

Pitchers Covering First

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When did pitchers begin covering first base on balls to the right side of the infield? Nowadays there are charts showing where every fielder should go for every sort of situation, and these charts are drilled into the players. The pitcher covering first is perhaps the most basic of these maneuvers, practiced in spring training and considered a fundamental of the game.

Such charts certainly were not known in the amateur era. Tangible charts are probably a feature of the twentieth century. But this isn't to say that some maneuvers weren't known earlier. One reason for scores dropping to modern levels in the 1870s was the development of more sophisticated defenses. The pitcher covering first is one of the most basic defensive maneuvers.

The idea of the pitcher generally covering a base is an early one:

"The pitcher must be ready to occupy the bases, if left at any time by their guardians while after the ball."
Porter's Spirit of the Times December 26, 1857

This seems to envision the pitcher as a sort of general backup man. 1857 was early in the development of the art of pitching. The pitcher was still seen as merely delivering the ball to the batter so that he could then put it in play. Defensively he was something of a supernumerary. The advice from Porter's Spirit of the Times gives him a role by which he can contribute to his side, but only in a very loosely defined way. We can't take from this that the pitcher knew to run to first as soon as the ball was hit to the right side of the infield. The earliest example of this happening is in 1859:[Knickerbocker vs. Excelsior 6/30/1859]

"The ball struck by [Russell] was fielded by Stephens (first base man) while McLaughlin (pitcher) ran to and covered the first base in time to receive the ball, and to head off Russell." New York Sunday Mercury July 3, 1859 [additions in parentheses in the original]

This is a clear example, but it is not clear whether Stephens was following any understood doctrine or if he spontaneously assessed the situation and took the initiative. We should be wary of inferring much from absence of evidence, but it is interesting that the next example of this in my notes is not until nine years later. There are two examples from 1868:

[Atlantics vs. Athletics 8/31/1868] "Al. Reach, as usual, was the first striker on the Athletic side; he hit a hot bounder which Joe Start [the first baseman], in consequence of the wet grass, slipped in trying to stop, and the ball rebounding from his hands, was thrown wildly by Kenney [the second baseman] to Zettlein [the pitcher], who had run to the base to take the ball from Start, and Reach, therefore, reached his third base."

47 Philadelphia Sunday Mercury September 6, 1868

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49 [Cincinnati vs. Athletic 9/28/1868] "Kingsley hit a hot grounder to Fisler [the first baseman], who could not
50 pick it up in time, and making a poor throw to McBride [the pitcher], who had covered the base, Kingsley
51 made his first." Philadelphia Sunday Mercury October 4, 1868

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53 Note that both of these attempts, by arguably the two best teams in the country, failed.
54 This might be a sign that the maneuver was difficult to pull off in the pre-glove era, and the
55 gap in documented attempts shows that most teams didn't even try. Or it might be that it
56 was performed routinely, and these two instances merited mention because they failed.
57 My guess is that the truth is somewhere in between: that the better fielding clubs
58 understood the idea but it was not universal. This is, however, merely a guess. The
59 question is further clouded by a suggestion three years later that covering first was not
60 considered the pitcher's responsibility:

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62 Joe [Start] "... knows how far to leave his base to field a ball, which is something all first basemen are not
63 posted in. In regard to this point, it is now known that there is a certain kind of ball just hit quietly along the
64 ground to the centre of a triangle formed by the positions of the pitcher, first baseman and second baseman
65 at right short field, which almost invariably gives first base to an active runner, simply because it is a ball
66 which tempts the first base player to try and field it himself, and all but old hands get trapped by it. Last
67 season we saw E. Mills and other noted first base players try to field such short balls, and in nearly every
68 case they failed. Joe Start judges these balls admirably, and leaves them to the pitcher or second baseman
69 to field to him unless they happen to come within a certain distance which he knows he can get to and back
70 before the batsman can travel from home to first." New York Clipper February 25, 1871

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72 This seems to be addressing not ground balls to the right side in general, but bunts placed
73 between the pitcher, first, and second basemen. The bunt was a new technique at that
74 time. This discussion may be part of the process of working out how to defend against
75 them. The pitcher here is going after the ball rather than covering first base, so the first
76 baseman needs to be careful not to stray so far off the bag that he can't get back in time for
77 the out. In any case, there are examples from the early professional period of the pitcher
78 covering first on a ground ball. Here McBride of the Athletics completes the maneuver
79 successfully:

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81 [Eckford vs. Athletic 8/12/1872] "A very excellent piece of play by McBride [the pitcher] deserves
82 mention. A. Allison hit a hard ball past first; as soon as he had done so, Malone [the first baseman]
83 started for the ball and McBride for the base, to catch the striker, which he did successfully."
84 Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch August 18, 1872

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86 So in conclusion, it was understood from before the Civil War period that the pitcher should
87 actively assist the infielders by covering a base vacated by a fielder going after the ball.
88 By the late 1860s this idea had developed at least among the top clubs to pretty much the
89 modern doctrine that the pitcher is responsible for covering first base on a ground ball to
90 the right side. How often this was successfully put into practice is not clear.