

Baseball Tip of the Week Archives..Pitching, Hitting, Fielding, Coaching

Take What the Defense Gives You

There are a lot of offensive situations, throughout the game, where the defense almost gives away base hits. For example, a man on 1st base and less than 2 outs; the 1st baseman is holding the runner on and the 2nd baseman is at double play depth. In this situation, there is a huge hole on the right side of the infield. Hitters should take advantage of that hole, especially when struggling. You could hit a 20 hop ground ball to the right side and it will still get through for a base hit. Not only do you get a base hit, but you also move the runner to 3rd base.

In this game of baseball, you are not always going to hit the ball to the gap or hit a homerun. When you are going to the plate, know the situation of the game. The situation of the game might be an indicator of how the pitcher will pitch you, as well as how the defense will set up. These little things can make good hitters great ones.

Avoid #9 Leading Off

In a 6 or 7 inning game you don't want to lose any opportunities to score runs; therefore, you need to make the most of each inning. The odds are not as good to put together a productive inning with your #9 hitter leading off an inning.

To avoid this scenario, make sure you don't try to steal with your #9 hitter at the plate with 2 outs, unless you are pretty confident you'll be successful. When your runner gets thrown out for the third out of the inning, the result is your #9 is leading off the next inning and let's be honest, your nine hitter is in that part of the lineup for a reason.

Oh, by the way, if you're thinking about running a hit and run instead, forget about it. The hit and run is not a good call with two outs.

Make the Wood Bat Choice

More and more leagues are moving towards wood bats and dropping the aluminum, in most cases, safety is the main reason. Aside from slower speeds of the bat, wood bats offer a true reading of the type of contact the hitter is making. Anything that doesn't hit the sweet spot will provide immediate feedback in the form of a weak grounder or lazy flyball; where as the aluminum may still produce a double to the gap.

So if your league is not using wood yet, then I recommend using the wood as a training tool. Before the season starts, hit BP and use wood in practice games to develop quicker hands and make more consistent contact on the good part of the bat. Go back to the aluminum after practicing with wood for a while and you'll feel much more confident at the plate.

I know of a local adult league that made the switch to wood and after the first challenging year of lower averages broken bats, the players now adjusted and don't ever want to go back.

Catching - Trouble Seeing?.....Get Lower

I know that there are those fields where it is almost impossible to see the ball coming out of your pitcher's hand. Whether it's the trees in the background, the glare from the sun, or just one of those days, anyone who has ever caught has had that feeling of hopelessness. One little adjustment seems to make a big difference; GET LOWER.

When setting up for the pitch, try to get as low as possible. Sometimes this means taking a little different stance than normal, but if helps to be comfortable and catch the ball, it is well worth it. By setting up a little lower, it creates a better angle on the ball, which in turn helps pick the ball up a little easier.

Catching -- Anticipation Helps Keep the Ball In Front of You- Next time you are watching a big league game, take notice to how few balls actually get by the catcher. As I was catching through high school and college, I remember watching guys like Bob Boone and Mike Scioscia. I don't ever remember seeing a ball get by them in the dirt, but I can picture them blocking balls and how easy they made it look. They were like a wall back there.

Big league catchers might go a game or two without having to block a ball, but they are always ready for it. The main reason they are so good is because they anticipate. Every time they call an off-speed pitch, they are thinking that the ball will be in the dirt. They take into consideration whether it's a right or left-handed pitcher, what pitch they called (slider, curve, split, etc.), and whether the pitcher is trying to strike the batter out or just throw a strike. All of these things help determine where the ball might end up.

To become better at blocking balls in the dirt, you must become better at anticipating. If you expect the ball to be in the dirt, your mind and your body will be ready for it when it happens and therefore, you will react quicker.

Football and Baseball Together- Do you want a fun way to practice catching fly balls and fielding on the run? Play a game of touch football, except with a baseball. Simply set up two teams against each other, with everybody using their glove. The offense sends their guys out for pass patterns and the quarterback (a coach for younger players) passes the baseball to the receivers. Play with a softer, reduced injury baseball for safety.

The kids will also get some great conditioning out of this without even knowing it.

When to throw breaking balls- There is a great debate as to when little leaguers should begin throwing breaking balls. I personally believe pitchers should master two things before they start breaking off curve balls: Spot the fastball and learn a change-up.

Once a young pitcher learns how to work both sides of the plate with his fastball and effectively uses the changeup; it then is time to move on to breaking balls.

If you want a general age bracket or level of baseball to make a decision about throwing curves, then go with the "60 feet, 6 inch" rule. Players do not break anything off until they are at a level of pitching where the full distance to home is used.

