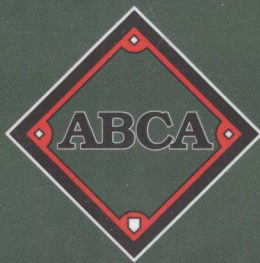
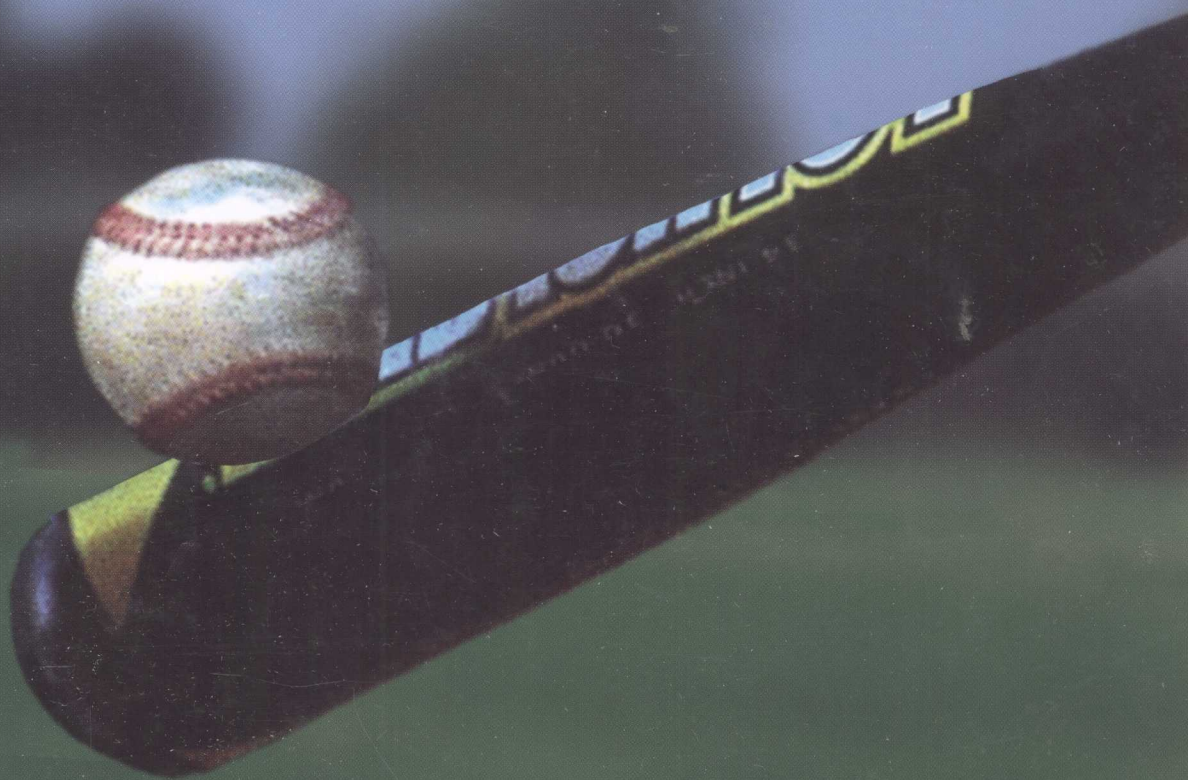


BASEBALL Skills & Drills



American Baseball Coaches Association

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American Baseball Coaches Association



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Introduction

Coaching baseball for more than a half century has provided me a lifetime of lessons and memories. Teaching players of all backgrounds and abilities and seeing them develop to their full potential is one of the most satisfying experiences a coach can have. I certainly learned a lot along the way.

One enduring truth in baseball is that talent alone is no guarantee for success. Yes, so-called natural ability is a bonus for any athlete. But Hall of Famers and today's top players achieved greatness by combining their physical gifts with proper conditioning and frequent, repeated practicing of the game's essential skills—hitting, baserunning, pitching, catching, fielding, and throwing. Most players who excel take whatever talent they were blessed with and maximize their performance by working harder than their peers to master the fundamentals.

