



## Bunting Fundamentals

The higher you move up in softball, the more bunting you see. That is because softball is even more of a "small ball" sport than its big brother, baseball. Many high level games end up being 1 - 0 after lots of extra innings. The deciding play is often a well-placed bunt moving a runner to second or third. It behooves a player to learn how to bunt well.

I have seen a few different techniques for bunting but seldom do I see it taught the same way it is taught in baseball. I think the baseball technique is the best for control so that is the one I'm going to write about here.

### Hands And Feet

Basically the batter stands as she would to hit. As the pitcher begins her wind up, the batter takes her top hand and making a "thumbs up" movement, she slides the hand up to around the sweet spot of the bat as she turns to face the pitcher. To mimic the thumbs up movement, make a fist and lift the thumb straight up as if you are giving someone the "thumbs up." The part of the batter's fist above the index finger is where the bat will rest. The thumb acts as a shock absorber as the bat will kick back against it when the ball is struck.

The lower hand maintains its place on the bat and the cock of the arm stays the same as she steps and turns her body so as to be square with the pitcher. Both the hips and shoulders must be square to the pitcher at this point. Her feet should now both be pointing at the pitcher with the back foot slightly behind the front, knees bent, similar to the position one would take fielding a groundball.

Now the lower hand comes up and extends a bit so the bat is held exactly level just below the eyes and in front of the hitter. Both arms are slightly cocked to also cushion and control the impact of the ball. The arm attached to the lower hand has the elbow extended towards the dugout while that attached to the upper hand has the elbow extended downwards towards homeplate.

Many bunters make the mistake of not keeping the bat level because they have observed other players, particularly drag bunters, doing this. But not having a level bat, squared with the pitcher results in foul balls and the bunter's worst nightmare, pop-ups. Keeping the bat level just below the eyes makes it easier to make good, even contact with the ball and causes the bunt to be fair more often than not.

### "Catching" the Ball

When the body is square and the bat is level, the batter has a much better view of the pitched ball and can adjust more easily. The batter should adjust to the pitch, to the greatest extent possible, by bending her knees to squat or stand straight up depending on where the pitch is. There is no reason to lunge at the ball or bend over to make contact. The head remains still. The arms keep their semi-flexed position once achieved.

Once the batter is ready to strike the ball, **the technique is really more like "catching the ball" with the bat** than it is striking it. She catches the ball with the bat by adjusting her position exclusively with the knees. The bat never moves until it is struck and then only a little. It may feel a little awkward at first but this

is the best technique to teach as it results in the greatest likelihood of making contact while having the greatest amount of control.

### **Some Pitch Considerations**

If a pitcher is trying to prevent a batter from putting down a sacrifice bunt, she will most often throw the pitch high. This is because the batter is forced to lift the bat above her eye level where she cannot judge good contact. She is far more likely to bunt the ball into the air resulting in a double play, if she can be coaxed into lifting the bat above her eyes.

Another technique pitchers will try is to force the batter to bunt the ball where the defensive team wants it. For example, with a right handed bunter and a runner on second, the defensive team may want the batter to bunt the ball directly at their left-handed first baseman in order to get a clean throw to third and nail the runner. She may try to pitch inside around the waste in order to force a defensive bunt. You have to train your team to understand when a pitcher is trying to force a bad bunt that may end up costing you an opportunity. Once your bunter realizes she cannot make the sacrifice, she needs to do something to indicate to the base runner that she is not going to be dropping one down. She can, for example, pull her upper hand back towards her chest and stand straight up in which case your runners, alerted to this, will know to go back to the base. It is important to teach beginning bunters that they must remove the bat from the strike zone, if they do not like the pitch. So teaching bunters to pull back the top hand serves two purposes.

### **Placement of Bunts**

I alluded to it before but the key to a good sacrifice bunt is placement. Unfortunately a good bunt in one circumstance is not a good bunt in another. Whether the pitcher, first baseman, or third baseman are righty or lefty is an important consideration. Also, whether you are trying to move a runner from first or second is important.

The bunter must try to get the bunt to the fielder least able to get your lead runner out. A lefty first baseman has an excellent view of the bases when fielding a bunt. A righty third baseman has almost no hope of throwing a runner out at third. Pitcher often make good targets as they often have difficulty adjusting to throwing overhand. But many pitchers are excellent fielders. You are going to have to judge for yourself who the best player to bunt at is, depending on perceived ability, left or right handedness, and the situation.

### **Drilling**

As far as drilling the bunt goes, control is the key element you are looking for. After you have taught the basic body position and had your girls each have a few turns bunting, they will see that making contact is pretty easy. The next thing you are after is control. This really boils down to experience and while there is nothing like game experience, drilling in practice can go a long ways towards teaching bunt control.

Get your pitchers to throw live pitches to your bunters. This makes it real and can also provide the added benefit of training your pitchers to field bunts. I don't like pitching machines for practicing bunts. Batters quickly adjust to where the pitch is thrown and this defeats the purpose. I think pitching machines have a purpose in teaching hitting in general but bunting is best done live.

Make some marks in the dirt in front of home plate. If you have spray-paint, use it. Make several circles and even circles within circles. Put a point value on bunts in different areas and have a little contest. It doesn't much matter where the greatest value is. You are not trying to get your bunters to place the perfect bunt in the middle circle to the right of the pitcher on each attempt. Rather you want them to learn control. And since the "perfect bunt" depends on several variables, it is actually better if you teach your girls to bunt into each of the circles, like a game of darts. Perhaps the greatest point value should be awarded for bunting the ball into all the circles.

In any event, rather than having your bunters try to be the team's best bunter, I suggest you set different

levels such as "beginner, yeoman, and expert." Let your girls know that if they place a bunt in each of the circles, they achieve "expert" status. But from time to time, tell them that every "expert" must maintain their status by proving their expertise again. This way you can have your girls keep up their bunting skills.

Whatever you try to get your girls to practice bunting and perfect the art, you won't be sorry. Chances are that you will win a couple close games just because your kids know how to bunt.