Visualize the moment- Did you ever wake up from a dream that seemed so real that your heart was beating fast? Well the mind makes the body do some strange things at times, but with baseball you can use the power of the mind to help improve your swing, make a play, or throw the perfect pitch.

One of the techniques I picked up from playing at the U. of Pittsburgh was to use visualization to improve my game. We would lie down in the outfield grass as a team and the coach would place our minds in a state of relaxation by telling us to smell the grass, feel the sun, hear the sounds around, and then see ourselves at bat or pitching in a situation. He would tell us to envision that perfect swing or perfect pitch, see it in our minds.

The visualization took about 10 minutes each pre-game; but believe me it was well worth it. I started to implement it before innings when I pitched and before at bats when I hit.

Bad Move? Then mix your set..- Often right-handed power pitchers have an awful pickoff move to first base because of their high leg lift needed to generate more velocity for their fastball. Or maybe the pick off move is just not a good one. Well to keep runners from stealing at will, simply change the length of time of the set position. Hold for 3 seconds one pitch and half a second the next pitch or hold the set until someone calls time; just keep mixing it up. Changing how long the pitcher holds the set will help eliminate any opportunity for the runner to get a good jump.

Bunt, Slash, and Steal- A great split-squad game to play during practice is "small ball". Basically, you create two teams and you play a nine inning game of small ball, where the only offensive plays allowed are bunts, slashes, and stealing. Create new signs for each team so the other doesn't cheat and throw a live pitcher on the mound allowing him to only throw fastballs. This is a great game for both the offense and defense. The hitters learn to strategize and produce runs, while the defense learns to properly defend some of the toughest situations in baseball.

Slide the thumb for more movement. - A simple way for pitchers to get more movement on the fastball is to slide the thumb towards the pinky finger. The ball will leave the hand with a slightly different rotation causing it to tail and/or sink. Movement is more important than velocity when it comes to the fastball. Ballplayers at higher levels have no problems throwing straight fastballs. Pitchers should work on different grips on the ball to see which promotes the most action with the best control.

Abdominal Strength is Key- I can't think of any more important part of the body for a baseball player to develop than the abdominal region. Baseball players need to strengthen the trunk area in order to maximize their rotation during the throwing motion and swing. Some common exercises to perform are crunches, Russian twists, and various medicine ball exercises. Ballplayers that implement an abdominal workout into their routines will eventually see positive results in their hitting power and arm strength.

Lead with the hands- All major league hitters lead with their hands to get to the point of contact. Casting the bat will cause a long looping swing which is deadly for a hitter. A simple drill to promote leading with the hands is to stand arms length away from a wall and take a swing with a bat, pulling the hands through first to avoid hitting the wall.

Best pitch in baseball-My father would always tell me, "The best pitch in baseball is a strike". I do believe that, however, a good change up is the most effective. ALL YOUNG PITCHERS need to learn a change up before they start throwing breaking balls. You ask good hitters what the toughest pitch to hit is and most will agree that a good change up is very difficult to adjust to. To learn how to throw a great change up visit the Play Ball Academy website.

Baserunning misconception- Most coaches tell their players to go back to first base on the backside of the bag when going back standing up from a lead. If the player is going back standing then the play shouldn't be close, therefore, tell your players to go back on the inside part of first base. The reason being that any throw to the outfield side of first base will be difficult for the first baseman to get to because the runner will be in the way and he'll need to go around the runner to catch the ball. You'll see a number of wild throws from the opposition put your runners in scoring position.

Make it fun- If you're coaching a little league, high school, or college team, it doesn't matter; make practices fun for your players. Do your hour of drills, situations, etc. but then play a live game, set up some competitions, or play some stickball. There are many ways to work on the skills and have fun in the process.

Unstoppable steal- If you have a slow runner at first base in a first and third situation there is one play that is almost unstoppable with less than two outs. Run a fake suicide squeeze. Your batter squares just before the ball is delivered, the runner on third takes four hard steps to the plate, the bench yells squeeze, and the man on first steals second. The batter intentionally misses the ball, the runner at third retreats back to the bag, and the man stealing, walks into second with a stolen base. Everyone on defense is so concerned about the squeeze play that nobody pays attention to the man stealing. This is a great way to get another runner in scoring position.

Effective bullpen...for hitters- Allow your hitters before the game to stand at home plate while the pitcher is warming up in the bullpen. Have him track the pitches coming in by telling the hitter to say "yes, yes, yes" if the pitcher throws a strike, "yes, yes, no" if the pitch is a ball. He should simulate his swing while doing this. Tracking gives hitters practice on seeing the strike zone; it also allows the pitcher to throw with a batter in the box.