
CATCHING THE FOOTBALL



Chapter Two

All receivers have two jobs. One is blocking. Another is catching the football and scoring. While blocking is arguably the most important function of a receiver (since each receiver spends more time in games blocking than catching a football), receivers tend to be judged by their catching ability. This chapter discusses techniques of catching in general, as well as specific catching techniques based on the type of route being run.

Basic Catching: Hand Position

The basic rule of catching is to make a diamond-shaped window (some coaches teach a triangle) by putting the thumbs and index fingers of both hands together with the fingers spread out. This hand position is used when a football is coming waist high (belt buckle) or above, and directly to the receiver. When a ball is thrown below the waist, the hand position is the opposite: the pinkie fingers of both hands touch with thumbs pointing to the outside so that the hands form a basket to catch the ball. While common practice is to say waist high or above, the preferred method is to fine-tune the delineation point by using the bottom of the numbers, as the location that determines which hand position to use.



Figure 2-1. Window hand position

The Window: Big Eyes

The eyes are the most important component of the catch. Teach receivers to look through the window created by their hands. This technique is used not only to teach basic catching, but also to underscore the significance of using the eyes in the catch. Receivers should frame the incoming football with their hands and view the ball through the window. The receiver must maintain eye contact with the ball as it moves through the air, and he catches it—thus embracing the phrase “big eyes.” Receivers should constantly practice catching the football with their eyes, hands, and the football all in the same frame.



Figure 2-2. Viewing the football through the frame

Focus and concentration are keys to getting the ball into the receiver's hands. Teach receivers to put "radar lock" on the ball, which means they lock their eyes on either the tip or the white stripe that forms a circle as the ball rotates in the air. The purpose of the small aiming point is if the receiver focuses on the whole football and he misses it, he misses it completely. If he aims at a smaller spot on the ball and misses that, it is still highly likely he will get his hands somewhere on the ball.

However, many passes will not be in front of the receiver, which makes him unable to view the ball through the frame. Other techniques—which are described later in this chapter—must be used for these types of catches.

Soft Hands and Big Hands

Teach receivers to catch with soft hands, which means to catch the ball with receptive fingers, wrists, and slightly bent elbows, and to give a little with the football as they catch it. Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese martial art, offers a useful lesson here. When two hard things collide with enough force, they often break. However, when a hard thing hits a soft thing, the softer thing can—by giving a little initially—control and manage the force. It is the same with catching a football—which can travel with a velocity of up to 70 miles per hour. The catch can be secured when the hands and elbows give and accommodate the force of the football. If the hands are too inflexible and hard, the ball will ricochet off.

Also, place emphasis on spreading the fingers apart during the catch. This use of big hands helps the receiver to cover more of the ball's surface area and in effect makes smaller hands bigger and the catch easier to secure. In fact, one of the key measurements an NFL scout looks for in receivers is the size of the hands. Of course, a receiver with smaller hands but proper technique can still be a great receiver.

Catch With the Fingers

Remind receivers to catch with their fingers and not the palms of their hands. One NFL receivers coach tells his players to snatch the ball from the air with their 10 fingers or 10 prongs—and not with their hands. Their fingers should be strong and powerful, slightly bent, and not stiff or straight. Receivers must grab the ball from the air with their fingers, and then cushion it with their palms while giving with the elbows.

A sign that a receiver is catching too deep in his hands is when an especially loud thud noise is heard when he makes the catch. In fact, if you look carefully at the hand action of receivers who are in a catching slump, you can often see that they are using their hands (palms) and not their fingers to initiate the catch.

Finger and hand exercises that build individual finger strength are extremely helpful. In addition to the typical grippers and squeeze balls, tools that work one finger at a time are especially useful. They not only improve mechanics, but also build the finger awareness that is crucial to catching (see the Special Equipment for Receiver Work section at the end of this chapter).

Arms Extended

Receivers need to catch the ball with their arms extended, and not with or against their bodies. If a ball in flight touches a receiver's body, it may ricochet off his shoulder pads making the pass incomplete—or worse. When his arms are extended and slightly bent, the receiver is able to use his elbows as shock absorbers to help cushion the catch as the ball makes contact with the hands.

Another reason to reach out with the arms to make the catch (and not wait for the ball to come into the body) is that the stretching out of the arms increases the distance between a defender who is behind the receiver and the football. If the receiver waits on the ball and then attempts to catch the ball against his body, the defender has a much greater chance of a deflection or an interception.

If the ball does pass through the receiver's hands (and he is lucky enough to trap it against his body), obviously the catch still counts. However, receivers must understand that a body catch is Plan B, and Plan A is to catch the ball in the hands with arms extended.

The Tuck

Once the receivers have caught the football, they must correctly tuck the ball to protect it from defenders. Tucking consists of watching the ball into the hands, and then locking it in a protected position using the hand, forearm, and elbow to squeeze the ball into the body. While coaches differ in the exact number of pressure points involved, it is imperative to have pressure from each of those three areas. Coach the receivers to run with the ball high and tight: high to maximize protection from tacklers, and tight against the body.

Coaches also disagree about how many fingers need to be held over the nose of the ball. Some programs teach one finger over the nose, and others teach two. The preferred method is two fingers, because two fingers give strong bilateral pressure.

The catch is not complete until the ball is tucked away. Receivers should tuck the ball every time they make a catch—even in the most basic warm-up drills in pre-practice. Demanding the tuck at all times instills discipline in your players, and adds crispness to your program. Tucking the football on every catch should become as automatic as breathing.



