

3 DRILLS TO BECOME A MORE FLEXIBLE CATCHER

Top collegiate and pro baseball catchers have some key things in common: They are creative in their pitch calling and they're flexible in their hips, core, lower back, hamstrings, glutes and quads.

Three basic drills can improve your hip flexibility, sway, posture and balance in your primary and secondary receiving positions. Flexibility in your primary and secondary positions will give you better depth in your stance, which in turn will allow a lower center of gravity and better balance—and thus a lower target for your pitcher to throw to at the bottom of the strike zone. A flexible catcher also gives the umpire a better vision path to see a ball or a strike at the bottom of the zone.

Drill 1: Foundation

Needed: a partner and a medicine ball

Playing baseball is not the same as running a marathon. You need low-intensity training for the aerobic base you need for health and conditioning.

Set-up

- Set up in primary position.
- Assume a balanced and confident stance.
- Have your partner stand 2 to 4 feet away from you.

Sets/Duration: 3 x 45 seconds, 1 minute, 1 minute and 15 seconds

Drill

- Begin in your primary position.
- Have your partner throw the medicine ball toward your left knee while you sway your hips to the left.
- Catch the ball and chest-pass it back.
- Repeat with the pass toward your right knee. Be aware of hip flexibility and hip sway; it will allow you to get in a better receiving position, which will result in a better outcome.
- Repeat the sequence with increased time, speed and reps (partner increases the force of the throw).

Note: After you receive the ball, aggressively throw it back to ensure balance, and stay in a good power position.

Drill 2: Vision, Timing and Sound

Needed: a partner to pitch (or a pitching machine), moveable home plate, bucket of baseballs, extra catcher's mitt, eye patch (for advanced players)

Sets/Distance: 2 x 60 feet, 40 feet, 25 feet from each location (inside, outside, down the middle)

Drill

The key to this drill is to track the ball and make sure it hits the pocket of the mitt. There should be no extra movement as the ball enters the mitt. When you do it correctly, the ball makes a distinct popping sound inside your mitt. This pop will give your pitcher confidence—a much needed component in a catcher's game-calling.

- Place the extra catcher's mitt on top of your head to force correct posture and balance.
- Place the movable home plate 60 feet away from the pitcher.
- Set up in your primary position. Be sure you are in a stable, flexible and athletic position to allow depth in your stance.
- Repeat the Foundation Drill, above, doing the same sequence/ reps at 40 and 25 feet away from the pitcher. This will increase the complexity of the drill and force you to focus more.

Elite athletes (high school and above) should repeat this drill in all locations with an eye patch—first covering the left eye, then the right.

Drill 3: At the Bottom of the Zone

The concept behind this drill is to correctly receive the all-important pitch at the bottom of the zone or "at the knees."

Needed: a partner, a bucket of baseballs for rapid flipping, a catcher's mitt

Sets/Reps:

- 3 sets of each pitch (fastball, curveball and changeup)
- 3 sets from a right-handed release point
- 3 sets from a left-handed release point
- 10-12 throws per set

Drill

- Start on all fours with good posture and your chin in an upright position.
- Straighten up and balance your posture and hips so you can receive with confidence and have the correct hand angles to keep the ball in the strike zone.
- Have your partner on one knee flipping the ball from around 20 feet away to the bottom half of the zone.
- Have your partner begin each set of pitches in learning speed, then gradually back up and throw harder.
- Receive the ball with your thumb under the ball, which will allow a confident stop in the zone.
- Repeat for inside, outside, down the middle, up in the zone and down in the zone.

Advanced: Repeat the drill in all locations with an eye patch—first covering the left eye, then the right.

Note: Videotape each session so you can critique it and compare your progress with your teammates.