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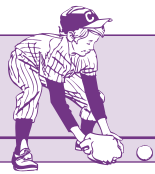
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## Striking/Fielding: Part I

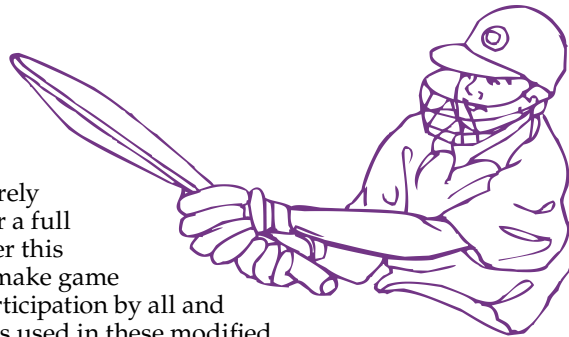
# Batter's Choice: Lessons for Teaching Tactics in a Modified Striking/Fielding Game

by Christina Sinclair

All one has to do is ride by a local park to see children playing games that require striking/fielding skills such as kicking or hitting a ball. Rarely do children have enough players for a full game of softball or kickball, however this does not deter them. They quickly make game modifications that allow for full participation by all and the fun begins. The skills and tactics used in these modified games may later be used to play the traditional games of softball, baseball, kickball, tee-ball, or even in games children themselves invent.

Children usually make the game fit the child. However, in elementary physical education classes across the country, children play official, adult forms of striking/fielding games with no obvious learning purpose or goal other than to stay “busy, happy, and good.” For many children, such practices lead to a low rate of success as well as a lack of enjoyment and participation (NASPE, 2000). The result has been a call for modifying games based on the developmental needs of children (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2004; Morris & Stiehl, 1999; Rink, 2002).

This article presents a sequence of lessons leading to Batter's Choice, a modified striking/fielding game, designed to maximize the attainment of tactical awareness, skill enhancement, and enjoyment by elementary children. Each lesson uses a tactical approach to involve students in solving a tactical problem within a game-like situation and then practicing the skills necessary to solve the problem. The tactical problems prepare students for game situations they will experience in the culminating game, Batter's Choice. The game-like situations are designed to highlight offensive tactical decisions (such as where to hit the ball in order to get on base) and defensive tactical decisions (such as where to throw the ball after fielding it). Though the complexity of Batter's Choice is appropriate to the needs of middle to upper elementary children, tactics learned in these lessons may later be used in more complex and traditional sports such as softball or cricket.



The tactical approach is a logical extension of the skill themes approach, common within many elementary physical education programs. Both stem from a movement analysis approach to physical education. The tactical approach uses the same conceptual base as the skill themes approach, but with a reversed focus. As such, each lesson is presented in a game-

practice-game format (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2003). For example, the skill themes approach emphasizes skill development that leads to game play, while the tactical approach emphasizes game play supported by tactical awareness and skill development.

The following lessons were designed to teach fundamental skills and tactical awareness in a modified striking/fielding game. One sign of a truly skilled games player is the ability to make quick decisions under pressure. By focusing on tactical awareness early in the teaching progression, students develop the ability to think about “what to do” in the constantly changing circumstances of a game (Morris & Stiehl, 1999). In each lesson, students experience a tactical problem in an initial game; then they are asked to solve the problem via carefully designed questions from the teacher. Next, they practice the skills needed to successfully solve the tactical problem. Near the end of the lesson, students apply those skills in a final game.

### Lesson 1

**Tactical problem:** Where/how to hit the ball to get on base

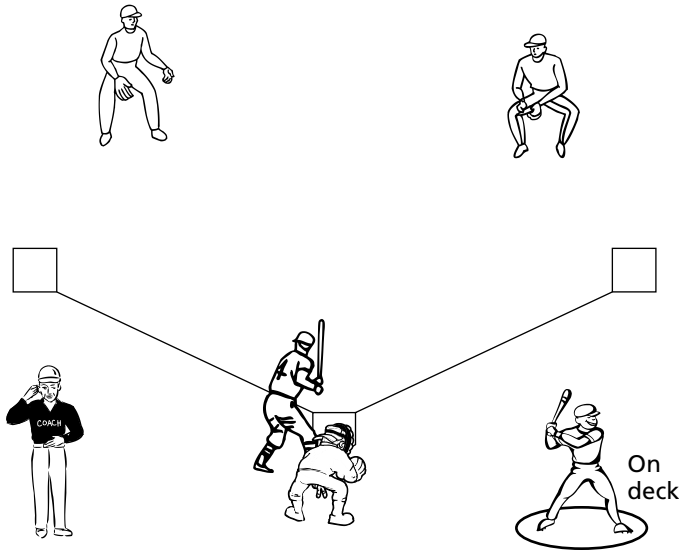
**Game:** Batter's Choice (see Figures 1 & 2)

**Situation:** 0-2 outs, no runners on base, batter runs to first

**Lesson focus:** Field awareness

**Objective:** Students will understand where and how to hit the ball to increase the chance of getting on base when there are 0-2 outs and no runners on base.

