

Avoiding The Inside Pitch



More often than not, a young hitter's lack of success at the plate can be directly attributed to his fear of being hit by a pitched ball. Let's face it, in the Little League Majors Division, a big 12 year old can throw the ball extremely hard from 46 feet. This can lead to intimidation, a very real fear of being hurt and a lot of weak swings that result in strike outs!! The diminishing confidence that follows continued failure in front of the coach, teammates, friends, Mom, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa can only hurt the player's next appearance at the plate. All this from being afraid of the ball.

A good coach knows that this spiraling effect needs to be curbed right at the beginning. A good approach is to immediately demonstrate the proper way to avoid being hit by a pitch. The knowledge of the proper technique can do wonders for a player's self esteem, not to mention his playing ability. Confidence is one of the key factors in a successful at-bat. If a player confidently approaches the plate looking for a pitch to hit instead of being hit by a pitch, he has already increased his chances by leaps and bounds.

With this in mind, take the time to learn the proper technique of Avoiding The Inside Pitch. It will make you a better hitter! My preferred method of teaching this technique is to use the softer IncrediBalls made by Easton . With these balls the coach can actually "plunk" the batter a few times without injuring him. It is important for the player to be hit a few times in order to accept the fact (psychologically as well as physically) that :



- 1.) It doesn't hurt that bad.
- 2.) The pain does go away.
- 3.) The proper technique allows for even less pain

Have the player enter the Batter's Box. Stand a few feet away from the player with an IncrediBall (or other soft ball) and hold the ball up. Walk the ball to the plate on an inside path toward the batter. This will give the player a good visual picture of the pitch he wants to avoid. The "walking" of the pitch effectively slows down the action enough to instruct the player in the proper steps to avoid the pitch safely. As the ball is nearing the plate have the player verbally alert you the moment it is apparent the ball is going to be too close to him to be a strike and a pitch he wants to avoid. You can use the command: "NOW!" The coach should stop at this point. Instruct the player to do the following:



- 1.) Immediately turn his upperbody (from the waist up) away from the pitch.
- 2.) The head and shoulders act as one unit turning away.
- 3.) The shoulder nearest the ball should rise up a little to protect the face.
- 4.) The elbows drop in close to the sides to protect the ribs.
- 5.) The chin dips down to the chest to protect the neck from a direct impact.
- 6.) The bat lowers directly in front of the players upper body.

All of the above actions take place in one simultaneous motion as the player is rotating away from the pitch.

Now, continue walking the ball toward the hitter and show him how protected he is while in this position. Walk the player through this sequence a few times until they feel comfortable with the maneuver. Once they tell you they are ready to move to the next step then proceed with the following drill.



DRILL

Kneel about 20 feet from the player. With an IncrediBall (or other soft ball) begin softly tossing the ball into the strike zone. Let the player know before hand that he may be hit by a pitch, albeit a soft one. Instruct him to turn away from the pitch, in the manner he has been taught, the moment he identifies the pitch as being one that may hit him. Conversely, have the player yell out "NOW!" when he recognizes the pitch as being a strike (this is a great tactic to help a player recognize a pitch he can hit). Throw a few soft strikes and then progressively move the pitches closer and closer to the player until you finally strike him (aim for the buttocks).

Praise the player for every pitch he properly turns away from (or properly calls a strike - purposefully throw a few outside pitches to see if he

mislabeled them as strikes).

If at any time during the instruction the player reverts to the age old "jumping back with the hands in the air" technique of avoiding a pitch, immediately stop and have the player freeze in that awkward position. Then walk the pitch up to him and show him how vulnerable he is to injury in that position.

Continue with the drill until you see the player begin to naturally turn away from every pitch that is questionably inside. Repeat the drill periodically, even when you know the player is completely comfortable with the technique. I guarantee you will see a tremendous increase in the player's confidence and performance as he masters this very important fundamental skill.



BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION



When it come to developing a good stance, there are two very important factors that need to be expressed. The purpose of the stance is to afford you the best opportunity to see the ball. Secondly, to have enough balance so that you can take a mighty swing at the ball, giving you the best opportunity to hit the ball hard somewhere. The two actually go hand in hand. That is, if you are in good balance then there will be less of a chance that you are moving your head around during your swing. If you are not moving your head, then you will see the ball better and naturally have greater success hitting the ball. Having said that, that's not the see we are talking about just yet. Head movement, and its effect on your success as a hitter will be discussed in detail later.

THE GRIP

IT STARTS WITH THE HANDS



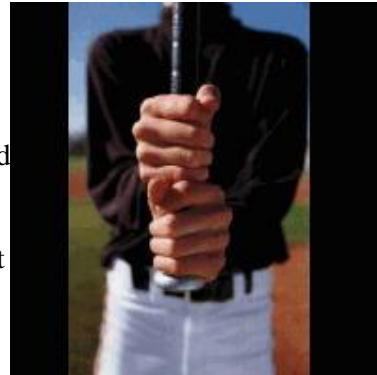
The hands are the one and only physical link to the bat. You don't hold it with your arms, your shoulders, your legs, feet or your mind. The only body part which touches the bat is your hands. You may use those other body parts to swing the bat properly, but your hands are the only physical connection to the bat.

It stands to reason then, that if you intend to develop yourself into a good hitter, that you start with a fundamentally sound grip on the bat. One that will allow your other body parts, once they are introduced, to work properly and efficiently with your hands to produce a powerful, effective, controlled and repeatable swing.

A good grip is one where the handle of the bat is held primarily in the fingers of the hand. To do this, lay the handle of the bat across the lower base of the fingers of each hand. Then, simply close your hands around the handle.

Do not squeeze the bat. Hold it lightly in your fingers. Pretend as though you are holding a small bird in your hands. You want to hold the bird firmly enough to prevent it from flying away, yet not so tightly that you harm the bird.

A light grip such as this keeps the muscles of the hands, wrists and forearms loose and prepared for action. Loose muscles are fast muscles. You might think that by squeezing the sawdust out of the bat, gritting your teeth and flexing your arm muscles, you are prepared to hit even a Nolan Ryan fast ball. In actuality, the reverse is true. Tight muscles are slow. The tightness inhibits other muscles, that you don't even realize you are using, from helping you during the swing. Have you ever watched a Major League hitter lightly grip and re-grip the bat as he waited for the pitch? He is unconsciously reminding himself to keep a loose grip.



Here is a great example of loose muscles being faster and more powerful: The next time you happen to be watching a boxing match on television listen to the announcers early in the fight. Inevitably they will comment on the boxers being "tight," that they aren't quite loose enough yet to "get off first." This is especially true during championship bouts because the fighters probably are a little more tense. Tension and tightness slows the muscles down. As the fight wears on and the fighters have adjusted to the moment, they begin firing punches with incredible speed and power. The tremendous quickness you see is the result of the muscles being more relaxed and ready to respond to the commands their brain is sending to them. Lesson number one: Loose muscles are fast muscles. Take a light but firm grip with the bat in the fingers of the hands.

The easiest way to ensure that you are keeping the bat up in the fingers is to rotate your hands so that the second row of knuckles on each hand line up with each other.

Never hold the bat back in the palms of the hands! Holding the bat in this manner inhibits the flexion of the wrists during the swing and robs you of natural quickness and power. Holding the bat in the palms can also be very painful. I have seen many batters, of all levels, strike the ball while holding the bat incorrectly and receive a terrible bruise near the web of the top hand. These bruises seem to linger with hitters for several days or even weeks. Believe me, it only takes one of these bruises to make a believer out of you about the importance of holding the bat in the fingers.



If you are uncomfortable with aligning your knuckles as described earlier, try rotating the hands until the second and third knuckles line up with each other. This is known as a "box grip" and is used by quite a few Major League players. Either

way, it is important to be comfortable. So, pick the one that feels the best for your size and shape of hand and stick with it.

Both ways may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but it is important that you pick the one most suitable for you and practice it over and over. Soon it will become second nature to hold it in your fingers automatically. When that happens, you will have laid the foundation for all of the other parts of the swing to work effectively.

