

Hitting: The Mental Side, Part 1

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A lot of young hitters work extremely hard on their hitting and their swings. They put a lot of time and effort into the mechanical side of hitting, however, very few work at the mental aspects of hitting or even understand what having a hitting "approach" is all about. In this article, I will give young hitters some ideas of what they should be focusing on when preparing for an at-bat.

Proper Goal Setting

If I asked ten high school-aged hitters what their goals were at the plate for the upcoming season, eight would say something to the effect of, "I want to hit over .320 with at least three homeruns and 20-plus RBIs." Now I believe it is good to set tangible goals for yourself, but is it really rational to think that you have any control over what happens to the ball after you hit it? NO! Once you have made contact, the result is completely out of your hands. The defense may make a great play or the ball may drop. Either way, you have no control.

In the summer of 1990 I played American Legion baseball with Baseball Factory President Rob Naddelman. I had a great season and won the league batting title with a .452 average. Rob also had a good year and hit .356 while hitting so many line drives right at people that it became a joke in our dugout. It would be fair to say that Rob hit the ball every bit as good as I did that summer, yet hit nearly 100 points less than me. The point is that all we could control was hitting the ball hard - the fact that I got an extra ten balls to drop that season was out of my control.

Set goals that you can control (see the list below). Your goals should be for each individual at-bat during the course of a season.

1. See the ball.
2. Swing at strikes.
3. Know what you are trying to do.
4. Put a good swing on the ball.

Note that each of the goals is something that you can control. I really wanted to write "get a good pitch to hit" for the second goal but reconsidered - can you really control whether the pitcher throws a

good pitch to hit? No, but if you set a goal of swinging at strikes only, you will get something decent to hit much more often. Let's examine each goal individually.

1. See the ball: Probably the most important aspect of hitting, yet it is not discussed nearly enough. *If you can't see the ball, you ain't gonna hit it.* I'm not suggesting to get your vision checked (although not a bad idea). Hitters need to focus on seeing the ball well and tracking it all the way to contact with the bat or the catcher's mitt for every pitch. If you work at tracking the ball all the way in, you can almost begin to "slow the ball down" with your eyes.

When hitters struggle, you will often hear them say that they are not seeing the ball well. Does this mean that their vision has suddenly worsened? No, it means they are not staying focused on seeing the ball. If you step in the box while thinking about everything other than seeing the ball, you are taking away from your focus. I remember at-bats when I was thinking, "Man, do I need a hit. If I don't get a hit I'm gonna be 0-for-3 and my average is gonna drop and..." Before you know it, you're swinging at a curve in the dirt because your focus is distracted from seeing the ball.

2. Swing at Strikes: As a hitter, you can have a mechanically sound swing - or even a perfect swing - yet still struggle at the plate if you consistently swing at bad pitches. Obviously, this goal goes along with the first goal; you must first see the ball, and then be selective.

Barry Bonds has a perfect swing and is extremely selective at the plate. In last year's postseason games, it seemed as if he hit the ball hard each time he swung at a pitch. He was patient and did not chase any pitches outside of the strike zone, therefore creating an opportunity to make solid contact with each swing.

Imagine if during the course of your season you could guarantee that you would swing only at strikes. Do you think that your average would go up? You bet it would. By forcing yourself to be more disciplined and by swinging only at strikes, you will avoid making easy outs and will force the pitcher to "come to you" as opposed to helping him to get you out. This is a lot easier said than done, but you must make it a priority in your game - it is something that you can control.

3. Know what you are trying to do: I would be a wealthy man if I had a dime for every time I have seen players waste an at-bat. You must be clear as to what you are trying to do with your at-bat before

you step into the box. YOU must know the situation, the number of outs, the score, and of course, what the pitcher is doing. Know your game situations. If you are up in a one-run game with a runner on second and nobody out, what should you be trying to do? Your job is to hit something to the right side on the ground and move the runner to third. Or maybe your coach has you hitting in the four-hole and wants you swinging to drive-in that run. You must know what you are trying to do before you get in the box.

But what about when you are at bat with your team winning by eight runs with two outs and nobody on base in the eighth inning? Usually, these are throwaway at-bats as you just want to end the game. Wrong! Work! Go to the box with a purpose - maybe a goal to drive the ball the other way. Perhaps you should focus on trying to get a good pitch that you can drive and try to hit a home run with your normal swing mechanics. Whatever you choose, work at it, and be sure you are decisive about what you are trying to do. Again, this is in your control.

4. Put a good swing on the ball: You work hard on your swing year-round to be a good hitter. You take thousands of swings in the batting cage. You train at hitting the ball to the opposite field, up-the-middle, and to the pull side. You work on hitting the high pitch, the low pitch, the fastball, the curveball. Now, relax and take a good swing. Judge yourself on the swing, not whether it was a hit. Slumps occur when you judge yourself on hits rather than the quality of your at-bat and your swings.

I have seen players who were swinging the bat well who started to tinker with their swings because they weren't getting hits. My favorite example is the guy who gets fooled and takes a bad swing but is happy after he bloop a single. Then, later in the game, he has a great at-bat, gets a good pitch to hit, hits a rocket line drive right at a guy, and he gets MAD. Shouldn't he be upset about getting fooled and taking the bad swing and happy about executing everything correctly and taking the great swing? Yes, I understand that you work to have a good batting average, but ultimately, all you can control is trying to hit the ball hard - the rest will take care of itself.

If you can take this mental approach to hitting, I believe that you will greatly enhance your ability to hit. You will be the player who somehow manages to get hits whether you are facing a junk-baller or that kid in your area who throws gas. You will develop mental toughness and confidence in yourself and your ability to hit. As a

former college coach now working with Baseball Factory, I get asked all the time what I looked for when I went recruiting or scouting. When evaluating a hitter, coaches look at a player's swing and his mental approach to hitting. This is a major factor in determining whether to recruit a player. You can watch players hit all day long - it is the hitter with bat speed and a sound approach who will most impress a coach. In the next issue, I will explain how to achieve the goals outlined in this article.

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