Figure 1—Batter's Choice Field Set-Up.



The distance between bases varies according to the developmental level of the students.

### Game 1: 2 vs. 2 Infield Game

**Conditions:** The offense tries to score by throwing a grounder to the infield and making it to first base before the throw from the defense.

The defense fields the ball and tries to stop the offense from scoring by throwing the runner out at first. Offense and defense switch on three outs or three runs, whichever occurs first.

**Goal:** Score as many runs (getting on first base) as possible.

**Questions:**

Q: Where should you throw the ball so you can make it to first base *safe*? Why?

A: Away from first base or to the left side of the field, because the play will be farther from first base.

Q: Why is it best to throw a *grounder*? (A ball that rolls on the ground).

A: If the defense catches the ball in the air, the batter would be out.

Q: How do you throw the ball to make it roll fast on the ground?

A: Throw it hard and down toward the ground.

Now, we will practice hitting grounders to the left side of the field. Remember these cues as you practice hitting the ball: side to the field, front foot points to target, bat back, eyes on ball, rotate and shift, swing fast and down (demonstrate).

**Practice Task:** 2 vs. 2

**Positions:** 1 batter, 1 retriever, and 2 fielders. The batter hits from a tee. Fielders stop the ball and roll or throw it to the retriever who places it in a hoop. The retriever should stand a safe distance from the batter. Rotate positions after five hits.

### Game 2: Same as Game 1 (except the batter hits from a tee rather than throwing the ball)

**Closure:** Review and check for student understanding of the best place and way to hit the ball when there are 0–2 outs and no runners on base.

Figure 2—Batter's Choice Field Set-Up

1. Set up the playing area like a standard tee-ball game, but smaller, so 4-6 games can be played simultaneously.
2. Remove second base. Use only home plate, first, and third base (Figure 1).
3. Use a plastic bat and whiffleball or large sponge ball.

## Lesson 2

**Tactical problem:** Defending infield space

**Game:** Batter's Choice

**Situation:** 0-2 outs, no runners on base, batter runs to first

**Lesson focus:** Getting the lead runner out

**Objective:** Students will field a grounder cleanly and throw the runner out at first base.

### Game 1: 2 vs. 2 Infield Game

**Conditions:** The offense tries to score by hitting a grounder to the left side of the infield and making it to first base before the throw from the defense.

The defense fields the ball and tries to stop the offense from scoring by throwing the runner out at first. Offense and defense switch on three outs or three runs, whichever occurs first.

**Questions:**

Q: What did you do to try and keep the offense from scoring?

A: Field the ball and throw it to first base.

Q: Did your team get the runner out every time? Why not?

A: No. Missed the ball, throw was too late.

Today, as we practice fielding grounders to the left side of the field, remember to move toward the ball, stay low, scoop up, turn and throw like this (demonstrate).

**Practice Task:** 2 vs. 2

**Positions:** 1 batter, 1 first-base person, 1 fielder, and 1 retriever. The batter hits off a tee, or throws, to the left side of the field. Fielders attempt to catch the grounders and throw to first base. The first-base person rolls the ball to the retriever, who places it in a hoop. The retriever should stand a safe distance from the batter. Rotate positions after five hits/throws.

### Game 2: Return to Game 1

**Closure:** Review and check for student understanding of the best place and way to field and throw the ball when there are 0–2 outs and no runners on base.

## Lesson 3

**Tactical problem:** Defending infield space

**Game:** Batter's Choice

**Situation:** 0-2 outs, no runners on base, batter runs to third

**Lesson focus:** Fielding a ground ball from the right side of the field and throwing to third base.

**Objective:** Students will field a grounder cleanly and throw to third base.

## Game 1: 2 vs. 2 Infield Game

**Conditions:** The field consists of home plate and third base only. The offense tries to score by hitting a grounder to the right side of the infield and making it to third base before the throw from the defense. In this game the batter is running directly from home to third base instead of first base.

The defense fields the ball and tries to stop the offense from scoring by throwing the runner out at third. Offense and defense switch on three outs or three runs, whichever occurs first.

