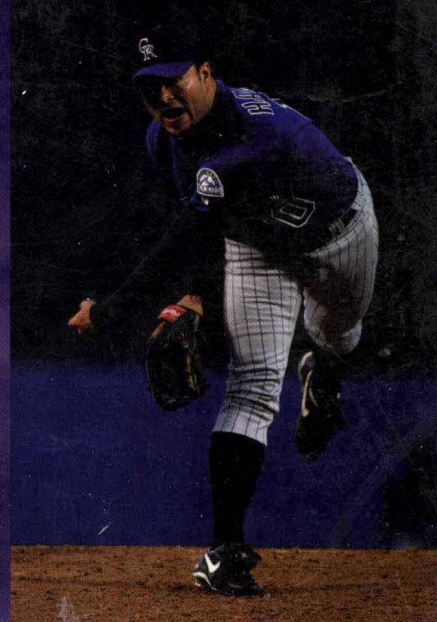


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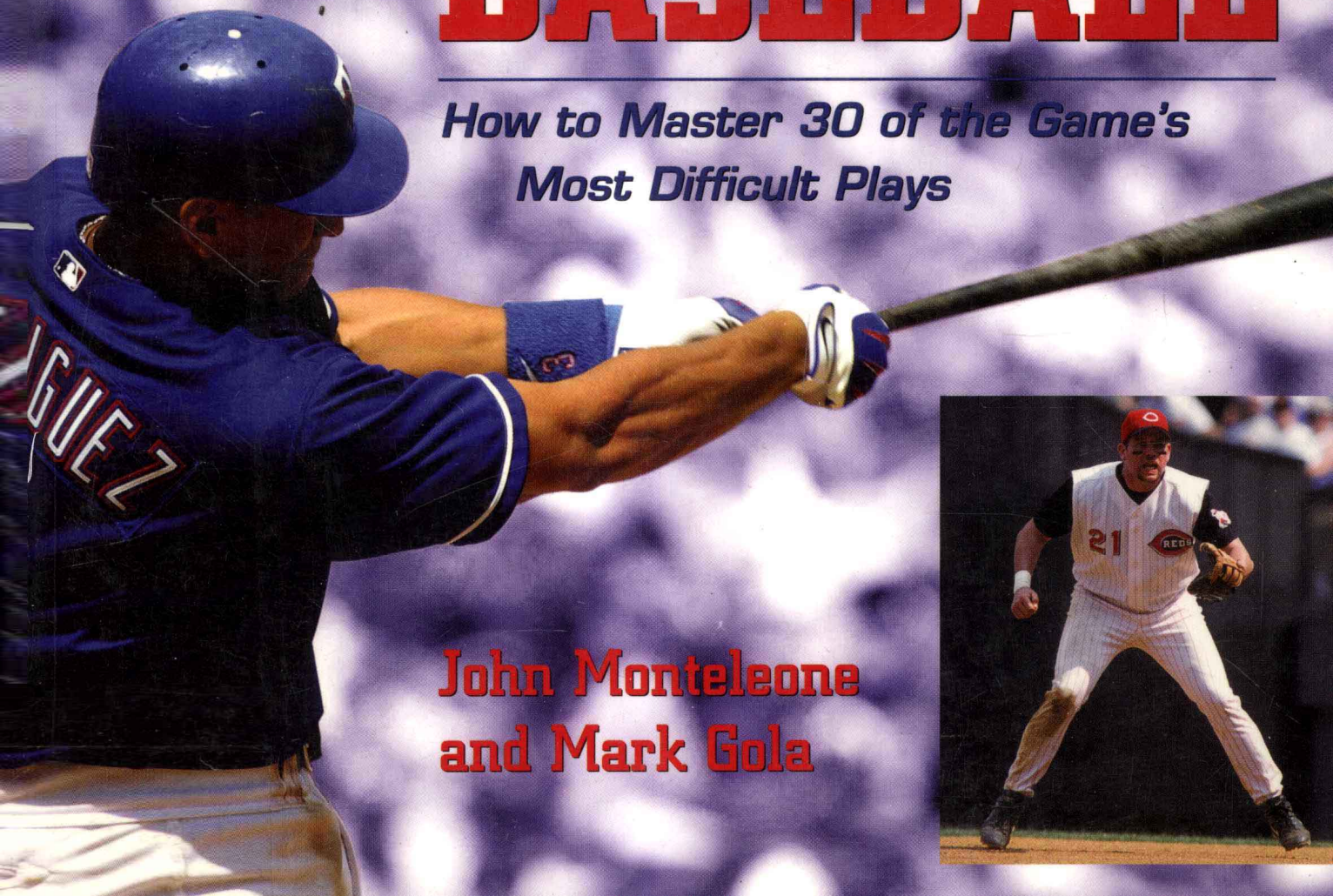


