You can make the argument that poor fielding by the Detroit Tigers’ pitching staff cost the team a chance to win the 2006 World Series. In fact, you can make a very strong argument. If nothing else, the fielding miscues suffered by the Tigers’ pitchers on the baseball’s biggest stage brought attention to the importance of pitcher’s fielding practice (PFP) at all levels of the game.

Following a pitching and fielding clinic by Detroit postseason hero Kenny Rogers, a four-time Gold Glove Award winner, in 3-1 Game 2 victory, the Tigers’ pitching staff began treating the baseball like it was a live grenade. Actually there was a less-glaring error committed by a Tiger pitcher in Game 1, too.

As a team Detroit committed eight errors in the series, which predictably ended with the St. Louis Cardinals on top, 4 games to 1. Big league teams are too good to continually provide them with extra outs to work with, especially in a short series of closely contested games.

Tiger pitchers botched just about every type of play a pitcher confronts with the exception of a situation in which the pitcher has to cover first on a ground ball to the right side. They booted one comebacker and threw to the wrong base after fielding another, threw away a pick-off attempt with a slow runner on base and misplayed two bunts.

Here is a breakdown of the situations:

GAME 1
An errant pick-off throw by Justin Verlander opened the floodgates for a three-run inning that turned a 4-1 game in the sixth inning into a 7-1 deficit. The Tigers eventually lost, 7-2. It’s debatable how much of an impact that play had on the outcome, since the Cardinals did manage three hits that inning and were aided by an error and an interference call against Detroit. However, the error did allow a runner to advance all the way to third base with no outs, a situation that almost always results in a run at the big league level.

GAME 2
A botched comebacker by closer Todd Jones in the ninth inning nearly ruined Rogers’ eight innings of masterful two-hit pitching and ultimately allowed the Cardinals to get the tying and go-ahead runs on base in a 3-1 Detroit win.

GAME 3
The most talked-about miscue, possibly one of the series’ turning points, occurred in the bottom of the seventh. With no outs and runners on first and second, reliever Joel Zumaya fielded a routine comebacker that should have been an easy double play. Instead of throwing to second to start the twin killing, Zumaya, to everyone’s surprise (including third baseman Brandon Inge), attempted to cut down the lead runner at third. He threw errantly, permitting St. Louis to extend a 2-0 lead to a much more comfortable 4-0 margin.
GAME 4
With Detroit in front, 3-2, in the bottom of the seventh, reliever Fernando Rodney fielded So Taguchi’s bunt, and instead of collecting himself and stepping toward first base before throwing, lofted an off-balance toss toward first that ended up somewhere down the right field line and allowed David Eckstein to score the tying run. Preston Wilson’s two-out single (there should have been three outs at that point) pushed the Cards in front for good.

GAME 5
The Tigers were up by one again, 2-1, in the bottom of the fourth when Verlander fielded Cardinals pitcher Jeff Weaver’s bunt with one out and runners on first and second. Verlander made a questionable decision by attempting to get the lead runner at third, and threw errantly, allowing the tying run to score and runners to advance to second and third. A ground ball that should have been the third out would later score the go-ahead run.

While it’s impossible to say that if those plays had been made the results of those games, and ultimately the series, would have been different, it is clear that Detroit would have had a much better chance of winning if those errors had not been committed. And that brings us back to our main point: Pitchers’ fielding should not be taken for granted. Unfortunately, especially at the youth and high school levels, coaches get so involved in batting practice, infield/outfield, game situations and having their pitchers throw on the side that this part of the game often gets overlooked.

Well, after this year’s World Series, we’d like to think that will change. The hard part for many coaches is how to fit PFP into a daily practice routine. Hopefully we can help you with that.

PFP generally consists of many different elements: Fielding comebackers (throwing to first and starting double plays), pitchers covering first, holding runners and fielding bunts. While there are drills specifically designed to address each of those fundamentals, pulling only the pitchers aside specifically for PFP can be challenging. Most youth and high school teams either don’t have the staffing to accomplish this or don’t have the field space. Also, most young pitchers play an important role in their team’s defense or are the team’s key hitter, which often discourages coaches from pulling them out of the portions of practice that focus on those areas.

One solution is to spend five to 10 minutes each day at the end of practice working on PFP. For older pitchers who do more distance running than sprint work, this can be done while the rest of the team runs bases or does other conditioning work. This is not a perfect fix, however, since the first basemen would not be available during this time. PFP actually can be done after practice to remedy this situation, but with limited field availability and parents who are eager to take their kids home, this can present problems as well.

One way to fit PFP into practice is to build it into the time during which you work on field fundamentals. We recommend that at least 20 minutes of each practice (up to 40 minutes for older teams) be committed to practicing team fundamentals. These include bunt defenses, first-and-third defenses, cutoffs and relays, fly ball priorities and so on. Incorporating PFP into this segment of practice can allow you to address many areas at one time.

This type of drill work can take many forms. First, have your outfielders line up as baserunners at first base. Place defensive players at first, second and short. Have all of your pitchers around the mound and a catcher in full gear behind the plate. One pitcher should be on the mound with a ball and the others should stand to the third-base side of the mound, allowing for a clear throwing path from home to second.
The first player in the baserunning line takes a lead at first, while the first pitcher operates from the stretch. The runner is going to work on taking a proper lead, the steal break (crossover step and go) and actually stealing second. The pitcher will practice holding the runner on by varying tempo and throwing over to first. The first baseman will work on footwork, holding runners properly, receiving throws and applying tags. While all of this is going on, a coach is standing in the batter’s box at home plate with a ball and a fungo bat as the second baseman and shortstop communicate silently who will cover the bag.

As the pitcher releases the ball, the runner breaks for second. One of the middle infielders covers the bag and the other backs up. The catcher attempts to throw the runner out. Once the catcher’s throw clears the pitcher’s head, the coach hits a comebacker to the pitcher, who fields it, steps toward first and makes a firm throw. Change pitchers and catchers (if you have more than one). Rotate infielders after both the second baseman and shortstop have had a chance to cover the bag. At some point the runners can move over to second and attempt to steal third. Obviously, first basemen are not needed (and third basemen are needed) in this case.

This same type of format can be used to practice plays in which the pitcher covers first, with the coach hitting a ground ball to the right side after the catcher’s throw clears. The second baseman and first baseman must communicate who will field the ball, and whoever does field it make a throw to the pitcher covering the base. In this scenario only the shortstops would take throws at second.

Finally, your team can practice its bunt defense while your pitchers work on fielding bunted balls in a similar type of drill. Some outfielders can practice bunting while others can run at first or second base. In fact, you can even place a runner at third and allow your team to execute the squeeze play from both an offensive and defensive perspective. Once again, pitchers should work on holding runners close and the proper method for fielding bunts to the first and third base sides.

Hopefully these ideas will help you incorporate PFP into your practices without your having to give up valuable time working on other areas of the game. Whatever you do, however, don’t neglect PFP or forget about it altogether. Get creative and find ways to work it into your practice plans.

After the World Series, Tigers manager Jim Leyland blamed himself for Detroit’s defensive lapses. He even talked about holding PFP in spring training on a wet field to allow his pitchers to get used to fielding under varying conditions. This may be a case of one of baseball’s ultimate stand-up guys sticking up for his players and trying to publicly ease their pain, but we guarantee you that the Tigers will place an emphasis on PFP before and during the 2007 season. If it’s important enough for the big leaguers to focus on, it’s definitely important enough to emphasize to your youth and high school team as well.