



## Berlin Youth Baseball – Drills for Catcher Basics

**Goal of this document:** Provide coaches, parents, and players with drills that can help start young youth down the path of learning the fundamentals of being a catcher, staying safe behind the plate, and consistently keeping the ball in front.

As soon as the youth are in a league where stealing or taking a base on a past ball is allowed, the catcher position becomes critical to the success of a team. The catcher position is a grueling position that requires long periods of time squatting, requires constant awareness, regular hustle to chase a ball, but also is very prone to players getting hit repeatedly by wild pitches, foul tips, simple missed catches, and sometimes even get touched by the bat. A youth that is able to play catcher is typically one that is not afraid of the ball and is very tolerant of bumps and bruises.

### Catcher Safety

The most important thing a coach should consider for a catcher is their safety. One of the main ways a coach can do this is by making sure the catcher is wearing all the catcher's appropriate gear, and that the gear fits tight and snug so as to limit the chances of a ball actually hitting the body. A minimum of a mask, chest protector, and leg guards are needed. All youth baseball players, but in particular the catcher, should also be regularly reminded that they need to be wearing compression shorts or a cup for safety.



### The throwing hand

To keep a youth catcher safe, you want to immediately teach them that behind the plate they are going to always catch with their glove hand only. This means their throwing hand should be wrapped around safely their back to avoid any balls hitting the fingers or hand or arm. As the youth get older they may move their hand to behind their ankle.



### Where should the catcher be

In order to give the youth player a chance to catch the ball in the air and have the umpire still see it as a strike, the catcher needs to be setup with their catcher's glove even with the batter's back foot. Young catcher's have a tendency to setup too far back, making it difficult to catch the ball and difficult for the umpire to properly see strikes. Practice with your youth catcher getting them up close to that batter's back foot.



## What glove should the catcher use?

At a very young age, players may ask to wear their own fielding glove instead of a catcher's glove. But it is important at an early age to start getting youth catchers comfortable wearing a proper catcher's glove. A catcher's glove is thicker and has the fingers closer together, creating more stability and security to ensure when pitchers are throwing at a high speed repeatedly, that the hand and finger is protected from wear and tear and injury.



## Catcher's Stance

Catcher's will need to squat down, in a low position, their toes are pointed out, hips open. The glove should be just out in front past the knees. Their weight should be on the inside part of their feet, and their heels should be touching the ground. The catcher should be in a relaxed position, not tensed up, allowing their butt to sit low near the heels. In this stance, a catcher has the flexibility to move and adjust depending on where the pitch goes. Some youth may want to kneel on one or both legs, may want to stick one leg way out straight, or some youth may even want to sit on the ground, but you should teach your youth to avoid these awkward positions as they take away from their ability to move quickly and adjust on the fly for a wild pitch.



## Creating a target for the pitcher

It is important that a youth catcher gives the pitcher a nice, big, and consistent target. It may seem obvious, but it's also important to ensure the catcher puts their glove in the strike zone (many kids will put the glove too high or low). To make a nice looking and big target for the pitcher, the catcher needs to learn to get the glove near the middle of their body and setup with their glove as wide open as they can get it. It's also important for the catcher to use their chest as a target, so while squatting, the chest should be straight and puffed out making another nice target area for the pitcher to see.

## A catcher's mentality (Hockey Goalie)

One way to explain what it's like to be a catcher to a youth player is to tell them they are a hockey goalie, and nothing can get by them. Regardless if low or high, inside or outside, find a way to throw the body in front of the ball. Remind the youth they have a chest protector, and leg guards for a reason, so they should be comfortable with the ball hitting them in order to ensure the ball doesn't get past them.

### **Wild pitch, ball in the dirt (creating a wall with no holes)**

The catcher needs to focus on the ball coming out of the pitcher hand, and as soon as they see a short, wild pitch, one that's not going to reach the plate and that's going into the dirt they need to get into "blocking mode". Steps to block the ball typically involve

- 1.) Drop the catcher's mitt down to the ground, flipped over, between the knees
- 2.) As the mitt goes down, the knees go down with it along the mitt's outer edges
- 3.) Finish by hunching your shoulders and neck down looking towards the ground



### **Blocking to the Left and Right**

If the pitch is further inside or outside, the youth will need to take a step with the leg in that direction (ball is right then step with right leg, if ball is left then step with left leg) and drop that leg to the knee. The other leg will come along, or drag/straighten out as you get your glove flipped down to the ground between your legs. The youth will also hunch their shoulders and neck down towards the ball again.



### **Past Balls**

It is inevitable that a youth catcher will not be able to stop everything. It is important to establish that hustle is required for every past ball. There is no walking back to find the ball and giving the runner a free pass to the next base, the catcher should hustle as fast as they can to find the ball and get it back in their possession.

## **Flipping off the Mask**

While the catcher's mask is a terrific safety device allowing your youth to feel safe as the fastball is coming in from the pitcher, there are several instances where you need to teach your youth catcher to get rid of the mask (flip it off and toss it aside as fast as possible). One such situation is as soon as there is a wild pitch/past ball, if the ball gets behind the catcher and is rolling back near the fence, the mask suddenly makes it difficult for your youth to find the ball. Therefore on a past ball, the catcher should get used to flipping off the mask, tossing it aside, spotting the ball, and then hustling to pick it up. Another situation where the mask comes off is on a pop-up, as soon as the catcher realizes the batter has hit the ball in the air near home plate, the catcher's mask should immediately get flipped off, tossed aside, then look up in the air and find that ball. As youth get older, the bunt is something that batters may try to do, and this is another situation where a catcher will want to flip off their mask as soon as they realize it's a bunt, so they can find the ball and throw it to first.