BOOK OF



GAME-BREAKER BASEBALL

*How to Master 30 of the Game's
Most Difficult Plays*



**John Monteleone
and Mark Gola**



THE



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**GAME-BREAKER
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A Mountain Lion Book

Contemporary Books

Chicago New York San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City
Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Monteleone, John J.

The Louisville Slugger book of game-breaker baseball : how to master 30 of the game's most difficult plays / by John J. Monteleone & Mark Gola.

p. cm.

"A Mountain Lion book."

ISBN 0-07-138561-4

1. Baseball. I. Gola, Mark. II. Title.

GV867.M56 2002

796.357—dc21

2002020779

Contemporary Books



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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 VLP/VLP 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN 0-07-138561-4

This book was set in Sabon by Ellen Kollmon

Printed and bound by Vicks Lithograph

Cover and interior design by Nick Panos

Cover photos, clockwise from top left: Derek Jeter © Tom Hauck/Allsport, Mike Hampton © Jeff Gross/Allsport, Sean Casey © Mark Lyons/Allsport, Alex Rodriguez © Ronald Martinez/Allsport

Interior photographs by Mike Plunkett

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

To Bill Leary of the Lambertville (NJ) Indians, who first showed me how to “take two and hit to right,” a solid-gold game-breaker tactic (#7) in the book for the ages.

—J.J.M.

To two great coaches, Stan Davis and Sonny Pittaro. Thank you for your teachings, guidance, and, finally, friendship. The baseball field acted as your forum, but the lessons gathered from your “coaching” extend far beyond the white lines.

—M.G.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, thanks to Rob Taylor, editor at Contemporary Books, for his continued support and friendship.

Thanks to Bill Williams, vice president of Advertising and Marketing at Hillerich and Bradsby, for his trust in representing Louisville Slugger®.

Thank you to Mike Plunkett, photographer, for his exceptional work behind the camera. Mike's professional expertise is what allows our instructional text to come to life.

Thanks to the baseball players at Rider University who volunteered their time to participate in the photo shoot: Rich Brooks, Jared Carle, Casey Long, Bryan Merrigan, Erinn Pesaresi, and Kevin Riley. Best of luck to the Broncs in the 2002 season.

Thanks to Rick Freeman, baseball aficionado, for cracking open his treasure chest of archival gems that provided several bites of baseball history for anecdotal reference.

A special thanks to Sonny Pittaro, head baseball coach at Rider University, for unlocking the gates to his sacred grounds at Richard F. Daly Field.

Thanks to Joan Mohan at Mountain Lion, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

This book is for the player who wants to excel at the game of baseball. And it is for the player who wants to prepare himself to move up to higher levels of competition. It is for any youth league player trying to make a starting lineup or scholastic player aspiring to make the varsity team. *The Louisville Slugger® Book of Game-Breaker Baseball* explains and demonstrates how to master the advanced skills of baseball, the skills that can make a difference in winning a game. The following pages of *Game-Breaker Baseball* include 30 of these most difficult plays and skills.

