

Setting a Line-Up

By Scott Brosius

One of the most important tasks coaches have each year is setting a productive line-up. As we evaluate the players on our roster and the talents each possess, how do we put a line-up together and what are we looking for with each role?

Most importantly, a line-up should reflect the best combination of the coaches offensively philosophy, based on the talent they have. We must have an understanding of how we intend to score runs. Do you like to play for the big inning, or do you like to play small ball? My goal with every line-up is to have a group of 9 hitters who give me the most flexibility and provide the most opportunity to score runs each inning.

We don't coach in a perfect world. Sometimes what we want and what we have are two different things altogether, but these are the qualities I look for in my hitters, starting with the leadoff position.

Lead-off: The lead-off hitter should provide a spark at the top of the order. I look for a hitter with good speed and bat control. He must be willing to take some pitches and work the count. He must have leadership skills and a positive demeanor on the field. He is the tone setter. As much as his physical skills, he should show a positive tenacity at the plate and on the bases. He should be willing to bunt, get hit by a pitch, whatever it takes to get on base. His feedback to the other hitters after his at-bats becomes crucial as we make adjustments during the game.

2-Hole: In a perfect world, I would like the 2-hitter to be left-handed. He will serve many different roles as the 2-hitter. He becomes the second lead-off man if the lead-off guy makes an out, so bat control and speed are important for this role. He should be a good on base guy, but he also needs to be able to bunt and hit and run when called upon, and have the ability to pull the ball through the 4-hole when the first baseman is holding the runner on. He must be a good fastball hitter, as many pitchers or coaches may throw more fastballs to him as an attempt to keep the lead-off hitter from stealing.

3-Hitter: Simply stated, I want my best hitter to be hitting in the 3-hole. It's important that this player hits in the first inning, regardless of the situation. The three-hitter generally possesses the best overall blend of power and average, he's the guy you want up in any situation.

Cleanup: The cleanup hitter should have some power, but more importantly be a clutch RBI guy. He needs to live for RBI opportunities. While not an all or nothing guy, I don't mind this hitter hitting for a touch less average if he's a productive RBI and run producer.

5-Hitter: This place in the order is overlooked but very important. He must be one of your better, most dangerous hitters, as pitchers should not feel they can throw around the cleanup hitter to get to the 5-hole. He should have some power and be a run producer as well. With both the cleanup and 5-hitter, offensive production is more important than speed.

6-8 hitters: For me, these are the hitters who help the line-up be productive every inning throughout the entire game. So many times you see a strong top of the order, only to find a bottom half that is non-productive and easy to pitch to. While in most line-ups these won't be my strongest hitters, there are certainly qualities I want in each of these roles. They should all be good bunters and be able to hit in different situations. As it may be difficult to string hits together at the bottom of the order, hit and runs and moving runners becomes imperative. While hopefully I'll have the depth that my 6-hitter is also a run producer, I still want to be creative with these hitters throughout the game. They should be patient, competitive hitters who make the pitchers work.

Great line-ups never let-up, they never give a pitcher a break. So even if the bottom half are not the best hitters, they should be scrappy and competitive. The ability to drag bunt, hit and run, run the bases, work deep counts, these are all traits I look for in this part of the order. Nothing makes an offense click more than production from the bottom half.

9-Hitter: I may be different in my thinking than other coaches, but I like to have a fast, pesky hitter in the 9-hole. I believe this spot is very important in rolling a line-up over. If he is on base ahead of the leadoff hitter after the first time through the order, I don't want him to be a roadblock on the bases. I will look for a guy with speed, maybe a younger player who will be a future leadoff guy. I will sometimes put a guy in the 9-hole who may struggle with breaking pitches, as many times pitchers will come after the 9-hitter more aggressively. But I don't want this to be a dead spot in the order. I may sometimes put a hitter who may have a touch more ability than the 7-hitter or 8-hitter, just because I want him as the second leadoff hitter as the line-up turns over.

In all these decisions, I certainly think in terms of the physical skill set of my players, but I never ignore their mental make-up. My fastest player may not be my leadoff hitter if I don't think he has the make-up to handle that role. What I consider my best hitter may not be the guy with the most power or the guy who gets the most hits; he may be the guy I feel gives the most competitive at-bat in clutch situations. I will take nine "gamers" with less ability over nine talented players who lack competitive fire.

There are a lot of factors that go into setting a line-up. It should go well beyond a simple ranking of the top nine hitters and putting them in that order. Questions we should consider as we decide on a line-up: What does your talent allow you to do offensively? How do you believe you can score runs? And, which players have the physical and mental qualities to perform on those roles in the line-up.