Figure 2-3. Tuck position

“The Eyes Have It” to the Tuck

The key coaching point on tucking the ball away relates to the eyes, and not to the hands. At any level of football, look at the number of passes that hit receivers' hands but get dropped—often because the receiver does not look the ball all the way into his hands. Instead, he looks up at the oncoming defender or starts to turn his body upfield to run too soon. Concentrating and watching the ball in until the tuck is complete will prevent many of these drops.

To drive home this point, make receivers call out, “Laces/no laces,” depending on which side of the football is up whenever they catch a football. Some programs use this just in individual receiver drills, but others incorporate it throughout practice. One receiver made it such a habit that he shouted out the phrase as he made a touchdown reception in a game, and the cornerback thought he was trash-talking.

Different Kinds of Catches

This section analyzes the techniques used to catch balls thrown in different positions in relationship to the receiver. Teach receivers that if there is a problem with incomplete passes, they need to check their own technique and not blame the quarterback. This helps create a positive relationship between the quarterback and the receivers. The motto for receivers should be, “If it touches the skin, bring it in.”

Balls in the Frame

Head-On Balls

These balls are ideally caught with the eyes looking through the window at the ball, arms extended in front of the chest, and the elbows slightly bent and with give in them.

While this basic catching position is useful for coaching technique, it rarely occurs in game situations. The reason for this is that this kind of catch only occurs when a ball is perfectly thrown on a couple of types of routes (e.g., stops and curls).

Crossfield Balls

When catching a ball on a crossfield route (i.e., dig, drag), the receiver needs to quickly get his eyes on the ball, get his hands around for the catch, and maintain his running stride. The receiver catches the ball with the correct hand position (diamond window facing the tip of the ball). Slight upper-body twisting will help get the correct angle on this catch.

High Balls

Among the several kinds of high balls are instances when the receiver is:

- Facing the quarterback (stop/curl)
- Moving continuously across the field perpendicular to the quarterback (dig/drag)
- Coming back to an underthrown deep ball (fade/corner/post)

Facing the Quarterback (Stop/Curl)

When a ball is thrown directly at a receiver, but up high, he needs to place his hands high and in front of his body. As he makes the catch, he should see the ball move all the way into his hands. Receivers tend to wait to catch this ball until it is almost directly over their heads. They then lose sight of the ball at the last second. If a receiver cannot catch the ball high and in front where he can see it, he needs to tilt his head back so that he keeps the football in sight at all times. This type of catch is, of course, not the easiest thing to do in shoulder pads and a helmet. Hence, catching high and in front should be repeatedly drilled. It is a reaction issue, and the reflexes need to be quick.



Figure 2-4. High-ball catch on a stop route

Encourage receivers to stay on the ground unless it is absolutely necessary to jump for the catch. Jumping is a bad habit some develop to enable them to secure catches easier by cradling the ball into their body instead of reaching out to it with their hands. Be sure to remind receivers not to leave the ground unless the ball is so overthrown that they must jump to make the catch.

When they must truly go airborne to get their hands on the ball, receivers need to time and position their jump with the hand/eye mechanics previously discussed. In other words, they must always see what they catch.

Moving Continuously Across the Field (Dig/Drag)

When catching a high ball on a crossfield route (dig, drag), the receiver needs to keep his eyes on the ball, keep his head up, get his hands in the diamond position and around for the catch, and maintain his running stride. Again, the receiver should not jump for the ball unless it's unreachable from the ground. This technique is especially important on these types of routes as the receiver has great running momentum going already.



Figure 2-5. High-ball catch running crossfield

If the ball is thrown high and so far in front of the receiver's path that he must extend his upper body way out (or even lay out airborne for the ball), conventional practice is for the receiver to use the diamond window hand position to make the catch. If a receiver does this well instinctively, it is great. However, you may notice a lot of drops on this type of catch for the following reasons:

- The receiver does not get his hands sufficiently around, and the ball hits the sides of his hands.
- The receiver's hands come at the ball too high and bat it down.
- As the receiver lands, the football is less secure upon contact with the ground.

Therefore, the pinkies-together hand position is the preferred method because it enables the receiver to make an easier catch that is less likely to be dropped.

However, if the ball is so far from the receiver's body that it is virtually unreachable, an alternative is for the receiver to use the thumbs-together-and-hands-around technique. The biomechanics are sometimes such that, for the virtually uncatchable ball, this hand position provides the arms the greatest extension, and allows extra momentum for laying out for the ball.

Underthrown Deep Ball (Fade/Corner/Post)

Strangely enough, a receiver must turn an underthrown deep ball into a high ball. When the receiver recognizes that a deep ball is underthrown, he stops his progression by planting his upfield foot and turning around to change direction to come back toward the football. He then needs to "high-point" the football by jumping to catch the ball at its highest point so the defender cannot get to it. When jump balls of this sort do occur, the receiver must have ultimate concentration and have his eyes completely fixed on the football. If a receiver is working one-on-one against a defender, remind him to use his body to shield the ball from the defender. This technique is similar to a basketball player blocking out and going up to get a rebound.



Figure 2-6. High-point catch

At times, the ball may be so badly underthrown that the defender is in a better position to make the catch than the receiver is. In this situation, the receiver becomes the defender. When he cannot secure the catch himself, he may need to aggressively deflect the pass in order to prevent the defender from intercepting it. Sometimes the receiver might purposely commit an offensive pass interference penalty to ensure that the defender does not make the catch.

Low Balls

When a ball is thrown head-on and low to a receiver, he needs to bend his knees and get low. He absolutely must bend from the knees and not the waist. Receivers tend to underestimate how much they need to bend their knees (it's uncomfortable) to be able to get under the ball. Therefore, the key on all low balls is, "Go lower than you think you need to go."