The grip is the first of the three, what I call, essential fundamentals you will need to master if you want to become a good hitter. Remember, the hands are the only body part connected to the bat. The bat is the only thing you have to contact the ball. Get this most basic of fundamentals down so that it is an unconscious act, something you don't have to give any thought to whatsoever.

Some of the great hitters in Major League history were said to have carried their bats around everywhere they went. Just to carry it, to get used to feeling it in their hands, to grip it, to feel it's weight, to feel comfortable with it. You can do the same.

The great thing about practicing the grip, is that you don't have to be anywhere near a ballpark to do it. You don't need any extra space. All you need is a bat. You can practice your proper grip while watching your favorite program. Or even better, while watching a baseball game on television. If you do watch a game, you can take advantage of the opportunity to study how Major League hitters are holding their bats. Pay attention to how loose their grips are. You can learn a lot if you know what you are looking for.

Remember; loose, comfortable and up in the fingers.



THE THREE STANCES AND VISION

As it relates to your stance, seeing the ball better means how you initially stand in the batter's



box to look out at the pitcher. There are basically three different types of stance. The **neutral stance** is one where your feet are square to the plate. This means that they are an equal distance from the plate. A stance like this affords you a good, comfortable look at the pitcher without straining yourself or otherwise becoming uncomfortable in the batter's box. Most Major League hitters use a neutral stance. Ken Griffey, Jr., for one. Remember, we are only talking about how you place your feet in the batter's box. We want to build that solid foundation from the ground up.



The second stance, and also a very popular one with Major League hitters, is the **closed stance**. On the closed stance, the foot closest to the pitcher's mound is placed slightly closer to home plate than the other foot. The key word here is slightly. You can overdo most anything, and getting too closed with your stance will definitely hamper your hitting. The great Tony Gwynn believes this is probably the best stance for most hitters.

The **open stance** is just the opposite. The foot closest to the mound is pulled away from home



plate. Jay Buhner of the Mariners is one of the more notable hitters that uses the open stance. Fewer Major League hitters use this stance, because of the obvious distance it takes you from the hitting zone. An open stance requires you to do more during the time the pitch is on its way to the plate, in order to get in the proper hitting position. More on that later.

So, which stance is right for you? Well, each one has its advantages. Before you choose one though, I'd like you to take a little test. Because it is important to see the ball well, we need to find out which of your eyes is the dominant eye. The dominant eye is the one that does the

majority of the work when you look at something. It sends the messages to the brain about where the ball is as it relates to the space around you. Your other eye does the same thing, but your dominant eye sends more precise information. Remember, you want every advantage on your side, not the pitcher's.

Extend your hand out in front of you with your thumb up as though you are giving a friend the "thumbs up" or "good job, way to go," sign. With both eyes open, pick an object about twenty feet away from you and position your thumb so that the end of it covers that object. Now, close your left eye. Did your thumb seem like it moved over to the left? If it did, your left eye is your dominant eye. If nothing happened and your thumb is still covering the object, close your right eye. Did your thumb seem to have jumped over to the right? If so, your right eye is the dominant eye.

Why is all of this important to you? The answer is simple, you want to make use of your dominant eye when you are hitting. Choosing the proper stance to help put that dominant eye to work is important. Ideally, your dominant eye would be the one closest to the pitcher. The left eye for the right handed batter, the right eye for the left handed batter. Unfortunately, most people are just the opposite. Right handed batters generally are right eye dominant and vice-versa.

Having your dominant eye closer to the pitcher contributes to better tracking of the ball to the hitting zone. This is one of the factors that helps explain why switch hitters hit better from one side or the other. Not having this luxury does not mean you can't be a good hitter.

What it means is, by knowing which eye sends the more precise messages to the brain, you should position yourself so that you see the ball with that eye.

This is the reason most Major League hitters choose the neutral position as their stance of choice. I doubt, however, that many of them consciously know which of their eyes is dominant. It probably came about from years of trial and error and they finally settled on that position because they felt they saw the ball better. You can wipe out years of trial and error just by knowing which of your eyes sees the ball better! From the neutral stance, you can position your head comfortably enough over your front shoulder to use both eyes to see the ball, bringing your dominant eye into play. This is known as **binocular, using both eyes**.

