

## Developing Fielding Skills

### What sort of practice can a player do to develop world class fielding skills?

- **Sound technique.** This can be developed through repetition. Take as many catches as possible at training and focus each time on employing the correct technique. Feet, shoulders head and hands all need to be put into the correct positions again and again and again. Catches off the bat, off a slips cradle or from the hand can all be employed to develop sound technique. Make sure you are changing the angles between thrower, bat and fielder regularly so that you are always working at getting in the right position.
- **Awareness.** Catching drills can never be dull because each catch is unique and presents a new challenge to the fielder. So while the fielder is practicing sound technique, they should also be keeping themselves aware of the specific challenge of each catch and practicing their anticipation. This often translates into that split second advantage the great catcher seems to have over mere mortals.
- **Athleticism.** This can be done via cricket-specific drills involving catching, throwing, running etc. But you can also use drills and activities that are not cricket-based to effectively develop your athleticism. Cross training can be very helpful here.
- **Determination** – The more you can push yourself at training the more likely you are to take that screamer on a weekend. This is often the area that separates the 'men from the boys'. To develop this attribute, you need to approach each training session with a single-minded attitude to attack every chance and really push yourself physically: To dive further, jump higher and anticipate quicker. By working to your absolute physical maximum, you develop mental toughness that stands you in great stead in games, be it in the field, or batting or bowling.
- **Self-Belief** – When you train with a high level of intensity, you will be surprised at the number of amazing catches you can take! The more classics you take at training, the more likely you are to take a classic when it counts in a game, simply because you are used to making the movements and you really believe you can do it. **We often talk about great fielders always wanting the ball to come their way (How many players take this attitude at club level).** This is because they believe that when the ball does come their way, they will take the catch, make the run out or save the boundary. This self-belief can only come from constant and intense practice.

### 4 ways to improve your cricket reactions

Your reactions will naturally vary from other peoples, but whatever your reaction time, you can improve it by practice.

The benefits to cricket are huge, giving you more time while batting and fielding, so reaction training should be part of your plan to improve your cricket.

1. **Reaction ball.** If you only own one bit of 'training' gear, get a reaction ball. They are cheap to buy, easy to slip in your bag and great fun to practice with. You can bat or field with it and it actually works at improving your reaction time.
2. **Double up.** During skills practice you can use 2 balls to improve reactions. For example, get a partner to hold a red and white ball out at shoulder height. He drops them both and calls out a colour. You have to catch the colour he calls.
3. **Get fit.** General fitness is proven to improve reaction times significantly.
4. **Concentrate.** The more focussed you are on the task, the quicker your reactions. That said, it's impossible to concentrate for long periods without a rest, so you need to use all the tricks you can to improve your cricket concentration.

Great catchers make the skill look easy and comfortable, even at high speed. What factors go into this?

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- **Technique.** You probably already know the basics but it's worth revisiting them. How many players in close get caught on their heels every season? **Walking in every time.**
- **Reactions.** Good fielders see the ball coming to them early and are in position more quickly.
- **Experience.** The better catchers can anticipate the ball coming better than most
- **Relaxation.** If you are confident in your ability you are less tense and more able to catch with soft hands and a stable body position.

The combination of these skills will make sure you catch more than you drop on a regular basis. How do you develop this? I would recommend the following:

- **Practice.** The key to practicing close catching is to do it as much as possible in as many different environments as you can. Practice under pressure; use a coach to get your technique dead on, practice when you are tired as well as when you are fresh, practice with tools like a cradle or with a coach deflecting the ball. The more you catch in practice the more you catch in a game.
- **Learn how to switch off.** Concentration is a finite thing so learn how to relax between balls and get a trigger.

Why you drop more catches than you should (and what to do about it)

Does this sound familiar?

You have been practicing your catching like always before play. You stroll onto the field focused and confident that today you will catch everything that comes your way.

That is, until it does.

You snatch at the ball and watch in seemingly slow motion as the ball makes its inevitable path to the turf. The horror of that moment is unmatched on the cricket field. You have let the bowler down, the team down and yourself down all in the fraction of a second.

### The myth of soft hands

"Catch with soft hands and give with the ball"

We have all heard the coaching advice. It sounds good in principle. Cushion the ball into your waiting hands and enjoy the congratulations of your team mates. But watching top players catch the ball shows a different picture.

Excellent fielders like Mark Waugh make catches look like they are having a ball lobbed to them from 5 yards, not flying off the edge at great speed, or just travelled 60 metres plus to the boundary edge.

They are not catching with soft hands, but they are catching. What's more they make it look easy.