One of my former players at the University of Maine, Mike Bordick, typifies a player whose consistent execution of the basics made him an all-star. As he points out, baseball success doesn't happen by accident.

"I'm a firm believer in preparation, working at basic skills," Bordick said. "For me, that's the fun part. Some people, when they hear work, tend to shy away from it. But I love going down to the batting cage. I love taking ground balls. The most important thing is doing it all the right way." Amen.

Baseball Skills & Drills is for players and coaches who want to do it the right way, taking no shortcuts. The book covers the essential techniques, with three excellent coaches teaching the skills on which they are respected experts.

Offense by Mark Johnson

Defense by Jack Leggett

Pitching and Catching by Pat McMahon

In coordinating this project on behalf of the American Baseball Coaches Association, I had a hand in both selecting and working with these three men. All proved perfect choices, as they produced masterpieces on the development of fundamentals in their respective parts of the book.

Hitting a baseball is often considered the most difficult skill in any sport. Perhaps that is why there are so many approaches to teaching this aspect of the game. Whatever the approach, solid hitting is a result of two things—being quick with the bat and getting a good pitch to hit. Heavy-bat drills can improve quickness, but thousands of good at bats will be required to sharpen a player's sense of the strike zone.

Coach Johnson agrees with the "simpler is better" approach to hitting. His success in developing superb hitters attests to his extensive knowledge, straightforward teaching style, and at-the-plate practice regimen. As a believer in giving hitters lots of quality contact swings in practice, I find Mark's emphasis on doing it right and doing it often to be a sound and positive alternative to the hitting gimmicks that have crept into the modern game.

Behind every pitcher on a winning baseball team is a solid defense. When teams of mine did not make it into postseason play, what most often held them back was a failure to make the

basic plays and double plays in the field. There is no such thing as the routine play. Unless players concentrate and use proper fundamentals on every play, lapses will occur.

Coach Jack Leggett's section on fielding is essential for any player who wants to contribute to his team with his glove and arm. It is filled with instructions and special teaching points on how to handle ground balls, line drives, and fly balls, and then make the correct throw. The many drills and fundamentals presented will enable players to field balls hit right at them, hit to the glove side, or hit to the throwing-arm side more effectively. Coach Leggett covers position-specific skills, relays, double plays, and many other fielding fundamentals.

Over the years, much has been written on pitching. I've read most of it. Nowhere has the topic been covered more succinctly or effectively than by Pat McMahon in chapters 11 through 17 in this book.

Coach McMahon teaches proper pitching technique, which is crucial in protecting the arm from injury. The pitching arm must explode toward the plate in synch with the body, neither too far ahead of it nor lagging behind it. Achieving the correct motion all hinges on being in balance and timing movements accurately through execution.

Effective pitch location is also stressed here, which, as Coach McMahon points out, is more important than pitch speed. Pitchers, especially young, developing pitchers, need to gain a sense of the strike zone and command of the ball to deliver it where they intend.

When Bill Swift arrived on our campus, he was primarily an outfielder who also happened to pitch. Once we convinced him that his future in the game was as a pitcher, he spent endless hours mastering the correct technique and focusing on proper pitch location. His hard work paid off as he led our team to the College World Series, pitched in the Olympics, and was a 20-game winner in the major leagues.

Baseball Skills & Drills is both a valuable learning tool for players and a teaching guide for coaches. The material in this book is not only authoritative from a technique instruction standpoint—it works! The success of the three coaches who wrote this book attests to the application of the content on the field. Make use of it in every practice session from now on and see the results.