Obviously, the open stance gives you an even greater use of both eyes. The reason it is not employed as often by great hitters, is that the trade off for good vision and the increased amount of things you need to do to get in the proper hitting position is simply not worth it. The less complicated your swing is, the more successful you are apt to be. Again, more on this later.

The closed stance has advantages. If you can comfortably position your head over the front shoulder to utilize the vision from both eyes, you can take advantage of the increased plate coverage you get from this stance. Stan Musial, one of the great hitters of all time, used a slightly closed stance. If you were to look at him from the pitcher's mound during his stance, you might think his neck was made of rubber his head was turned so far over his front shoulder. Needless to say, he saw the ball very well, and he hit the ball very well.

To sum this section up; since we are building a good hitter a little at a time, pick a stance that affords you the best opportunity to see the ball well. Taking into consideration which of your eyes sends the more accurate messages to the brain. You need to give that computer up there the proper information if you want to be successful at one of the more difficult physical acts in sports.

THE STANCE AND BALANCE



Now that you have decided which position you want your feet in, let's get you in a good hitting position with your stance. Your feet should be slightly more than shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent and your weight evenly distributed between both feet. You should feel a little more weight toward the balls of your feet and to the inside of your feet. You should feel springy and ready for action, like a quarterback under center. This is a well balanced, athletic stance that will allow you to hit with power and grace.

The best way I have found to teach young hitters how to get into a well balanced, athletic position, is to have you stand still with your feet about shoulder width apart. Now jump as high as you can, straight up in the air. When you land, you will usually land in a very balanced and athletic position.



When you look down at your feet, your knees should be bent just enough to prevent you from seeing your ankles and the in-steps of your feet. Standing too straight, or squatting too far, can lead to poor mechanics of the swing. There are exceptions, obviously, if you look around at the Major Leagues, where players have had success from one extreme to the other. Some players crouch down, others stand straight up, that is a matter of "style," and that's something we don't want to discuss just yet. For now, balance and efficiency are what we want to concentrate on.

Mechanically, what a good balanced stance does for you is it allows you to freely stride with the front foot and rotate the back foot while maintaining enough balance to swing the bat through with leverage and power. Good balance is imperative throughout the swing.

THE HITTING POSITION



Okay, now that the lower part of your body is squared away and you understand how to stand and the necessity for good balance, let's put the weapon in your hands and get into the hitting position.

Assume the basic stance position with your weight balanced and your knees slightly bent. Now, gripping the bat properly, raise your hands up so that the top hand on the bat is just above and in front of your rear shoulder. The knob of the bat should be pointed down, toward the plate. The rear shoulder should be raised just slightly higher than the front shoulder. Your head should be turned toward the pitcher and looking out over the front shoulder, putting both eyes to work for you. This position is the proper hitting position. From here you are balanced, athletic and prepared to adjust to the path of the ball as it come to the plate.

Earlier I mentioned the word "style." No where is it more likely to be seen than in a batter's box. Everyone has their own "style." Just as we each have our own "style" of walking, talking, dressing or even standing. You name it, virtually everything we do in life, we do with our own "style."

Cal Ripken, Jr., has probably gone through ten different "styles" at the plate during his wonderful career. As I mentioned earlier, Jay Buhner has his own unique approach at the plate. As does Mickey Tettleton, with his bat laid back nearly horizontal to the ground. Joe Morgan used to "flap" his rear arm like a bird just before the ball was thrown. Nomar Garciaparra, one of the great young hitters in the game today, shuffles and taps his feet back and forth as the pitcher goes into his windup. But, here's the key; everyone of these players, and virtually every good hitter I have ever seen, returns to the proper hitting position at about the time the pitcher is releasing the baseball. I call this the pitcher's "critical" position.

I have studied tons of film on hitters and I have found this to be a constant with every one of them. They might wave the bat around high in the air like John Kruk, or lay it on their shoulder like Cal, but when the pitcher reaches "critical," the good hitter sheds his "style" and puts his body in the best possible athletic position to hit the baseball. That position is shown in the above figure..