The receiver then scoops the ball up (hand position is pinkie finger to pinkie finger with big hands) to make sure the ball does not touch the ground. Watch your receivers carefully and you will see that low catches are often missed because the receivers do not get their hands quite low enough and end up knocking the ball down. Instead of scooping the ball up, they actually bat the ball down.



Figure 2-7. Head-on low ball catch

When the ball is thrown low and to the side of a receiver, he needs to adjust to the ball by aligning himself directly in front of the path of the ball. Catching low balls with the hands out to the side has a very low success rate. Therefore, only as a last resort should a receiver try to catch this type of low ball without first aligning himself directly in front of it.

Occasionally, a ball is thrown low and so far to the side that the receiver has to lay out for it. When he does, the receiver should have his arms and elbows extended with palms up, and pinkies together. Laying out and using the pinkies-together hand position enables him to get his hands under the ball and scoop it up, and thus minimizes the risk of inadvertently batting it down. When the catch is made, he should simultaneously turn to his side as he hits the ground if at all possible. This protects the receiver from getting the breath knocked out of him. It also creates a natural barrier between the ball and the ground and gives the receiver a second chance to secure the catch if he does not have a firm grip on it. Laying out for the ball is difficult and somewhat dangerous to drill, but the concept should be introduced early on (a basic drill that minimizes injury risk is included at the end of this chapter).

Often, referees do not have a clear visual on whether a very low ball is truly caught or just trapped by the receiver's body. Therefore, the receiver should immediately, while still on the ground, hold the ball up to demonstrate that he has control of it. Doing so helps show everyone—especially the officials—that he has truly made the catch. Some

might even suggest that the receiver do this when he has just trapped the ball, as well as when he has actually caught it.



Figure 2-8. Laying out for a low ball

Balls Thrown Behind the Receiver

Quarterback coaches spend a lot of time telling quarterbacks to lead the receiver when throwing the football. However, balls are often thrown slightly behind the receiver in such a way that he has to open and turn the hips—flip the hips—to get his upper body turned, and to get his hands back around to catch the ball. Hand position in this catch follows the regular high- and low-ball rules. This catch is difficult to make, but one that occurs fairly often and must be drilled frequently. It should be included in the receiver warm-up drills at practice and before games. It is important to get those hips open and flipping.



Figure 2-9. Flipping hips on a ball thrown behind the receiver

Some offenses include a pass purposely thrown to the hip of the receiver on routes such as a fade route versus man-to-man coverage (Chapter 7). Since the defender is in a full sprint with his eyes focused on the receiver, he does not see the ball coming. Therefore, the receiver can quickly get his hands around and snag the ball before the defender can throttle down to reverse his upfield momentum and go after the ball.

Over-the-Shoulder Balls

To catch an over-the-shoulder ball on routes such as the post, corner, and fade, the hand position is pinkie fingers together and palms up. The receiver's eyes must follow the trajectory of the ball over his shoulder and into his hands. The receiver brings the ball straight into his body, cradling it as he moves it to the tuck position.

A key coaching point here is to ensure that the receiver only puts his hands up for the catch at the last second. The reason for this delay is so the defender—who at this point typically has his back to the ball—has the minimum amount of time to realize the receiver is about to catch the ball, thus reducing his ability to make a play. Also, when a receiver runs with his hands out, it slows down his speed, and increases the chances of an overthrown ball.

Adjusting to Off-Target Balls

A receiver may run deep while looking for a pass over his inside shoulder, only to realize the pass will come over his outside shoulder. An example is a deep-post ball that the quarterback overthrows to the outside instead of leading the receiver toward the middle of the field. The receiver must immediately recognize how to adjust his path to catch the football.

If the ball is slightly off the correct path, the receiver can simply adjust the angle of his route and make the catch as planned over his inside shoulder. This technique is called "adjusting to the ball."

If the ball is dramatically off-target, another type of adjustment must be made. This play is a low-percentage play, but it can result in a spectacular catch when it works. Look at it as a lemons-to-lemonade scenario. The receiver must change the direction of his route by turning his back to the football in flight and running to the splashdown area where he will catch the ball over his other shoulder. The receiver should execute the turn as quickly as possible and get his head around immediately to find the football with his eyes.

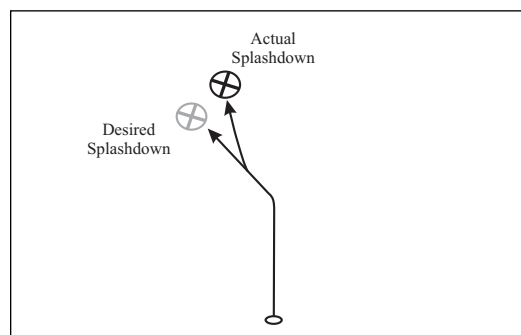


Figure 2-10. Path of adjusting to the ball

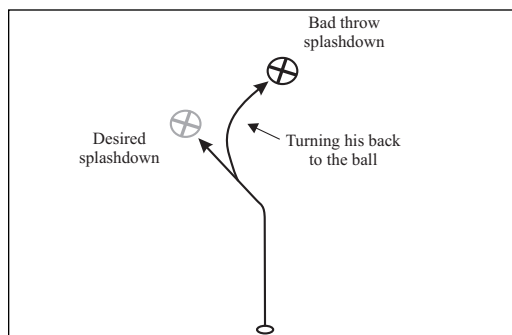


Figure 2-11. Path of adjusting to a bad throw over the wrong shoulder

Sideline Balls

Often a receiver will have to make a catch as he is barreling toward the sideline or the back of the end zone. At this point, the receiver must show that he has control of the ball, and make the catch with one foot inbounds (both feet in the NFL). He cannot be juggling the ball as his momentum takes him out of bounds. Receivers need to develop a feel for the boundary, and throttle down soon enough to stay inbounds for the catch. Besides thinking about shortening their stride dramatically by chopping their feet, receivers can practice tiptoeing toward the sideline. Rising up on their toes in a tiptoe motion automatically cuts stride length. Drills, like the ones in this book, must be practiced for the footwork and to develop a feel for the location of the line. It is important to practice this type of catch because receivers initially tend to look at their feet and the line instead of staying focused on the catch.

