SECRET TO SUCCESS

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Special To Collegiate Baseball

LOS ANGELES — See the Ball! Hit the Ball! This is the key to hitting and it sounds so easy. When the player is in "the zone", hitting is simple...the ball looks big, it is moving very slow. When the hitter looks out at the defense, the defenders look tiny and there is green space everywhere.

And when this peak level of performance is there, everything just happens with relaxed concentration and total confidence.

How often does this happen?

The reality is that a player will be in "the zone" a small percentage of the time. One key to consistency in hitting is learning to execute when the player doesn't feel great.

The player must learn to compensate and adjust. It is important to take what you have in confidence, focus, feel and intensity and do battle with it.

If you have 60 percent, do everything you can to feel as strong as you can but at a certain point take what you have and focus out on the release point and beat the pitcher with the 60 percent.

Because in the box score it doesn't say "Ravizza 0-5 (but he"

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didn’t feel good.

No one cares how the player feels, the player must deal with it.

When I worked with Skip Bertman, with the 1996 Olympic team, he always emphasized to the hitters that baseball is a game of failure and the only thing the hitter has control of is to give himself the best chance for success.

In this article Tony Abbatine and I will collaborate in sharing some of our thoughts on the mental and visual components of hitting.

The purpose of this article is twofold; first to discuss the intricate relationship between pressure and its effects on vision.

Second, we will share some of our ideas with the intent of stimulating the reader’s thinking on this critical interplay in hitting. From my 20 years of working in baseball, I have learned that each player experiences pressure in unique ways.

Some players experience inappropriate muscle tension, others negative and/or irrational thinking and some experience vision difficulties. They can see the ball well in practice, but when they get in the game they lose their ability to focus effectively.

In my work I encourage hitters to be in control of themselves, have a plan, focus on and/or attend to that pitch and the final step is to direct their energy (vision) out. It is at this point where I am excited to have an opportunity to integrate my ideas with Tony who specializes in the visual mechanics of hitting.

Quality At-Bats

In my book Heads Up Baseball, I discussed five components of a quality at-bat.

These components can be used to evaluate the “quality of the at-bat”.

First, was the hitter in control of himself before he stepped in the box?

Second, was the player able to establish a plan and execute the plan?

Third, how was he seeing the ball?

Fourth, did the player make contact?

Fifth, did the player get any hits?

Self Control And Vision

The major issue in this article is how the hitter’s stress level impacts his ability to focus and attend to the critical task relevant cues.

When a player is struggling, he is hitting in batting practice but not taking it into the game I want to know how he is seeing the ball.

If the player isn’t seeing the ball and driving it in practice then he needs to work on his ability to hit. But if the player can do it in practice but can’t take it into the game then it is a mental game issue.

Sometimes vision is affected by self-imposed pressure and improper attentional focus.

In a previous article that I wrote for Collegiate Baseball, I discussed the “Sphincter-Cranial Tendon” which is a metaphor for the relationship between tight buttocks and the impact on “stinking thinking” and poor vision when the player is emotionally tight.

The reason the player is not seeing the ball well may be because his focus is too “internal,” he is thinking too much about the mechanics, or his own thoughts and this doesn’t allow the player to focus his energy out to the pitchers mound and thus he doesn’t pick the ball up well and the ball appears faster because he has to mentally and visually catch up with the ball.

Importance Of A Routine

Questions I am constantly asking a hitter are “When does your at-bat begin?” “What is your routine?” “How does your focus “funnel in” as you move through your routine?” “What are your thoughts as you put on your hitting helmet and hitting gloves?” “What do you do in the hole?” “What do you do on deck?” “What is your routine stepping into the box?”

The player must have a consistent routine in the way he approaches his at-bat.

He must always remember what Joe Maddon, Anaheim Angels coach claims, “An at-bat is a precious thing to give away”.

I ask players to imagine what their batting average would be if they cut the at-bats they gave away in half... what would that do for your batting average?

