

Laws on Hitting

The Brain: It Can Help and Hurt Your Hitting

Ever notice when you get into a slump in any athletic endeavor the amount of people are eager to help you? Fall into a 1-for-25 slide in baseball and it seems everyone has a solution for you, from your teammates to your coach to your wife. Your head is pulling out. Your stance is all wrong. Your bat is too heavy. You name it: Everyone's identified the problem. The problem is, of course, that you can do more damage and prolong your slump by taking too much advice. Listening to everyone's suggestions often only clogs the mind. This is when the brain can get in the way of hitting. If the brain is trying to process too much information, the message it finally sends to the body is slowed. And hitting is all about timing and quick reactions. You want that message from the brain to the body to occur instantly. The point is this: When mired in a slump, be wary of taking in too much advice. Don't create an information overload.

Hey, the truth is, everyone goes into a slump. Everyone. Even the great hitters. In baseball, as with any other sport, you have to accept a certain degree of failure. As you've probably heard a million times, the best hitters in the game, the .300 hitters, fail seven out of 10 times. What keeps a great hitter great is his ability to fight through slumps. As I've pointed out before, there often is a mechanical reason for why a hitter isn't hitting well. Maybe he's not starting his swing soon enough. Maybe his top hand has become too dominant. But sometimes slumps occur simply because of your mental approach. You can't be successful at anything unless you first believe you can be successful. Yes, I believe in mind over matter. Your brain can do wonderful things if you let it and convince it to.

Mental approach: Tunnel Vision is Good

One way to assure self-confidence is to always go to the plate with a plan. Have an idea what you're going to try and accomplish in each particular at bat. Are you going try to move the runner from second to third? Are you trying to lift a fly ball to score a runner from third? Focus on your plan. All the hours of batting practice and perfecting your swing are now behind you. It's just you and the pitcher. And know that pitcher. Do your homework. Know your enemy. Have all that information and data processed before you step to the plate. Once you get to plate, clear your mind of any unnecessary thoughts and simply focus on the plan. Sometimes you can avoid slumps or pull yourself out of a slump just by returning to the basics. Wipe out the past and concentrate on the present: This at bat. Forget about the past failures and tell yourself that you will come through in this at bat. You're better the pitcher. Show him.

An excellent way to maintain that focus and block out all possible distractions is to use what I call the tunnel-vision technique. Envision a tunnel between the pitcher's delivery point and the hitting zone. Mentally block out everything else around it. Your mind now will direct all its attention toward this tunnel. Track the ball in this tunnel. Prepare yourself to hit the ball when the pitcher's lead leg touches down and the ball emerges from the tunnel and approaches you. Tunnel vision. The great thing about this approach is it not only eliminates all unwanted distractions, it can also improve your selection regarding which pitches to hit. If you can envision a tunnel that ends right at the strike zone, you probably won't swing at many bad pitches because you've trained your mind not to respond to anything outside that tunnel.

Any pitch that drifts out of the tunnel is ignored. Tunnel vision is a great tool to train your mind to concentrate on the task at hand.

So, have a plan before each at bat. And benefit from tunnel vision. Many slumps occur because hitters lose their focus or get distracted. That's where the expression "beating yourself" derives from. Believe me, there are enough people wanting you to fail (namely your opponents). Don't give them any help.

A Little Cockiness is OK

Sports is as much a battle of egos as it is a battle of physical ability. I've always believed that. A big ego doesn't guarantee you'll perform better than your opponent but understand this: Lack of confidence and self-doubt will beat you every time. If you think the pitcher is better than you, you have virtually no shot at getting a hit. That's why a little cockiness and swagger isn't such a bad thing. Feeling good about yourself often translates into performing well. Of course, don't go overboard. Overconfidence can beat you just as easily as having no confidence. Just tell yourself: Hey, the pitcher's good, but he's not that good.

Seize the moment

Some hitters and some hitting instructors adhere to one of the most befuddling philosophies in baseball: Take that first pitch. I've never understood that thinking. Why take a pitch when it's possible that the pitch might be the best pitch you'll see all week? This is an absolutely silly mental approach that can without a doubt contribute to slumps. If you're a serious baseball fan, you've probably noticed that Wade Boggs always takes that first strike. In other words, unless the pitcher is incredibly wild, Boggs starts many at bats behind in the count and at a disadvantage. Once again, this is a baseball philosophy that complicates hitting rather than simplifies it. It's a little bit analogous to starting with a crazy launch position. Yes, some hitters can start in a crazy launch position and then get their bat back to the proper launch position and still be successful. And yes, Boggs has delivered over 3,000 hits and enjoyed a very successful hitting career in the big leagues. But just think for a minute about how many great pitches Boggs has let go by. How many more hits could he have produced had he been more aggressive?

I prefer to preach aggressiveness at the plate. If you see a strike, if you see a pitch in your tunnel, go after it. Attack. Attack. Attack. Let me give you an example: How would you like it if suddenly the rules of the game were changed and hitters had to start each at bat down one strike in the count? How many hitters do you think would favor that rule change? Hitters would be furious. But that is essentially what you're doing if your mental approach consists of taking that first strike. Being behind in the count, in essence, forfeits some of your power over to the pitcher. Being behind in the count makes you a defensive hitter. Bottom line? If you see a good pitch, hit the damn thing.

