

Most Common Hitting Flaws - #5

By Matt Schilling, Director of On-Field Instruction at Baseball Factory, professional scout and former college coach

Bad mental approach to hitting - Previous articles have discussed four of the most common hitting flaws that are practiced by high school baseball players. Each of these has regarded imperfections in the mechanical side of hitting. However, mechanics are not everything when it comes to a successful hitting technique.

Another common problem at the plate is a bad mental approach to hitting. This is a flaw that begins in the early stages of an athlete's playing career and can follow the player into the big leagues. Certain players possess outstanding hitting ability, but may struggle because of a bad mental approach. Have you ever seen a player who astonishes you with his ability to crush the ball in batting practice but never manages to become a solid game hitter? More than likely, his problem stems from a bad approach at the plate.

What do I mean by "approach?" When I think of a hitter having a good "approach," I think of a player who knows:

- 1. What he is trying to accomplish in his at-bat.**
- 2. What pitch or zone he is looking for.**

An example of hitter with a good approach would be a right-handed batter who comes up in the 7th inning with a man on second and nobody out. First, he is trying to move that runner over to third as this is what he wants to accomplish. Second, he wants to hit the ball to the right side, and therefore is looking for something away -- this is the zone he is looking for. Knowing what you are trying to do and what you are looking for are key components to EVERY at-bat.

A third aspect of having a good "approach" is knowing:

- 3. What the pitcher throws and his strike-out sequence.**

If you are paying attention and doing your job before the game, you should have a very good idea of what the pitcher is throwing before you step into the box. You should know that the pitcher throws a fastball, curveball, and change-up or if he has a splitter. Also, be able to recognize his strike-out sequence, not just his out pitch. This means that you should know what a pitcher throws when he gets a batter 0-2 or 1-2.

i.e. Curt Schilling uses a high fastball then a split-finger in the dirt to strike out batters. He will throw a high, hard fastball to see if the hitter will chase it, then a hard biting split finger in the dirt, which most players chase. That is his strike-out sequence.

As a hitter, if you are able to lay off the pitches that the pitcher intends for you to chase, you will greatly increase your chances of getting a pitch to hit. When a pitcher has two strikes on a batter, he is taught to expand the strike zone, or in other words, throw the ball close enough that the batter will go after it.

As hitters, we are taught that when we get two strikes we should "go after anything close!" or "protect the plate!" These are some valid statements but they play right into the pitchers hands. I suggest that hitters make it their job to pay attention in the on-deck circle and in the dugout in order to discover what the pitcher is throwing and how he is trying to strike out batters. If you do this, you will become an offensive hitter instead of a defensive hitter. It is also recommended to listen to what the pitching coach tells his pitchers because hitters can learn a lot this way. For example, pitching coaches tell their players to get ahead of the hitter. Therefore, he wants them to throw first-pitch strikes. As a hitter, you should be ready to hit the first pitch because there is a really good chance it will be a strike!

Once you have developed a solid mental approach, you must be able to apply it to a game situation. Knowing what you are doing and actually being able to use it are two different things. In order to be able to demonstrate a good approach at the plate, you must have discipline -- a hitter with discipline is a dangerous thing.

Barry Bonds is a good example of a Major League player with discipline. This past season, Bonds walked 198 times and struck out only 47 times! He very rarely chases a ball out of the zone, swinging only at pitches he can handle well. As a result, Bonds batted .370, and hit 48 homeruns -- unbelievable statistics for a power hitter. Bonds' patience forces pitchers to throw balls he can hit which makes hitting a lot easier. He has developed an unbelievable ability to lay off bad pitches swing only at the good ones. In order to be successful, hitters must train themselves to do just that.

As a hitting instructor at Baseball Factory, I train my hitters to swing only at strikes rather than chasing everything. I keep track of the amount of balls that they hit hard. For example, if they swing at 10 strikes, most of them will hit seven of them hard. That means that 70% of the strikes they swing at they hit hard. Next, each player will take regular batting practice while I count how many balls they hit hard. Most players will drop down to five out of 10, only 50%. Try doing this at home when you are taking BP. Swing only at strikes and count how many of them you hit hard. You will notice that your average is much better when you swing only at strikes.

As a hitter, you want to develop sound mechanics, good power, and an appropriate mental approach. If you can develop those three skills, you will be well on your way to becoming an outstanding offensive player. Hopefully, you have been able to pick up a few tips that will help you develop as a hitter.

For more information on hitting or other related topics, please send emails to newsletter@baseballfactory.com or to speak with a Baseball Factory Representative call 800.641.4487.