Also, when a ball is thrown far enough that the receiver has to stretch out to catch the ball, the receiver must execute a toe drag in order to stay inbounds. The toe drag is the final action that lets the receiver stay inbounds while enabling him to extend the upper body as far as possible out of bounds to secure the catch. Again, make sure that the receiver practices the toe drag enough that he can automatically execute it in a game situation while focusing on making the catch.



Figure 2-12. Sideline catch

Two-Handed Versus One-Handed Catches

The preferred method is that players should be told to catch the ball with two hands. If players are allowed to make one-handed snags in practice, it may come back to haunt you in a game. If a receiver reaches out for the ball with one hand and misses it, he misses it. If he has both hands extended, he may end up tapping it with one hand into

the other by using the second hand almost like a baseball mitt (it is interesting to note that back in the day, receivers were expressly taught to make catches in this fashion).

One-handed catching drills do develop heightened finger and hand dexterity. And, if you can catch routinely with only one hand, how much easier it is then to catch with both hands. However, finger and hand dexterity can be as effectively developed in a number of other ways (see hand exercises in Appendix C). When practicing live catching, drills should simulate game situations as much as possible, and one-handed catches in games are not what should be coached. Of course, if it happens in a game, the receivers coach will be as happy as anyone.

However, at college level and above, one-handed catching drills make sense because basic catching skills are already well-cemented. Also, the great sophistication of the defenders at this level, and the “let them play” mentality of the refs, mean receivers may literally have to make catches with one hand tied behind their backs.

Drills

Partner Passing

Objective: To work on basic catching and tucking techniques

Equipment Needed: One football for every pair of receivers

Setup: Have the receivers pair up and face their partners at a distance of five yards. The receivers in one line have the footballs.

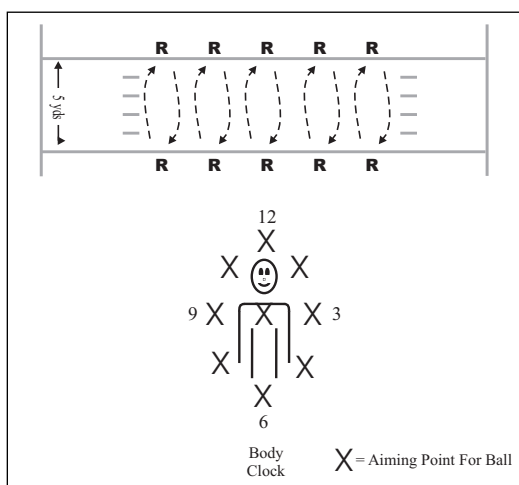


Figure 2-13. Partner passing drill

Execution: The receiver throws the football to his partner in the line facing him. The velocity of the throw steadily increases during the drill. First, the receiver catches the ball with his hands out in front of his body as the ball is thrown to the middle of his chest. He makes a laces/no laces call as he tucks the ball away. Next, he catches balls in several positions (with his arms moving around his body like the hands of a clock), as follows:

- High over his head (12 o'clock)
- High and outside to the left (1 o'clock)
- To the left (3 o'clock)
- Low and outside to the left (4 o'clock)
- Low (6 o'clock)
- Low and outside to the right (8 o'clock)
- To the right (9 o'clock)
- High and outside to the right (11 o'clock)

At this point, one line turns their backs to the first group. Each receiver throws the ball over his partner's shoulder to simulate the fade ball. During all of this drill, the coach should walk up and down the line of receivers correcting their technique, making sure they are making the right laces/no laces call, punching the ball out of their hands when they have weak tucks, and so forth.

Technique: The receiver finds the ball with his eyes by looking through the diamond window when possible. He catches the ball in his fingers with his hands out in front of his body, arms slightly bent, and his eyes always on the ball. He looks the ball all the way into his hands and into the correct tuck position with two fingers over the nose.

Common Errors:

- Receivers catch the ball with their bodies and not in their hands.
- Receivers catch with the palms of their hands instead of in their fingers.
- Receivers are inconsistent in their tucks and their laces/no laces calls.
- Receivers take their eyes off the football.

Things to Yell:

- "Keep your eyes on the ball!"
- "Catch in your fingers!"
- "Ten prongs!"
- "Big hands!"
- "Soft hands!"
- "Tuck the ball away!"
- "Give me a laces/no laces call!"
- "You're not looking it all the way in!"

Variations:

- The drill can progress from the initial 5 yards, to 10, and then to 15 yards.
- To help receivers improve reaction time, have them start with hands behind their backs and only bring them up when the ball is released.
- If the receivers start to feel whether the laces are up or down, as opposed to looking the ball all the way in (and they will), it is useful to mark numbers with

a Sharpie on the nose of each quadrant of the football. Then, since no crime goes unpunished, make the receivers call out the number that is up as they tuck the ball instead of making the laces/no laces call.

