

Train your eyes for better results

"You can't hit what you can't see." You've probably heard this phrase before, but what does it mean? What concrete role does vision have in successful hitting?

Hitting can be broken into four categories: mechanics, making adjustments (to speed and location), vision (seeing and tracking the baseball) and the plan or mental approach that a hitter has for his/her at-bats.

Coaches, typically with beginners, focus on the mechanical aspect of a hitter's approach. While mechanics are critical, the concept of vision, or seeing and tracking the baseball, is an often-neglected technique at the youth level.

The following drills are ideal, when done correctly, for enhancing a hitter's vision and their ability to track the baseball successfully.

Getting started with color

To start, secure two dozen balls. Kids love colors, and many are visual learners -- so feel free to include tennis balls, or even colored-whiffle balls into the mix to vary things up. On twelve of the balls, mark a colored dot with a permanent felt marker. (It's important to make the dot medium-sized -- not too small to complicate the drill, but not so big that the color is too obvious.)

Note: These drills involve front toss, or flipping baseballs, from behind a screen in front of a batter. Consider using a tarp or drape over the screen, as it will not allow the hitter to cheat or see any colored balls before release point.

Simple tracking drill

Flip all the balls in random order, mixing colored balls with regular balls. The object for the hitter in this first sequence is simple: track the baseball from release point of the flip, through the hitting zone, and into the catcher's glove (or back screen). Note: The drill works best when the hitter takes his normal load and stride, using an aggressive mentality.

The hitter must be ready to aggressively hit each pitch, only to pull up and take each pitch at the last minute. This sequence forces hitters to identify colored and regular balls. Emphasis and teaching points include seeing and tracking the ball, regardless of color, as well as utilizing an aggressive load and stride with the intention of hitting and attacking each baseball.

Selective tracking drill

In this sequence the hitter names the color on the baseball as it is tossed; choosing balls with one-syllable colors makes the drill easier. Emphasize that the color must be verbally called out once it is recognized. The hitter remains silent when a regular baseball comes, but should stay aggressive with the load and stride approach.

Hitting the colors

With the balls mixed up, the hitter is now allowed to hit. Instruct the hitter to again verbally call out the colors on balls as soon as they are recognized. However, in this sequence, colored balls may be speed pitches, or possibly balls out of the zone, while regular baseballs can represent good pitches.

By following these three drills young hitters will drastically improve their pitch recognition and increase their ability to find a good pitch to hit -- something even the big leaguers continue to work on.