

Hitting: The Mental Side, Part II

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

In Part I, I listed a number of goals that you should strive to achieve. The main theme of the article was to get you to think about the things that you can control, more so, things that you can actually do something about. Here are the goals that I mentioned:

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

You will greatly enhance your ability to hit if you develop the mental discipline to stay within these goals EVERY single at-bat. In Part I, I defined each goal, now I will explain a few things that you can do to achieve these goals.

1. **See the ball:** This seems like it would be the easiest of all the goals. The problem is that players don't really see the ball well. The first thing that I would recommend is that you go see a sports eye doctor. This is very different from the usual eye doctor. (To locate a doctor in your area, check The Yellow Pages for sport-specific doctors or ask your coach.)

A sports eye doctor will be able to analyze your vision in such a way to be able to tell you what pitches you should hit well and what pitches you would struggle to hit. At Coastal Carolina University, we had our players' eyes checked every year. It was amazing what we found out. We actually had a catcher that had some depth perception problems. Can you imagine trying to catch or hit 90 mph pitching with a depth perception problem? It explained why he often had passed balls on routine pitches.

Secondly, you must change your thought process on seeing the ball. Andre David, roving hitting instructor for the Kansas City Royals, told me that during the first day or two of spring training, their players spend the whole time taking and tracking pitches. They must see the ball out of the pitcher's hand and track it all the way into the catcher's glove while maintaining proper balance in the box. I have seen too many young hitters quit on pitches that are halfway to the plate because they knew it would be a ball. This is a bad habit! Track every single pitch for as long as you possibly can. This will help to sharpen your vision and your timing, two immensely important parts of hitting.

Lastly, CLEAR YOUR MIND! The only thought you should have in the box is "see the ball." Do not allow your mind to be cluttered by other thoughts. Don't be thinking about mechanics, don't be thinking "I gotta get a hit," simply think "see the ball." You'll be amazed at how much better your focus is at the plate.

YOU can control this.

2. **Swing at strikes:** If you swing at pitches that you can get a lot of the bat on, your chances of hitting the ball hard increase dramatically. BP pitchers all over the country are going to be mad when I say this, but...swing only at strikes during BP. I was at a high school baseball game recently and watched a team take batting practice before the game - at least 50% of the pitches the kids swung at were balls.

During drills in our batting cages, some players will swing at every pitch I throw because they just want to swing the bat. You must decide if you want to be a HITTER or a SWINGER. Whether you are taking front toss, side toss, BP - whatever the drill may be - SWING ONLY AT STRIKES. This is the only way that you are going to learn to develop an understanding of the strike zone. Generally speaking, when pitchers are ahead in the count 0-2, or 1-2, they are going to try to expand the strike zone and get you to chase bad pitches. If you can develop the ability to lay off of these pitches, you will greatly increase the chances of getting a strike to hit. These are things you must work at in games and in practice. You can not go from swinging at every pitch in practice to suddenly being selective in games; it just doesn't work that way.

YOU can control this.

3. Know what you are trying to do: If you dig in the batters box and just swing, you're going to have a short career. When I see kids do poorly in situations at the plate, I often think that it is because they don't know what they are supposed to be doing.

With runners on second and third, one out, infield back, and in a close game, what should you try to do? Most kids will tell me they are looking to get a hit while others say sacrifice fly. Both are good answers, but keep in mind a routine ground ball scores the run. Make a decision on what you are trying to do and stick with it. Be committed to your approach and see it through. Talk to your coach about situational hitting, come up with different scenarios and ask him what he is looking for. If all else fails, call time and go down to the third base box and ask him. Either way, know what you are trying to accomplish each and every at-bat.

This will avoid wasted at bats and make you a more productive hitter. Baseball Factory Instructor Jake Weber, currently in AA with the Angels, informed me the other night that their minor league system keeps track of what hitters do in situations on a plus/minus scale. All of their minor league teams keep the statistics and at the end of the month one of the teams is named the winner.

If you fail to score a man from third with less than two outs, you receive a minus. If you fail to move a man over from second to third with no outs, you receive a minus. This helps their organization to have better situational hitters who understand what they are supposed to do. Try to keep a plus/minus rating on yourself in order to become a productive hitter.

YOU can control this.

4. Put a good swing on the ball: This is the fun one. This is why you spend those countless hours in the cage. Train yourself to hit pitches all over the strike zone. WORK on high strikes, low strikes, inside and outside strikes. Hit outside pitches to the opposite field and pull inside pitches. WORK to develop your swing so that you can hit any pitch in the strike zone hard. Take private lessons, learn the proper mechanics of the swing, learn how to correctly work on your swing and then WORK at it. Swing the bat and work on your hitting. This is the only way that you will improve.

This is the goal that players usually don't have trouble working on as it is fun to work on because it is physical. The other goals are more mental and require discipline.

YOU can control this.

If you can take some of the suggestions that I have laid out for you in this article and put them into action, you will see the benefits pay off over the long haul. The mental aspects of hitting are under-coached and under-developed. A lot of people can hit the ball hard; it is the mental side that will allow you to be productive over an extended period of time and to avoid prolonged slumps.

Good luck, and WORK on you game, both mentally and physically. Remember to focus on the things that **YOU** can control.

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