



## SOFTBALL EXCELLENCE

with **Cindy Bristow**

# Should You Be Using Another Catching Signal System?

If you want to find a better signal system that not only helps your pitchers but helps your fielders and your dugout coaches as well, then you might want to check out something I learned Down Under. Recently I've been seeing catchers from Major League Baseball to the Little League World Series using a touch method signaling pitches instead of the traditional finger system. How do you know if this is the right system for you?

I've been going down to Australia every summer for the past four years to work with their future national team pitchers, catchers, players and coaches. And while it's certainly one of the greatest places on earth, it's also a place where I learn as much as I teach since it's located off the main softball-thought line. I often see new things there that I haven't seen before in the States, and one of those things was a completely different signal system for catchers.

Australia not only has great female softball, but they are also the current World Champions in both the Men's and the 18 & Under Boys divisions. In working with the boys' program I started seeing the catchers doing all kinds of crazy body taps just prior to the pitch. This intrigued me to no end, so of course I had to get to the bottom of it. I filmed it, and studied it and thought at length about it, and after talking with John Neilsen, the Head Coach for Australia's World Championship Boys 18 & Under National Team, I've come to the realization that it is a system with a great deal of merit.

While I know it's completely out of the traditional square (as the Aussie's say instead of using the far too overused "box" reference), that isn't always a bad thing. Too often we all do what we've all done without really thinking about how solid, logical or even valid it may be. And while I know I'm not about to convince all of you to suddenly change how your catchers give signals, I do hope I get your brains working to at least realize that there is another method out there – and that method has some big benefits.

I have no clue if the signal system I'm talking about actually has a name, but I call it the body tapping system since I've got to call it something, but know that I just made that up so you can call it whatever you want.

Traditionally, catchers give signals with their fingers deep in the base of their legs, in an effort to hide the signal from the opposition (as you can see the catcher

doing in the Traditional picture). The biggest thing you'll notice about the body-tapping signal method is that the catcher gives signals so that everyone on the field can see them. This is counter-intuitive to how most of us have been raised in regards to catching signals. We were all taught to have the catcher keep her fingers tucked deep between her legs, not let them drop too low (so nobody sees them in the opponent's dugout), and just to be safe, keep the glove down by the ankle to further hide the signal. It's all based on a very secretive, spy-like need to hide the signal.

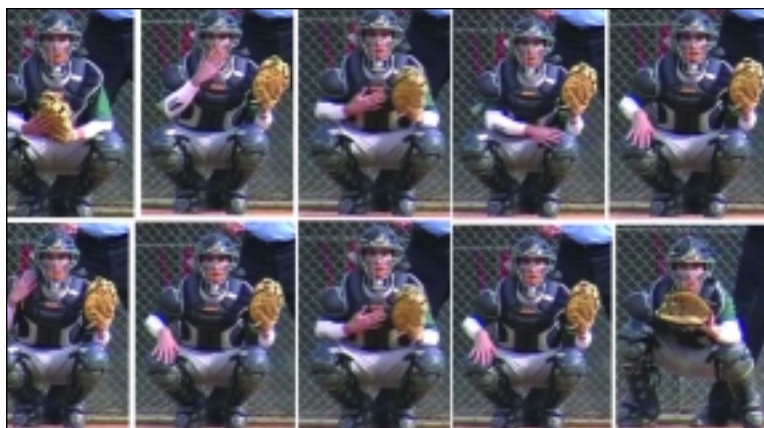
While catchers work to hide their signals from everyone but the pitcher and a few infielders, coaches have always given their signals out in the open for everyone to see. Whether standing at third base or sitting on a bucket in the dugout calling pitches, coaches have used the body touch system for years. The idea has been that just because you see my signals doesn't mean you know what they are. The body tapping signal method for catchers is based on this same notion.

In the **Full Sequence** pictures you can see a catcher using this body tapping system through a series of rapid taps. This catcher is obviously not worried about anybody seeing his signals so he's not trying to hide them as a result.

Using this method of out-in-the-open catching signals makes it easier for the pitchers to see the signals (try seeing a catcher's signal at night) as well as every player on your defense – making it unnecessary for your middle infielders to have to relay signals behind their backs to the outfielders.



**Traditional**



**Body Tapping Signals**  
*Full Sequence*

### Keys to the Body Tapping Method for Catchers:

**The Concept:** As coach John Neilsen explained it to me, the reason that he really likes this system over the traditional signal system for catchers is because it helps him know as a coach if the pitchers are hitting their spots. Since he lets his catchers call their own pitches it was hard for him to figure out if the pitcher was missing the target or the

catcher was simply making a bad pitch decision. With this method, he knows for sure.

**Count the Touches:** The system is based on a certain number of touches or a specific touch following a key. You can use either the touch count or touch location method based on whatever variation works best for your pitchers and catchers.