John Winkin

Key to Diagrams



Fielder throwing the ball initially to begin the play



Relay man or cutoff man



Flight of the ball



Call man (calls where the ball should go)



Run path



Tackle dummy

P

Pitcher

C

Catcher

CH

Coach

SS

Shortstop

1B

First baseman

2B

Second baseman

3B

Third baseman

B

Batter

R

Runner

LF

Left fielder

CF

Center fielder

RF

Right fielder

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Drill

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PART I

Offense

How can you score runs without the help of the other team? To answer that question, you may picture a hitter in the batter's box crushing a "frozen rope." In some cases, that answers the question emphatically, but if you agree with the familiar maxim that "good pitching will beat good hitting," you must realize that the offensive side of baseball encompasses more than just hitting the ball.

Many have said that hitting a baseball may well be the most difficult task in all of athletics. The success ratio certainly bears witness to that statement. Rarely in any sport is 3 out of 10 considered successful, but that ratio is a mark of merit in hitting a baseball. Hitting is a difficult and often confusing task. We ask players to use a round bat to hit a round ball squarely.

Frank Sancet, the legendary former coach at the University of Arizona, once stated that 40 percent of the games a team wins aren't really won by the team—the other team loses them. Simply put, by making costly mistakes opponents will help you win games. But what do you do against a good team that won't help you win? A team like that is the one that shows up in the big games, the playoff games, and, yes, the championship games. The winning team must manufacture their own runs because their opponent plays solid defense and usually has an ace on the mound. Can you score runs with minimal hitting? If you have prepared well and have armed yourself with more than just a slugger, you have a chance.

Part I includes an in-depth discussion of hitting, of course, but it also covers other important areas that contribute to a successful offense. Teams that do not have high team batting averages still win championships! Such teams are usually

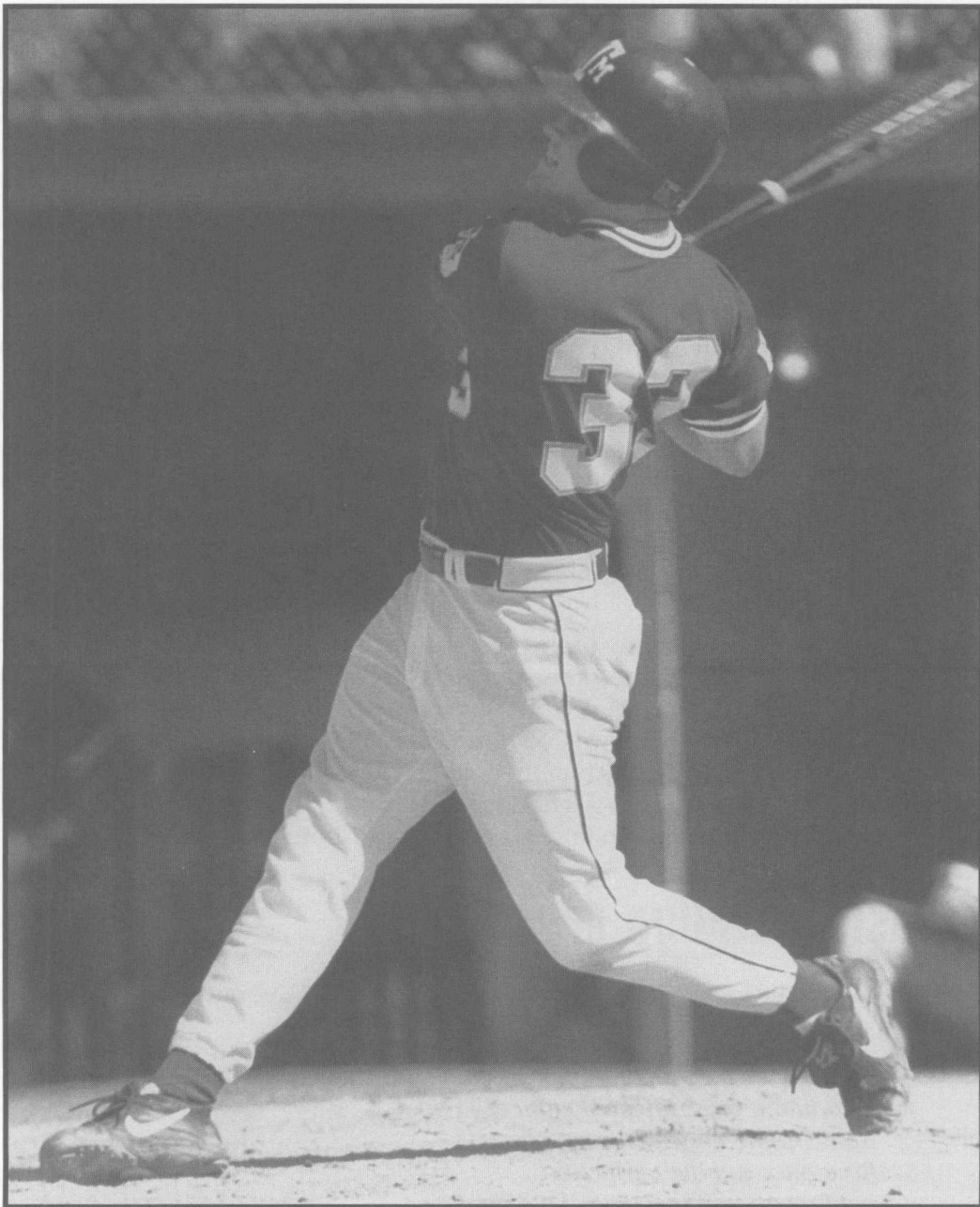
highly skilled at bunting, baserunning, sliding, and situational hitting. The chapters in part I cover skills and drills on all aspects of offensive baseball.