### Questions:

Q: What did you do to try and keep the offense from scoring?

A: Field the ball and throw it to third base.

Q: Did your team get the runner out every time? Why not?

A: No. Missed the ball or the throw was too late.

Today, as we practice fielding grounders to the right side of the field, remember to move toward the ball, stay low, scoop up, turn and throw like this (demonstrate).

### Practice Task: 2 vs. 2

**Positions required:** 1 batter, 1 third-base person, 1 fielder, and 1 retriever. The batter hits, or throws, to the right side of the field. Fielders catch the ground balls and throw to third base. The third-base person rolls the ball to the retriever, who places the ball in a hoop. The retriever should stand a safe distance from the batter. Rotate positions after five hits/throws.

## Game 2: Return to Game 1

**Closure:** Review and check for student understanding of how to field a ground ball and where to throw it when there are 0-2 outs and the batter runs to third base.

# Lesson 4

**Tactical problem:** Where/how to hit the ball to get on base

**Game:** Batter's Choice

**Situation:** 0-2 outs, runner on first

**Lesson focus:** Hitting to get on base and advance the runner on first to home plate

**Objective:** Students will hit the ball to the right side of the field.

## Game 1: 3 vs. 3 Infield Game

**Conditions:** The offense has 1 batter, 1 runner at first base, 1 first-base coach. The defense has 2 infielders, 1 catcher.

The playing field has first, third, and home bases (no second base; see Figure 1). The offense begins with a runner at first. The batter hits the ball off the tee to the right side of the field. After the ball is hit, the runner on first goes directly to the home base and the batter runs directly to third base (remember, there are only first and third bases). The runner on first base doesn't run to second (because there is no second base) or third base, but runs home. The offense scores one point if the batter advances the runner from first base to home plate without an out. The offense also scores a point if the batter makes it to third base safe. The defense fields the ball and tries to stop the offense from scoring by throwing runners out at home plate and/or third base.

Rotate positions after each batter: The batter becomes the coach, the coach becomes the runner at first base, and the

Figure 3—Peer Assessment

Coach: \_\_\_\_\_ Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Watch a teammate hit several times during the game and rate his or her performance. Circle a 1, 2, or 3 for each.

3 = Always 2 = Sometimes 1 = Not yet

Always = consistently performs the critical element  
Sometimes = performs the critical element sometimes  
Not yet = does not perform the critical element

### Hitting a Ground Ball

**Stance:** Side to the field, front foot pointed toward the target.

3 2 1

**Bat back:** Bat behind shoulders and elbows up.

3 2 1

**Head down:** Eyes focus on the ball.

3 2 1

**Rotate & shift:** Squashes the bug with the back foot.

3 2 1

**Swing:** Swings fast and down toward the ground.

3 2 1

**Decision Making:** Attempts to hit to the right side of the field when a runner is on third.

3 2 1

**Decision Making:** Attempts to hit to the left side of the field when a runner is on first.

3 2 1

runner from first base becomes the batter. Offense and defense switch on three outs or five runs, whichever occurs first.

### Questions:

Q: Where should you try to hit the ball so you can make it to third base *safe*? Why?

A: Away from third or to the right side of the field, because the play is farther from third base.

Q: How should you try to hit the ball so you can advance the runner from first to home plate? Why?

A: Hit a grounder by swinging fast and down, so the ball can get past the infield.

Remember these cues as you practice hitting the ball: side to the field, front foot points to target, bat back, eyes on ball, rotate and shift, swing fast and downward (demonstrate).

### Practice Task: 4 vs. 2

**Positions:** 1 batter, 1 retriever, 2 fielders on the right side, 1 backup for the fielders, 1 fielder on the left side of the infield in case the batter accidentally hits to the left side of the field. The batter hits from a tee. The fielders stop the ball and roll or throw it to the retriever, who places it in a hoop. The retriever should stand a safe distance from the batter. Rotate positions after five hits.

## Game 2: Return to Game 1

**Closure:** Review and check for student understanding of how and where to hit the ball to advance the runner and get on third base.

### Lesson 5

**Tactical problem:** Where/how to hit the ball to get on base

**Game:** Batter's Choice

**Situation:** 0-2 outs, runner on first or third base

**Lesson focus:** Hitting to get on base. Hit to the correct side of the infield, given the situation.

**Objective:** Students will hit the ball to the side of the field opposite the empty base.

#### Game 1: 3 vs. 3 Infield Game

**Conditions:** The playing field has first, third, and home bases (no second base). The offense consists of two players and one coach. Each offensive player is up to bat every other time. The coach fills out a peer assessment sheet (Figure 3), but does not bat. The offense rotates roles after each inning, so the coach rotates in as a player.

