

THE MENTAL APPROACH: HITTING

HAVE A GOOD APPROACH

This Mental Approach to hitting will vary depending on the age and ability of the players you are coaching.

For many young players, just getting the bat off the shoulder is a difficult task the first year or two they see live pitching. This is usually because of fear or self doubt and is pretty normal when another kid is throwing a ball from the mound for the first time and everyone knows that he has little idea where it will actually end up.

Some ideas to help with younger players (Age 7 - 9):

- ❖ Give them confidence in their swing, build them up physically and mentally with good fundamentals.
- ❖ Give them a team motto: We are a hitting team, we crush strikes.
- ❖ Give them a personal motto when they are up to bat: Yes, Yes, Yes - meaning they are swinging at this pitch.
- ❖ Give them positive feedback: Great Swing, Good at Bat, That's what I want to see - way to swing the bat.
- ❖ Give them a "focus point": Have them step out and rub their hand on the barrel of the bat and say to themselves, "this is where I am going to hit the ball". Step back in and Yes, Yes, Yes.

For older players (Age 10 and older), the pitcher, the pitch count and the situation should start to play a bigger part in the Mental Approach to hitting.

Some ideas to help with older players (Age 10 and older):

- ❖ Use any of the items mentioned above as needed.
- ❖ Set goals that players and teams as a whole can control. Your goals should be for each individual at-bat during the course of a season.
 1. See the ball.
 2. Swing at strikes.
 3. Know what you are trying to do.
 4. Put a good swing on the ball.
- ❖ Have a Good Approach when at bat.

During a practice or game, players will have a lot going on in their heads that has nothing to do with baseball. The days of pure focus on each pitch are not upon us yet and until it is, we as coaches need to help re-focus players at times. One simple term I have used during practice and games that works pretty well in focusing a player is to say, "Have a Good Approach" when they are coming to the plate.

Having a good approach to an at bat is something we talk about frequently, it basically means I want them to try and drive the ball the other way. I will do this against a good pitcher, a slow pitcher, a curveball count or when we have a runner on third base and a ground ball out the other way will probably get the run in.

In theory, if we talk about it and practice it, it should also aid in our fundamental swing. The player will try to wait on a ball, let it get deeper into the zone, see/track the ball better, and not try to pull everything down the line or swing out of their shoes. More times than not, that focus leads to some very solid swings - mission accomplished.

- The pitch count should have a direct impact on each swing you take at the plate.

Certain pitch counts favor the hitter and certain ones favor the pitcher. Just as the smart pitcher takes advantage of the times he is "ahead in the count," the smart hitter understands when he has the advantage.

In these situations, the hitter must capitalize. If you are ahead in the count 1-0, 2-0, 2-1, or 3-1, you should be looking for that "good pitch to hit." Something in your favorite area of the plate that you usually hit hard.

Knowing "your pitch" is crucial in this situation. If you have no idea where in the strike zone you hit best, then you cannot take advantage of the "hitter's count" situations. These are the times when you can really look for "your pitch" and when you get it, take a strong cut at it.

These "hitter's counts" are not only ideal situations to look for a ball in a certain area, but are what are known as "fastball counts." The pitcher does not want to risk throwing another ball and falling further behind in the count. So, you will usually get a fastball in these counts. If you know you are likely to get a fastball, your likelihood for success skyrockets ("hitting is timing".) In addition, on 2-0, 2-1, 3-1 and 3-0 counts, that fastball is going to be "fatter" (thrown more to the center of the strike zone). Because (as earlier stated) the pitcher does not want to give you a base on balls.

This is where batting practice comes into play. Try to take the time to spice up your batting practice by yelling out a count every once in awhile so the batter understands the importance of the count both the advantages of hitting 2 - 0 counts as well as 1 - 2 counts (throw a little curve if league appropriate).

Doing this can help the Mental Approach that each kids takes to the plate.

A good hitter understands the game well enough to adjust his mental approach on each pitch, as the count changes. Nobody is encouraging you to be a "guess hitter," just understand the game and it's tendencies.

- Know the pitcher, this means pay attention when others are batting. What does he throw with 2 strikes, is he working the outside or inside corner, how hard is he throwing - will it affect my usual timing and is he throwing a fastball on the first pitch to every batter.

Pitcher's are instructed from Little League to the Major Leagues (and every stop in between) to get ahead in the count! "First pitch, first strike, first out" is drilled into them from an early age. It stands to reason that most first pitches are going to be "good pitches to hit."

Unless he just walked the preceding batter or the coach gives a player the take sign, be ready to put a great swing on that first fastball like it is a 2 - 0 count.

- Once you have two strikes on you it is imperative that you take a "battling" mind-set.

This is a battle between you and the pitcher. Do not give the at-bat away just because you have 2 strikes. No longer look for Your Pitch. Cut down on your swing, keep your head still, and intensely track the ball the moment it leaves the pitcher's hand. Your goal is to "get a piece of it" if it is anywhere close to the strike zone. If you hit it fair. . . fine. If it's a real tough pitch in a tough location. . . foul it off. The more pitches you make the pitcher throw in these situations, the greater your advantage.

My philosophy has always been "don't let the umpire decide," keep battling. Many a hitter has been called out on a third strike that was "close." Don't risk it. Keep battling. Chances are you will get a better pitch to hit. This is "two strike" hitting, or "protecting the plate," a totally different approach than when you are ahead in the count.