So step up to the plate.

My section of this book is dedicated to all the coaches that have graciously shared their baseball knowledge with me; to my wife, Linda, who has supported my passion for the game and who proofread my section; and to Jason Hutchins who labored over my handwriting and placed my thoughts in typewritten form.

Mark Johnson

Hitting



Courtesy of Texas A & M University

From the day that the baseball diamond was conceived and balls and bats were first gathered at the ballpark, the excitement and allure of hitting a baseball has been the central issue. The highlight of most practices and games for the individual player is usually associated with his turn at bat. The ground ball scooped and thrown to nip a runner at first, the fly ball snatched from going over the fence, the dust-churning slide safely into second, the curveball that catches the outside corner for strike three—these will almost always play second fiddle to the player's turn at bat. Ballplayers say it at practice every day: "Wait! Give me one more cut."

The art of hitting has been discussed, debated, practiced, filmed, studied, and analyzed since the game began. Rarely will you find two people who completely agree on all facets of hitting. Some fundamental conclusions, however, can give us a firm starting place for discussion:

1. If your hitting philosophies, ideas, and thoughts are based on sound mechanics, can accommodate individual idiosyncrasies, and if you believe in them, and can teach and sell them to your players, your ideas will have a good chance of working.

2. The better you are at teaching, the better your philosophy will work. It is not enough to have a sound idea of how to hit if you can't teach it to your players. This is indeed what separates the outstanding hitting instructor from the ineffective one. Knowledge is not enough. If you do not have a teaching method, the patience to teach, and the adaptability to work with every person individually to meet his needs, it will be difficult to reach and teach your players. This is one secret of being a good coach—reaching the players.

3. The better the hitter or athlete is, the better your philosophy will work. You may well have a sound philosophy, but you may not have a talented athlete to instruct. Although intangibles and exceptions can cloud the picture, most outstanding hitters have some special gifts and talents that allow them to succeed at this difficult task. A wise coach once said, "Leave the gifted, successful hitters alone. The ones you can help the most are the average talented hitters. You can make them good."

4. Remember that many of the best hitters ever to grace a ballpark were not and are not always solid in their mechanics. They simply had or have special talent to hit with what are perceived to be flaws for the normal hitter. But what they do works for them. What can we conclude? Simply that it is not always a good idea to base your instruction of hitting mechanics on a major leaguer who uses a hitch in his swing, wraps the bat as his hands move up, yet hits .300 and gets a 40-ounce bat through the hitting zone to knock a 93-mile-per-hour fastball 400 feet!

