

How to Throw a Flip Horseshoe

Ready, Aim, Fire!

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Through my horseshoe pitching web site I see statistics that indicate many searches on “how to throw a flip horseshoe,” so I thought I’d answer it from my point of view, as someone who’s tossed a “flip” shoe for over fifty years.

Why Throw a Flip Shoe?

Because one doesn’t know better?

That’s why I started throwing a flip shoe. My parents had two horseshoe courts at their lake resort in Minnesota. As a youth (in the late 1950s) I watched my father pitch with his friends, and I saw them having a lot of fun. When the horseshoes were not being used, I picked one up and noticed a metal piece that looked like it was designed for one’s thumb. I hadn’t paid attention to how my father gripped a horseshoe (he threw a “turn” shoe), so it seemed to make sense to hold it there with my thumb and then toss it to the other pit. After I adjusted to the distance of 40 feet (again mirroring how I saw my father pitch), I got rather good at a double flip, though I later moved to a single flip.

Had I known better, I wish I’d learned to throw a $\frac{3}{4}$ or $1\frac{1}{4}$ turn shoe. But habits are difficult to break, and I still throw a flip shoe in my mid-60s.

Advantages of a Flip Shoe

Well, even though the $\frac{3}{4}$ or $1\frac{1}{4}$ turn shoe is more successful, especially at 40 feet, the flip shoe has the advantage that it can have more success at the 30 foot distance than at 40. It’s easier to be “on target” to hit the stake pitching from 30 feet than from 40. At 30 feet, it’s difficult to get the loft for the “turn” shoe to do its thing properly. I’ve seen “turn” pitchers be successful at 30 feet, but many pitch at a distance between 30 and 40 feet.

Disadvantages of a Flip Shoe

Well, I didn’t list many advantages of a flip shoe, so here are the cons of flipping. At 40 feet (well, foul line at 37 feet), that’s a long way for a throw to be exactly on target. A shoe flipped at 40-feet is more likely to bounce off than one pitched at 30 feet. One can throw a beautifully flipped horseshoe to the opposite stake only to watch it slide right on by the stake or land past the six inch distance of being a point. Or, the flip “flops” in the air and doesn’t land flat; the wobbly shoe then tumbles end over end (or side over side) and hits the backstop, or maybe (if lucky) it hits the stake and bounces around and stays near the

stake. Or the “flip” does a flip and a half, banging the back of the shoe against the stake (and bouncing away).

From my experience, a flip shoe has to land on its bottom side (flip completely one time) and be on target to land encompassing the stake (or land just above the bottom of the stake). With practice, that can happen regularly at 40 feet and more frequently at 30 feet.

The Grip to Flip

I’ve seen many permutations of a pitcher gripping a flip shoe, so what works for you is fine. Other than using an under-handed toss, the NHPA does not care how one pitches the shoe; how you throw a shoe the required distance with accuracy becomes your own style.



I grip the shoe such that my right thumb is slightly off-center (I am right-handed), just a little to the right of the center of the thumb cleat, knuckles below the horseshoe. [Photo at left is the top of my grip, photo at right is bottom on my grip.]



The shoes I pitch are the Sue Snyder EZ-Flip II shoes, the ones without a ringer breaker. A ringer breaker gets in the way of my grip, so I don’t use shoes with ringer breakers. My right little finger becomes my “steering” finger.

I’ve seen successful flip pitchers grip the shoe at its curve, some grip the shoe at the toe caulk but grip it as they might an oar with their knuckles on top, some grip by a heel caulk or a shank. Find what gives you the best control and balance with the most consistent successful results and make that your grip.

The Feet Next

Outside of not stepping past the foul line (37 feet or 27 feet), one can move one’s feet however one wants to, and I’ve seen a variety of foot movements. I stand on the platform on the left side of the pit (left-handers will want to do the reverse, stand on the right side of the pit), my feet slightly apart (maybe 3-4”), toes about even, weight slightly more on my right foot. I bend slightly at the knees and take a step forward with my left foot. The forward step is for momentum, to get some “oomph” to toss the shoe to the other pit. [Note: I have seen some pitchers be successful pitching leading off with the “off” foot, that is, a right-hander leading with his/her right foot. Others have success pitching from the “other” side of the platform.] Again, my motto, “Whatever works for you.”

What to Wear

Let me talk about shoes here since I'm writing about feet. Wear shoes that are closed toes, no sandals or flip-flops. (The NHPA rules require closed-toe shoes.) Horseshoes get dropped or bounce about, and no one wants a 2 1/2 pound metal horseshoe landing on one's foot. The shoes should have good traction; as one brings the left foot forward, if the platform (or grass) is wet, one could slip, slide, or fall. I also wear thick socks, my feet enjoy the extra cushioning. There's a lot of walking in a horseshoe singles tournament, and I need my feet to be happy.

But I do wear shoes that I don't care about getting dirty. Sometimes I am squatting in the pit to get an accurate measurement of a ringer or a point, and as much as I try not to step in the pit, sometimes I need to. I'll also use the side or bottom of my shoe to even out the sand or dirt in the pit. As a game goes on, there become hills or pockets in the pit, and I like to have an even surface. So, your shoes may get dirty.

As for shirt, shorts, pants, or skirts, wear what you are comfortable in, especially to accommodate free arm movement. One wants to be able to swing one's arm such that there are no constraints with clothing. One is bending a lot, so I don't recommend that women wear a skirt. I bring extra clothes so I can change if I need to; the weather can change, so I might switch to long pants if it gets cooler out. Tournaments often start early in the day when it's cooler, so I might start in long pants and move to shorts when the weather warms up. I know I do not pitch well when it's cold, especially when my arms are cold, so I bring a long-sleeved sweatshirt. I have eye issues with glaucoma, so I wear a hat or visor and have quality UV sunglasses available if the sun gets very bright.