My feeling on "style" is this; I don't care if you do cartwheels in the batter's box. I really don't. But, if you want to be a good hitter, you better get in the proper hitting position at about the time the pitcher gets to "critical." Otherwise, your chances for success are greatly diminished.

Learn what that proper position feels like. Embed it into your muscle memory. Make it second nature to adopt the proper hitting position automatically when you step into the batter's box. Practice getting into it over and over and over. You don't want to have to think about this, or your grip, or anything other than seeing the ball and hitting the ball when the time comes. So, ingrain these basics to the point of making them automatic. Once you have mastered the proper grip and the proper hitting position, you will be well on your way to becoming a better hitter. These two fundamentals are so important I cannot over emphasize them. They are the foundation that makes the rest of the swing so efficient.

THE MYTH ABOUT THE ELBOW

I have heard fathers and coaches yell out commands to their sons and players for quite a few



years now. Many times their information is incorrect. One command in particular that stands out in my mind (because I hear it so much) is the one telling the hitter to keep his back elbow up. I'm not sure where this "tip" first came from, but I can tell you it is a "fault" not a "fix." With the back elbow up in the air it changes the hinging of the wrists during the swing. This, in turn, changes the path (see section on swing plane) of the bat, as well as the leverage which affects the speed of the bat. The proper advice, which may have gotten lost in translation years ago, is for the batter to make sure his back shoulder is slightly higher than the

front. The forearms should actually be in a reverse "V" and fairly close to the body. This allows the bat to flow freely to the ball. All of this is explained in greater detail later in the book. I just wanted to dispel a myth regarding the stance. Practice the stance you have learned in these lessons and you'll be well on your way to becoming a great hitter.



THE SWING PLANE

I always get a kick out of listening to the parents of Little Leaguers when their child is at bat. "Swing level," "Keep your back elbow up," "Do this," "Don't do that." "Geez, Mom, hush up and let me hit!" Most kids would probably love to step out of the batter's box and say that.



In reality, your swing must match the path of the baseball thrown by the pitcher as closely as possible, and for as long as possible, to successfully hit the ball. Pete Rose once said, "See the ball, hit the ball." Once you have ingrained the swing mechanics taught in the previous chapters, this is the proper approach. Let your swing take over. Swing the bat in the path of the ball, matching that path as closely as possible for as long as possible.

If all pitchers threw nothing but strikes for every pitch, and they were all the exact same height and threw from the exact same arm angle, and all had the exact same release point, combined with the exact same speed, with the exact same rotation on the ball (which affects ball flight), then. . . and only then, could a hitter have the exact same swing plane every time and successfully hit the ball.

To say nothing about the "timing" of the swing in relation to the speed and distance of the pitched ball. It's no wonder that Ted Williams described hitting a baseball as "the single most difficult task in sports." Studies have even been conducted by college physicists, who came to the conclusion that the batter is faced with tremendous odds for failure.

The key then, is to have a good swing that is repeatable and adjustable to the angle of the pitched ball. Since the pitcher is actually standing above you (on a mound) and he is throwing the ball from above his shoulder (most of the time), the ball will be traveling in a downward flight to the strike zone. Logically, the optimum swing plane for the bat would be a slight upswing to closely match the angle of the ball as it travels into the strike zone. Of course, this would be for the perfect strike.

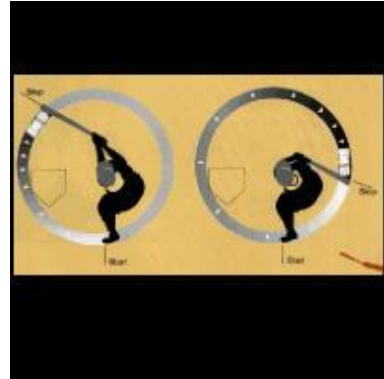


Let me ask you this, how many times have you watched a baseball game on television and seen the batter hit a low, inside pitch over the wall for a titanic blast? The replays show the hit over and over and the commentator says something like, "Whoa, he went down and got that one," or "He golfed that baby out of here, it looked like a 3-iron going out!" These are perfect examples of the hitter matching the plane of the pitched ball with his bat. If the batter had "swung level" at those pitches, it would be a swing and a miss, strike three!