Two kinds of slumps

There is more than one kind of slump that hitters endure. Some slumps are simply numbers slumps. Sometimes you can be drilling the ball almost every at bat and have no hits to show for it. Sometimes you can have games in which you hit four line drives and each one happens to be right at a fielder. The next day, you're 0-for-4 in the box score. Does that mean you've started a slump? Of course not. In reality, you're actually in a hitting groove. The tricky part, however, is convincing yourself to ignore the numbers. That's where trust comes in. If you believe in yourself and trust yourself, you will continue with the same mental approach even though the results aren't rewarding. Some hitters, though, can get swayed into believing they need to start making adjustments because those line drives didn't translate into hits. If you hit a line drive, you can claim victory no matter if it's an out or a hit. Hitting a line drive or hitting a ball squarely is your goal. Don't confuse achieving your goals with achieving a particular batting average all the time. Those line drives eventually will find a hole. Don't worry.

The other kind of slump, naturally, is a 0-for-20 type characterized by weak ground outs and pop-ups. Typically, in this kind of slump, your mechanics are out of whack. Your swing is messed up. You're chasing bad balls. Your mental approach is poor. By the time you're 0-for-20, you're suddenly believing you're never going to get another hit. OK, now you're in a real slump that you need to address. Just know the difference.

Success can breed slumps

Believe it or not, sometimes hitters fall into slumps because of success. What happens in this scenario is the hitter becomes so confident in his hitting ability – he may be raking every pitch thrown at him – that he suddenly believes he is invincible. The hitter then starts swinging at balls out of the strike zone. And it doesn't take much imagination to figure out what happens next. Once a hitter starts swinging at balls out of the strike zone, his swing starts to fall apart. This is the type of slump that a hitting instructor should be able to spot quickly. And fix quickly. Be aggressive at the plate and be confident. But be selective. Swing at strikes. Remember: You can't put a good swing on a bad ball.

Be wary of too much advice

As I mentioned before, often times when you fall into a slump, you will start getting advice from every direction. Your hitting coach. Your teammates. Your relatives. Everyone suddenly has the answer. Well, the truth is, no, they don't. Take advice only from those you trust, which, in theory, should be a short list starting with your hitting instructor. And hitting instructors, as I've warned before, don't obsess or nit-pick your hitters during slumps. Look for simple solutions. Don't overload the hitter with so much data to process that he starts to think too much during a slump about his mechanics. Quite often there are easy mechanical answers, such as starting the swing sooner. Or being more selective (swinging at strikes). And hitters should look within themselves for simple solutions, too. Block out all the ridiculous advice you may get from uninformed sources. Trust in yourself and your hitting instructor. The two of you should know the subject matter. So just identify the problem, mental or mechanical, and seek the simplest solution.

Slump busters

Once you've identified the problem, you're going to need help from your brain to break out of a slump. You're going to have to convince yourself mentally that you can succeed again. What I tell students and my hitters is that they need to accept a certain amount of failure. During the course of a season, failure is inevitable. So go easy on yourself. Accept some failure. After all, seasons are long affairs. They are marathons, not sprints. In the major leagues, you will get close to 650 at bats. During that span, you will slump. If you've convinced yourself of that reality, you've got a much better chance of breaking free from slumps. Accepting some degree of failure is step No. 1.

Baby steps

Step No. 2 may appear like something right out of a self-help book, but it has merit in baseball: Take baby steps. What I mean by that is when you're trying to break out of slumps, seek small rewards at the beginning. Go into a game with a modest goal such as "Today, I want to hit one ball right on the screws. If I can do that, I'm going to be happy and sleep well." After a few games, you may tell yourself that you want to hit two balls hard. What this does is promote confidence. Slowly, as you continue to reach your modest goals each night, you begin to believe in yourself again. You are basically training your brain to think positively again. Instead of the negative thoughts that most likely were inherent during your slump, you begin to think you're capable of succeeding again.

Another element to remember about slumps is that as painful as they are to endure, they do make you stronger. The adage that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger is true. Being able to fight through slumps makes you a better overall hitter. It matures you. It prepares you for future potholes, future slumps. Once you get through one slump, you can always tell yourself you can get through another.

Situational hitting

We now turn to the other aspect of a hitter's mental approach to the game: Situational hitting. Not all of hitting calls for line drives to the gaps or three-run homers, though, as a hitter, you certainly wouldn't turn those down. But some situations in baseball call for a different mental approach depending on where the runners are on base and how many outs there are. There are situations when grounding out to the second baseman is certainly OK, especially if it advances a runner from second to third and there are still less than two outs.

The two most common forms of situational hitting come up when there is a runner on second base with no one out, and when there is a runner on third and less than two outs. In the first situation, naturally the hitter wants to get that runner to third anyway he can so the next hitter can possibly drive the runner in with simply a fly out. Does that mean the hitter should purposely swing weakly? No, because a base hit will not only get that runner to third, but it could also score him. But what we don't want is a two-hopper to the third baseman or a routine grounder to deep short that doesn't move the runner off second base. That is a wasted at bat. And that is called losing baseball. It is also selfish baseball and you see a lot more of it in baseball today than you did years ago.

