

Base Running and Sliding

Over the years of my playing and coaching career I have seen many a game won and lost with the skills of, (or lack there of) base running and sliding. An offensive team that is aggressive on the base paths can take advantage of a defense that is lackadaisical moving toward the ball or timid and unsure with their throws. On the flip side, overly aggressive teams can run themselves out of games trying to take a base that isn't there. The best base runners are often natural and instinctive as well as being good at the skill of sliding. Because the act of running around the bases seems so self-evident, base running is often given short shrift in the compressed time frames of most practices. Yet as mentioned above- aggressive base running including good sliding often determines the outcome of close games. In U12 ball, sliding is usually the area with the widest disparity in skill levels among players on the same team. Usually players that do it well were taught how to do it early. In a way, sliding is kind of like swimming or skiing, which is, best learned before the player is old enough to be afraid to try it.

Mechanics of Base Running

Proper running form is extremely important when running the bases. There are 2 components of good running form for every softball player to remember.

- **Path around the bases** - The runner should not be too wide on the turns – she should lean and use her arms to make tight turns. She should look for the base coach so there is no hesitation when advancing to the next bag.
- **Running form** - The athlete should run on the “balls of the feet” and not her heels. She should lift her knees high so when the balls of her feet hit the ground she can “claw” on the ground to propel herself forward. Her arms should be pumping from “cheek to cheek” [that would be face cheek to buttock cheek]. She should lean slightly forward with her head up at all times so she can see where she is headed.

Bent Leg Slide

To be a good aggressive base runner, one must reach 2nd, 3rd or home plate as quickly as possible without overshooting the bag. The Bent Leg Slide is the standard slide, and if properly executed (together with the detachable bases typically used in junior softball) a safe way to achieve this somewhat oxymoronic task. Players should wear sliding pants or sliders and knee pads on the non-thrusting “bent” leg since that's the leg that touches the ground. In order to execute the Bent Leg Slide, the runner should:

- Sprint towards the bag; momentum is key (run full speed at all times – don't slow down; the sliding action will act as the brakes).
- Lower herself toward the ground when she is about 5 to 8 feet from the bag while in full stride – don't jump into a sliding position, this makes for hitting the ground harder and increases the chances of injury.

- Thrust out the left leg or the top leg while the right leg is dropping toward the ground. This is the recommended form when sliding into 2nd or 3rd base and the throw is coming from the infield because it keeps her face pointed toward the outfield and away from the throw for safety. If the throw is coming from the outfield, she should try sliding with the right leg on top and the left leg dropping toward the ground. In this case, the player's face will now be toward the infield and away from the throw for safety. Even with a face mask on the helmet this is a good practice to use to further prevent injury.
- Bend the knee of the back leg at a more or less 90 degree angle so that the foreleg is tucked beneath the thrusting or lead leg.
- While dropping to the ground, distribute her weight more or less on the bent leg side of her body with most of the weight being on her buttocks. Players who cut up their knees have too much weight forward on the top of the leg and need to lean back more.
- Keep her back more or less flat against the ground to help her avoid a high tag.
- Keep her arms extended behind her head and off the ground (to prevent jamming her hands in the ground).
- Glide into the bag, touching it with her thrusting or lead foot.

A low profile will make it harder for the defensive player to make the tag out, and help to evenly distribute her weight to prevent abrasions and knee injuries. Once she slides successfully into base, call time out if the bag has moved from its original position before retrieving and standing on the bag.

Learning to slide is a very important skill in Fastpitch softball, but also learning how to read the play and where to slide on the location of the bag is just as important. Read the incoming throw and body language of the defensive player to see where the throw is coming into the bag and then slide to the part of the bag that is most open and furthest away from the throw and defensive player. This will make you an even harder target to tag out.

Remember, every 60 feet you can move up for your team and 1 less hit your offense needs to get in order to score. Proper base running and sliding can be a key to you and your team's success when it comes to winning games. Practice both skills at least 1 time every week and watch your team score more runs and become more productive offensively. Good Luck!! For more information on base running, sliding skills and drills check out my website at www.MicheleSmith.com and visit the section on my "A Coaches Guide to Game Winning Drills Book" and the Dynamic Training DVD's and Year Long Training Guide for help to build speed and agility techniques.