Hands Around the Goalpost

Objective: To ensure that the receivers catch the ball in their fingers with their hands extended away from their bodies and with give in the elbows

Equipment Needed: Three footballs and one goalpost

Setup: The first receiver stands up against the goalpost facing the coach, who is 10 yards away. He gets into good football catching position and pumps his arms (simulating a running motion) while waiting for the throw.

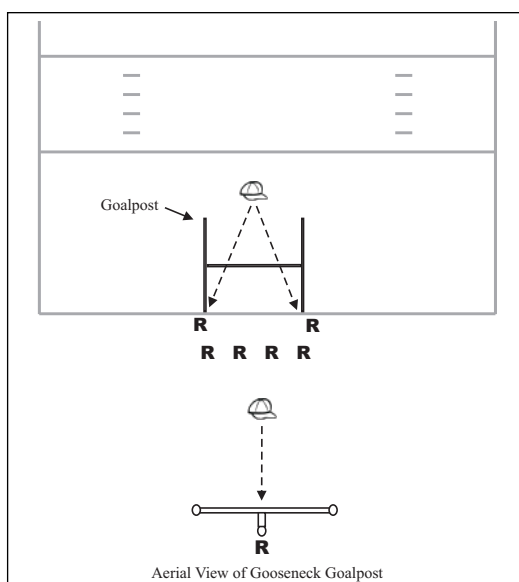


Figure 2-14. Hands around goalpost drill

Execution: The receiver catches the ball in his fingers with his arms extended around the goalpost. The goalpost ensures the receiver cannot catch the ball against his body.

Technique: The receiver should catch the ball in his fingers with his arms extended away from his body. His arms and hands give during the catch. He quickly locks the ball away in the correct tuck position.

Common Errors:

- Receivers catch the ball in the palms of their hands and not with the fingers.
- Receivers do not take the time to tuck the ball away.

Things to Yell:

- "Keep your eyes on the ball!"
- "Keep your elbows flexed!"
- "Catch in your fingers!"
- "Big hands!"

- “Soft hands!”
- “Look it in!”
- “Tuck it!”

Variation: Once the receivers have mastered this drill, it is useful to have one or two receivers stand beside and slightly in front of the receiver who is catching the ball. Have them distract the receiver by waving their arms and coming as close to deflecting or intercepting the ball without actually touching it as they can. This drill is a very close-in and intense distraction drill and it’s something your receivers can have fun with. You may even get some pseudo-trash-talking (boasting, teasing), which will liven up practice for them.

Warm-Up Catching Drills

Objective: To get receivers loose and focused on the different techniques used to catch basic types of passes. This drill is a good early practice and pre-game drill because a lot of catches are made and not much running is required.

Equipment Needed: Two footballs

Setup: Line up the receivers single file on a yard line across the field. Initially, the coach stands 10 yards in front of and 10 yards perpendicular to the receivers.

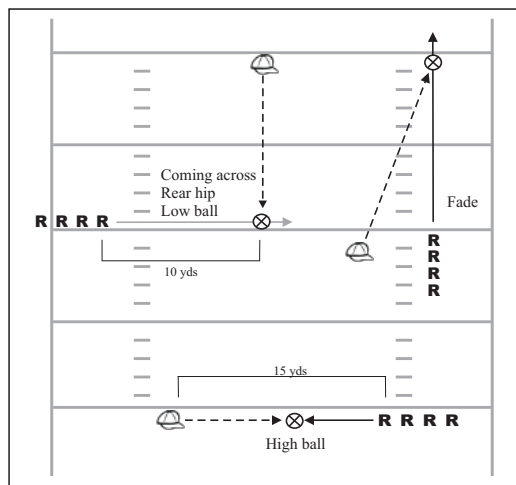


Figure 2-15. Warm-up catching drill

Execution:

- Coming across—Each receiver jogs along a yard line and catches a pass thrown chest-high in front of him. When all receivers have gotten their rep, the receivers reverse the drill, and come back across from the opposite direction (same type of pass).
- Rear hip—The receiver jogs across the same yard line, but the coach aims the ball at the rear hip of the receiver (a pass that is all too common in a game situation). The receiver must flip his hips—not just put his hands around—in order to catch the ball. The receivers then repeat by coming back from the opposite direction.

- Low ball—The coach pitches a low ball to each receiver as he comes across the field. This drill is great for getting the knees bent, and to reinforce scooping the ball up from low to high with both hands instead of batting at it from above. Again, repeat from the opposite direction.
- High ball—The receivers line up facing the coach at a depth of approximately 15 yards. They jog forward, are thrown a high ball, and go up and catch it at its highest point.
- Fade—The receivers line up parallel to the coach and jog about 7 to 10 yards down the field as the coach throws a fade ball.

Technique:

- Coming across—Does the receiver use the correct hand position (diamond)? Does he catch with his fingers and eyes and tuck the ball away?
- Rear hip—Are hips opened and flipping? Does the receiver quickly turn his head and get his hands in the correct position?
- Low ball—Does he bend from the knees and not the waist? Is the receiver “going lower than he thinks he needs to go?” Does the receiver use the correct hand position (pinkies together)?
- High ball—Is the receiver high-pointing the ball? Are both the hands and the ball in the line of sight as he makes the catch?
- Fade—Is he adjusting properly to the ball? Is the receiver staying in full running motion as long as possible and sticking his hands up just before the ball reaches a catchable point? Does the receiver use the correct hand position (pinkies together)?

