

EARNING FASTBALLS

Pitchers use fastballs a majority of the time. The fastball is the easiest pitch to locate, and pitchers need to throw strikes. I'd say pitchers in Little League baseball throw fastballs 80% of the time, roughly. I would also estimate that of all the **strikes** thrown in Little League, more than 90% of them are fastballs.

It makes sense for young hitters to go to bat looking for a fastball, visualizing a fastball, timing up for a fastball. You'll never hit a good fastball if you're wondering what the pitcher will throw. Visualize fastball, time up for the fastball, jump on the fastball in the strike zone.

I work with my players at recognizing the curveball or off-speed pitch. Not only recognizing it, but laying off it, taking it. Good hitters live off the fastball. With some players I've coached, once I recognize how vulnerable they are to the offspeed pitch, I have actually told them they are "not allowed" to swing at offspeed pitches. I make it into a game of sorts, counting the number of times they make solid contact with the fastball and the number of times they swing at an offspeed pitch; if the number of offspeed pitches they swing at outnumbers the fastballs they made solid contact with, there are penalties to pay at practice (three laps of the field, for example), and, if the opposite is true, there are rewards (they are excused from equipment and field cleanup at the end of practice). Sometimes, I'll reward that player by throwing him nothing but offspeed pitches in batting practice, allowing him to swing away. Once you make it a rule, players tend to abide by it, recognize offspeed pitches and lay off them.

Some coaches think I'm crazy doing this sort of thing. *What if a kid has two strikes and the pitcher drops a curve in there for a strike?* Well, the player strikes out. He'd likely have swung and missed anyway, if he's a weak offspeed hitter. And, most importantly, once he shows how gullible he is to offspeed pitches, he'll get a steady diet of them. Until I can teach that player how to hit a curveball, he's better off developing his pitch recognition skills, not swinging at pitches he can't recognize soon enough to make contact with.

Becoming disciplined enough in your approach to recognize junk pitches – and lay off them – means that you'll get more good

fastballs to hit. You **earn fastballs** in this way. You earn them by achieving counts where the pitcher needs to throw a strike. We're talking about 1-0, 2-0, 2-1, 3-1 and 3-2 counts. If the previous hitter walked, it's almost a given that the first pitch you'll see will be a fastball. And, after a walk, it's likely the catcher will set up dead-center behind the plate. You could say that the patience of the hitter before you earned you a fastball in your wheelhouse. Take advantage.

A HISTORY LESSON

Pitchers and hitters have been battling each other forever. In the dead ball era, pitchers had advantages. One or two balls were used in a game. The ball was brown from dirt and tobacco juice and wouldn't travel far when you hit it. Batters did not have helmets, so the fear factor was high.

Inside fastballs – chin music – were common in keeping hitters from getting too close to the plate. Some guy named Candy Cummings invented a pitch called the curveball to add to hitters' misery. Hitters were already tiptoeing because of chin music, and with Cummings there came a pitch that often started at their heads before curving in for a strike. No fun at all.

The 'live' ball era began near the end of the second decade of the 20th century. It featured new white baseballs which traveled much farther and were replaced regularly during games. The son of a Baltimore saloon keeper, Babe Ruth, took advantage. His homerun prowess was so exciting that, after he was traded to the New York Yankees by the Boston Red Sox, they had to build a new stadium to hold the overflowing crowds. Yankee Stadium was built in The Bronx and was known as The House That Ruth Built. Sad that this historic landmark is about to be torn down.

For a while it was the hitters who were in the limelight, while pitchers searched for new ways to regain their advantage.

There were curveballs, change-ups and spitballs to mess up the hitters' timing. Hitters used a weight-transfer style, and the best way to keep them off balance was to change speeds, throw off their timing.

By the 1960's, pitchers needed more sophisticated tricks. Hitters could see the ball

better. The color barrier had been broken and the best black players had joined the Major Leagues. Players from baseball-crazy Latin countries were being signed in greater numbers. Pitching had to get better, in a hurry.

The slider was born, a harder curve with rotation so tight the hitters couldn't pick it up. Pitchers started throwing a forkball, too. **Roy Face** of the Pirates, a relief pitcher, won a Cy Young Award throwing mainly forkballs. Delivered with a fastball motion, the fork would start out looking like a fastball and then, as it neared the plate, would dive suddenly. The fork is the father of the splitter, or split-fingered fastball.

At the height of the slider and forkball era – the late 1960's – pitchers had taken over again, as mentioned in an earlier handout. Major League Baseball ordered the pitcher's mound significantly lowered prior to the 1969 season. Hitters needed help, and MLB gave it to them.

There had been hitting coaches before this, but the 1970's were when hitting coaches got paid more handsomely. Charlie Lau was the old guru, the man who first articulated Backside Rotational style hitting, what I teach. Charlie Lau was in the vanguard of hitting mentors.

Using the Backside Rotational style – hitting against a firm front leg, rotating the hips in sync with the hands delivering the bat – hitters could wait a millisecond longer before committing to a swing. Against sliders and splitters, this proved crucial. If you could lay off the junk low out of the zone, you could earn a fastball count. Averages started to rise again, and a few hitters even flirted with the magic .400 in the years after.

DISCIPLINE AT THE PLATE

The more disciplined the hitter, the more fastballs that he'll see, and the higher his average will go. By being patient, laying off junk, by going ahead in the count and forcing the pitcher to compromise location and bring a fastball to the center of the strike zone, you are earning a good fastball to hit.

Time the fastball while on deck. Even in Little League, where you no longer can stand in the on-deck circle, you can still rehearse your timing in the dugout if you have an unobstructed view of the pitcher. Get your muscle memory

involved, feel the timing while awaiting your turn at the plate. Go up there looking for a fastball strike. Visualize the fastball in your mind. When you see a pitch that is not a fastball, lay off it, avoid swinging at the off-speed pitch. You want one good fastball to hit during each at-bat. When you see a fastball that is up near your eyes, lay off that pitch – it's a ball. Be disciplined. Force the pitcher to be the one to compromise. If you are able to maintain this poise and discipline, you'll earn a fastball strike, a pitch to hit, your batting average will rise, and your coach and teammates will be giving you high-fives for helping the team to succeed. Good luck and good hitting!

DOUG LANG dalang@telus.net