**Signaling Pitch and Location:** Sometimes counting touches can get too long or confusing so designating a certain touch to represent a certain pitch and location is much easier. The Pitch Signals grid shows how that might work.

As you can see from this grid, when the catcher touches her/his mask (key) the next touch immediately following the mask is the pitch. So if you go back up to the Full Sequence pictures you'll see that this catcher touches his chest immediately after touching his mask, then based on the list to the right, the catcher just signaled for an inside change up.

This list is just a suggestion to show touch location and pitch.

Since you're limited to only a few basic touch locations on the catcher – places like knees, shoulders, mask and chest protector – you have to start double-taps in order to cover all your pitches.

Pitch Signals	
TOUCH	MEANING
Mask	Key
Inside Knee	Inside Rise
Outside Knee	Outside Rise
Double Inside Knee	Inside Drop
Double Outside Knee	Outside Drop
Inside Shoulder	Inside Screw
Outside Shoulder	Outside Screw
Double Inside Shoulder	Inside Curve
Double Outside Shoulder	Outside Curve
Chest	Inside Change Up
Double Chest	Outside Change Up

**Prevent Opponents from Picking:** The beauty of this system is that it is very easily changed, even mid-game, to keep your opponents from ever picking your signals. Here are 3 different ways to change up this system:

**Option 1:**

**Odd Innings: Last Touch with no Key**

**Even Innings: Second Touch after Key**

**Option 2:**

**Odd Innings: Second Touch after Second Key**

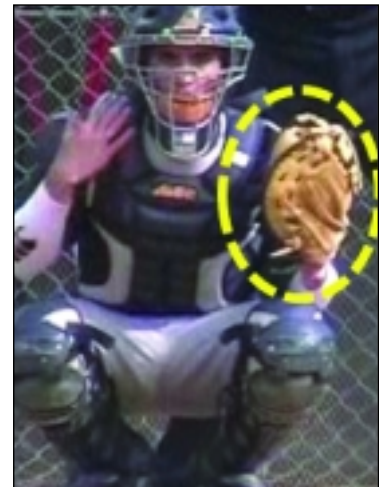
**Even Innings: First Touch after Second Key**

Keep in mind that the Key can also be changed each inning or kept the same throughout the game. The more often you change the key the harder the signals are for your opponents to pick, but the more confusing it can be for your players as well. Always remember that the first goal of signals is to give information to your players and the second goal is to hide them from your opponents. You can decide before the game what the key

Pick Off & Pitch Out Signals	
TOUCH	MEANING
Double Left Shoulder with Glove Down	Pick Off at 3 <sup>rd</sup> Base to 3B
Double Left Shoulder with Glove Up	Pick Off at 3 <sup>rd</sup> Base to 5S
Double Right Shoulder with Glove Up	Pick Off at 1 <sup>st</sup> Base to 2B
Double Right Shoulder with Glove Down	Pick Off at 1 <sup>st</sup> Base to 1B
Double Mask	Pitch Out
Clenched Fist Next to Leg	Reply for Pick Off

will be for each inning if you're going to change them that often and then simply let your players know before each inning. While you can change the key as often as you want to, the location column remains the same.

- This same system can be used for Pick Offs as well. Here's a list of touches that can work for different pick off attempts at different bases and to different players:
- You can also have the catcher come to the front of the plate and touch her mask while giving the number of outs to signal a pick off. This is a lot simpler than trying to remember all the combinations on the list above and might be much better for younger players.
- When the coach says Glove Up or Glove Down it's referring to where the catcher places her glove while giving the taps. Let your catcher get used to giving these various touches to determine where she naturally places her glove before coming up with a glove system for pick offs. For instance, in the Full Sequence pictures the catcher was most comfortable with his glove up while giving taps so for pick offs, the best glove position might be down and resting on the leg. The catcher below is showing you exactly what the "Glove Up" position looks like.



What's important is to mix the options during a game with keys or touches. Same key or touch all game and after a couple of innings your opponents may be able to pick them.

- If this system seems intriguing to you then you might want to consider the following:
- The touch system takes about two seconds from beginning to end so if you call pitches from the dugout don't take forever.
- Keep the touches as simple as possible and abbreviate the total number of touches to help your players have more success.
- Keep the signals the same for all your pitchers or else your catchers will need to have a wristband cheat-sheet and a lot of practice.

Modify the system so it works best for you.  
 For more help with your catchers, check out the following at [softballexcellence.com](http://softballexcellence.com): DVD: The Fundamentals of Catching; DVD: Softball Catching Drills; eClinic: Critical Counts – How to Stop the Walks; eDrill: Flip Dives.

To help improve your favorite fastpitch player's hitting, stuff a stocking with:  
 •Hitting Disks •Zip Balls •Hitting eDrills  
 •50 Hitting Drills Manual •Tee Stackers Kit



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