

The Winning Hitter

To be successful, a hitter must always be aggressive in his approach. (Coaches should help instill this in all their hitters.) A young hitter learns to hit by swinging the bat, not by taking pitches.

He is entitled to three good cuts. Don't cheat him by making him take pitches. (Do away with that, "Take a pitch until he throws a strike" stuff.) Hitters should think that every pitch is going to be a strike. "Think strike and then react."

Be aggressive early in the count. Pitchers are trying to get ahead by throwing strikes, swing at those strikes. Hitters who find themselves always behind in the count are taking too many pitches. If a hitter is consistently behind in the count he will get a steady diet of off-speed pitches and pitches on the edge of the plate. If he will go to the plate with a positive, aggressive attitude, he will get more good pitches to hit. Hitting is a one-on-one battle with the pitcher. Statistically the pitcher has the better of it and if the hitter does not have the correct approach, he will not win many battles.

The hitter must take a **positive approach**. He cannot be overcome by negative thoughts; a previous unsuccessful at-bat, crowd noise, umpires, poor weather, or poor field conditions. Negative thinking will cause a hitter to become tentative. A tentative hitter will usually be unsuccessful.

He must learn to be **mentally tough**. He cannot become intimidated by any pitcher. A pitcher's best pitch is his fastball. Coaches should attempt to instill in their hitters the mindset that no pitcher will get his fastball by them. That should be a primary focus.

Understand that failure is part of hitting. Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times. Uncontrolled emotions after an unprofitable at-bat will hinder a hitter's development.

He must **adjust mentally** to various situations. He should come to understand that a winning at-bat might be simply hitting a ground ball to the right side of the infield to move a runner to third, or that executing a successful bunt will contribute to a winning team effort.

He cannot let outside situations influence him. He must be **consistent** in his approach. He must strive to remain positive in all situations. A negative approach will breed negative body language and ultimately cause the hitter to lose the battle. It is difficult to teach a young hitter to stay in a state of controlled aggression and yet remain relaxed at the same time. Yet, that is what he must do. He must consider the situations before the ball is pitched but when it is, he must think of nothing at all. "See the ball; hit the ball."

How do we coach kids so they can develop these favorable characteristics?

Here are teaching techniques we believe are important.

- Give constant and never ending **positive reinforcement**. Hitters fail and they should come to realize that it is part of the game.

A young player does not need the coach or dad to moan and groan when he strikes out in an important game situation. In my opinion, a sure-fire way to stifle a kid's aggressiveness at the plate is to display disapproval when he fails.

- **Applaud strikeouts swinging** and discourage called strikeouts. Do not let the umpire have an influence on your game. Swing the bats.
- Use game failures as **teaching opportunities**. We have said that many times and it is important.
- **Talk** about the game in the dugout and immediately after the game. You know, down the foul line in the outfield grass. Talk about missed opportunities and how a pitcher may have pitched to them. Always end on a positive note. Talk baseball. A coach's enthusiasm will carry over to his players.
- To be a winning hitter youngsters can't just go up there hacking. They have to understand the situation, what the pitcher may be trying to do, what the hitter should try to accomplish, what to look for in various counts; in short, how is he going to approach this particular at-bat.

Young hitters cannot achieve this unless the coach makes it a part of his teaching process.

- Include dry swings, tee work, opposite field hitting, soft toss and offensive batting practice in your daily batting practices.

You have to teach the game. **A sound routine will greatly assist you.**

It is the routine above all, that gives young hitters the solid foundation to compete and compete well.

When tight game situations arise, that routine takes over and frees the hitter to react; react with confidence bred from sound practices and sound coaching.

How you coach and how you conduct your practices plays a vital role in your players' development.

The talent level being equal, all dangerous (big game) hitters have had the benefit of a great batting practice routine; including a coach who teaches and provides all the types of situational hitting practice.

- To develop mental toughness the coach must teach his hitters to be responsible for their own actions. (There are no politically correct "victims" in baseball.)

He must teach them to react in a mature fashion after unsuccessful batting appearances.

He must not allow any questioning, whatsoever of umpires.

You know, "STRIIIKEE!" and the hitter turns to look at the coach with a questioning look on his face. Do not allow that.

One of my favorite sayings is, “Are you going to hit or are you going to umpire?” Or, “You hit and he’ll umpire.”

Do not allow questioning of balls and strikes from the dugout. Teach your players that it is a form of begging. (Set a good example, Coach.)

By staying above negative and distracting behavior, the effective coach gives his players much more than baseball instruction. He is providing a life lesson.

- **Swing the bats.** That is a mindset and if you have a team that is tentative at the plate, you can establish penalties to help them overcome their reticence.

I coached a young high school age team one summer that wouldn’t swing the bats at fastball strikes for the life of them. It was like every coach who had gone before them had told them to take pitches.