Game-Breaker Baseball supplements and builds on the instruction of those books that explain the basics. For example, where a basic book on hitting would explain the rudiments of hitting, *Game-Breaker Baseball's* treatment explains how a right-handed batter can hit a ball to the opposite field, or how a left-handed batter can hook a ball to the pull side of the field. These are “game-breaker” skills because they’re precision skills applied in certain recognizable situations that help move runners into scoring position or score them, and thus break open games. They’re the skills and plays that not only win games but also draw the comment that all players covet hearing, “He knows how to play the game.”

The treatment is divided into separate sections on hitting, fielding, pitching, and baserunning. Readers should read and study each entry separately, apply and practice the instruction, and then return to reread the instruction. Doing so will enable you not only to master the desired skill but also to appreciate the many nuances of the particular skill or play.

Players should pay special attention to the situations in which these advanced skills are best applied. Some are self-evident, such as two-strike and zone hitting when at bat, but others—such as hitting the curveball, or hook sliding, or throwing a change-up—call for total concentration and instant awareness of when and how to act.

The skills presented in this distinct treatment should be undertaken at the proper age. Advanced pitching techniques, such as throwing a curveball, should not be attempted until the body is strong enough to endure the torque and stress brought on by the pitching motion, particularly the external shoulder rotation of the throwing-side arm. However, a pitcher’s technique when covering first base or learning how to slide can be safely (and productively) undertaken at any age.

The time it takes to master the 30 skills and plays of *Game-Breaker Baseball* will vary significantly. Some may take as much as a year or two, or sometimes longer. For example, hitting the curveball or expanding the strike zone can take several years to master, while the push bunt or pop-up slide can be mastered in a relatively short time. But the important thing is to learn the proper technique and then practice it over and over. If you stick with it, you'll eventually master it, and you'll soon be making a pivotal play on a regular basis in games of your own.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

SECTION I HITTING

- 1 Hitting the Curveball 3
- 2 Hitting the Change-Up 9
- 3 Hooking a Ball 15
- 4 Zone Hitting with Favorable Counts 19
- 5 Two-Strike Contact Hitting 25
- 6 Lifting a Fly Ball When a Sacrifice Fly Is Needed 31
- 7 Hitting to the Right Side
(with a Runner on Second Base) 37
- 8 The Slash 43
- 9 Push Bunt for a Base Hit 49

SECTION II FIELDING

- 10 Outfielder Going Back on a Fly Ball 57
- 11 Outfielder Fielding a Ground Ball and Making the Throw 65
- 12 Outfielder Making a Catch and Throw When Runner Is
Tagging Up 71
- 13 Infielder Making a Play on a High Chopper 77
- 14 First Baseman Catching Half-Hops and Short Hops 83
- 15 First Baseman Making a 3-6-3 Double Play on a Ball Caught on
the Infield Grass 89

- 16 Second Baseman Making a Double-Play Throw to Shortstop on a Ball Hit to His Left 95
- 17 Second Baseman Making a Double Play When Runner Is Making Sliding Contact 101
- 18 Shortstop Making a Play from the Third Base–Shortstop Hole 109
- 19 Shortstop Making a Double Play When Runner Is Making Sliding Contact 115
- 20 Third Baseman Making a Play on a Slow Roller 119

SECTION III PITCHING

- 21 Throwing the Curveball for Strikes 127
- 22 Throwing Change-Ups for Strikes 133
- 23 Holding Runners on First Base 137
- 24 Changing Arm Slots 143
- 25 Expanding the Strike Zone 149
- 26 Detecting Weaknesses in the Hitter 155

SECTION IV BASERUNNING

- 27 Adjusting Your Slide to the Play at the Base 163
- 28 Stealing Third Base 169
- 29 Getting a Good Lead and Jump on Batted Balls 175
- 30 Breaking Up a Double Play 181

Index 185



HITTING

Introduction

It's been said time and time again how difficult it is to hit a round ball with a round bat. It's difficult, but not impossible. By taking swing after swing and hitting ball after ball, you develop a sixth sense that helps you find the ball with the barrel with increasing consistency. Soon, your personal hitting zone evolves. Pitches are thrown in certain areas of the strike zone and you pulverize the ball with subconscious effort. Conversely, there are other areas of the strike zone that you survey with distaste.