Your job as a hitter is to "see the ball, hit the ball." We have already grooved your swing so that it is mechanically proper. Trust it! Swing the bat in the direction the ball is coming.

I will say this, the longer you are able to keep the bat on the same path as the baseball, the greater the chance you are going to hit the ball hard. Probably over the fence, if you get it just right. Here is my philosophy on why. If you get the bat "on plane" early in the swing, it has more of an opportunity to accelerate to the ball, the longer it is accelerating, the faster the bat gets moving.

The faster the bat is moving, the harder you will hit the ball. It is really pretty basic. You only need to have the bat moving at approximately 75mph to hit a ball 300 feet. 75mph is really not that fast, honest. Ever watch a golfer swing a club? Pros can reach speeds around 120mph seemingly without effort. The swing we have built in the preceding chapters can easily reach 75mph on an average 14-15 year old boy. Most Major League fences are less than 400 feet away in dead center field! Of course, these numbers reflect a ball being pitched at Major League speeds (more on that later).



Again, get the bat "on plane" early in the swing. Whatever that "plane" is. Many a homerun has been hit on balls pitched out of the strike zone. Once you have committed yourself to swing, give it a good rip. You have a good swing, hit the ball hard somewhere. If you miss, so what. You get three strikes, more if you foul a few off. I am not advocating that you swing at any pitch. There are discussions elsewhere in this book pertaining to pitch selection. To be a successful hitter, you must be disciplined enough at the plate to swing at strikes, or what you believe are strikes. What I am trying to get across is that not every pitch is a strike, not every hit is a result of a ball pitched in the strike zone, and the batter that is best able to adjust his swing to the path of the ball, is the "good hitter" I want you to become. Ted Williams, one of the most analytical hitters of all time, really broke down the science of hitting with one phrase, "Get a good pitch to hit!" If you have developed a good swing with solid fundamentals, the moment you see a "good pitch" coming at you, let that swing go and hammer the ball somewhere!

SIX STEPS TO A SWEET SWING

Everybody wants to be a great hitter. Most young players dream about hitting the ball like Barry Bonds or Sammy Sosa or Jason Giambi. What they don't realize is that All-Star players



like that have such deeply ingrained muscle memory built into their swing that they can totally forget about their swing and concentrate solely on hitting the ball. The swing just happens for them at this stage in their careers. They are literally seeing the ball and hitting it, automatically! Guess how they got to that point? Work! Swing after swing after swing, thousands and thousands of swings. Not just any swing, the right swing. Soft toss, Tee work, Batting Practice... swing after swing after swing. Eventually, they developed the muscle memory to the Sweet Swing. When their visual system recognizes a good pitch, the "swing" command from the neural system is given and the Sweet Swing happens.

Does that mean that every swing results in a 450 foot homerun? No. There are many variables that affect success at the plate and those are for other discussions. What is important is that if you are fundamentally sound in the mechanics of the swing, you will have a greater opportunity to be successful in your at bats. The question is, Do you have what it takes to develop the Sweet Swing? In this article I will give you the proper mechanics of the Sweet Swing, broken down into six simple steps. Performing this swing thousands and thousands of times correctly is up to you. If you have the discipline, desire and dedication to ingrain these simple steps into muscle memory, you will be well on your way to becoming a better hitter.



Step 1 - Loading

Hey Coach! You forgot the stance position! Actually, no I didn't. I purposefully left that position out. Look around the Major Leagues, there are hundreds of different stances, very few of them are similar. Everybody has their own comfort level, style and body type. If you have been playing baseball for any length of time you more than likely have a position which you feel most comfortable in, stay with that. Just make sure you get to a simple, proper load position similar to the one shown here in the photograph. The key points to a good load:

- The weight moves primarily onto the inner portion of the back leg and foot.
- The front shoulder closes slightly, automatically loading the hands and tilting the bat head forward toward the pitcher (knob looks at the catcher).
- The front knee kicks inward (show the pitcher your pocket) this move cocks the hips.
- The player is stacked, meaning from the bottom of the back side to the top everything is aligned. The foot is under the knee, the knee under the hip, shoulder and hands stacked above the hip.



