Defending the Steal, by Bob Morgan
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A key to stopping the running game is to identify running situations and the players who can run. You should check the stat sheet for stolen bases and stolen bases attempted. In general, you can expect middle players or the one, two, and nine hitters in the lineup to be runners.

Good runners like to run early in the count, especially with two outs. Also, they often run with three balls on the hitter. They will run more in close games. Slower runners will try to run on breaking-ball counts and may try to delay steal, especially with a left-handed hitter at the plate.

**Disrupting the base runner’s timing.** When a runner reaches base, the pitcher must upset his timing and rhythm. The simplest and most effective way to threaten a potential base stealer is to hold the ball and freeze the runner. The pitcher can disrupt the base runner’s timing by varying the amount of the time he holds the ball on each pitch. On some pitches he can hold the ball longer, and on others he can go directly to the plate with only a slight pause. If the base runner is unsure when the pitcher will throw to the plate, he will become tense. His muscles will tighten up, and he is unlikely to get a good jump. Holding the ball until the base runner stops prevents the base runner from getting a walking lead. Additionally, the batter who is waiting will become anxious and begin to lose his concentration.

Statistics show that marginal base stealers have a significantly lower success rate when a pitcher throws to first at least once. A well-planned quick throw to first can be effective. Varying his moves is probably the best way for the pitcher to stop the running game. A quick step-off will chase the runner back to the bag and will often expose his intentions. When a runner slides headfirst back to first, it’s a sign that he is going. A throw to first or a quick step-off will also cause the batter to tip his intentions.

**Quickening the delivery to the plate.** The pitcher can control the running game by speeding up his move to the plate and quickening his delivery to the plate. He should concentrate on minimizing arm and leg movement; the less wasted movement he has in his delivery, the easier it becomes to speed his release to the plate. He should think of his leg kick as a leg lift rather than vice versa. He should keep his arms close to his body and reduce the arc that his arm travels. He should get his arm up into a throwing position quickly. These techniques will speed up his delivery and improve his mechanics.

**Slide step.** The slide step is an effective way to slow down the running game. From the set position, the pitcher simply locks his hip and slides his lead leg close to the ground toward the plate. In essence, he is speeding up his time to home plate. If a normal leg lift is timed at 1.4 seconds, using the slide step would reduce the time to the plate to 1.2 seconds.

**Pitchouts.** Pitchouts are another way to slow down base runners. The purpose of the pitchout is to give the catcher an easy ball to handle so that he can get off a quick, accurate throw to second base. For a pitcher, the key on a pitchout is to stay compact, quicken the delivery, and throw a four-seam fastball high and away. He does not use a slide step when pitching out because the base runner will probably not go on the pitch. The pitcher can also use a modified pitchout, a pitchout thrown eye high just off the outside corner. A team that has the opponent’s signals should use the modified pitchout because the opposition is less likely to suspect that their signs have been compromised. The modified pitchout is also used against teams who read pitchouts well.

**Left-handers’ advantages.** Left-handers should have a good move to first base and be able to stop the running game better than right-handers can. Many lefties have not developed a move to first base because most players do not run on lefties. The key is to keep all the actions of the pitch and pick the same so that the base runner has no key on an early read.
A left-handed pitcher can do a variety of things with his leg and arms. Left-handed pitchers must abide by two simple rules when picking to first base. The first rule concerns the leg lift. The stride leg must not cross the front plane of the rubber as it is being lifted. The second rule deals with the stride leg, which must land within a 45-degree angle from the center of the rubber.

Left-handed pitchers have the luxury of being able to freeze runners without throwing the ball to first base. One such move is called the shoulder turn. As the pitcher lifts his leg, he turns his right shoulder in toward the runner while keeping the left leg from crossing the plane of the rubber. He then delivers the pitch to the plate. This move will cause the runner to freeze or retreat to first base.

Read lift. The read lift is effective in slowing down the opponent’s better base stealers. The read lift is a slow, deliberate lift of the leg without committing to either the base or the plate. The pitcher must read the runner and act accordingly. If the runner breaks toward second base, the pitcher steps down toward first and picks. If the runner freezes or retreats to first, the pitcher delivers the ball to the plate.

Step-back pitch. The step-back pick can be the quickest way for a left-hander to get the ball to the bag. The pitcher must step off the rubber with his left foot and throw the ball with a flicking action to the bag. A variation of this move would be not to throw the ball or to fake the throw. Because he has stepped off the rubber, a throw is not necessary.

Awareness of runners at second. When defending the steal, pitchers must be aware of runners occupying second base. Stealing third base can be much easier than stealing second for several reasons. Pitchers tend to have a slower count with a runner at second. Runners at second typically get bigger leads while taking walking leads. The runner will be in motion while taking his primary lead, which will increase his lead and make him quicker in getting a jump to run.

Inside move. The inside move is beneficial in deterring theft of third base. The pitcher executes the inside move by lifting the stride leg until it reaches its apex, turning the leg over and across the rubber, and stepping down to pick to second. This move can be effective only if the leg lift of the inside move resembles the leg lift of his normal delivery to plate. This particular move is great to use against aggressive runners, runners who put their heads down when they run, and in two-out, full-count situations when runners at first and second are running on movement.

Daylight, or open-glove, play. Other pickoffs to second or third are used with timing and communication within the team defense. One such strategy is the daylight, or open-glove, play at second. Either middle infielder will see daylight between the runner and bag. As the pitcher comes set, the shortstop will flash an open glove with his arm extended while he breaks to the bag. (The second baseman extends his right hand to execute the play.) The pitcher sees the open glove, immediately turns, and picks to the bag. This play takes timing, nonverbal communication, and the ability of the shortstop or second baseman to read daylight.

As we have seen in this section, defending the steal can involve a multitude of looks, counts, rhythm, and timing strategies. If a pitcher can learn to apply these techniques, he will surely be able to slow the running game of the opponent and control the game.