Gradually, the type of hitter you are becomes more defined. Some hitters are "dead fastball hitters," who await the hard stuff, sit back, and explode on incoming pitches. Other hitters are more rhythmic, sometimes guessing at pitches early in the count before becoming more conservative as the count deepens. They are better hitters with two strikes.

Even the types of hits you produce become predictable. There are fly-ball hitters, line-drive hitters, and contact hitters who produce mostly ground balls. Furthermore, hitters are classified by where they hit the ball and are known as pull hitters, opposite-field hitters, or a select few who learn to use the entire field of play called spray hitters.

These elements define the type of hitter you are and how you perform. And at advanced levels of play, pitchers use this profile data to get you out. That's part of what makes them your enemy. Observant pitchers, catchers, and coaches recognize a hitter's tendencies and combat them by avoiding strengths and exploiting weaknesses. If you like the hard stuff, they'll serve up soft stuff. When they see that you punish pitches up in the strike zone, they'll throw pitches at the knees or below. If you love to pull the ball, the only strikes you'll sniff are those thrown to the outside part

of the plate. And even if you do get a pitch you like and can pull, the fielders will be positioned in areas that defend your individual patterns. Hitting is difficult not simply because the ball is round and the bat is round. The pitcher, the catcher, and seven other men in the field play a fairly significant role as well.

A Well-Rounded Offensive Asset

As you progress in levels of baseball, your ability to execute and produce in a variety of situations must expand for you to remain an offensive threat. Whether you like to hear it or not, you're going to have to learn to hit a curveball. If you don't, you're an easy out in the lineup. It's time to grow up and confront your weaknesses. As longtime Rider University head coach Sonny Pittaro would utter to his freshman hitters who struggled to adjust to college pitching, "Call your mom and dad and tell them the pitchers are throwing you curveballs."

Becoming a well-rounded hitter entails more than hitting different types of pitches thrown to varying locations. You have to be capable of performing duties that help your team win ballgames. Everyone must learn to bunt. Bunting is a skill that may seldom be used, but is extremely critical in big-game situations. If it's in the late innings, and your team is down by one run, you'd better be able to lay down a sacrifice bunt to advance your teammate into scoring position. Bunting is a simple skill that is often neglected in practice. It requires proper technique and light maintenance. That's it. There is no excuse for being a poor bunter.

Other offensive skills include drag bunting, slashing, hitting ground balls to the right side of second base, and lifting balls in the air for a sacrifice fly. The ability to execute these offensive plays is crucial. They can make a significant impact on the outcome of a game. Your goal is to be a great hitter, and also to execute efficiently in situations that necessitate specific results. Base hits up the middle and doubles down the third-base line are not always required for you to contribute to your team's offense.

By mastering these advanced hitting techniques, you'll improve as a hitter and increase your value to the ball club. Learn how to execute the fundamentals of these skills during individual batting sessions. From there, sharpen your skills in daily batting practice by dedicating a few minutes to situational swings.

HITTING THE CURVEBALL

“A good hitter will always look for the fastball [because] he can adjust his timing for the slower curve and change of pace. But if he is looking for the curve, the fastball will be thrown by him.”

—LEFTY O'DOUL

Hitting would be a lot easier if pitchers just threw fastballs, but the curveball has been complicating the game since shortly after the Civil War. As baseball lore has it, a man named William Arthur “Candy” Cummings is credited with the introduction of the curveball.

Identifying the Curveball

The first thing we need to know and understand is the precise nature of a curveball and how it differs from a fastball. While the fastball is predominantly straight, the curveball goes down and to one side or the other, depending on the pitcher. The velocity of the curveball is slower than a fastball's.

