PASSING AND CATCHING A LACROSSE BALL

by Coach Thomas Neil Zacoi

Developing into an accomplished lacrosse player can be compared to building a house—it starts from the ground up! Learning how to throw and catch the ball correctly is the fundamental skill that must be mastered in order to reach your fullest potential.

FOOT POSITION

Before we start, it’s important for every player to know her lead foot from her anchor foot. There are easy ways to determine it described in the Taking and Defending a Direct Free Position article. For the sake of this discussion, we’ll refer to the back foot as the anchor and the forward foot as the lead.

When partner passing, a player holding the stick with her right hand on top should place her right foot back and position both feet just outside shoulder width. This stance will give you a solid foundation. Reverse these instructions if you’re throwing with your left hand on top.

Regarding partner passing, the three best lessons I have learned from Coach Krista Samaras are: (1) It’s important to continuously move your feet, which will make the exercise more game-related, and you’ll be giving yourself an aerobic workout, too. Coach Ricky Fried from Georgetown University feels it’s so important that he starts his new video with it; (2) Intentionally throwing a series of inaccurate passes to one another will help your reaction time and is also game related; (3) Wearing properly fitted, broken in, surface specific, women’s lacrosse shoes (cleats for grass surfaces; turf shoes for artificial surfaces), with a clean and dry pair of cotton-blend, crew-high socks is a must.

FOOT WORK

If you can envision a baseball pitcher’s delivery, that’s the basic footwork necessary to effectively throw a lacrosse ball. As you start the throwing motion, simultaneously step forward to the target with your lead foot (the foot opposite your top hand), snap your top hand’s wrist, pull back with your bottom hand, and release the ball and follow through by bringing your anchor foot forward. When throwing with your right hand on top, step to the target with your left foot. When throwing with your left hand on top, step to the target with your right foot. I can’t tell you how important it is to look at, and step to the target!
For most girls, throwing the ball 30 yards (the benchmark) or more requires a longer follow through. This is accomplished by bringing your anchor foot in front of your lead foot after the ball is released while simultaneously sweeping the stick across the front of your body. End by imagining you are putting your top hand in your shorts pocket on the opposite side of your body.

**BODY AND HEAD POSITION**

Stand perpendicular to the target, bend your knees slightly, and place a little more weight on your anchor foot. It’s difficult to hit a target you’re not looking at, so it’s imperative to keep your head still and your eyes on the target. The target is your partner’s stick head, if passing, or one square of the net, if you are taking a shot.

It takes a modicum of strength to throw a lacrosse ball. Using an Exercise Band, a Wrist Gripper and Wrist Roller will improve your upper-body and arm strength.

**HAND AND ARM POSITION**

I wish I could start over with every player I’ve coached over the years because I don’t think I stressed the importance of the grip! Holding a lacrosse stick properly is another fundamental skill of the game. If you don’t hold the stick properly, it will be difficult to execute the basic skills, let alone the advanced ones, and it will be impossible to reach your fullest potential!

Start by firmly holding the butt end of the stick in your bottom hand as if you were making a fist. Avoid extending your thumb up the back of the shaft. Lay the shaft at the base of your fingers, one third to half-way up the stick. Gently close them and place your thumb pad only on the flat edge closest to you. The top hand’s grip looks exactly like you’d hold a screen door handle or shaking someone’s hand. Do not hold the stick in the palm of your hand or place your index finger up the back of the shaft or flatten your thumb against the shaft. Doing so will restrict the hand movement necessary to perform all of the skills but especially throwing for distance.

Regarding grip pressure, “embrace” the stick (it is your best friend on the lacrosse field) as if you were holding a live bird without crushing it! You can hold it “tight” but not too tight! “Why,” you may ask? Because our muscles are programmed to tighten as we move, so it’s unnecessary to put a “death grip” on the stick.
Now that you know how to hold the stick, let’s discuss arm position. I teach my students to push both arms out, lift them up and swing them back (simultaneously dropping your anchor foot back). This requires keeping the stick up and holding the top hand above and in front of the shoulder on that same side. To be effective, the butt cap and stick head should be in line with the target.

Remember to keep the stick head up and tilted slightly so the ball doesn’t fall out. This step is imperative because if you lower the stick head behind you as you start the throwing motion, you could drop the ball or throw it up in the air, not out toward the target!

**THE THROWING MOTION**

As mentioned, the throwing motion can be likened to a baseball pitcher’s delivery. The arm, hand and wrist movement is also similar to throwing a dart or hammering a nail. With that being said, it’s important to understand the concept of “continuous acceleration.” Continuous acceleration can be likened to an airplane taking off or a car pulling away from a stop sign. Both of those movements start slow and gradually speed up. It’s essential that you start the throwing motion smoothly and continuously increase speed, culminating with the wrist snap, the pull back, and the step forward with your foot, all completed simultaneously. If you start the motion abruptly, the ball can easily fall out on the ground behind you.

