

Coaching the Hitter in the Box

Since this is fastpitch and not slo-pitch, I hate to see a coach just stand on third base and let the player make their own decisions at the plate in regards to bunting, hitting, etc. especially when that player is a younger player. Older players that you have been with for awhile and that you have taught the strategy of the game to might be a different story in **some cases**. But you are the coach who has more experience so help the players and tell them what you would like them to do while at the plate.

Strategy seems to be a lost art since some coaches either just want the long ball or maybe they just do not believe in using the strategy of the game to produce runs. Going for the long ball is great if you have the players with the power to do that and they happen to **also** have the ability to read the right pitch in order to put a good swing on the ball. But that percentage is very low. In most games, it is up to the coach to produce the runs through using strategy in order for the team to win.

Realize that I am speaking about players in every age group, the elite players may do these things naturally but that is a small percentage of players when you consider every kid that plays fastpitch. So, adapt this to the kids you have on your teams.

I am the type of coach who believes that if you are aggressive, if you attack the ball and if you are a smart hitter, you will hit for a good average and on base percentage and with a team full of those will win a lot of games. You will also get your share of “bombs” not even trying for those. The players love the strategy of the game. When the coach “pulls the strings” and the players are successful in bunting for a hit, pulling off a squeeze play, doing a hit and run, dumping the ball into the outfield for an RBI etc, they love it and it elevates their game. It is so obvious and predictable to tell which players just are swinging for the fence or as hard as they can, thus making the pitcher’s job easier. When the hip section goes one way and the ball is thrown another, the pitcher most likely wins.

A large percentage of players in college but definitely those of high school age and younger really are not sure how to read the defensive alignment nor the pitcher. My guess is most have been taught to hit the ball with the basics but not how to look for a pitch, read the pitcher’s tendencies or where to take the ball.

When reading the pitcher, a hitter should determine things like these:

- the speed of her
- the type of pitches she can throw
- her best pitch
- her favorite go to pitch when she needs a strike or an out
- the pitch of pitch she throws with a runner on third or bases loaded
- the bat the hitter is using
- the hitter’s physical strength
- the hitter’s quickness of bat speed

Adjusting to the pitcher is crucial in being successful and that is where a coach on third has to talk to their hitter and talk them through the at bat. If the coach doesn't, the teaching moment is gone. Trying to correct it in practice or after the game is over is in many cases just too late. The player will never remember that at bat, the situation or what their body was doing at that specific time when it is after the fact.

Ok, I hear you, how do I do that with one conference. First of all, start right away coaching the players from third in practices or using the cues during hitting practices so they are use to them. Then during a game they will hear you talking to them and will understand the verbal or hand cues. Have cues for them that are short and to the point.

When I see one of my hitters not reading the pitch or adjusting to the pitcher well, I give them some of the following cues:

—hitting the ball to the opposite field—this is vary hard for them to think of doing. Seems like a lot of players feel they have to pull the ball and hit it as far as possible. Instead teach them to use the whole field. The player that does this is harder to defend against and harder to pitch to normally. I know some coaches/trainers teach their players not to step on the swing. That's fine if the player is successful with that. But when watching some players, you can see that the hip section and front leg are trying to pull the ball when the pitcher is throwing the ball outside. That leads to missing the ball, a weak grounder to the opposite side or a little pop up. So, I believe in doing whatever it takes to get the job done according to the situation and the players. Players are individuals. Keep teaching them the difference in techniques and adapt them to whatever works for them.

—when they are not hitting the inside or outside pitch I will say “take the ball where it is thrown, attack the ball where it is thrown, go with the pitch, step to the pitch” (meaning take an outside pitch to the opposite field, inside pitch—turn on it).

Note: I know some coaches teach the no step technique and that is fine if the player can do it. If the player is still swinging with the hips going one way and the top half the other, it may have to be adjusted more.

—when they are not swinging the bat with authority, hesitating on the swing or just giving a token swing. I will very strongly but in a positive tone say “attack the ball, be aggressive or sting it” that is said over and over not just once, you have to talk some players into attacking the ball. I am constantly talking to them.

—with a runner on third—I will say “take the pitch where it is thrown” meaning look for the outside pitch and guide it over the infield. Plus I might say, “it's Yadi time (Yadier Molina of the St. Louis Cardinals is the one I want up with a runner in scoring position especially when on third. He shortens up and takes the pitch over the heads of the opposite side infielders for a base hit and an RBI.) Other cues would be “go with it”, meet it where it is thrown” and also hand cues that equate to “just take the ball over the infielders”.

—having trouble hitting the rise—players unless they are taught will stand right in the middle of the box. I call this no man's land. The hitter is will have trouble hitting any ball with movement on it. Some players can move up in the box and stay off of the rise and some cannot. A coach needs to realize who can and who cannot hit it where they are standing. If they cannot, signal them to move all the way to the back of the box with their back foot as close to the back line of the box as possible. Then can see the ball rise out of the box and hopefully hold their swing and the umpire can see that the pitch is a ball. The pitcher will probably counter with an outside pitch but if the hitter can “take the ball where it is thrown” will be able to shoot the ball directly down the opposite foul line. If the hitter is jammed, she has more time to get around on it. It is a chess game but the hitter has to have the tools and know how to be able to play the game skillfully.

—being overpowered by the pitcher—I go through the check list with verbal and visual cues from third base. This might be one of my conferences also. I will cue the hitter to make sure the knuckles are properly aligned, to choke up, to lay the bat back a little, to shorten up a little on the swing and approach, open the hips a little on the stance and get the bat out of the V of the hand.

NOTE: I know that might take away power but I would rather have a base hit than a strike out. The players have got to be taught that sometimes they will just have to adjust their stance and their approach to certain pitchers that have the physical edge over them. Not everyone is of equal height, weight or talent but there are ways to beat a pitcher who is actually better than the hitter.

The hitter also needs to be taught that if they are struggling with a pitcher that is overpowering them and that pitcher gives them an outside pitch especially a high outside pitch, just take the body that way and stick the bat out at the ball. Even a half swing against a fast pitcher will result in the ball going over the opposite side infielders for a hit. That is called a “screamer in the books” because no one knows that the hitter dumped it into the outfield versus shooting it to the outfield but it still goes down as a base hit.

So many players do not look for a pitch that they can just get into the outfield when they need to do that to stay alive. They say “but it is a ball”. That is true but with hitters and slappers some of the best pitches against better pitchers are balls that are outside. The hitter can just slap them right down the opposite foul line for a hit.

As a coach, you may have a stud player whose “job” may be to produce the long ball especially when they are older players or those in the elite programs. But what percentage of players is that? Most players will not be in that category so if we coach everyone like they are, how successful will that player or program become?

My suggestion is to recognize who those players are but coach every player individually to be the best player possible according to their own strengths. Teach the players what their strengths and weaknesses are and then teach them not only according to their strengths but also their weaknesses.