

## HAVE A PLAN

The reason we practice hitting is to build good habits, so we can use them in games and help the ballclub. In the gym and on the practice field, the attention is on technique and repetitions. The drills that coaches use are intended to establish and reinforce good habits. Your job, as the player, is to follow the directions carefully, so that you get the most out of the drills, so that your reps are building positive **muscle memory** in your body. There are a few naturally gifted hitters, but most good hitters are good – and get better -- because of the quality of their practice and how well they study the game.

One of the things that I deal with in handouts like these -- and in talking with players off the field – is the psychological approach to hitting, **the mental game**. This is to assist hitters in remaining positive and having a **plan** at the plate, to keep them from getting down on themselves.

Remember: no matter how good you get at hitting, you're going to have to deal with a lot of failure. *How you deal with failure is crucial to how much you improve as a hitter.*

As the season progresses, I use the **Take** sign less and less, as my players learn to have a plan at the plate and manage their at-bats. They learn what to look for in each situation. Taking a pitch early in an at-bat is never a bad idea, especially in your first plate appearance against a specific pitcher. It's a chance to study his pitch, to rehearse your timing, all without risking going out.

Ted Williams almost always took a pitch against a new pitcher because, as he put it, "I'd rather learn what kind of fastball he's throwing, see if it's sinking a lot that day, and I want to learn that while I'm still at the plate, not mad at myself heading back to the dugout after grounding out to second base." Williams used to swing for the top of the ball against pitchers who threw four-seam fastballs, and the bottom of the ball against those who threw two-seamers. If a guy had an extra-good sinker, Ted would swing for an imaginary ball underneath the real ball. It's no wonder he put out a book called *The Science of Hitting*. The best hitter in the game, the Splendid Splinter remained a student of hitting until the day he retired.



## ONE MISTAKE

I talk a lot with hitters about having a plan for each at-bat. This plan will change depending on the situation, but let's start out with nobody on base, early in the game.

In youth baseball, pitchers make at least one mistake – a fat pitch – for every batter they face. The challenge, then, for hitters, is to be relaxed enough, and ready to pounce all over that mistake. With regards to the take sign and why I avoid it more as my hitters have better plans at the plate, it's because the first pitch is often the fattest. Especially in summer play, when the pitchers get a little finer, better at locating, less prone to mistakes. The hitter gears for fastball in his crush zone; if it's there, he drives it. Otherwise, he takes the pitch.

Most mistake pitches are earned, though, by hitters who have good management of the strike zone. By not chasing tough pitches – even pitches that are strikes, but just not very hittable strikes – hitters force pitchers to make that one mistake. It's no accident that batting averages on 2-0 and 3-1 counts are higher. Batting averages are higher on 1-0 and 2-1 also. By being patient and disciplined you force a pitcher to compromise. Instead of going for a corner, because he's behind in the count, a pitcher has to throw a fastball to the middle of the plate. Against a good hitter, that's a mistake. *And, good hitters make pitchers pay for their mistakes.*



## SITUATIONAL HITTING

As the game situation changes, hitters adjust and have different plans. Let's say you come up with one out and a runner at third in a 0-0 game, second or third inning. Your job is to punch that run across. Sometimes, you'll be asked to bunt. That little roller puts all kinds of pressure on the defence. But let's say your coach doesn't give you the bunt sign. Your job remains simple: punch the run across. So, what's your plan?

A ground ball will usually get the job done in this case. Keep your hands high and look for a pitch in the bottom half of the zone, one you can drive on the ground. It sounds simple, but it's not. It takes practice.

I have players practice -- off tees, off soft-toss, and in live batting practice -- hitting ground balls. You learn to wait back, see the pitch a millisecond longer, and take the bat to the top of the ball. A well-delivered ground ball with a runner at third is a pretty thing, and goes right to the heart of *sacrifice*... still the most beautiful word in the game.

Let's say you come up to the plate in the fourth inning with runners at second and third, nobody out, and your team is leading 2-1. What is your plan?

If you're a left-handed hitter, look for a pitch to pull to the right side. If you're a right-handed hitter and you've learned to go the other way,

look for a fastball to the outer half of the plate and drive it to right field.

Why right field? Because that runner at second base will have a better chance to score if you hit *behind* him. If you drive the ball toward shortstop, that runner has to hold up until the ball goes through. If you drive the ball toward the second baseman, that runner takes off on contact, and will often score if the ball goes through to the outfield. That's why righthand batters are taught to go the other way. Right field is RBI country.

It's an interesting thing. If I'm calling pitches for the defensive team in this situation, and the batter is right-handed, I'll tend to call fastballs to the inside third of the plate and mix in offspeed, anything to keep the ball out of right field.

## STARTING OVER

Short-term muscle memory lasts about 10 seconds. If you make a bad swing -- chase a high fastball or, especially, get fooled badly on an offspeed pitch -- it's important to take a walk out of the batter's box. That walk must last 10 seconds, to allow short-term muscle memory to fade from your mind and body. It's called *starting over*, meaning that when you step back in you are focused on the next pitch, not the last one.

Pitchers use a curveball or change-up as a set-up pitch. It hypnotizes the hitter, so the fastball that follows appears much faster and catches the hitter napping, makes him late. Take a moment, take a breath, and use your self-talk to tell yourself to *look fastball*. That gives you a chance to be on time.

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