Common Errors:

- Coming across—Receivers have incorrect hand position.
- Rear hip—Receivers don’t flip the hips, just the hands.
- Low ball—Receivers do not bend their knees low enough.
- High ball—Receivers wait to catch the ball until the ball is directly overhead instead of going after the ball and catching it when they can still see it.
- Fade—Receivers lose sight of the ball. Also, they do not adjust properly to the flight of the ball.

Things to Yell:

- “Look it in!”
- “Flip the hips!”
- “Go lower than you think you need to go!”
- “High-point it!”
- “Adjust to the ball!”
- “See what you catch!”

- "Tuck the football!"
- "Great catch!" (especially when you have put a ball in a very hard-to-reach position, either on purpose or inadvertently)

Pat-and-Go

Objective: To work on catching the football and staying on the stem (vertical path from takeoff to the breakpoint) of a route. This drill is a good warm-up for both quarterbacks and receivers.

Equipment Needed: Four footballs

Setup: Two lines of receivers are lined up diagonally and crossfield on yard lines with a quarterback throwing to each line. Each line of receivers is in on a yard line adjacent to and 10 yards away from each quarterback. The quarterbacks are diagonally 20 yards from each other.

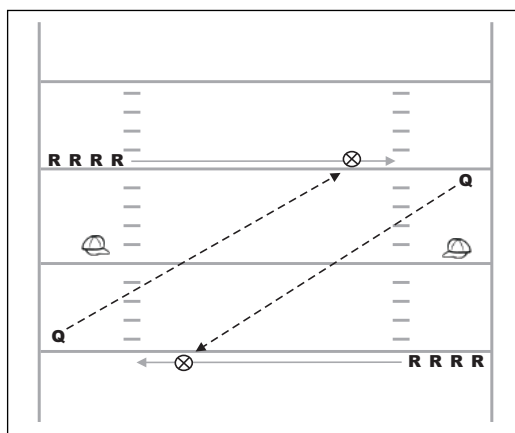


Figure 2-16. Pat-and-go drill

Execution: Routes that can be run during this drill include the stop, curl, fade, and go, and they should be run in order from shortest to longest. The quarterback simulates the snap by patting the ball. The receiver releases and runs along a yard line, which works on the receiver's ability to stay on the vertical stem of a route and alerts him if he strays from it. The receiver runs the designated route, catches the ball, and secures the tuck. After the ball is caught, the receiver finishes his run and hands the ball to the quarterback on the same side where he just finished the route and joins that line of receivers. The quarterbacks and receivers can widen from the initial 10-yard distance after the quarterbacks' arms begin to get warm and loose.

Technique: The receiver must start from a correct stance, run the route staying on the stem, and catch the football using proper hand technique.

Common Errors:

- The receiver does not burst off the line, run with good form, or stay on the stem (yard line).
- The receiver does not catch the ball, even though the drill should be a relatively routine throw and catch on air (no defenders).

- The receiver does not use proper hand technique in catching the ball.
- The receiver does not tuck the ball after the catch.

Things to Yell:

- "Eyes on the football!"
- "Adjust to the ball!"
- "Big hands!"
- "Soft hands!"
- "Look it in!"
- "Tuck the ball!"

Diving Catch

Objective: To work on the receiver's ability to make a diving catch (minimizing the risk of injury).

Equipment Needed: Two footballs

Setup: The first receiver gets on his knees 10 yards from the coach.

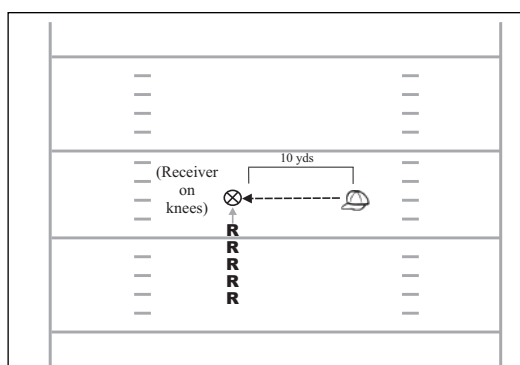


Figure 2-17. Diving catch drill

Execution: The coach throws the ball one to two yards in front of and to the side of the receiver in such a way that he must lay out to catch the ball.

Technique: The receiver dives out to catch the ball. Arms and elbows are extended, with palms up, pinkies together, and the hands under the football. The receiver scoops the football into his body, rolls on his side, and secures the ball as in a fumble-recovery drill. He then holds the ball in the air to show the official he has made the catch.

Common Errors:

- The receiver scoops the ball from a bent-knee position without laying out flat.
- The receiver does not move quickly enough to protect the football.
- The receiver does not sell the catch.

Things to Yell:

- "Lay out flat!"

- "Keep your hands together!"
- "Protect the football!"
- "Show me you caught the ball!"

Variations:

- This drill may also be done as a partner passing drill.
- This drill minimizes injury risk, but does not let the receiver get the full feeling of laying out flat. You can fix that limitation if you have access to pole-vault mats. Have the receiver jog toward the mat. The ball should be thrown in the middle of the mat so the receiver has to dive to make the catch. Doing so gives him the experience of going airborne while fully unlocking his hips and laying out flat.

Reaction Drill

Objective: To improve the receiver's ability to react quickly to the flight of the football

Equipment Needed: Two footballs

Setup: The receiver is 10 yards from the coach, and has his back turned toward him.

