

The Mental Side of Hitting

By Dan Piro

It is fair to say your success as a hitter depends on how much you get from the combination of your physical and mental skills. Your mental approach can make an enormous difference in this regard.

Your physical skills consist of your size, strength, vision, eye-hand coordination, quickness and speed. Your mental skills include information collection, analysis, and the management of your physical abilities. You use your brain to understand your capabilities and limitations as a hitter, to gather information on pitchers, to decide what you need to do to succeed in any given hitting situation in a game, and to anticipate something useful about each pitch about to be thrown to you, such as its location, its speed or both.

Developing and Maintaining Your Hitting Technique

You use your brain to achieve good hitting technique through drills and practice. In our Summer issue, we presented drills developed by Mike Epstein. If these drills work for you, you would employ them. If you have other drills that produce results for you, you would incorporate those drills into your practice routine.

Just trying to mash the ball in the batting cage is not likely to get the job done. Tony Gwynn, a .338 lifetime hitter, devoted little practice time to driving baseballs over fences. Instead, he spent much of his Hall of Fame career hitting off a batting tee and taking early batting practice during which he would repeatedly hit line drives to a small area in left field. That daily series of line drives to the opposite field allowed Gwynn to evaluate his technique. If he was a bit off, he would return to the batting tee to do some more work.

The point is that you will need to establish and use check points within the framework of the drills you do to determine if you need to work on some part of your hitting technique.

Understanding Yourself as a Hitter

In his classic book, *"The Science of Hitting,"* Ted Williams stressed the importance of knowing yourself as a hitter.

Suppose you are a left-handed hitter with excellent foot speed. You hustle on the base paths and find lots of ways to take extra bases. Your power is okay, but speed is your strong point. You will want to make an effort to hit line drives and ground balls, while shunning the idea of hitting the ball high in the air. When you practice, you will stress line drives and hard ground balls. You will practice hitting balls to the left side because you will have a chance to beat out grounders the shortstop grabs in the hole between third and short. With less than two strikes, you might look for a fastball that is middle to away, while conceding the inside pitch. Looking for a fastball away also would give you some room to handle an off speed pitch.

Now, suppose you are a larger, stronger player with only average speed. In this case, it is a disadvantage to hit ground balls. If you have average power, you will stress hitting line drives, and strike a balance between fly balls and ground balls. If you have exceptionally good power, you will take aim at hitting line drives and more fly balls than grounders. Your practice routine will take into account the approach you want to have in a game.



Game Factors

A good mental approach includes collecting information prior to and during a game. When you play in your league, you often know about the opposing pitcher; you can assess how your skills match against his repertoire. In a tournament against a pitcher you have never seen, you will have to ask others, watch him warm up, and watch every pitch he throws. You will have to decide how you match against this hurler. Suppose you are facing a pitcher who throws gas and has reasonably good control; you will have to work to put the ball in play. You cannot afford to get into a hole with two strikes. Instead

"...hitting is self-education — thinking it out, learning the situations, knowing your opponent, and most important, knowing yourself."

— Ted Williams

of looking for a pitch in a specific location to drive to an alley, you will give yourself a larger part of the strike zone to cover, shorten your swing a bit, and aim to hit the ball hard somewhere. Even when you are

ahead in the count, say as much as 2-0, an overpowering pitcher can beat you if you take big swings. A 2-0 count can become 2-2 if you fail to put in mind you are not well matched against this pitcher.

Later, suppose you face a relief pitcher who has an average fastball and an okay curve. This pitcher will need to hit locations to gain the advantage over you. You are confident that with two strikes, you will be able to put the ball in play. Now when you are ahead on the count, you can be selective and look for a pitch in a certain location that you can drive. A smart hitter assesses his risk/reward position from at-bat to at-bat, and adjusts his approach accordingly.

Situational Hitting

When the game is close, situations occur that require you to do what is needed to help your team win.

Suppose, for example, the game is tied in the eighth inning, and you come to the plate with a runner on second and none out. It is your job to advance the runner to third or to score him. You set the goal of hitting a ground ball to the right side. If you bat from the right side you will aim to execute an inside-out swing. If you bat from the left side, you will aim to turn on the pitch, even if it means swinging at an outside pitch and rolling a weak grounder to the right side.

Now suppose the runner is on third with one down with your team trailing by a run. The middle infielders play at normal depth, with the corners in. Your best bet in this situation is to hit a fly ball to the outfield. With less than two strikes, you will look for a pitch that is "up" in the strike zone—perhaps from mid-thigh to somewhere near

top of the zone. It is easier to put such a pitch in the air. With two strikes, you will aim at putting the ball in play and hoping for the best.

Working the Count

It has been said a hitter has only two counts: two strikes and less than two strikes. This notation contains much truth. The table below is from a 1992 study on how well major league players hit in different counts. Two measures, batting average and slugging average, are shown for each ball-strike count. Various other studies since have produced similar results.

