

The Ripken Way

By CAL RIPKEN, JR.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT GLOVE

One of our philosophies when it comes to baseball instruction is “Celebrate the Individual.” You see and hear us refer to that saying quite a bit. All that it means is that everyone has their own personal style and way of doing things when it comes to baseball. We respect – even celebrate – that. Hitting a pitched baseball or catching a hard-hit line drive or one-hopper is a difficult skill, so it is important that players feel comfortable on the field.

So, many times, when it comes to our baseball lessons we will say that a way of approaching something is really up to the individual. Some may say this is a “wishy washy” way of addressing an issue. However, in baseball it seems that more often than not it is the truth. With that said, it is important to note that everything can’t be left up to the individual. Most times there are certain basic fundamental approaches that should be followed within an individual’s specific comfort zones.

Let’s start this lesson, then, by saying that the choice of what glove to use is a personal one. There are, however, certain circumstances that dictate what class or model of glove a player should consider. Middle infielders generally look for smaller gloves so they can more easily make the transition from catching to throwing. Third basemen, who rely more on reflexes and have to handle balls that are hit hard and travel a shorter distance, may look for something that is a little larger, but still provides for a relatively easy transition. Pitchers may want the protection of a larger glove or the easy transition provided by a smaller glove. Outfielders generally look for something larger so they can gain a little extra reach when running down a ball in the gap or trying to reach over the fence to take away a home run. Of course, catchers and first basemen have gloves specifically designed for their positions.

These are the basic classes of gloves that players at each position consider. The decision-making process at the big league level has changed considerably when it comes to glove selection over the past 15-20 years for one major reason: the players get bigger every year. In the early days of baseball right through the 1970s and into the early-to-mid ‘80s, most middle infielders were little guys. Some of the famous old-time middle infielders like Luke Appling, Pee Wee Reese and Louis Aparicio hardly were intimidating physical presences on the field. Pee Wee didn’t earn his nickname because he was the biggest kid on the block! In the ‘70s and ‘80s guys like Joe Morgan, Fred Patek, Mark Belanger, Ozzie Smith, Rick Burleson and Bucky Dent were not causing baserunners to pull up short and avoid contact on potential double play balls.

Since I began playing in the big leagues, however, it seems that for some reason teams have started gravitating toward bigger middle infielders. During that time span physical specimens such as Derek Jeter, Alex Rodriguez (before he moved to third), Nomar Garciaparra and Brett Boone all played up the middle. Of course, the more traditional smaller guys such as David Eckstein and Fernando Vina also have manned middle infield positions, but big league players in general are bigger than in the past. The proliferation of bigger players has caused a movement toward bigger gloves among infielders.

At any level it is most important for a player find a glove that he or she is comfortable with, regardless of the size. At that point, through trial and error, the player should be able to figure out if he or she can successfully perform all of the skills necessitated by his or her position. If this is not the case, then maybe that player should look for a bigger or smaller glove that he or she is comfortable with.

A young player may pick up a glove that is way too big, and this may be obvious. Maybe the player has seen a particular big-leaguer wearing a glove and wants to try the same exact model. Or maybe the bigger glove makes the player feel like he or she can catch the ball more easily or get to more balls. Or perhaps the glove just looks cool. As a coach or parent you can tell right away if a glove is just too big. If the glove comes off sometimes when the player catches a ball, that should be the first clue. If the glove seems very flimsy when the ball enters it or if the player has to jam half of his or her arm in the glove to make it tight enough to catch the ball without the glove flopping around, then it may be time to try a smaller model.

For the younger players, finding a glove that they consistently can catch with is the top priority. Don't worry about finding a specific infielder's or outfielder's model for them. Making sure they have a glove that they like and that they catch with consistently is really what matters most. Players at the younger ages really should not be specializing anyway. They should be learning the game and finding out what positions they like best by trying all of them. This will help them develop a good baseball knowledge base and allow them to develop all the skills a good baseball player needs.

For the absolute youngest players — those players looking for their first gloves — there are many good options. Whatever the choice, we feel that players should stay away from the vinyl or plastic gloves. These gloves don't really give players the feel for catching the baseball like a leather glove, and they often are either very hard to squeeze, don't squeeze at all or squeeze so much that the glove becomes deformed and the ball is harder to catch.

There are many softer leather gloves on the market today that don't even need to be broken in much, if at all. Catching is probably the most difficult skill to teach t-ball-aged players. It is helpful to these little guys and girls if they have a glove they can actually squeeze a little bit when the ball comes to them. At first, all catches are going to be with two hands below the chest. But if you really want the players to make progress and learn to catch the ball with their fingers pointing up, they need to have a glove that they can squeeze at least a little. So, for the smaller and younger players, look for something that their hand fits snugly into and that they can squeeze.

As players get older, there are many more glove options available – and the prices seem to rise. If you as a parent or coach want to buy your child a top-grain leather glove and don't have a problem making that financial commitment, we would never tell you not to do that. However, keep in mind that these gloves can be costly and that the players are going to outgrow them. As players get older and approach the game more seriously, they are going to ask you for the top-of-the-line gloves. I guarantee it!

I can't stress enough that it is important for the players to be comfortable with their gloves and to be able to use the gloves effectively. It is also important for players to choose gloves that they like. If they really like the glove because it has Derek Jeter's autograph in it or because it looks cool or because it's a brand used by their favorite players, they are more likely to respect, take care and not lose the glove. These are all valuable lessons for when players do get older and want to purchase the \$150 models.

As players get older you will hear infielders talking about using 11-inch gloves or even 11.5-inch gloves. Some may even look at a 10.5-inch glove. Again, a middle infielder needs a glove that fits his or her hand or body and that allows for an easy transfer from catching to throwing. Third basemen can use a little bit bigger model if their hands allow for it. Outfielders may use 12-, 12.5- or even 13-inch gloves. Herm Winningham, an outfielder for the Montreal Expos in the '80s used a huge glove, maybe 14-inches or so. Again, it really is an individual choice.