

Winter Baseball and the Little Things

Winter Baseball? No that does not mean you are hitting snowballs with your Easton. It does mean though that you can do things inside that can help prepare you for the season that will be here soon enough. There are so many little things a young baseball player can do that will help him get better. You will hear sayings in baseball all the time and one of them is, "Baseball is a game of little things." It is all those little things tied together that collectively make you successful on the field of play.

Swing your bat:

Find an area that is clear for this such as your basement or garage and swing your bat. They are referred to as "dry swings". No one is pitching to you but you can still envision a pitcher going through his wind up. You are practicing your swing. When I was in the Texas Rangers Organization I was fortunate enough to see great hitters such as Julio Franco, Juan Gonzales, Ivan Rodriguez and Dean Palmer play. In Pre-Game they would grab their bat and head out on the field. Near our dugout and without a pitcher practice their swing. They would envision the ball away and swing seeing the ball back in their stance and swing driving it to the opposite field. They next would envision the ball middle of the plate and swing to drive it up the middle. Then lastly envision the ball on the inner half of the plate to work on pulling the ball. It is not out of the ordinary to swing your bat and get in 50 to 100 swings a session. This prepares your body for on field work. It loosens up those muscles that you have not used doing baseball things this winter.

The Swing:

Hitting is timing. There is no real substitute to live pitching from a real pitcher. It is the best way to develop your timing as a hitter. Leading up to hitting off of a pitcher, it is important to work on your swing so that you are mechanically sound. Through drills like soft toss a player gets repetition. By practicing the swing over and over again, a hitter works on muscle memory skills. This allow as a hitter to feel confident when stepping into the batter's box to see the ball and put a good swing on it. Young hitters need to focus in the batters box and try not to worry about things other than seeing the ball and putting a good swing on it. If hitters put the work and time into practicing then game time allows a hitter to react versus thinking through every bit of the mechanics of the swing. There are any myriad of thoughts that run through a player head.

1. Stance
2. Load
3. Stride
4. Swing

Parents can work with your young hitter with the following. Remember not every hitter will stand or swing in the same fashion, but you can bet the ranch that they all look the same at point of contact, when the ball meets the bat. The head is down, back foot turned, releasing their hips for good torque, striking the ball level through the strike zone and finishing through the ball after contact.

1. **Stance** - Balanced, legs a little wider than shoulders, bat gripped like a hammer, knocking knuckles lined up, not overly tight grip - you hear the phrase "white knuckling it". Don't squeeze the bat so tight.

2. As the pitcher is in the leg kick, or hands separating, I work with my hitters to get in their **Load** position. This means, their front shoulder turns in, as the pitcher shows his number on his back to you - you show your number to him. Hitters front foot is now on the ball of his foot.

3. **Stride**, as the pitcher is releasing the ball, the hitters hands move slightly back and his front foot moves forward at the same time, . This is referred to as "separation". The hitter is to be 60% weight on back side or foot and 40% on the front side. I still do not know how to ever measure this! The important teaching point to your hitter is to be "back", hands are back and the front foot needs to be "down" on the ground before you start your swing. I teach my pitchers the same principle, of positive traction, two feet on the ground and you get power as a hitter and pitcher. You can't swing with your front foot up in the air or pitch with your lead foot in the air. So get that foot down before you swing. The foot is like reaching out and not a big step where your head is now at another eye level. It is a smooth reaching motion with the front foot staying balanced and the weight is slightly back.

4. **Swing** , the back foot turns, this unlocks the hips and this allow for the power in your legs and torso to get to work. The power is in the lower half in hitting and pitching. So the progression is lower half, shoulder and hands follow and that bat needs to be level through the hitting zone. There will be many schools of thought about swinging down, up or level. I teach my guys to practice swinging down but you will actually swing level giving that ball back spin. I teach my guys to want to hit the ball hard, and “to let the big fly or homerun take care of itself”. I like my guys to hit the ball hard and line drives are rewarded. Balls on a line or ground can make you a tough out. Fly balls are easier outs. Mike Schmidt, Hall of Fame player, hit over 500 big league homers, agrees. That is good enough for me. The finish of the swing, is though the ball with two hands on the bat, the wrist do not roll over until after contact and your hitter should have his head over the ball when he is done. I tell my guys that chin starts on the front shoulder and finishes on the back shoulder.

This is something that has worked for me in my baseball career and what I teach my young hitters today. They have not made the coach or player that knows everything about the game. Earl Weaver, former Hall of Fame Manager of the Baltimore Orioles, used to say when you walk on that field and think you know everything there is about the game, you are done. I only am sharing my experience with you and hope it helps in some small way. Watch hitters in the big leagues, they all like to have a timing mechanism or trigger point. They are timing that pitch. Even if a hitter does not swing at it, they want to time the pitch. Some hitters pick their foot up and put it down, some tap their front foot but they are all working on timing that pitch. You have to find what works for you and stick with it.

One last point, Push Ups - do them, every day, younger boys, start out doing 5 to 10. You will be surprised if you push yourself how you will increase your numbers each day. They are a great way to build up strength. They are free too!

Hope you check back in with Fallston Baseball's Cougar Corner.

Coach Holcomb

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