Count	BA	Slug	Count	BA	Slug	Count	BA	Slug
0-0	.305	.452	2-0	.326	.540	0-2	.168	.234
1-0	.314	.474	2-1	.330	.504	1-2	.176	.246
0-1	.302	.422	3-0	.307	.479	2-2	.193	.280
1-1	.310	.455	3-1	.318	.527	3-2	.223	.346

With less than two strikes, you have the luxury of taking a pitch that fools you or that you can't handle well. Once you have two strikes, you must defend against being called out on a third strike. You cannot afford to take close pitches, so you expand your strike zone. You also have to handle both the fastball and the off speed pitch, so you adjust your approach. For many hitters, this means gearing themselves to expect a speed between the two. They are willing to be a little late on the fastball so they are not completely fooled by the off speed pitch. In doing so, hitters trade contact for power. You will find yourself in this situation 40% to 45% of the time.

The right approach to working the count can pay huge dividends. The counts that put you in the driver's seat are: 2-0, 2-1, 3-1, and 3-0. The table above shows that major league hitters have their best results for these counts. Think of the 3-0 count as being a stepping stone to 3-1. Major leaguers take the 3-0 pitch 93% of the time. Either they walk, or they are hitting at 3-1. When you are blessed with these advantageous counts, you need to do what the big leaguers do and take your best swing.

When the count is 2-0, the pitcher is under pressure to throw a strike. He will be less concerned with painting a corner. In most cases, you will get a fastball and you can gear yourself to putting a hard swing on the pitch. If you miss, you will still have the upper hand at 2-1. When the count is 3-1, you will take the same approach. With the 3-1 count, unlike the 2-0 and 2-1 counts, one-third of the time you will walk on the next pitch. If you swing and miss, the count will be 3-2 and you will have to stress making contact rather than swinging to drive the ball. However, the 3-2 count is much better than suggested by the batting average shown in the table, because a batter will draw a walk 40% of the time after the count reaches 3-2.

"2-1 you become very comfortable, 1-2 you become very uncomfortable." —Alex Rodriguez

The 1-1 count requires special attention. If the batter takes the next pitch, the count will be either 2-1 or 1-2. The 1-2 would give the pitcher a tremendous edge, allowing him to expand the strike zone for the next two pitches. The 2-1 count would give a decisive advantage to the hitter because the pitcher would be under pressure to throw a strike to avoid taking the count to 3-1. Catchers understand that 1-1 counts are pivotal. In most cases, the catcher will call the pitch his pitcher is most likely to throw for a strike. You should use this knowledge to guess the next pitch. Often, that next pitch will be a fastball. On some days, however, certain pitches work better than others. If this is a day when the man on the mound has an effective slider or curve, that is the pitch you should anticipate. How can you be sure? Pay attention to every pitch. If it is practical, ask your teammates to help you chart the pitches. You can look at the chart throughout the game to see what the catcher is calling. If the catcher is

calling off speed pitches fairly often early in the count, he is telling you a great deal.

Looking for Your Pitch

A hitter who is skilled in driving baseballs to the alleys and over fences usually does so because he is in the habit of looking for certain pitches, especially when ahead in the count. It is well known that most power hitters, when they are ahead in the count, look for fastballs. Some hitters place great emphasis on pitch location. Derek Jeter, who has perfected the inside-out swing, has a great deal of success driving the ball to the opposite field. In many situations with less than two strikes, Jeter will look for the pitch away. For Jeter, anticipating the pitch's location is more important than guessing its speed.

Sometimes the situation dictates what to anticipate. For example, against a pitcher who is determined to throw a strike on the first pitch, it is often wise for a hitter to anticipate a fastball. Some pitchers tend to throw breaking pitches when they get ahead. Consider a lefty pitcher against a left-handed hitter with the count at 0-1. In that situation, if the pitcher has a good curve, he will tend to throw it. So it is often right for the hitter to anticipate the breaking pitch.

If a pitcher is having trouble keeping the ball down in the strike zone, a good hitter will focus on the upper part of the zone. Alternatively, if the pitcher is having trouble throwing his off speed pitch for a strike, a good hitter will look for the fastball when the count is less than two strikes. On a day when the opposing pitcher is struggling, with less than two strikes the hitter has the luxury of looking for a specific pitch in a specific location.

If you want to get more extra base hits, you will need to find opportunities to look for specific pitches and target specific locations. Which pitches? Which locations? That is for you to decide. You need to know which pitches you handle best, and in which areas of the strike zone you are most productive.

The Umpire Factor

Each umpire has his own strike zone, and you need to know it and accept it. It pays to find opportunities to ask umpires to tell you about their strike zones. An umpire once explained to me that he always gave a generous outside corner, but had a very tight inside corner. Why? He knew he was forcing hitters to protect the outside corner, so he could hardly expect them to handle the pitch on the inside corner. If I had not asked, I might have gone the entire season believing I had to protect both corners.

The Bottom Line

Hitting is a combination of physical and mental skills. Every hitter needs to work on having sound, repeatable hitting mechanics. Once you have a good swing, achieving solid results as a hitter involves a great deal of mental work. You need to have good information on the opposing pitcher. You need to be able to assess how your abilities as a hitter match against the guy on the mound. You need to recognize when you are in a special game situation, and know what you need to do to succeed in that situation. You need to know how to work the count. You need to know how to take the umpire's strike zone and tendencies into account.

What is amazing is that players who work at the mental part of hitting can process information during the game at lightning speed. They have a clear idea of what they can expect and what they need to do each pitch of each at bat. It makes a difference in their results.