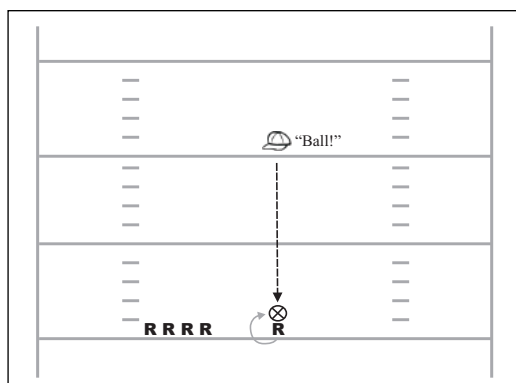


Figure 2-18. Reaction drill

Execution: The coach releases the ball while shouting, "Ball!" The receiver quickly turns around, catches the football, and tucks it away. The first time through, the receivers turn to the right, and the second time they turn to the left.

Technique: The receiver should quickly get his feet and body turned 180 degrees in one motion. The initial phase of this motion is to vigorously pull the elbow in the direction he is turning to create momentum for the rest of the body to follow. The receiver must immediately find the ball with his eyes and quickly get his hands in the correct catching position.

Common Errors:

- The receiver does not get his head and body around fast enough.
- The receiver does not locate the ball in the air quickly enough to catch it.
- The receiver catches the ball against his body and not with his fingers.

- The receiver does not tuck the ball quickly and/or does not use his eyes to look it all the way in.

Things to Yell:

- "Throw your elbow!"
- "Get your head around!"
- "Eyes up!"
- "Find the football!"
- "Catch in the fingers!"
- "Look it in!"
- "Tuck the ball away!"

Variations:

- Have the receiver lie flat on his back with his feet in the direction of the coach. When the coach yells, "Ball," he pops up and finds the football.
- To increase complexity, you can have the receiver initially lie with his head in the direction of the coach.

Sideline Drill

Objective: To teach receivers to catch a ball inbounds when the throw is on the sideline and almost out of bounds

Equipment Needed: Three footballs

Setup: Line the receivers up 10 yards from the sideline along a yard line. The coach stands five yards perpendicular to and midway between the receivers and the sideline.

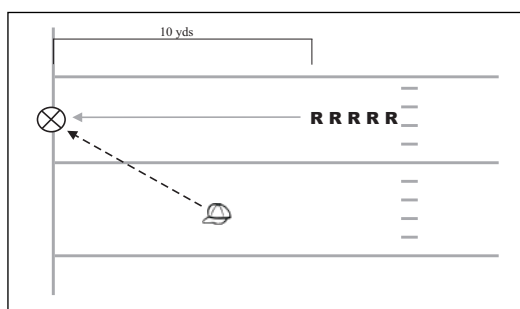


Figure 2-19. Sideline drill

Execution: The receiver runs full speed toward the sideline to simulate the top of an out route. The coach throws him a pass so that the ball arrives when the receiver is right at the sideline. The receiver must catch and show control of the ball with one foot inbounds. A great catch isn't a catch if the receiver is out of bounds.

Technique: The receiver must be aware of where the sideline is, know when he needs to throttle down his running motion into choppy little steps and tiptoe, and if/when to execute the toe drag. If the receiver has any room to turn and run upfield after the catch, he must do so.

Common Errors:

- The receiver will not begin his throttle-down action soon enough, and will catch the ball out of bounds.
- The receiver will not have control of the ball in the catch.

Things to Yell:

- "Chop now!"
- "Tiny feet!"
- "Toe drag!"
- "Catch it first!"

It is not so much *what* to yell here as to be able to judge *when* to yell. A novice receiver needs help knowing when to start throttling down in order to catch the ball inbounds. The trick is for him to start tiptoeing soon enough but not any earlier than necessary, or he will not gain maximum separation from the defender who is trailing him. The coach may therefore need to shout, "Chop" when the receiver should begin to throttle down.

Variation: A variation is the end-zone catch. The coach stands on the 10-yard line and throws each receiver a vertical or fade ball as the receiver approaches the end line. The receiver must secure the catch—and be in control of the football—while throttling down enough to keep one foot inbounds in order to have the touchdown be valid.

Distraction Drill

Objective: To improve the receiver's ability to catch a football in traffic

Equipment Needed: Three footballs

Setup: Receivers line up on a yard line facing a line of distractors who are 15 yards away. The coach is in the middle and 10 yards away from the yard line.

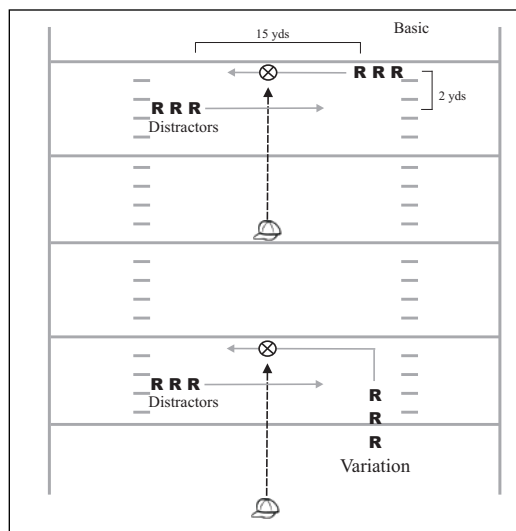


Figure 2-20. Distraction drill

Execution: At the snap, the receiver takes off on a crossfield path at the same time as the defender releases on a similar crossfield path two yards in front of him. It is important that they time their pace to meet in the middle of the drill. At the point where the paths of the two players cross, the defender waves his arms over his head, jumps, shouts, or does anything else he can think of to distract the receiver from catching the pass. The defender can do anything short of touching the ball.