BASIC TEACHING APPROACH

The legendary former baseball coach at Clemson University, Bill Wilhelm, shares a poem that makes a lot of sense.

*There once was a .400 hitter named Krantz,
who had a most unusual stance.
But with the coaches' correction
his stance is now perfection,
but he can't hit the seat of his pants.*

Not all hitters hit alike—that would make it too easy! That’s why they call hitting an art. The coach must be willing to let the hitter find his swing. A swing is like a signature. A person signs his name using the basic rudiments of the alphabet, but he uses his own unique handwriting. Each hitter has distinctive talents, gifts, and idiosyncrasies. The issue for improvement is to realize and identify the hitter’s personal strengths and talents and, without restricting those areas, increase his competency.

One of the great authors of our time, Alex Haley, has a saying that he considers important: “Find the good and praise it.” Perhaps we could add another phrase: “Find the good, praise it, and *build on it*.” Praise is the foundation for improvement for all of us, certainly in hitting. It is proven every day that more success is attained because of praise and encouragement than by criticism and negativism.

Not only can we “find the good, praise it, and build on it” we can develop, enhance, and enlarge a hitter’s self-image. All of us limit ourselves by setting boundaries about who we think we are and what we can achieve. As coaches, we have a unique opportunity to enhance a person’s self-image by encouraging each player to believe he can achieve at a higher level. Self-image is critical in all phases of development and improvement. If a player feels good about himself, he will achieve at a higher rate. People who do not feel good about themselves rarely accomplish great things. Helping others feel good about themselves is part of parenting, teaching, and coaching. It is part of helping others to rise to the next level.

Perhaps the most important skill in coaching is to be able to teach with a variety of terminologies that can establish a positive mental picture, or proper visualization. If a hitter cannot picture in his mind the mechanics you are teaching, he will not be able to produce the intended results. Not all hitters will respond with the same visual mental picture to a simple comment. Telling a hitter who is dipping his back shoulder to “stay tall on the back side” may mean absolutely nothing. He simply cannot picture it. But asking him to keep his front shoulder lower than his back shoulder may give him the intended result. Physical skills require mental pictures. The mind must see to achieve. The body will respond to the mind’s picture. If the picture is a result of a negative instruction, the outcome will usually be negative. For example, the instruction “Don’t drop your back shoulder” will usually produce a dropped back shoulder because that is the picture. Teach with positive mental pictures and your results will have a better chance of reaching fruition.

GENERAL HITTING PHILOSOPHY

An old farmer once said to a lost motorist who happened upon his farmhouse, “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” Players too often learn hitting techniques without understanding the results they wish to accomplish. Does the hitter want to try to hit home runs all the time? Does he want to take a lot of pitches? Does he just want to hit the ball to the opposite side? If a player is to be a successful hitter, he must have a philosophy.

A solid hitting philosophy includes five basic elements:

1. The longer the hitter can wait, the better hitter he will be.

2. Line drives and ground balls win games.
3. The hitter should have a plan at the plate.
4. The hitter should understand the three Ps—patience, persistence, and poise.
5. Drills and fundamentals are important.

The Longer the Hitter Can Wait, the Better Hitter He Will Be

This statement refers to the hitter's ability to identify the pitch and location before committing to a forward movement of his swing. Research indicates it takes an 80-mile-per-hour pitch approximately four-tenths of a second to travel to home plate. Research also tells us that the hitter requires two-tenths of a second to read the pitch properly. Thus the hitter has two-tenths of a second to deliver the blow to the ball with the bat. Herein lies the centerpiece, the core, the pure essence, of hitting. Most of the problems in hitting a baseball are caused by starting the swing too early, before getting a good read on the ball. Hitters who start too early are fooled on curveballs, change-ups, and pitch location. Their timing is off on the swing.

If we agree that the early start is the initial culprit of most problems in hitting, then why don't hitters wait longer to initiate the forward movement of the swing? There are probably hundreds of reasons why this occurs. Here are a few worth mentioning. (It may be worth noting that this inquiry approach may be a good teaching method: here is the objective, here is the problem. Before correcting a problem, let's find out why we have the problem. This method gives us a better chance to solve the puzzle.)