So how does the hitter get himself in the proper mental approach to advance the runner from second to third? Use that tunnel-vision approach we have discussed previously. You're looking for a pitch in a specific location – on the outer half of the plate. You want a pitch there because you're going to attempt to drive the ball in a direction that will allow the runner to advance. That direction should be anywhere from the left of where the shortstop is positioned, not necessarily just to the right of second base, as you probably were taught at an early age. If you hit a ground ball to the left of the shortstop, the runner on second should still be able to advance. And don't necessarily assume you have to have a ground ball. If you put a good swing on the ball and drive it to the outfield in our specified direction, the runner still should be able to tag up and advance. You're still accomplishing your mission even with a fly out.

Back off the plate

What should you do mechanically to drive the ball toward this specified area? Naturally, you'll want to release your bat slightly later than normal (delay your start) to avoid pulling the ball. But you also need to take into account the pitcher's motives at this point. The pitcher obviously is going to make your objective challenging by trying to pitch you inside. He will likely pound you pitch after pitch inside. How do you combat his tactics? Simply back off the plate with your stance. A few inches should suffice. This should give you the room you need to direct those inside pitches toward the specified area.

Getting that runner home

The other most common type of situational hitting occurs when there is a runner on third and less than two outs. Chances are, in a tight game, the infield is drawn in, hoping to make a play at the plate on any ground ball. As a hitter, you're now being called upon to drive a fly ball deep enough to allow the runner to tag up at third and score. To me, the best place to drive a fly ball is from left-center field to the right-field line. Once again, you'll want to release the bat a little later so you direct the ball to the specified area. You're also going to want to hit slightly under the ball so you achieve some altitude, but not so dramatically that you collapse your swing. Just a slight uppercut. You're aiming to hit the ball somewhere between about 4 o'clock to 8 o'clock on the "watch dial" of the baseball. Hitting the ball there will provide the necessary altitude you need to get that ball to the outfield deep enough to accomplish the mission.

Why would anyone switch hit?

I want to close this chapter on the mental approach to hitting with a discussion on the theory of switch-hitting. The longer I've been around baseball and the more I have studied the concepts of hitting, the more I have questioned the basic theory behind switch-hitting. In fact, I have reached the point where I don't see the value of switch-hitting at all.

Think about this: Every switch-hitter who has ever played the game always has had a stronger, natural side of the plate from which he hits. Why would anyone purposely waste any at bats from their weaker side? Yes, yes, I know all the old-school theories on the value of switch-hitting: It is always better to have a breaking ball come toward you than move away from you, for vision purposes. And yes, it has been believed for years that it is far better to have right-handed hitters match up against left-handed pitchers (at least for offensive strategy) and vice versa. But the game is changing. And it has changed, thanks to the Lau System of Hitting. Statistics will bear out that hitters using the Lau method can hit right-handed or left-handed pitchers equally as well. This not only eliminates that whole righty vs. lefty maneuvering that managers love to overmanage with late in games, it eliminates the very premise of switch-hitting.

Let me explain it another way: The reason switch-hitting really became popular in the '40s, '50s, and '60s was because the primary school of hitting was the pull school of hitting, the Ted Williams pull school of hitting. Almost every hitter in the game was taught to be a dead-pull hitter. Of course, it's a little tough to be terribly successful as a pull hitter against intelligent pitchers who are running curve balls away from you. As we have explained previously, when a pull hitter attempts to hit a curve ball away from him, the result is usually a weak ground ball. This is why switch-hitting rose in popularity. The dead-pull hitters found they could be more successful if they always had that curve ball coming toward them rather than moving away. So they switched sides of the plate. And even by hitting with their "weaker" side of the plate, they improved their overall average slightly. But we no longer are shackled by just one school of hitting. We no longer are restricted by dead pull hitting. In the Lau System of Hitting, hitters can cover the entire plate no matter what direction the pitch is heading.

To further illustrate my point, let me ask you this: Who was the last switch-hitter to flirt with hitting .400? Yet George Brett has. Larry Walker has. Tony Gwynn has. None of these great hitters are switch-hitters. And all three use the Lau System of Hitting. It makes little difference to any of those hitters whether they are facing a lefty or a righty because they have or had the ability to cover the entire plate. Here's a more recent example. Chipper Jones, one of the more well-known switch-hitters today, is far better from his dominant side, his left side.

From the left side, he hits .320 with 25 to 30 homers a year. From the right side, he hits about .220 with homers. So why does he continue to switch hit? Only he can tell you. Another example is Royals rookie of the year Carlos Beltran, who in 1999 hit .300 with 15 home runs and 88 RBIs from his dominant left side, but hit only .265 with two home runs and 20 RBIs from his right side.

It seems to me that switch-hitting is yet another old-school philosophy that needs to be put on a shelf, right next to back-foot hitting and rolling the wrists over.