

THE UNDERHAND FLIP

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The underhand flip is one of the most important defensive skills that infielders can master. Unfortunately it is a skill that often is taken for granted and not practiced often enough. A little bit of time spent discussing and practicing the underhand flip can save a team a substantial number of runs during the course of a season.

If you look around the infield there are many obvious examples of situations when using the underhand flip that's necessary. The most common use is to begin the 6-4-3 or 4-6-3 double play. In addition, first basemen use the underhand flip on plays where the pitcher must cover first and the distance between the two players is close to allow for an overhand throw. Catchers use the underhand flip if there is a wild pitch or passed ball that bounces back off the fence when there is a runner on third and the pitcher is covering home. Pitchers sometimes need to use it on a squeeze play when the runner is approaching home plate and a quick toss is the only way to get the out.

We are going to look at the underhand flip as it relates to middle infielders for the purpose of this article. It is important for players of all ages to master this skill. There won't be many 6-4-3- or 4-6-3 double plays at the youngest ages, but how many times have we seen what should have been a routine force out turn into an ugly situation because of a botched force play at second? If the underhand flip is not addressed and practiced, a shortstop or second baseman is likely to field the ball and stand straight up to attempt an overhand feed. It is very difficult to get the ball to first base accurately for the force out in this manner; usually the ball is too difficult for the receiver to pick up, it is thrown too hard or it is thrown straight into the ground.

If the underhand flip is practiced, the force out becomes routine. As the players get older and stronger the execution of the double play begins to take place naturally. This is one of those instances when developing a strong fundamental base allows players to execute more complicated plays as they get more mature. There are subtle variances in the mechanics of the underhand flip for the shortstop and second baseman. The mechanics used by the shortstop to start the 6-4-3 double play are those most commonly utilized by other players on the field.

We would argue that 2/3 of all double plays should be started with an underhand flip. The flip should be attempted on balls hit right at the middle infielder as well as balls hit to the second base side of the middle infielder. The only time an overhand feed should be attempted is when a ground ball pulls the fielder away from the bag to which he is feeding.

SHORT TO SECOND

So, with that premise in mind, when a double play ball is hit directly at the shortstop – or to the second base side of the shortstop – the following things need to occur:

- Field the ball first – We can't throw it if we don't catch it.
- Clear the glove – Make sure to move the glove so that it doesn't hide the ball as it is flipped.
- Stay low and generate momentum toward the target – Just like with throwing across the diamond, we want to be able to shuffle our feet toward the target, generating enough momentum to allow the ball to be flipped to the person covering the base.
- Maintain a firm wrist – The wrist should remain firm at all times. The hand should never extend backward beyond our leg. This is not bowling. Shove the ball forward with your hand, keeping the wrist firm. The ball should not spin very much.
- Try to make this an "uphill Feed" – The ball should travel in a straight line with little or no arc from the release point directly to the receiver. At no time should the ball be higher than the receiver's eye level. It should arrive at chest or chin level so that it is easily seen and handled. By staying in a low athletic position when shuffling it is easier to make the feed from low to high.

- Leave the hand high – After the ball is flipped, the feeder’s hand should end up at the face level of the receiver. This makes it more likely for the ball to travel to where it is intended to go.
- Follow the flip – Take a few steps toward the target after the ball is flipped to ensure that it gets to the receiver quickly and firmly.

The mistakes we see most often when it comes to the underhand flip are “bowling,” a limp wrist, players who stand straight up before flipping the ball and a failure to leave the hand at the receiver’s head level. When players “bowl” or wind up before making the flip, the ball often rolls off the fingertips and stays below waist level. This also happens when players don’t leave their hands high, which makes the toss very difficult to receive. A limp wrist can result in a ball that does not carry far enough and can pull the receiver off the bag. Also, when a ball is tossed with a limp wrist it may hang in the air a long time, making the receiver vulnerable to the approaching runner.

Again, the mechanics of the shortstop’s feed to second are identical to the way a pitcher, catcher or first baseman might execute the underhand flip.

SECOND TO SHORT

For the second baseman starting the 4-6-3 double play, everything is identical except for one thing. The second baseman must keep his throwing hand in front of his body when generating momentum toward the target. That’s where the ball is caught, so that’s the most logical place for the ball to be tossed from. The player’s right shoulder should be turned so that it is pointing toward the target and the throwing hand should remain inside the right leg. When the hand is outside the right leg the player often stands more upright, and the ball is harder to pick up out of the hand. Standing upright also makes it harder to keep the wrist firm, often leads to “bowling” and makes it more difficult to leave the hand high. Also fielding the ball, second baseman should clear the glove, point the right shoulder toward the target, get the throwing hand out in front of the body, shuffle toward the target and execute the flip by keeping the throwing hand inside the right leg. After the ball is flipped the hand should finish high (at target’s head or face level), and the second baseman should follow the toss. Some more advanced players may prefer to execute a crossover step instead of shuffling toward the target.

DRILL FOR YOUNGER PLAYERS

Keep in mind that the goal when teaching the underhand flip to younger players is to make the force play at second base more routine, eliminating errors and runners circling the bases. The most important thing for younger players to understand is the concept of generating momentum and allowing that momentum to carry the ball to the receiver so that it can be handled easily. To assist with this we have developed a very simple drill we like to use at our camps.

The players line up single file. We like to keep the lines small, with five or six kids per line. A coach sets up about 10 feet in front of the line. It can be helpful to place a cone or baseball several feet behind the first player in line. Players not fielding should be to stand behind this marker so that the fielder has plenty of room. The coach rolls a ball to the first player in line, stressing proper fielding technique (wide base, butt down, hands out in front). The player fields the ball, shuffles toward the target (the coach) and executes the flip. To reinforce the concepts of following the flip and leaving the hand high, the player must keep moving toward the coach after flipping the ball and give him a high five. Please emphasize to the players that they should not stand straight up before executing the underhand flip. They should shuffle in an athletic position without any wasted movement. Players who stand straight up tend to bowl, use a limp or not finish with their hands high enough.

Developing a consistent underhand flip is a matter of repetition for older players. Keeping the players moving and in small groups can help keep things interesting for them, however. Simply divide the players in half between short and second. Players line up single file at each position. The coach rolls a ball to the first player who fields it and executes the underhand flip before jogging to the end of the second base line. The second baseman presents a target with two hands at chest level, receives the throw and returns the ball to the coach before jogging to the end of the shortstop line. By rolling the ball to the player, the coach can control the exact location of where the flip should start and avoid balls to the backhand that would need to be delivered with an overhand feed. After several repetitions, balls should be rolled to the second baseman. As players get more comfortable with the underhand flip, first basemen can practice receiving double play throws at the first base bag.