1. The hitter has flaws in his swing and requires more than two-tenths of a second to get the bat to the ball.
2. The hitter is not strong enough or quick enough to get the bat to the ball in the allotted time for success. Perhaps the bat is too heavy.
3. The hitter believes the age-old misconception that has tempted every hitter: if I take a long, hard, powerful swing at the ball, it will go farther, perhaps even over the fence. Every hitter would like to hit home runs. In an attempt to do so, he creates a long swing that requires an early start.
4. The hitter brings anxiety to the plate, which creates poor focus. He is not playing in the now, in the moment. He brings garbage to the plate. His concentration is poor, and he doesn't properly pick up the ball as the pitcher releases it. He starts early.
5. The hitter lacks confidence in his ability to hit. He simply does not trust his stuff. He starts early.
6. The hitter tries to guess every pitch rather than read the pitch. This is a dangerous trap because the hitter will eventually reach a level of play in which the pitcher's arsenal is so varied that he will be unable to guess correctly. Because most hitters guess fastballs or pitches in, they start early.
7. The hitter refuses to get beat on the inside fastball; thus his approach to the swing starts early so that he can get the bat head out in front to meet the inside pitch. Getting beat inside with the bat means a possible broken bat, a weak ground ball, or what is referred to as "bees,"—a sting of the hands. Although the results are

not as damaging with the aluminum bat, the desire to win the battle inside continues. This has always been the contest, and it always will be. For most hitters, proper contact on the inside pitch will produce a harder hit ball, which increases the chance for a home run. The striving for a home run creeps back in! Most hitters do not have opposite-side power; thus they must sit on the inside pitch. The origin of this problem is twofold: a hitter has a major goal of hitting home runs, and his ego, his manliness, will take precedence over using proper hitting style. Simply put, making outs or poor contact on pitches away from him does not bother him nearly as much as getting jammed and beat on an inside pitch. To be a good hitter, this thinking must be addressed and adjusted because most outs and most pitches occur on the outer half of the plate. Players must move their competitive nature to the next level and learn to play smart baseball.

Other reasons could be the cause for the early start, but those just listed are the most common. Solid observation of the good hitters, the major-league hitters, shows many more late swings or foul balls to the opposite side than early swings or foul balls to the pull side. At lower levels of expertise, we observe the opposite result.

If we are to accept the philosophy that the longer the hitter can wait, the better the hitter he will be, then proper adjustments—physically, emotionally, and mentally—must occur. The hitter must develop a short, compact stroke. He must keep his power base intact throughout the swing. This means that the ankles and knees do not travel beyond his feet as he shifts back and transfers forward. He must adhere to the rule of transferring his weight from back to middle, not from back to front.

Line Drives and Ground Balls Win Games

Year-in and year-out, a larger percentage of games will be won by the team with the highest on-base average rather than the team with the highest slugging percentage. Another truism is that a swing that produces line drives and ground balls takes less time than one that hits fly balls. This correlates with our first premise: the hitter must find a swing that does not require an early start.

Many studies have been conducted concerning productivity of ground balls, fly balls, and line drives. Most studies at the NCAA Division I level conclude:

1. For every 10 ground balls hit, 3 will fall in for base hits. On-base average results are 42 percent.
2. For every 10 line drives hit, 8 will fall in for base hits. On-base average results are 84 percent.
3. For every 10 fly balls hit (including all home runs), 2 will fall in for base hits. On-base average results are 29 percent.

Keep in mind that these statistics are for top amateur baseball players playing against highly skilled defenses on playing surfaces that are usually better than other amateur fields. We could certainly argue that batting averages and on-base averages would increase with less-skilled defenses or poorly manicured fields. More base hits would occur on fly balls, but the increase for ground balls and line drives would be even greater. It is simply easier to catch a fly ball than it is to stop a ground ball, throw it accurately to a base, and have a teammate catch it.