Throwing the ball is a compound motion. Push forward with your top hand and snap your wrist, while simultaneously and vigorously pulling your bottom hand back toward the middle of your chest (not under your outstretched arm) while stepping forward. What isn’t emphasized enough is the importance of the wrist snap and pull back! The wrist snap in combination with the pull back will add pace and keep the ball on a “flat” (straight), as compared to an “arching” (rainbow) trajectory. Daily practice will build up your hand speed and muscle memory and will also help prevent injuries to muscles and connective tissue. You must also know, if done correctly, the ball is propelled from the pocket and not pushed out from the ball stop. Too many players push the ball instead of throwing the ball. They hold their bottom hand close to their waist and their arms close to their side like “chicken wings.” Remember to hold your hands out, up and back when throwing. A lacrosse stick after all is a lever, and the longer to the lever the easier and further we can through the ball.

The trajectory of the ball is determined by technique and the release point. The flight of the ball will tell you how it was released. Before we talk about that, I’d like to introduce you to the concept
of the “Vertical and Horizontal Planes.” When making an overhand pass, imagine standing inside the face of a large clock with your head pointing at twelve o’clock, your eyes facing three o’clock; you’re standing on six o’clock and nine o’clock is behind you.

Providing you know how to throw the ball properly and are standing upright as described above, if you routinely hit your teammate’s feet you’re releasing the ball too late—after twelve o’clock. Conversely, if you consistently throw the ball over your teammate’s head, you’re releasing the ball too soon—before twelve o’clock. To throw passes of 20 yards or less, release the ball at twelve o’clock in the vertical plain.

If you stand in the middle of the clock face and tilt it horizontally so your eyes face twelve o’clock, nine o’clock is to the left (if your right hand’s on top), and six o’clock is behind you, a side arm pass of ten yards or less will go straight if you release the ball at three o’clock. If you “pull” the ball to the left, you’ve released it too late (before three o’clock). If you “push” the ball to the right, you released it too soon (after three o’clock.)

FOLLOW THROUGH
The “follow through” is the natural extension of a swing. Most sport techniques include a follow through and lacrosse is no exception.

To review, a pass of 30 yards or more usually requires a modified follow through. Unlike short passes where you may only bring your anchor foot forward to meet your lead foot, most players have to bring their anchor foot in front of their lead foot (like a baseball pitcher). Longer passes also demand that most players swing the stick across the front of their body and end with their top hand near the pocket on the opposite side of their body. This may sound a bit complicated, but it does call attention to the fact that daily practice is essential to master the skill!

THROWING WITH YOUR NON-DOMINANT HAND
You’ve heard it said over and over again, the hallmark of an accomplished lax-player is her ability to throw equally well with both hands. You can dramatically increase the likelihood of your
success by holding the stick properly, throwing the ball correctly and practicing every day with your non-dominant hand. Playing lacrosse at a high level requires ambidexterity and responsible coaches demand it!

Becoming comfortable and confident in throwing the ball with your non-dominant hand on top requires a combination of proper mechanics, persistence, and daily practice! If possible, start each home practice session in front of a full length mirror. But first and foremost, write an inspirational message on a note card; “I can switch because I’m a girl and girls are great!” Now tape the card to the mirror and read it out loud before every practice. After you finish reading it, stand in front of a full length mirror, about four feet away, and “shadow throw” without a ball. Practice the throwing motion by holding the stick with your dominant hand on top. Complete a series of 12 overhand throws with your top hand above your shoulder, the foot on that side placed back and then stop. Next, stand square (parallel), raise the stick over your head and make a dozen throwing motions the stick centered with the mid-line of your body. Now reverse your hands and repeat the same mid-line exercise. Finish the exercise by holding the stick over your shoulder with your non-dominant hand on top and do a dozen throwing motions on that side of your body (don’t forget to reverse your foot position). If you repeat this regimen every day for a week, you will be pleasantly surprised to see the ease and confidence you have using your non-dominant hand. I suggest you use this same regimen to practice cradling with your non-dominant hand.

Learning to use your non-dominant hand can also be expedited by holding two sticks, one in each hand, two-thirds from the bottom of the shaft. Stand square, in front of a full-length mirror and practice three sets of 12 throwing motions using both hands simultaneously. If you practice this daily for only one week, you will be astonished to see how much easier throwing with your non-dominant hand becomes! If you don’t have two lacrosse sticks use pencils. You can also buy a three foot, wooden dowel at the hardware store and cut it in half. If you don’t have a mirror, stand six feet away from your television set and practice as you watch American Idol, Glee or Dancing with the Stars. Plug in an iPod, boom box or watch something on your computer. Practicing with a teammate or a friend can make the experience far more enjoyable! Whatever you do, don’t use a ball indoors and don’t give up!

