

hat a Wonderful Offensive Tool-The Bunt

The power game is nice but if you cannot hit the pitcher, do you just strike out or should you be creative? I am a huge believer in the short game:

BUNT RUNNERS OVER WITH NO OUTS

BUNT FOR A BASE HIT-BUNT FOR A BASE HIT

SLAP THE BALL AS A RUN AND SLAP

SLAP THE BALL AS A SLAP BUNT TO COMBAT A SLOW PITCHER

LEARN TO RUN THE BASES AND SLIDE CORRECTLY-AWAY FROM THE TAG NOT STRAIGHT IN TO THE BASE

SQUEEZE THE RUNNER HOME

BE ABLE TO BUNT WITH TWO OUTS, TWO STRIKES AND THE GAME ON THE LINE

BE ABLE TO BUNT THE BALL DOWN EITHER LINE

BE ABLE TO PUSH THE BALL PAST CHARGING INFELDERS

Much of our success was putting pressure on the defense thus, forcing them to make mistakes. When I watch high school games, summer games, play other junior colleges and even watching the Women's College World Series, it amazes me that coaches wait for the big hit not even trying to bunt runners over in no out situations. It especially confuses me when they do not try to beat a good pitcher by exploiting the defense with the short game. I watch player after player strike out with a big swing. Home runs are great but I believe that if you can't catch up to the pitcher, learn to bunt and keep that defense honest.

We loved to mess with the minds of the defense. When I would hear them say to each other, "I don't know what they are going to do?" I knew we were going to win. *The players love the strategy-so teach it, the players love to steal-so steal, the players love to beat out bunts-so bunt!!!* Running a fast offense can really get your team up and excited. Baseball is a boring game, so why do the same thing during a softball game. Break the baseball tradition mentality and THINK SOFTBALL. SPEED KILLS.

You have to teach your players the mechanics of the bunt especially the bunt for a base hit. Players do not know the correct mechanics coming into you program unless the previous coach taught the fundamentals and worked on them a lot. We bunted every day. EVERY DAY! We were known nationally as a team that would bunt often and at any time during the game. If the defense gave us an inch, we would go to the short game to "burn" them.

The Sacrifice Bunt

Obviously, the whole idea is to put the ball down on the ground in fair territory. This sounds easy but not if you do not use proper mechanics. The sacrifice bunt should fool no one so the defense will be prepared for a bunt and the pitcher will probably throw the ball high in an attempt to make the bunter pop up. Do nothing fancy, it is a sacrifice, tell them to just put the ball down and take the out.

1. First, have the player pivot versus squaring around. We are going to do all of our bunts off a pivot so why change the feet for a sacrifice.

2. The player's weight should be forward on the front foot. So many times if the weight is equal, the player will shift their weight back and that creates backspin on the ball resulting in a foul ball.
3. The bat angle is the key. I like the bat to be level and if it is a low pitch, the bunter leans down to get it. When bunters slant the bat, there is more chance for them to overcompensate when going after an outside pitch especially if it is low causing it to go foul. If we would see a bunter with a slanted bat, we called a drop curve and very few of them could adjust to it to bunt it fairly. Most fouled the pitch off.
4. Keep the bat high, almost to the bunter's nose. Anything above the bat is a ball and anything lower they bunt. Emphasize over and over to keep the bat high.
Drill: Everyone has a bat or stick and we just keep practicing the pivot and hold. Sounds simple but it is amazing how many will have the bat below their chest when they pivot around. They have to be made aware of where the bat is in relation to their body. This is one huge mistake that the player makes in bunting; the bat has to be held high to ensure the ball will go down when bunted. Practice this over and over until they get it right.
5. The hands on the bat make a world of difference in determining if the ball will be fair or foul. The wrist and elbow of the **bottom** hand need to be down. When they are up, the hand is weaker and the bunter tends to foul it off because the tendency is to dip the top of the bat when the bottom hand is above the bat. Keep the wrist and elbow of the bottom hand **DOWN**. The **top** hand needs to be behind the bat. If you watch players, they have a tendency to have their hand under the bat, palm facing up. This causes the bat to rotate back which in turn makes the bat to go under the ball and the pitch to be fouled off. Keeping the hand behind the bat keeps the bat from rotating and gives the ball a truer bounce off the bat. You may even have the player rotate her top thumb forward to give the ball a little forward impetus helping it go into fair territory. The movement of her thumb is not a lot maybe as little of a quarter to eighth of an inch. There is very little movement when doing this technique.

Bunting for a Basehit

Players and coaches wonder why the player cannot beat out a bunt. What happens then is the coach stops calling for the bunt for a base hit thus taking away a huge offensive weapon. If you watch your player, you will see that they are not getting out of the box quickly enough. A bunt for a base hit means the player has got to bunt the ball on the run. If they do a drop step bunt or they are not **running** in the box, they probably will be out against a team with a good defense.