The curveball appears to leave the pitcher's hand with a slight upward and outward arc. The fastball leaves the pitcher's hand at a slightly downward angle with the pitcher's palm facing the batter. The rotation on the curveball is a forward and slightly sideward spin. When you see the pitcher's palm facing toward his throwing-side ear, look for a breaking pitch. The first indication is a slight arc that the ball travels just as it is released.

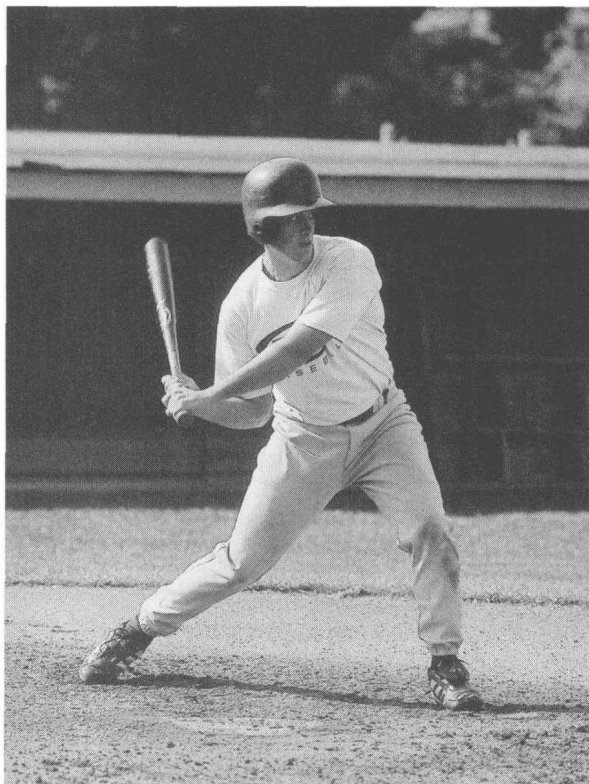
The fastball appears to explode out of the pitcher's hand, while there is a slight delay when the curveball is released. The speed of the curveball is slower. Major league curveballs travel 12 to 15 mph slower than fastballs. When a pitcher throws a curveball at a significantly reduced speed it throws the batter off balance and upsets his timing. Change-ups have a similar effect, although change-of-pace pitches usually travel slower than breaking balls.

Hitting the Deuce

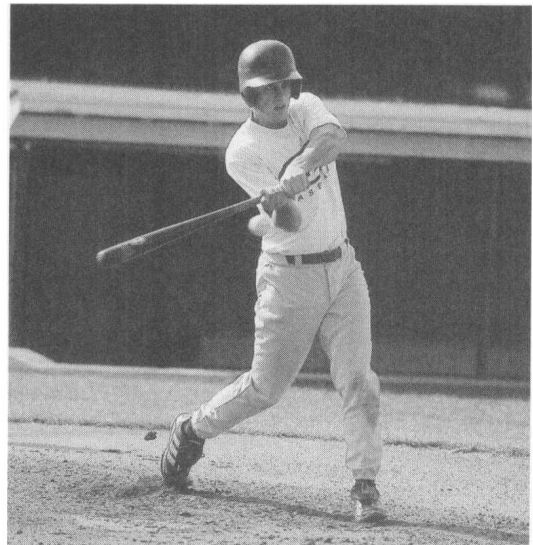
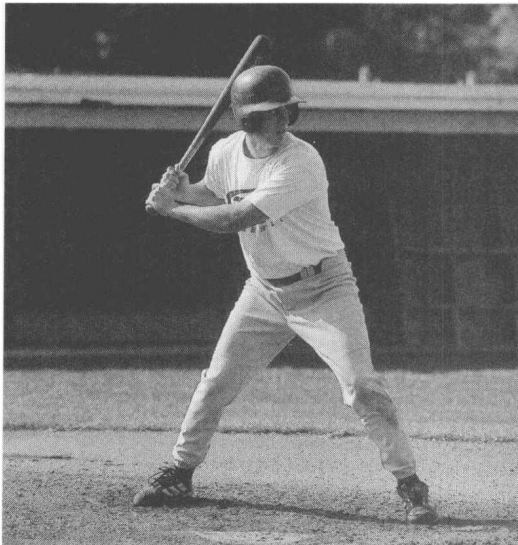
So now that you know what a curveball looks like and how it behaves, how do you hit it?