From this position the player is in a well-balanced, loaded position that allows him to attack the incoming pitch. Watch the Major Leaguers. You will see most players reach this position at some point, no matter what their stance looked like when they started.

Step 2 - The Step

This is a much more critical portion of the swing than most people give credit to. The load stage gets the hitter in synch with the pitcher. The step stage gets the hitter in synch with the pitched ball. Which are you hitting, the pitcher or the pitch? See my point? 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. The key points to a good step:

- Short is sweet. 6-12" is more than sufficient, some players simply pick the foot up and put it right back down. This depends on the width of your original stance.
- Land on the pad near the big toe... softly.
- Keep the weight primarily to the rear leg. This is the "stay 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. The head must remain in the same location it was in during the load phase.



- Time your step between the release point and about 10 feet from the pitcher. Early is much better than late. A late step makes it nearly impossible to hit. Remember, it is step then swing... not, step and swing. They are separate.

The importance of the steady head position cannot be overstated. When the head moves forward, the eyes move as well. The visual system is providing information to the brain relative to the ball's position in space.

When the eyes move forward it causes the brain (computing the incoming data on the ball) to calculate .. re-calculate.. calculate.. re-calculate regarding the point the player should intercept the ball with the bat. That is simply asking too much given the time frame. So, a steady head allows the brain to compute the information correctly the first time. Small step, weight back, steady head.

Step 3 - Launch the Hips



The third movement in the Sweet Swing sequence is the launching of the hips. This movement is the cornerstone of the power generated in a baseball swing. I have referred to this movement as the "coiling and uncoiling" in previous articles. The launching of the hips is the beginning of the torque phase of the baseball swing. The big muscles of the lower body (the hips and legs) are moving one way, while the big muscles of the upper body are ever so slightly moving the other way or remaining stationary... coiling against each other to create the powerful torque necessary for a Sweet Swing. The key points to launching the hips:

- The player fires the rear hip forward toward the pitcher.
- The head does not move forward, everything rotates under the head.
- The hands do not move forward (They will move a little on their own).
- The rear elbow tucks to the hip. This movement directs the knob of the bat toward the ball.
- Most of the player's weight remains on the rear leg with some weight moving to the firming front leg.

From this point in the swing sequence everything happens at super speed. It is almost impossible to distinguish the movements from each other because of the incredible speed generated from the proper hip action. It is imperative that you practice these movements in slow motion to fully ingrain the actions to muscle memory. Again, the head does not move! Rotate under the head. The hands not moving forward allows the player to react to the speed of the pitched ball. For a fastball, the player will obviously launch the hands almost immediately to time the contact. For an off-speed, the player simply waits for the ball to near the contact point before launching the hands. This is the "keep your hands back" command you hear so often from coaches. Ingraining this Sweet Swing to muscle memory makes that an automatic occurrence.



Step 4 - Launch the Hands

This is the only phase in the swing that most fans are aware of. They either see the player hit the ball or miss it when the player swings the bat with his hands. In actuality, if the player incorporates the previously addressed motions to muscle memory, this is the easiest part of the swing. Providing, of course, that the player has some measure of hand-eye coordination. Simply launch your hands at the ball... aggressively! This is no time to be passive, trust your hands and attack the ball. With the previous three steps already set in motion, the player has generated enough torque to propel the bathead at speeds matching or exceeding that of the pitched ball. The ball travels a total of 60 feet at those speeds, whereas the bathead travels only a handful of feet from the start of the swing to the point of contact. Great hitters are naturally more adept at this all important timing sequence. But the simple truth is confidence in your swing can play a tremendous role in your success. The



key points to Launching the Hands to contact:

- The knob driving toward the ball begins the sequence.
- The wrists flick, or snap the barrel to contact.
- The top hand is in a palm up position at the point of contact.
- The bottom hand is in a palm down position at contact.
- The front leg is firm and creates resistance for the body to propel the bathead.
- The head stays steady.