So, I installed a penalty. For every fastball strike they didn’t swing at, the player had to run 3 60’s and the team had to run 1.

After two games they started to get it. The third game they scored 11 runs. It was beautiful. Every fastball strike, (and of course some that weren’t) was greeted by an aggressive hack.

The poor pitcher didn’t know what was happening. Every time he threw the ball, a hitter was answering with a hard swing. Balls were being put in play all over the yard.

I know some coaches will not eagerly embrace this view. Old habits die hard.

“Let’s take a pitch; maybe they’ll draw a walk.” Or, many good hitting instructors instruct hitters to take that first pitch.

My answer is that you as coach are trying to instill an attitude, a team approach. You are trying to teach young hitters to hit the ball.

An aggressive approach to hitting will always be beneficial to your team in the long term.

What about, “You have to take pitches to learn your own personal strike zone?”

To learn your personal strike zone you have to swing the bat to see what you can do on certain areas of the plate. Learn by swinging, not taking.

- A swing and a miss is a good thing. It is a coaching and learning experience to use later in that at-bat or later in the game.

Another old habit. Put aside the results for a while and focus on the fact that you are developing your hitters.

- “End on a good one.” **Do away with that statement in batting practice.** Give an equal number of pitches to every hitter and stick to it.

And if a hitter doesn't swing at a strike in BP that counts against his allotted number.

If you are teaching hitters to be aggressive and take responsibility for their actions, don't break down and give in during BP.

“This round is ten swings. That is all your get. Make the most of it.”

That is also another step toward teaching mental toughness and enhancing concentration.

Such a small thing that can yield such positive results. Do it and watch your batting practices improve.

- Teach a two-strike approach to your hitters. Two-strike hitting is actually situational hitting. The pitcher has the best of it and the hitter is in more of a defensive mode.

Remember we have said we want our hitters to be aggressive early in the count because they will see more fastballs.

But two-strike hitting will still come into play sometimes so we want to be prepared.

Teach your hitters to think about what the pitcher has thrown to other hitters in this situation.

Are his pitches always on the outside corner? Does he have a great curveball? Does he throw it in the dirt to try to get you to chase it?

Teach your hitters to look away. Look for an outside pitch and just react, or (fight off) the inside fastball.

You can't expect to get “your pitch” (middle-in) in these situations so don't look for it.

Look to hit the ball up the middle or to the opposite field.

Shorten up your stroke. Many hitters choke up in two-strike situations or they shorten their stride or they don't stride at all.

The idea is to make contact, no matter how devastating a pitcher's breaking pitch is.

Expand your strike zone. Look a ball-width off the plate. Do not take anything close.

Keep your hands back. You want to look fastball but you may get the breaking pitch, so keep those hands back and don't commit too early.

Look for strikes, not balls. Look for a fastball but anticipate a breaking pitch. Adjust down.

Relax and see the ball out of the pitcher's hand. Once the pitcher starts his windup, mentally treat two-strike hitting as just another pitch.

Put the ball in play. Hit it somewhere. Give the defense the opportunity to make an error. That can't happen if you take strike three looking.

Battle. Don't give in to the pitcher. Fight off his best pitches.

Teach your hitters to be fearless. Again, they won't become dangerous hitters if you moan and groan when they strike out swinging. Develop, develop, develop.

You can use a two-strike drill in your intra-squad games. Start each hitter with two strikes and he must put the ball in play to be successful. A foul ball is an out. (For the purpose of time management as well as mindset.)

A winning hitter knows he can be successful in a two-strike situation.

- Think hard and long about how to improve your batting Practice routine. Give at least 60% of your practice time to this vital segment of practice. In past TOTW we have suggested ways to accomplish that. Dig them out. We also devote part of the Coaches Practice Planner to BP.
- A hitter will almost always get ONE GOOD PITCH to hit in at bat. If he fails at a plate appearance and he didn't swing at "his" pitch, ask him what pitch he should have swung at when he returns to the dugout.

You want to train his thinking process. Invariably he will know which pitch he should have taken a hack at. Let him know that you know as well.

- Watch every pitch your kids hit in BP and in games. A great coach can see the entire field at once so train your concentration and observations skills.
- **Care** about your kids. Don't think of them in terms of what they can do for you in winning games; think about what you can do to help them improve.
- **Teach** from the moment you step on the field until you leave it. Come early and stay late.
- Spend time with a player after practice who needs extra help. A lot of great teaching can get done during these one-on-one sessions. A side benefit from this is that you will be fostering a player who will remember you his entire life. Kids don't forget teachers who try to help them. (A rare commodity in this day and age.)
- Coaching hitters or baseball in general is not easy so give it your best effort of time and commitment.

A coach should never let the opportunity to teach go by. The rewards are simply too great.

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