Early recognition is critical. The sooner you identify the curveball the easier it is to make the adjustments. Concentrate on quickly identifying the pitch as it is released from the pitcher's hand. As soon as you've recognized the curveball, follow these steps to hit it.

The hitter is fooled by a breaking pitch. Once the hands commit to the ball, the batter has very little chance of hitting the ball with authority. Because the front knee bends, the rear leg collapses and the hips are unable to rotate. All power from the lower body is lost.



1. Stride softly, as if stepping on thin ice, a very short distance, perhaps four to six inches. Keep the toe closed. If you use a front leg kick when you stride, make sure that you do not prematurely drop your front foot. The keys here are to separate the front leg and hands from the core of the body yet keep the hips from uncoiling too soon. Engage the swing but keep the hands back and the torso, or top of the body, over the legs. Do not transfer your weight entirely onto or over the front leg, which leaves no foundation for uncoiling or rotating.
2. As you engage and continue the swing—with the left arm and left side leading—keep the barrel of the bat trailing behind the hands.
3. Swing where the pitch will be, not where you see it. Calculate the pitch's break and adjust your swing. (Recognizing what type of breaking ball and how much it breaks is information you should gather while waiting on deck and watching the pitcher warm up.) If the pitch appears to be thigh-high, it will probably cross the plate around your knees. Adjust to the break or you'll swing over the pitch.



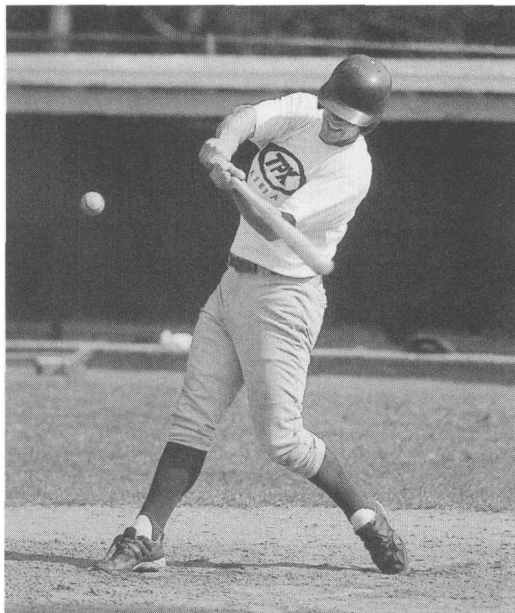
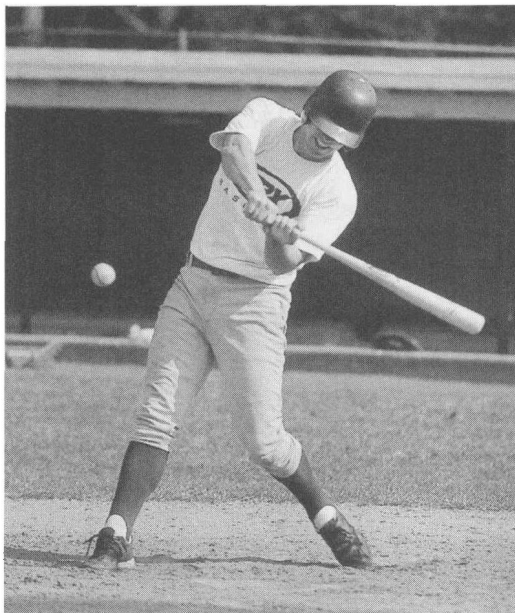
It's important to keep the hands back when a curveball is thrown. When you're behind in the count, look to hit the ball to the opposite field by minimizing hip rotation and letting the ball travel deeper into the hitting zone.

