throws home from right field
13U+	Holding runners and pickoff footwork	Bunt coverage, double-play feeds

Don't skip ahead. A 9-year-old who switches feet but still stretches early hasn't learned anything useful.

Don't Use First Base as a Hiding Spot

I'll own this one. Early in my coaching career I put my weakest fielder at first because "he only has to catch." That season we led the league in errors charged to *other* infielders, because throws that a real first baseman would have caught went to the fence.

The best youth first basemen are usually your most reliable catchers of the ball, not your weakest. They also need to be good athletes. The lateral stretch, the quick turn back to the bag, and the short burst to the base are movements that coordination drills and general agility work build, so we keep that work in every practice for players under 12, regardless of position. Make sure the mitt fits too. Our youth baseball glove sizing guide covers first base mitt sizes by age.

For more baseball-specific coaching resources, visit our baseball coaching hub.

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