THROWING SIDE-ARM

In addition to throwing the ball with your non-dominant hand on top, it’s imperative you practice
and are able to throw side arm, including low risers and everywhere in between in both hands!

Envision standing in the middle of a large clock face, with your head pointing at twelve o’clock, your standing at six o’clock, nine o’clock is to the left and three o’clock is to the right. An accomplished player can accurately throw the ball with the stick held at one, two, three and four o’clock with her right hand on top, and throw the ball from the eleven, ten, nine and eight o’clock positions with the stick held with her left hand on top. Like throwing overhand, this skill takes a combination of technique, perseverance and practice, too.

Throwing the ball from the one and two o’clock positions usually requires that you simply turn the stick head into position. Passes and shots from three o’clock and below demands that you modify your throwing motion.

Throwing the ball sidearm with the stick head pointing at three o’clock requires that you bring your top hand approximately two thirds of the way down the shaft. Twist your hands backwards slightly so that stick head is angled and the ball doesn’t fall out. The throwing motion requires a quick stick head turn, and a vigorous wrist snap, pull back and step toward the target—done simultaneously. End the shot abruptly by covering the target with the stick head. Do not follow through by sweeping the stick around your body.

Low risers take time to master and the best advice I can give you is bend your knees! Imagine there’s a four-foot shelf (that starts low and gradually angles up), on the stick side of your body. Start by bending your knees; lower the shoulder on the stick side of your body, place the stick head at the lowest end of the shelf and keep it pointed up slightly so the ball doesn’t fall out. Execute the shot by pushing and pulling the stick head along the shelf. End by snapping your wrist while vigorously pulling the butt end back toward your belly button (see illustration). The big difference is the follow through must
end pointing straight at the target and with the pocket facing the ground! I know that sounds complicated, but it does call attention to the fact that you may need to hire a coach to learn this technique and practice what you have learned. It is also imperative that you have a deep pocket.

ATTITUDE

Lacrosse skills do not come with the purchase of a new stick. It takes practice! Although most accomplished players are blessed with athleticism and hand-eye coordination, all of them practice daily to stay on top of their game! Nothing can take the place of hands-on instruction from a qualified lacrosse coach. But that’s only half of the formula! The qualities that separate a good player from a great player are daily practice, persistence and confidence!

CATCHING THE BALL

To catch the ball effectively set up the same way as described for throwing, the difference being your hand position. Keep both hands relaxed and hold them away from your body. Hold your stick head eight inches to the side and a few inches in front of your shoulder. This set up will protect the stick by keeping it in an “uncheckable” position close to your seven-inch sphere. Complete the stance by holding the butt end near the mid-line of your body, inches away from your belly button.

As essential as it is to keep your eyes on the target when passing, it’s even more critical to watch the ball go into your stick pocket when catching. It’s imperative that you do three things to reliably catch a ball: (1) Track the ball with your eyes all the way into your stick pocket; (2) Keep your hands relaxed (soft), and as the ball impacts the net, give with it (like a shock absorber), so it doesn’t rebound. Coaches often suggest players visualize catching an egg or a water balloon; (3) Move your entire body toward the ball to catch it! We teach goal keepers to catch this way and field players should do it, too. This explanation may sound easy to do and it is if the ball is thrown right to you. The reality is lacrosse balls are routinely thrown off target. In this case, if you can catch it, great. However, your first job is to stop it, and that is best accomplished by keeping both eyes on the ball, moving your feet quickly and get your body behind it.

I want to add one more element when partner passing that I recently learned from Ricky Fried, Georgetown University’s Head Women’s Lacrosse Coach. Coach Fried suggests catching the ball “behind your ear” (which keeps the ball in an uncheckable position), and then in one continuous motion, push your stick up and back into the Triple Threat Position every time you catch the ball.
This technique will also help shift your body weight back, which in-turn makes transferring your weight forward easier when it’s time to pass the ball!

NOTE: Everybody has a bad day catching the ball, but if you move both hands up the shaft so your top hand is close to the throat and your bottom hand is eight inches above the butt cap, then bring the stick in closer to the mid-line of your body, catching should become easier. It’s also easier to catch a ball with one of the newer stick designs, but a new stick needs to be “broken in.” You can purchase a Pocket Pounder and use it to beat the pocket into shape, or bounce the inside of the pocket off the toe of your shoe 50 times a day twice a day for a week or so. You can also turn the stick-head around and rake the shooting strings with the sole of your shoes.

Last but not least, I know we teach you when partner passing or in shuttle lines to verbally call for the ball. That is still important to do when the ball carrier doesn’t see that you’re open. During a game, however, try making eye contact with the ball carrier and silently ask for the ball by vigorously shaking your stick head.

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Somewhere behind the athlete you’ve become, the hours of practice, the coaches who push you, and the fans who cheer you, is the little girl who fell in love with the sport and never looked back. Play for her.

— Chip Rogers