The first batter has the option of running to either first or third base. After that, if there is a runner on one base, the next batter must run to the other base. When a ball is hit, the current base runner **must** go home, because he/she is the next batter.

Any ball hit on the ground creates a *force-out*. A ball caught in the air is an *out* for the batter, but the runner must also *tag up* before running home. Because the runner is the next batter, he/she cannot opt to remain on base. Scoring requires base runners to make it safely from either first base or third base to home plate (see Figure 4).

#### Questions:

Q: Where must you run if there is already a runner on first when you come to bat? Why?

A: The batter must run to third base to avoid running into a teammate.

#### Figure 4—Batter's Choice Rules

Similar to regular tee-ball. Modifications include:

1. Each team consists of three players:
  - a. Offense – 2 players who bat every other time, 1 coach (fills out assessment in Figure 3, does not bat) rotate roles after each inning.
  - b. Defense – 2 infielders, 1 catcher
2. First batter has the option of running to first or third base.
3. If a runner is already on first or third base, batter must run to the other base.
4. A runner on a base **must** go home when the ball is hit, in order to bat next.
5. All ground balls create a force-out situation.
6. When a fly ball is caught, the batter is out and the runner must tag up prior to running home.

Q: Where should you try to hit the ball if a runner is on first? Why?

A: To the right side of the field, because the play is farther from third base and this will help advance the runner home.

Q: Where must you run if there is already a runner on third when you come to bat? Why?

A: The batter must run to first base to avoid running into a teammate.

Q: Where should you try to hit the ball if a runner is on third? Why?

A: To the left side of the field, because the play is farther from first base and this will help advance the runner home.

Remember these cues as you practice hitting the ball: side to the field, front foot points to target, bat back, eyes on ball, rotate and shift, swing fast and down (demonstrate).

**Practice Task:** Practice batting from a tee toward a fence. Place the tee 8-10 feet from the fence. Students work in groups of 3: 1 batter, 1 coach, and 1 retriever. The coach calls the situation by saying "runner on first." The batter then attempts to hit the ball to the left. If the coach calls out "runner on third," the batter should attempt to hit toward the right. Encourage the coach to provide the batter with feedback. The retriever shags balls as they bounce off the fence and places them in a hoop a safe distance from the batter. Players rotate roles after five hits.

Allow students time to study the results from the peer assessment sheet. This provides students with useful feedback as they prepare to practice.

## Game 2: Return to Game 1

**Closure:** Review and check for student understanding of how and when, given the situation, to hit the ball to each side of the field.

## Summary

When played in their standard form, striking/fielding games are often a favorite among elementary students; yet they allow for only limited participation, which is contradictory to quality physical education (NASPE, 2000). The sequence of lessons in this article provides physical education teachers with ideas on how to maximize opportunities to develop tactical understanding and practice fundamental skills related to striking/fielding games. The challenge for the teacher is to

- Modify games to match the skill/ability level of the students.
- Create maximum participation/practice for all students.
- Teach students to play with tactical awareness.

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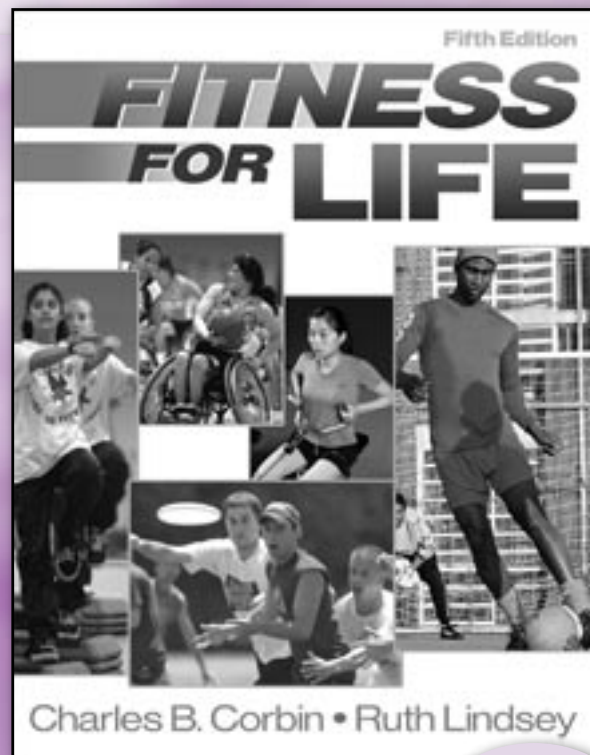
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