### How to catch with strong hands

There is an important distinction between strong hands and hard hands. When you are tensed up your hands are hard and don't allow the ball in.

Strong hands close around the ball effortlessly while your arms remain relaxed and your eyes focused on the ball. You will often hear players talking about 'seeing the ball all the way in' when they pull off a great catch. It's rare to see it all the way and drop it.

So strong hands start with focused eyes and mind. Other coaching cues that can help you practice catching with strong hands are:

- Get your hands to the line of the ball, not the ball itself.
- Get into position to catch the ball with the minimum amount of movement.
- Allow the ball to come to you.

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- Keep the phrase "strong but relaxed" in your mind.

It's almost like you are catching in slow motion, which the best catchers tend to report as happening.

You don't need special equipment like modern international fielding coaches use: Just some mates and a ball or two.

This method takes a bit of getting used to if you have always been told to catch with soft hands, but it's worth it. If you practice this way the next time a catch flies towards you, you will be ready.

## Ground Fielding

Effective ground fielding is a hallmark of the fine fielder. Knowing when to aggressively seek the run out and when to be more circumspect will get you the results your captain and team mates expect from you.

The benefits are clear:

- Defensive fielding can build pressure by drying up the runs.
- Attacking fielding can lead to more run outs.

However, if you get it wrong it can end in failure with batting teams stealing runs they should never get and simple wicket taking chances missed.

I'm sure everyone has done it at least once. I know I have. You try to attack the ball at the thought of a run out and end up misfielding or misplaying it totally, perhaps even giving away more runs.

Stories like this show that to the fielder wanting to impress, judgement of when to attack and when to defend is essential.

## When to defend and when to attack

Most occasions call for a defensive approach. That is not to say passive or unaggressive, but the main priority is to safely stop the ball and return it accurately.

Generally speaking you would be more defensive in your approach when the batting team holds the upper hand such as with an old ball or during a big stand. Also, if the outfield is bumpy and unreliable.

When you are looking to defend you would pick the slightly slower but safer options:

- Long barrier
- Traditional chase and pickup
- Throws for accuracy
- Not risking 50/50 chance skied balls

On the other hand, attacking when the situation demands is riskier but carries greater rewards. The technique is useful in any situation but especially so when wickets are more important than runs. That way you can afford to give away the odd fluff in the attempt to get someone out.

Attacking on a poor outfield can be very risky. At worst a nasty bobble can harm you; at best you give away needless runs. For this reason we always talk about fielding strategy before the game to make it clear to each other what we expect.

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Attacking techniques include:

- Pouncing on the ball with one and two handed pickups
- Throws for speed
- Risking 50/50 skied balls

It's vital to practice these time and time again. If you can perform the attacking skills under pressure practice you will miss less in a game.

### Getting cues

Once you have a general principle in mind, feel free to switch at any moment you feel confident. You get this feel for switching from cues the batsmen and bowler are giving you.

Let's say you are fielding at cover point. You watch the bowler deliver the ball and see early it is short. In your peripheral vision you see the batsman shaping to play the cut shot. You have identified early the batsman is looking to play an attacking shot.

You set yourself low. Now you are ready to dive to save the ball, turn and chase anything wide of you or take a flat catch. You are in defensive mode.

Now think about the same situation but the ball is on a length. The batsman is moving forward, perhaps to drop the ball in front of him and stealing a single. Instead of setting up like before you make your walking in to a run and then a sprint as you attack the ball, pickup and shy at the bowlers end for a spectacular attacking run out.

The difference was nothing to do with the game situation in that case. Instead it was your awareness of that ball. The first, an attacking shot, demanded defence first. The second demanded attack first. How quickly you pick this up from ball to ball will dramatically improve you fielding.

### Staying in touch:

Another way of identifying whether to attack or defend is through your captain and team mates. I already mentioned it's worth talking about your overall strategy before the game. Perhaps certain players like to steal lots of singles so you would look to attack more. Others might like to hit fours and you can frustrate them out with a more defensive mind-set. As you field, talk to the fielders around you between balls.

- How are they thinking about conditions and the two batsmen out there?
- Should you try dropping back a couple of yards or sitting in closer?
- Are you better of closer together or further apart?

On such small things games can turn. I'm sure you have seen such in your own matches. I know I have.

The captain and keeper set the overall tone too. Take instruction from the first as the former has the overall plan in mind while the latter sees the batsmen and conditions closer than anyone else on the field.

If you want to be the type of fielder a captain turns to, practice is the main way of course. But once you are well drilled in the skills of attack and defence, take the time to engage your mind on your tactical approach too.

If you get it right you will be getting the chance to turn games. What captain wouldn't love you if you did it right for them?