The routine provides a method to be in control of yourself and focus your attention on the task at hand so that at least you are taking one at-bat at a time.

You Must Be Present To Hit

It is important to be fully focused in the present moment and have your energy and attention on the release point.

Carrying your last three at-bats to the plate only clouds up your thinking and focus.

Having your attention on “Got to get a hit” gets a player too far ahead of himself.

This is why “See the ball, hit the ball” is so powerful, because it is simple and present focused.

But there are times where you first have to “check-in”, regroup yourself, focus out and do battle with the pitcher.

And this is where the routine can help you focus on the release point.

Dave Snow, Long Beach State Baseball Coach, can see when his player’s are out of control just by the changes he observes in their routine.

He can point this out to the player when he steps out of the box so the player doesn’t waste the at-bat.

Don Sneddon, Santa Ana College Baseball Coach, has hitters give him signal (touch the visor of the batting helmet) when they lose control to indicate that “they know they messed up but they recognize it and they are using the routine to turn it around” this way he knows that they are in control and refocused on the task.

Now that I have discussed the mental aspects of hitting and having the focus go out to the pitcher, Tony will discuss the visual components of hitting.

Visual Dynamics Of Hitting

Vision can be negatively affected by the stress of the situation and once the player is in control of himself (he has his mental game locked in) he must use his visual skills on a consistent basis.

Ask your hitters where they are, visually, (what are you looking at?) as the pitcher begins his delivery.

Many hitters will not be able to describe their visual game plan or reply that their “soft-focusing” then watching for the release point.
Implementing established principles of the human visual system can assist hitters in improving the “picture” they rely on to hit. A slight improvement in hitter’s visual mechanics (allowing for an earlier recognition of where it is and what it is) is crucial to long-term hitting success at the college and professional level.

The following techniques will allow hitters to improve their visual game.

**Scan And Hunt**

The eyes are in their most natural and tensionless state when they are gazing and scanning. Staring or fixating on an object leads to a diminished clarity of vision.

Hitters must learn to trust their eyes by “getting off” the pitcher to maximize their visual acuity (clearness).

The traditional soft-fine focus method of watching the pitcher leads some hitters to over focus (lock-up) and restricts their ability to gaze and scan to the release point.

Suggest to your hitters to find a comfortable “route” to the pitchers throwing side so as to avoid the visual “locking” that inhibits a clear picture of the oncoming baseball.

Over teaching the “release point window” restricts many hitters in scanning for pre-pitch cues and also inhibits their visual rhythm as they prepare for ball release.

**Visual Independence**

Hitters must take control of their field of vision as they prepare for the oncoming baseball.

Many hitters inhibit their ability to observe pre-pitch visual cues (arm slot, wrist angles, elbow height, head tilt) by over-fixating on the pitcher or parts of his body.

Hitters should experiment with different gaze routes to the pitchers release point.

As all coaches preach, hitting involves timing and a certain internal rhythm.

The hitter’s visual mechanics should be no different.

Looking in to the pitcher’s head and horizontally shifting (right to left for a RHP) to the release point may not be the ideal “road map” for all hitters.

Hitters should be encouraged to take their own routes to the release point so that minimal attention is given to the pitchers tempo and body movement.

Popular “routes” described by professional hitters include approaching the pitchers throwing side from the back, shortstop side, and from the front of the mound.

**Visual Aggressiveness**

Many hitters get caught up on attempting to watch the exact release point of the pitched ball that, at times, their field of vision never catches up to the oncoming baseball.

Put another way, staring or focusing on the “pitchers window” leads many hitters to be visually late in tracking the baseball.

This split-second “lateness” makes the 80mph fastball look like a 95mph pitch.

Hitters that complain of the ball “looking small or sneaking up on them” never recover from the over focusing of the release point.

Effective visual mechanics will attempt to evaluate the pitchers arm action and then quickly “get ahead of the ball” during the tracking process.

