



FREE GUIDE

Free Guide

3 Drills to Improve Your Pop Time

Simple drills any catcher can run today — no extra gear required.



THE TRUTH ABOUT POP TIME

Most catchers think pop time is about arm strength. Coaches spend hours in the bullpen working on long toss and velocity programs — and that work matters. But here's what the data shows: the fastest catchers at every level don't necessarily throw harder. They're more efficient.

Pop time is measured from the moment the pitch hits your glove to the moment the ball reaches the base. That window is broken into three phases:

Phase	Description	Target Time
1. Exchange	Glove catch → ball in throwing hand	< 0.6 sec
2. Footwork	Weight transfer + hip rotation	Simultaneous with exchange
3. Arm Path	Release point to target	Short, direct, repeatable

Get these three things right and you'll see real pop time improvements — without throwing a single long toss rep. That's what these three drills are designed to do.

POP TIME BENCHMARKS

Level	Good	Elite
High School Varsity	2.0 sec	1.85–1.9 sec
College	1.9 sec	1.8 sec
Professional	1.85 sec	< 1.8 sec

These are realistic, achievable benchmarks with focused, deliberate practice. Let's get to work.

DRILL 1 | THE REPLACEMENT STEP DRILL

The single biggest pop time killer is taking a full stride toward second base. It looks like you're generating power, but you're actually wasting time. The replacement step keeps your body compact and your hips loading through the throw — not before it.

HOW THE REPLACEMENT STEP WORKS

As the pitch arrives, your throwing-side foot drops back slightly while your lead foot steps directly toward second base. Your hips rotate through the throw simultaneously with your arm coming forward. You are not planting and then rotating — it all happens at once.

DRILL: THE REPLACEMENT STEP DRILL

PURPOSE: Train the drop step, weight transfer, and hip rotation as one connected motion.

SETUP: Catcher in receiving position, no pitch needed. Can do with or without a ball. Partner or coach stands at second base or marks the target.

EXECUTION: From receiving stance, drop your throwing-side foot back, step lead foot toward 2B, and complete a full throwing motion (no release required on form reps). Focus on the hip snap — lead hip clears before your arm comes through.

SETS/REPS: 3 sets × 8 reps. Rest 30 seconds between sets.

CUES: Lead foot POINTS at second base. Stay low — no rising out of the crouch on the step. Hip snap drives the throw, arm follows.

COACHING CUES — DRILL 1

- Lead foot points directly at second base — not toward the mound, not sideways.
- Stay low through the entire transfer. If you're rising up, you're losing time.
- Think: 'Drop and rotate' — one fluid motion, not two separate actions.
- Your weight shifts forward onto the lead foot as the ball is released.

DRILL 2 | THE EXCHANGE SPEED DRILL

Your exchange — the transfer of the ball from glove to throwing hand — should take less than 0.6 seconds. Most high school catchers take 0.8–1.0 seconds because they're 'fishing' for the ball in their glove. The exchange drill burns in the correct thumb-to-thumb transfer pattern until it becomes automatic.

THE THUMB-TO-THUMB EXCHANGE

When the ball hits your glove, your throwing hand thumb should be pointed UP, meeting the ball from below. As your throwing hand closes around the ball, the thumb of your glove hand naturally guides the exchange. This creates a clean, consistent grip every time — without looking at the ball.

DRILL: THE EXCHANGE SPEED DRILL

PURPOSE: Build a fast, automatic thumb-to-thumb exchange pattern.

SETUP: Ball in glove, catcher in receiving position. Can be done bare-hand (with just the throwing hand) or with glove. Start slow, build speed.

EXECUTION: Receive the ball (or simulate the catch), immediately transfer to throwing hand using thumb-to-thumb motion. Focus ONLY on the exchange — no full throw required. Count: catch, transfer, freeze. Check grip on each rep.

SETS/REPS: 3 sets × 10 transfers. Add full throwing motion once the exchange feels automatic.

CUES: Throwing hand thumb points UP to meet the ball. Don't dig — meet. Exchange happens in front of your chest, not at your hip.

COACHING CUES — DRILL 2

- Throwing hand meets the ball — the glove doesn't push the ball into your hand.
- Exchange happens at chest height, not down by your hip. Keep it visible.
- Close your eyes on rep 5+ to build feel. You should not need to see the ball.
- Two-seam grip is ideal. Practice finding the seams quickly on each transfer.

DRILL 3 | THE SHORT ARM PATH DRILL

A long, sweeping arm action feels powerful. But it adds time — and it makes your release inconsistent. The short arm path keeps your elbow up and your release point tight, cutting time between exchange and release without sacrificing velocity.

ELBOW LEADS — THE KEY THOUGHT

From the moment you complete the exchange, your elbow should lead your forearm toward the target. Think of your elbow punching forward first, then your hand and ball following. This prevents the 'wind-up' that most slow catchers have. Practice this at short distance (15–20 feet) so you can focus on the arm action rather than the throw.

DRILL: THE SHORT ARM PATH DRILL

PURPOSE: Eliminate the long arc from exchange to release, building a compact, efficient throwing motion.

SETUP: Partner or target at 15–20 feet. Full catcher gear optional — can be done in training clothes. Focus is mechanics, not distance.

EXECUTION: From receiving position, go through full exchange and throw motion. Concentrate on leading with the elbow — stop the drill if you feel your arm swinging wide. Throw to your partner, reset, repeat.

SETS/REPS: 3 sets × 8 throws. Gradually increase distance as the pattern feels automatic.

CUES: 'Elbow leads.' Say it on every rep. Release point stays consistent — same spot every throw. No big wind-up, no arm wrap.

COACHING CUES — DRILL 3

- Elbow leads. Say it out loud on every rep. This is the whole drill.
- Your release point should be at 10–11 o'clock — not 12, not 9.
- Short distance is intentional. You can't hide bad mechanics at 20 feet.
- Video yourself from behind. Watch the elbow, not the ball.

PRE-GAME | 10-MINUTE POP TIME WARM-UP ROUTINE

Use these three drills as your pre-game throwing warm-up routine. This sequence takes 10 minutes and primes your footwork, exchange, and arm path before the first pitch. It is also your daily practice template — do this 4–5 days per week in the off-season.

Time	Activity	Details
0:00–2:00	Dynamic warm-up	Hip circles, leg swings, lateral shuffles
2:00–4:00	Replacement Step Drill	3×8, no ball — footwork only
4:00–6:00	Exchange Speed Drill	3×10 — slow build to full speed
6:00–8:30	Short Arm Path Drill	3×8 at 20 ft — elbow leads
8:30–10:00	Full pop time reps	5 full reps — all 3 phases connected

Five full pop time reps with intention will do more for your development than twenty mindless throws. Connect footwork to exchange to arm path — every rep, every time.

NEXT STEPS | READY TO BUILD A COMPLETE CATCHING FOUNDATION?

These three drills are a starting point. They'll sharpen your pop time — but elite catching requires mastery of the full system: stance, receiving, blocking, game calling, and physical development.

That's exactly what Elite Catcher Foundation covers — our complete 25-page guide to every core catching skill, with 8 fully-detailed drills and a 4-week day-by-day training program.

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