4. Shorten your swing. The shorter the swing the longer you can wait to commit your hands. Long swings must be initiated as the pitch is released. You have to decide the location of your swing as soon as you see the ball. Shorten your swing and you'll increase the time you have to see the pitch.
5. Look to hit the ball to the opposite field. Because of the decreased velocity, hitters often try to pull breaking pitches, thereby making contact too far out in front of the plate and producing weak ground balls to the pull side or infield pop-ups. Telling yourself to hit the ball to the opposite field will keep you on the ball longer, lock your front shoulder in, and allow you to hit breaking pitches with authority.
6. Imagine a hitting area—a large horizontal oval—just above and to the opposite field-side of the pitcher's head and picture hitting a line drive right into that target area, which will keep you from over-rotating and promote a flat but slightly ascending swing plane.
7. Hold the hands in a right-hand palm up, left-hand palm down position (for right-handed batters) until the knob of the bat passes by the belly button and reaches the heel of the front foot. Make bat/ball contact with the palm up, palm down hand position. After the ball leaves the bat roll the right hand over and finish with a full extension of both arms.

Your belly button, or midpoint of the torso, points toward center field or right-center field upon completion of the follow-through. Brace your weight on the entire front foot but do not fully rotate the toe open as required when "turning on a pitch," that is, when fully rotating on a pitch located over the middle or inside part of the plate.

Keep your lower body "quieter," that is, do not rotate explosively. Maintain a vigorous athletic movement, but not so fast that you upset your timing and thus bring your backside and top hand into the hitting area so quickly that you pull or hook the ball.

One strategic note: If it's early in an at-bat, or you're ahead in the count, don't swing at any breaking balls (unless they're hangers). You'll find that pitchers frequently miss the strike zone with curveballs, because it's not just a hard pitch to hit, it's a hard pitch to consistently throw for strikes. Besides, why swing at a pitch you struggle with unless you have to?



On breaking balls thrown below the belt (left), keep your hands back and quiet your hips. Don't try to do too much with the pitch. Hanging curveballs (right), however, should be attacked and driven for power. Notice how the hips have fired, that is, fully opened, allowing the barrel to make contact out in front of home plate.

DRILL

You can practice hitting curveballs very effectively by using Wiffle balls. Have someone pitch from about 25 feet. To make a Wiffle ball curve, place your index and middle finger along the equator that divides the solid hemisphere and the perforated hemisphere, thumb underneath. Deliver the throw from an overhand or three-quarter-release point. It will break down and away. Take 50 swings in five sets of 10. Your goal is to hit 9 of every 10 curveballs correctly—solid line drives to the opposite field or back through the pitcher's box.

HITTING BREAKING BALLS

Major league third baseman Scott Rolen believes that:

"The most important element to hitting a breaking ball is letting it get to you. It's much easier said than done. You hear people all the time saying, "Stay back,

stay back," but it's difficult to do if you're looking at a fastball. The bottom line is it's not that easy to hit a breaking ball. You can put yourself in a position to hit a breaking ball as best you can, and I do that by looking for a fastball on the outer half of the plate. If I look for a fastball in, I'm going to be too quick to open up and won't be able to wait long enough for an off-speed pitch. I look for a pitch away because you naturally have to wait longer on a pitch away.

"The other key is that I try to make the breaking ball be up to hit it. Breaking balls down and away, you're not supposed to hit those pitches. Those are pitcher's pitches. The idea is not to swing at them. Attack the breaking balls that are up, ones that are hanging a little bit, ones that are more middle-in. The ones down and away you should leave. If you have two strikes, you have to try to do something. Maybe spoil the pitch by fouling it off, but unless you have two strikes on you leave that pitch alone."