Again, the last line is the key. The head stays steady. If the information provided by the visual system never changes you will have greater success in contacting the ball. Of course, the ball will move more in the last few feet. This is partially due to it losing speed and having gravity affect its path. This is why hitting is so difficult. The key is not to have information change (the brain computing where the ball and bathead will meet) as a result of anything the batter does. If information changes because of the talent of the pitcher throwing a moving fastball, or fantastic curve, so be it. Tip your hat. If the hitter keeps his head still and takes a short, linear approach to the ball, he has a better than average chance to succeed. Trust your hands.

Step 5 - The Power V



The fifth step seems unnecessary. After all, we have already hit the ball. Isn't that the object? Well, the key to being a good hitter is being able to hit the ball with authority. If you don't power through the ball, you may as well bunt every time. You have to accelerate through the ball much like a boxer punches through a heavy bag. Contact is important, accelerating through the contact point is imperative. The key points to the Power V:

- The hands do not roll over!
- They finish their flicking motion started at contact.
- Centrifugal force powers the bathead through the zone.
- The front leg firms up and straightens out creating leverage for the bathead to swing around.
- The player's head looks directly down the 'V', chin down.
- Some players lift off the rear foot as a result of the tremendous centrifugal force generated by the bathead, transferring even more body weight through contact.

This sequence is taking place at such incredible speed it is hard to imagine. By slowing it down to this stop system we can see how important the little aspects are in creating the levers and fulcrums that generate the force propelling the bathead at such amazing speeds. Most important to note is that the centrifugal forces we generated from the earlier hip action are what is actually whipping the bathead through the zone. The hands are actually opposing forces on the handle, creating even more torque! If a player were to release the bat it would fly a tremendous distance. How many times have we seen a bat fly into the stands 80-100 feet away after slipping out of the player's hand? This is a result of the centrifugal forces generated with the Sweet Swing mechanics.



Step 6 - Finish the Swing

Here is where the hands finally roll over. The wrists are required to roll in order to re-direct the forces from their final stage of centripetal motion (directly out the barrel head at the Power V position) to centrifugal again (around the body). This wrist rolling also allows the bathead to decelerate more naturally. If the wrists were to remain firm it would act as a brake to the bat and the player would lose power and distance. The famous Charlie Lau theory was to release the top hand to prevent the bathead from decelerating as a result of this resistance. This created more extension in the swing and, according to some experts, more power to the baseball. Problems occur when most young player's release too soon and therefore lose vital control of the bathead's path. Most great power hitters of the past had a more



natural finish around the body. Ted Williams, Hank Aaron, Mickey Mantle and Babe Ruth, just to name a few, had this type of finish to their swing. The key points to a good finish:

- The top hand rolls over.
- The bottom hand rolls over and the wrist collapses.
- The hands finish at the shoulder or just below.
- The bathead wraps around the back of the hitter.

The great announcer Vin Scully has a wonderful saying about players that have warning track power; balls that don't quite get over the fence for a homerun. "One more biscuit for breakfast and that baby is gone!" Well, you can find that "one more biscuit" in your finish. Don't decelerate the bathead after you hit the ball. Continue powering through the ball and let the bat wrap around your back before it stops. I think you'll find some extra power there that can make a difference between a homerun and a ball caught at the wall.

We are talking about a very short time frame here... less than half a second. But ingraining the muscle memory into these steps of the swing will insure that the player executes them in the proper sequence during that short time span. Repetition will mold the steps into one Sweet Swing. Practice them in stop form one phase at a time: Load-stop, Step-stop, Hips-stop, Hands-stop, Power V-stop, Finish-stop. Progress to slow motion movements where the stops have less time in between them. Do this slow motion swing over and over and over in proper sequence. Go back to the stops. Over and over and over. When you find yourself out of synch during BP or Soft Toss, go through your steps in slow motion to remind your body of the proper sequence to a Sweet Swing.