The Arms Do the Work

Okay, now you are wearing the right shoes, wearing a shirt that has room for the "give" of swinging, having a good grip on the horseshoe, and are standing on the platform on one side of the pit. The second shoe can be in your off hand, or it can be on the ground beside you or in back of you. After tossing (NHPA rules require an underhanded pitch) the first shoe, you have 30 seconds to toss the second shoe, so you want to have the next shoe at the ready.

Feet slightly apart, one horseshoe held such that I have it balanced in my pitching hand, the second shoe is in my left hand, I then go into my warm-up, get into my concentration phase.

My pattern is to swing my arms (yes, both), back and forth twice (back, forth, back, forth, and back to my ready position). My ready position is slightly on my right side, just above my waist level (probably left over from bowling). Some people hold the shoe higher and aim through it, whatever pattern gets you going is fine. Just as basketball players have their pre-routine for a free throw, find what makes you comfortable, keeping your focus/concentration. I used to lightly "clunk" my two horseshoes together, but that is not good form in a tournament with other pitchers around you, the noise is a distraction.

Somewhere in this process, I check that I can have a good grip on the horseshoe, that I don't have dirt stuck where I hold the shoe, or that there's no lump of dirt in a toe cleat making the shoe off balance. If the shoe is sandy or dirty, I wipe it off and start my swinging again. Also, I use the swing time to make sure there is no burr where I am holding the shoe. A sharp metal point hurts, and I carry a round file to remove any burrs. A flat file may not get into the curve of the shoe where there's a sharp point. Or, rubbing the shoes against one another at the sharp point can smooth out the shoe.

Here's where I sometimes forget to pause; too often I rush my toss and then my throw is off. I try to pause 3-5 seconds with knees slightly bent, and then bring my right arm back. I treat my right arm like a pendulum. When my right arm is back as far as I bring it, my left foot is bent at the toes. As I bring my right arm forward, my left foot takes one step forward. When my left foot has landed, my right arm is releasing the horseshoe (at about the height of my eyes) and my right foot lifts off the ground some and moves forward a little. The shoe floats out of my right hand, rises in the air, flips one complete vertical revolution, and lands softly around the stake (without actually hitting the stake, thus reducing bounce-back; that's the goal, anyway). My backswing is as even (smooth) as I can do it; I want the shoe to lift off my right hand balanced, no wobble, a nice gentle, even release. And I want my pitching arm to continue the pendulum arc in its follow-through.

This step is the most important one, it's the one that gets you ringers or points. If your balance is off, your toss will be off. Your head, shoulders, arms, and lower body all need to be in balance. Your front foot must be set before you let the shoe go. If all are in alignment and balance, you will be more successful.

I highly recommend serious horseshoe pitchers read Roy W. Smith's "How to Pitch Horseshoes" (there's a link to it elsewhere on my horseshoe web site). In his section entitled "The Stance," Mr. Smith writes this about balance:

Be sure that you are well balanced before starting your delivery. Perfect balance means perfect coordination and accurate alignment. The square, well-balanced stance will become a habit with practice. Here is why such a "habit" should be cultivated right at the start: A player pitches 100 shoes and makes 60 ringers. The pitcher fails to get ringers with 40 of the shoes. About 15% of the misses are due to a poor turn trajectory. The remaining 85% of the misses are due to poor alignment, most of which is caused by the careless way of standing.

Aiming

Now that a horseshoe has landed in the opposite pit, you can make adjustments for the next shoe. Analyze what went wrong. What, if anything, can you adjust to make the next shoe more successful?

If the first shoe slides by the stake to the left or the right, I try to adjust my release point. One way to adjust the release point is to change how the pivot foot (right foot for me as a right-hander) is aimed. If the shoe went to the left of the stake, I might slide my right foot so it points a little more to the right. And the converse, if the first horseshoe lands to the right

of the stake, I might re-point my right foot a little to the left. The idea is that I might step forward a little differently and then release it more on line to the stake.

If your footwork was as you had planned but the shoe was still off-line, maybe your arm swing was off, or perhaps your head shifted to the side and pulled the rest of your body out of alignment.

If the first horseshoe was short, then I try to put a little more force behind the release; and if the first shoe went long, then I try to back off a little. It's all muscle memory and practice, practice, practice.

Also, I might adjust my throw if I am pitching second and my opponent has left a leaner. I might try to hit the stake higher to get the leaner out of the way. Or, if the sand (dirt) is very dry, I might try to slide a shoe (a ringer) under my opponent's leaner. Or, I might throw a shoe a little harder (with a lower arc) to force the other shoe off the stake. Not sure what the physics involved are, but the point is that I might try something a little different depending on what my opponent left from his/her turn.

Ready, Aim, Fire

I think I have covered the three phases of ready, aim, fire. The "ready" is the grip, stance, and any pre-routine. The "aim" is to be in the mode to decide how you are going to toss the horseshoe. Finally, "fire" is the pendulum swing, step, release, and follow-through.

Practice, Muscle Memory, and Fun

As I wrote before, lots of practice helps the "memory" of the muscles to do what you want the muscles to do. Pitching horseshoes is fun, fun for one, two, three, or four pitchers. The game can be played at just about any age. "Whatever works for you." Happy pitching!

Footnote: If you are serious about the science involved in pitching horseshoes, I recommend reading the blog entitled "The Search for My Perfect Swing" which has a Table of Contents at

<http://photon713.wordpress.com/2008/08/20/the-search-for-my-perfect-swing-contents/>