

THE STRIDE: TO THE TOE

PART TWO OF THE TIMING MECHANISM

Timing is the most important component in hitting. An excellent swing poorly timed will likely get no results. By contrast, a poor swing properly timed will likely result in success.

This part of the swing tends to mess up a lot of things. Striding too late, striding too open, striding to closed, striding too long, or not striding enough can all end up in a bad swing or at bat.

The faster the pitcher or at levels where change ups and curveballs come into play, adjustments need to be made in the Stride. No longer can a batter wait for the pitch to be thrown and stride at the ball - there just is not enough time to ARRIVE ON TIME.

Bigger yet, if you stride as you initiate your swing, what happens when a off speed pitch comes? I can tell you, the player gets way out on the front foot and lunges at the ball and looks silly - this usually is followed by a self inflicted head slap of why did I do that.

The batter did this because they were trying to hurry up and stride and swing to catch up to the fast ball they just saw.

Because of the fact that we are only at 46 feet and that kids that play after Little League will face faster and faster pitching, I am working hard this winter and spring on developing an "Early Load and Stride" approach to the timing mechanism of the swing.

I have had good success using this approach with kids that step out of the box because it slows things down for them. They don't have to worry about Striding and Swinging at the same time, they focus on driving the back knee (next section) and hitting the ball.

* In other words, I think it best to get the Load and the Stride out of the way early, before the swing is initiated.

Thus, the Stride becomes Part Two of our Timing Mechanism.

The key points to a good stride:

- Short is sweet. 3-5" is more than sufficient especially with a Stance that starts slightly wider than the shoulders.
- Some players simply pick the foot up and put it right back down. This works well with tall players or contact hitters with wide stances.
- If you are going to do this, add the terminology, "**Stride to the Toe**" or at least ball of the foot. Remember, it is step to the toe, hesitate, then swing, NOT step and swing. They are separate movements. This will be important in the next section as we then drop the heel and start our swing.
- Keep the weight primarily in to the rear leg. This is the "coiled position" or the "keep your weight back" you always hear from coaches. Moving the weight forward to the front leg causes the head to move forward as well. This is bad news for a hitter as you have now lost your "torque" associated with a quick, strong swing. The head should remain in the same location it was in during the load phase - easier with a wider stance.
- Remember this is a timing mechanism, you do not want to do this way early or it is uncomfortable. You do not want it to be way late or you are obviously going to be way late. When to start will depend on the pitcher you are facing. One of the keys is that the Load and Stride to Toe will be out of the way and a player will be able to give himself/herself a bigger margin of error in the swing - especially when it comes to faster pitchers or off speed pitches.

- Some practice will be needed to develop the timing but in essence it should be a relaxed, comfortable, synchronized movement: Load, Stride to Toe, hesitate, Drop the Heel, Drive the Back Knee as you ARRIVE ON TIME.



Once again, the player above is shown Striding to the Toe, hands in Loaded position, weight back and ready to ARRIVE ON TIME (fastball or curve ball).

- The Main Reason to get the Load and Step out of the way early? A hitter needs the time.

Let's look at Little Leaguer's times: For 12 and under teams, the pitcher's mound is 46 feet from the front of the pitching rubber to the rear of home plate. Let's say a pitcher throws a 60mph fastball; 46 divided by 88.1fps = .522 seconds.

Okay, factor in the distance we lose because of the release point of the pitcher, and the 2 ½ feet from the back of home plate to the optimum hitting zone. Let's assume that Little Leaguers don't release the ball as far forward as Major League players and cut that number in half, make it an even 2 ½ feet.

That means we subtract 5 feet from the 46 feet and get 41 feet. Now, 41 feet divided by 60mph equals .465 seconds. Wow, that is only about .04 seconds different from the Major League formula.

Warren Spahn once said, "Hitting is timing, pitching is upsetting timing."

More math, the average human reaction time is 3/4 of a second. That's .750 seconds. What does that mean if a player simply reacts to the ball from the time it is released? That's right, if you are good at math, you figured it out. Go have a seat on the bench, strike three went right on by you before you could even swing.

Hitting is timing. A batter must begin his swing at the same time the pitcher begins his motion. There is an old saying, and I am not sure which hitting instructor first said it, "When the pitcher shows you his pocket, you show him yours." In other words, when the pitcher kicks his front leg up to begin his delivery to the plate, the hitter should begin his "Load" and "Step to the Toe" phases of the swing, preparing the bat for a swing at the ball. If he does not, it is physically impossible to react in time.

Learning how to time your swing to ARRIVE ON TIME is the art of hitting. Understanding your swing, and the rhythm and timing of it, in relation to the pitch speed and location is the essence of hitting.