Technique: The receiver must keep his eyes glued on the football and maintain a high level of concentration throughout the drill in order to make the catch.

Common Errors:

- The receiver loses sight of the football, and does not catch it.
- The ball hits the receiver's hands, but he does not secure the catch and tuck.

Things to Yell:

- "Keep your eyes on the ball!"
- "Concentrate, focus!"
- "White stripe, tip of the ball!" (to remind receivers to radar lock on the ball)
- "Soft hands!"
- "Tuck it!"

Variations:

- Receivers do not have to just come straight across the field. The receiver may simulate the tops of various kinds of routes (e.g., a square-in), while the defender simply continues to run on his crossfield path. Doing so enables the receivers to work on correct footwork in the break as well as to locate the ball and secure the catch through the arms of a defender. A further variation has the defenders mirroring the same routes instead of just coming straight across the field. Doing so gives the defenders an opportunity to work their breaks as well and makes practice time more efficient.
- Stationary reaction/distraction drill: The receiver lines up with his back to the coach. A defender is two yards in front of the receiver. The coach yells, "Ball" as he releases the pass. As in the previous example, the defender distracts the receiver who must turn quickly around and catch the football.

Trampoline Drill

Objective: To improve the receiver's ability to make acrobatic catches by having him catch the football in various contorted positions with minimal risk of injury as he falls. This drill will probably take place off-site and outside of regular practice hours. General trampoline safety rules must be enforced.

Equipment Needed: Two footballs and a trampoline

Setup: A receiver stands on a trampoline. The coach is on the ground and 10 yards away from the trampoline.

Execution: The receiver jumps on the trampoline. The coach throws the ball at several different aiming points to make the receiver vary the adjustments he has to make in order to catch the football. The receiver catches the ball airborne while using whatever body position is necessary to make the catch.

Technique: The receiver must adjust to the football in flight and make an airborne catch with the correct hand position. To make this drill realistic and useful, the receiver must remain in good football position as much as possible and use moves that can be transferred to game situations.

Common Errors:

- Receivers lose sight of the football.
- Receivers catch the football with the wrong hand position or against their bodies.

Things to Yell:

- "Stay in control!"
- "Keep your eyes on the ball!"
- "Lay out!"
- "Go get it!"
- "Stay with it!"
- "Watch the ball all the way in!"

Variations:

- The trampoline can also be used to work on diving catches. In this case, the receiver stands at one end of the trampoline. The coach throws the ball to the area over the middle of the trampoline where the receiver makes a diving catch.
- The trampoline may be used for "find the football" drills. The receiver starts jumping with his back to the ball. The ball is thrown on a ball call. The receiver turns around, locates the ball in flight, and makes the catch while laying out if necessary.

Special Equipment for Receiver Work

Gripmaster

The Gripmaster is not the classic squeeze ball or V-shaped "gripper," although those are useful, too. Rather, the Gripmaster is a tool that exercises each finger individually. It strengthens fingers, hands, and even forearms. Catching problems often exist because the receiver is palming the ball, and this equipment strengthens fingers so they can play a bigger role in catching. It also helps psychologically as it builds awareness of the fingers (not just hands) as a key to catching.

The Gripmaster offers a placebo effect as well. When a receiver is in a slump, buy him one as a gift, and tell him it has worked magic for other guys whose catching has suddenly gone bad. In so many cases, receivers have improved quickly and dramatically once they started using this tiny piece of equipment. It has brought more than one Texas State Champion football player out of a catching slump. Gripmasters can be found at www.gripmaster.net.

Bungee Balls

Plastic bungee balls can be hooked on any chain link fence, and are outstanding for improving hand-eye coordination, speed of reflexes, and catching with the fingers. Because no running is involved, bungee balls are a great and safe way to make use of pre-practice and other waiting-around time, and receivers can make hundreds of catches in a short amount of time. Bungee balls can be found on the Internet at www.worldsportinggoods.com.

Net Drills

Most catching drills can be done in front of a net. The advantage is that much less time is spent chasing loose footballs. A moderately sized soccer goal frame (as small as 12 x 6 feet) may be used. Alternatively, the frame can be easily built from PVC pipe if the soccer team cannot spare an old frame. The two ends of the goal should either have a solid base or alternatively large stakes at the bottom so that the net can easily be driven into the ground when it is moved from one location to another. If you use one of these nets, you will find you can get a lot more catching reps executed in a shorter period of time. It will add significantly to the crispness of your individual practice time.

Jugs

As with net drills, most throwing drills can be done with a Jugs machine. A Jugs football throwing machine is expensive (approximately \$2000), but very useful for a school's receiver corps because:

- The machine may be set so that balls come at a variety of different angles and speeds (up to 100 miles per hour). The Jugs machine is also very useful for working punt and kickoff return.
- A high number of repetitions can be performed in a relatively short time because the machine spews out up to 600 balls in one hour.
- Ends of routes and catches can be worked efficiently without the receiver overtiring his legs by running long distances (also true for end-of-route work with balls thrown the old-fashioned way).

These machines can be found at numerous places including www.thejugscompany.com.

GreatCatch

GreatCatch hand straps are small elastic bands with mini tennis balls connected to them. The receiver puts the band around his hands, with the balls in the palms. While wearing the GreatCatch hand straps, the receiver must catch the ball with his fingertips. If he tries to catch the football with his palms, it will bounce off the mini tennis balls

and he will not make the catch. The straps come with different sizes of mini tennis balls so they work for receivers with big or small hands. GreatCatch hand straps are excellent tools for learning to catch with the fingers and with soft hands. They can be found at www.greatcatch.org.