## **The Throw Back to the Pitcher**

Perhaps surprisingly for some newer coaches, you quickly find out that for any league that allows stealing, one situation you cannot take for granted is the throw back from the catcher to the pitcher. If the catcher overthrows the pitcher the runners may be able to advance a base. For the very young players, the best thing you can teach the pitcher and catcher is that after every pitch, the pitcher walks a few steps towards home, and the catcher always walks a few steps out in front of home before he throws it back to the pitcher. By both the pitcher and catcher walking forward, this shortens the distance of the throw and lowers the chance of dropping it.



### **Catcher letting everyone know the situation**

The catcher is the only position that is facing all the other defensive players on the team, therefore it is easiest for your catcher to be the communicator on the team. It is highly recommended that you teach your catcher to be very vocal, yelling out before each batter how many outs there are, pointing to which base the force out is at, and shouting out where the batter hit the ball their last time up. Having a mask on can hinder a catcher's ability to sound loud, therefore pulling the mask slightly up prior to yelling out this information is key.



### **Advanced Topic: Soft Body**

As the catcher gets older, they will realize that if the ball bounces hard off their body, it will ricochet in random directions and could go far away. Older catchers will start to learn that just like when infielders field with soft hands, the catcher needs to block balls with a soft body, by actually slightly backing off or absorbing the ball when necessary and purposely redirecting the ball, actually making the catcher have a small amount of control over where the ball bounces.

### **Advanced Topic: Framing the Pitch**

With the younger ages, you are mostly concentrating on teaching them how to block the ball and throw it back to the pitcher. As the youth gets older, you want to teach them to start "Framing" pitches. This means that for pitches that are slightly high, low, outside, or inside, immediately as the catcher catches the ball they slide their glove towards the center of the strike zone, "framing" the pitch as a strike for the umpire. In the photo below notice how the catcher catches the ball low out of the strike zone but immediately slides (or "Frames") his glove up to the middle of the strike zone.



### **Advanced Topic: Calling the Pitches for the Pitcher**

At the younger ages, you will usually just see the catcher worrying about catching the ball and not being involved much in the pitch call. In those younger ages, many times the pitcher isn't even thinking about what type of pitch to throw and for the most part is throwing a fastball over and over again. But the catcher and pitcher get older, they will start communicating pitches to each other. The simplest method is, before the inning, the catcher goes out to the pitchers mound and the catcher and pitcher talk to each other, with their gloves over their mouths so the other team can't read their lips, and they indicate what pitches are what numbers. Typically the catcher uses their fingers to signal a pitcher. As an example, 1 finger could be 4-Seam Fastball, 2 fingers, could be 2-Seam Fastball, and 3 could be change-up. It is important for catchers to keep the signal hidden up between their thighs so that the benches and base runners on the corners cannot see the pitch call. For older players, after making the pitch call the catcher may also do signals for an inside or outside pitch by tapping on their thigh or making a motion with the hand denoting up or down.



### **Advanced Topic: Calling a Pickoff**

At the younger ages, players cannot leadoff, but as the youth get older into a league where leading off is allowed, there may be times where the pitcher wants to try to pickoff the runner. The universal sign for this is typically the flicking of the catcher's thumb, and then the pitcher will step off the mound and throw to the base to try to pick the runner off that was leading off the base.



### **Advanced Topic: Calming a rattled Pitcher**

At any age, it can be helpful to teach a young catcher to identify when their pitcher friend is struggling. Perhaps the pitcher just threw 4 balls, or beaned a player, or threw a wild pitch, or gave up a homerun. The catcher should identify when a pitcher is having some trouble and call time and walk out to the mound to have a chat. These chats are meant to be motivational, so teach the catcher to lighten the mood with a funny joke or some positive feedback. Having the catcher do this is often times beneficial for the team, because many leagues have rules indicating that a coach can only go out to the mound once, and if the coach goes out a 2<sup>nd</sup> time the pitcher must be taken out of the game, therefore having the catcher calm down the pitcher can save on those precious mound visits.

### **Advanced Topic: Throwing Out a Stealing Runner (or making pick-off play)**

As the youth get older, the runners can start to lead off on the pitch and steal, and as you get even older they can leadoff before the pitch. This means as the ages get older, the catcher is ever more important in the ability to prevent runners from stealing or make a strong armed throw to get a stealing runner out. The catcher's throw down to get a stealing runner starts with the grip, your standard 4-seam grip (the letter 'C') that we've learned for all defensive players. Then the catcher should worry about transitioning the ball from the glove to the hand as fast as possible. Upon catching the ball, the catcher turns the open part of the glove towards their throwing hand, the glove elbow comes out facing the target, and the ball is pulled out making the "Big T" throwing position we've learned from other defense drills. Lots of youth make the mistake of making a big swinging motion with their glove to one side of the body or the other, but it's important to keep the glove close and compact to the chest to eliminate motion and increase the speed of this transition.



Simultaneously as the glove to hand transition is occurring, the footwork is as follows. Think of an imaginary straight line from the middle of the catcher to the target. The throwing hand foot steps up and in to the middle, directly in line with the target, landing on that imaginary line. The glove foot then swings around behind landing in front of the throwing hand foot, directly on that imaginary line. The arms at this point are in the "Big T" position so the catcher looks like he's about to throw a pitch from the stretch position, and he releases the ball then like a normal throw.