Known as “anticipatory saccadic movement” this aggressive tracking allows for improved evaluation of breaking balls because the hitter is seeing more of where the baseball is going and less of where the ball has been.

**Visual Stress Response**

The intensity of the at-bat, or more accurately, the intensity with which an at-bat is pursued, is one of the more important factors involved in visual stress.

Intensity relates to the degree of physiological arousal created by the hitter.

As a general rule, the greater the intensity with which a visual task is approached, the greater will be the stress response.

Game observations of hitter’s ocular (eye) actions have allowed us to classify professional hitters into three visual categories as they approach an at-bat.

Certain hitters exhibit a catatonic (fight) approach to the at-bat; exerting maximum visual concentration and maintaining an intense desire for achievement.

The second category we have called the fright approach, which consists of a paralyzation of action; just staring at the pitcher; immobilized to effectively recognize where the ball is coming from and what type of pitch is being thrown.

Hitters with high strikeout totals and/or missing breaking balls by significant margins are typically found in these two visual categories.

The syntoxic (flow) approach involves pursuing the at-bat with the least amount of pressure or tension, flowing with it, not becoming upset if the at-bat will be difficult.

Classic behavioral optometry tells us that a psychological acceptance of a visual task will make it less stressful.

It is no coincidence that hitters that genuinely enjoy the challenge of an at-bat, see the ball sooner and clearer as a result.

The eyes are no different then other hitting muscles.

Increased tension and over-exertion (bug-eyes) will decrease focus flexibility and restrict eye movement.

Significant improvements of a hitter’s game performance must start with an examination of their visual mechanics.

**Visual Mechanics**

Effective pre-game and practice swings should always have a game-like visual start.

Hitters should execute their individual routes and tracking patterns prior to looking at the ball on the T or swinging from a soft-toss drill.

Besides giving the eyes an effective stretch, the hitter is rehearsing the entire hitting process needed for game situations.

Hitting practice with no visual component is similar to a pitcher preparing to pitch in a game while warming up in the bullpen 45 feet away from the catcher!

Markers in the back of the hitting tunnels or baseballs positioned near a teams soft-toss or T-stations will provide for a visual start to each practice swing.

We have all heard the maxim; “Perfect practice makes perfect performance”; adding the visual process to all practice swings will simulate game hitting.
No different than making mechanical adjustments in their swing, hitters can adjust their visual mechanics to achieve long-term game success.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this article was to discuss the interplay between the mental and visual mechanics. If we can help players develop these skills to complement all the work they do on the mechanics of hitting it can only increase their opportunities for success.

Hopefully, we have stimulated the readers’ awareness of these issues and we can continue to explore an integrated approach to hitting.

(Editor’s Note: Tony Abbatine is the National Director of Instruction for the twelve Frozen Ropes Training Centers operating in the U.S. and Canada.
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(He works with the Long Beach State baseball team and serves as a performance enhancement consultant for the Los Angeles Dodgers. In addition, he is the author of a superb book on performance enhancement called Heads Up Baseball.
(Ravizza has appeared at clinics across the nation to explain how the mind can be tamed through time honored techniques.)

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REDONDO BEACH, Calif. To order the book Heads Up Baseball written by Ken Ravizza, one of the best books ever written on mental training for baseball players, send $17.95 plus $1.25 for sales tax if you are a California resident.

Send to: Kinesis: Heads Up Baseball, P.O. Box 7000-717, Redondo Beach, CA 90277.

Team discounts of 10 percent for 10 or more copies are available.

Ravizza, who is one of the leading experts of mental training in baseball, works with the Los Angeles Dodgers, Cal. St. Fullerton and Long Beach St.

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The Three Dynamic Fields Of Vision

**Hitter # 1** places the oncoming baseball in the front of his field of vision, seeing more of where the ball has been.

**Hitter # 2** sees parts of where the ball has been and parts of where it is going.

**Hitter # 3** has most of his field of vision in front of the baseball; he sees more of where the baseball is going.