1. Have them ready to shift their weight to their front foot **before** they contact the ball. It is like they are going to run out of the box like a slapper. They actually make contact with the ball while on their front foot only. Their front shoulder stays in towards the pitcher, do not let them square to the pitcher.
2. When running, their weight is on their front foot and their back foot actually is off the ground when they contact the ball. This allows their first step with their back foot to be out of the box in front of the plate and on its way to first. Remember, they have already contacted the ball before they take that step on to their back foot in front of the plate so they are not out of the box on contact. It is imperative that they be off that back foot and on the run.
3. Their bat should be over the complete width of the plate for the best coverage and should be out in front of the plate not back over the plate. It should be held high so they do not foul off a high strike and so that the ball is going down off the bat and not up. Here again, their bottom wrist and elbow are pointed down. Otherwise, if the hand is above the bat, it will tilt the bat, which creates a foul ball. **The hands are split apart not together.** As the player gets older and especially when they play more advanced softball, they will find that the pitchers they face are also getting better and faster. **If the player bunts with her hands together and chokes up on the bat, the bat will deflect off the ball instead of the ball deflecting off the bat unless she has very strong hands and forearms.** This will result

in a foul ball. I know many male coaches teach the slanted bat with the hands together and choked. Please realize that a man has more upper body strength and arm strength than a woman unless the woman does a lot of upper body and especially forearm work. The player becomes stronger with the hands split and the ball will then deflect off the bat instead of the bat deflecting off the ball. This is especially important for players who are not of nationally ranked caliber.

4. The top hand acts as a pivot point to be able to bunt the ball to third or to first. Remember to keep the hands split apart and then it is just a matter of pushing and pulling the bottom hand. The bottom hand controls where the ball is going and the top hand acts as the pivot point.
5. A right-handed batter pushes the left arm out to go to first and pulls it back toward their body to go to third. This is just the opposite for the left hander-push to third and pull to first. If the ball is not going down the lines and is going toward the middle of the field, they need to push or pull more. Remember, the bat needs to be in front of the plate not over it. We practice this constantly so that we can get the ball right down the lines. This causes the fielder like the third baseman to backhand the ball making a farther throw to the base. There is nothing more exciting than to see your player bunt down the line and you as a coach know that there is no way the fielder is going to throw her out.

Drill:

Have four players as bunters with another player at the pitching machine with plenty of balls. Also, have fielders at infield positions to shag. The infielders should be working on their fielding skills even if they are not throwing the runner out. I love to work on a couple of drills at the same time to save time. A cone is put down each line about 1 foot away from the line. The player has to bunt the ball in those areas-between the cones and the lines. The bunters start one at a time and run while the pitcher is about to feed the machine. The second bunter immediately follows the first bunter and so on. The four keep quickly rotating each getting just one pitch until the bucket is empty. This teaches the players to be aggressive and to get out of the box quickly. **We did this drill everyday without fail.** As a coach, you need to constantly correct each one until they understand and execute correctly. "Run faster, get out of the box, keep the bat high, keep the bat level, get the bat out in front of the plate, pull your arm in more, push your arm out more" and so on. That is the way they learn how to bunt for a base **hit-repetition and feedback from the coach.** Make sure the bunts are going down the lines to make it harder on the defense.

Slap Bunt

First:

A slap bunt can be used for a variety of reasons. One is to smack the ball past a charging infielder and another to combat a slow pitcher. It is always better for a hitter to be able to adjust to the different speeds of pitchers but sometimes they just cannot do it. Instead of them striking out, have them time the pitcher with a slap bunt. Their form is extremely important to keep from popping the ball up.

Second:

Once again, we use the pivot and never square around and the hands are split apart not together. Keeping the hands split and then putting them together before the attack phase creates a lot of zip on the ball upon contact. **First**, the weight goes to the front foot while the bat goes to a bunt position (high, level, wrist and elbow down, bat in front of the plate). **Second**, the bat is pulled back but it is extremely important for it to stay on the same plane as the first step. That means that the bat stays parallel to the ground and the **handle of the bat does not drop down at all.** The player is not going to a hitting position and that is where many players make their mistake. The players want to go to a hitting position and they are not quick enough to do that and it usually winds up in a pop up or a swing and miss. Reinforce to them to keep the bat on that level plane. As a coach, you may have to constantly say it to them and may have to actually guide their bat through that plane in slow motion so they can feel it. Their weight shifts all the way to the back foot. The split hands that started apart now will come together with the top hand coming down to the bottom hand. This creates a longer lever while attacking the ball, which creates more force to the ball. In other words, you sting the ball with a lot of power attacking right at the corner

infielders. This tends to put the fear in their eyes.

Third:

The player needs to transfer the weight back to the front foot as they attack the ball. The bat comes straightforward and the weight needs to be on the front foot not at all on the back foot. If it is on the back foot, the swing will go up and they will probably hit a pop up or weak grounder. When the bat stays on the same plane and the weight is transferred front to back to front quickly, it generates a lot of force and zips out of the infield. This sets up a fake slap bunt. Once the player zips a ball past an infielder, that fielder will think twice about charging a player using that technique. When they stop charging in anticipation of a slap, the player can lay down a bunt for a base hit and be very successful. The defense will be guessing what the player will be doing from then on during the game.

Squeeze Bunt

See the ball; bunt the ball fairly on the ground. The bunter's form is the same as bunting for a base hit when it comes to not showing the bunt early. They do not want to tip off the defense until the last second so the runner can get farther down the line. The bunter does not have to be on the run as much as a bunt for a base hit though. The bunter has to get the bat on the ball no matter where the ball is thrown unless it is way over everyone's head or way wide to where the catcher has no chance to catch the ball. Otherwise, even if the bunter has to jump up to bunt the ball to the ground, the attempt has got to be there. The runner is an easy out if the bunter does not do that. The runner's job is to go hard to the plate and the bunter's job is to put it on the ground in fair territory. Practice this a lot. The more you practice bunts for a hit and throws all types of pitches and speeds at the bunters, the better and more confident they will become and they will execute it during the games.

Look for Celeste's article next month.

Good Luck!