

Sacrifice Bunting

Philosophy

There are many offensive philosophies in baseball. Some coaches play for the big inning, while others try to score one run an inning. Whatever the philosophy may be, the bunting game should always be a skill taught to help enhance the quality of the offense.

The first key, and arguably the most important key to bunting, is getting the players to buy in and understand the importance of a successful sacrifice. As a coach, it is my job to educate my players so that they enjoy bunting. They first must be taught the reason for bunting and how it improves the offense. Once they understand the bunting game and realize the importance of it, they will then be enthusiastic about bunting. Instructing the mechanics of bunting will then become easier.

Before we get into the mechanics of bunting, there are a few rules that a player should be aware of to make the mechanics of bunting easier to learn. The golden rule of bunting is being committed to bunting a STRIKE. It is not good enough just to be committed to bunting. The player must be committed to bunting a strike!

After being committed to bunting a strike, the player must then be committed to bunting the ball to the ground early. We like to call it the “drop zone”. The drop zone is an area a few feet in front of the home plate area and extends down each foul line. This is very crucial when sacrifice bunting. If the ball lingers in the air the base runner must freeze until he/she knows the ball is going to hit the ground. This in turn will allow the defense to possibly throw the runner out at second or third (depending on the situation) base. This will then negate the reason for bunting and the team will be left in the same offensive situation but with one more out than before (typically one out, but some teams do bunt with one out.) Therefore, it is very critical that the bunt is laid down in the drop zone as soon as possible.

Lastly, if a player is committed to bunting, has bought into the system, knows about the drop zone, and is still experiencing trouble bunting, he should be reminded that a good bunt will work. Committed players are sometimes their own worst enemy because they tend to be perfectionists. They try to make the perfect bunt. This is not necessary. Players just need to lay down a GOOD bunt. A good bunt, nine out of ten times, will advance the runner(s) and give their team the best chance of scoring a run.

As stated earlier, it is easier to teach your team bunting when they understand what they are striving to accomplish. The objective of bunting is putting base runners into scoring position. The player must understand that he is sacrificing his “at bat” for the team to move a man in scoring position.

With no outs and a runner on first, we typically ask the batter to bunt the ball to the first- base side of the field. In a perfect world, the player would bunt the ball well enough for

the first baseman to field the ball. The logic is that with a runner on first, the first baseman has to hold him on. Therefore, he cannot creep in like the third baseman can. The pitcher is going to cover the left side of the infield. Consequently, if we get it to the first baseman, enough time has elapsed and will ensure that the runner will be advanced to second base (unless of course they have a crash play on.)

With no outs and runners at first and second, we typically ask the batter to bunt the ball to the third-base side of the field. The logic behind this is that the third baseman has to hold his ground. If the batter shows bunt and the third baseman charges in, the runner on second base can steal third base very easily. As a result, the first baseman is now crashing in and the pitcher is covering the right side of the infield. For that reason, we ask the batter to try to lay down a bunt that the third baseman can field. If he fields the bunt, third base will be left vacant, and this ensures that the runner from second base will reach third base safely.

Mechanics

When a batter is sacrifice bunting, his mechanics are critical to the success of the bunt. The first thing the batter should do is move up in the batter's box. This is His front foot should be on the chalk in the front part of the box. This ensures that the ball will be bunted in fair territory. Again, we are playing the percentages. If the batter starts in the front part of the box, the percentages go drastically up that the ball will be bunted fair and the runner will be advanced. However, if the batter chooses to bunt from the back of the box, then he is bunting from foul territory and must bunt the ball into fair territory. Not only should the batter move up in the box, he should move as close to the plate as he legally can. The batter now has plate coverage. If the batter does not make this adjustment, then he will have to reach for an outside pitch. Reaching for a pitch tends to make the bunter drop the barrel of the bat causing the ball to be popped up, not sent to the drop zone. Knowing that he has plate coverage, the batter now will have more confidence in his bunting. He will know that if he has to reach to bunt the baseball then the pitch was a ball and he can confidently know to pull the bat back and it will be called a ball.

Now that the batter is up in the box and over in the box, he has a committed mind set to bunt a strike. It is now all up to the technique or mechanics. As always, it starts with the foundation, or in this case, the batter's feet. The batter should widen his feet to more than shoulder- width apart. This will give him a solid foundation to work with. He should then rotate his hips so that he is square to the pitcher. As he squares his hips, he should sink his hips so that his eyes are level with the top of the strike zone.

***Coaching point: when the batter sinks his hips, if he cannot genuflect comfortably, then his feet are too narrow to rotate to the pitcher. If the batter is able to genuflect comfortably, he should then lift his knee about five to seven inches off the ground and he will have a very solid

bunting foundation***

The next step is proper hand placement. A good bunter will slide his top hand to where the label starts on the bat (closer to the handle.) The batter should pinch the bat with his thumb and index finger. A common mistake players make is wrapping their fingers around the bat. This is dangerous because his fingers are exposed and are at risk of injury. The batter should pinch the bat firmly and allow his elbows to act as “shock absorbers” to ensure that the barrel does not move backwards when it makes contact with the ball.

The batter should then move his bottom hand three to four inches up the bat away from the knob. The batter should grip the bat with his bottom hand. This will give the batter bat control and his hands will be in the best position to bunt a strike fair and in the drop zone.

Now that the foundation has been set and the hands are in the proper position on the bat, we will then teach the batter where to place the bat. The bat should be flat and at the top of the strike zone. Again, this is to instill confidence in the batter. If the batter places his bat at the top of the strike zone then he has eliminated the guess work about a high strike. Anything above his bat will be called a ball and the batter can feel confident, when he pulls the bat back, that the umpire will agree with him. Anything below his barrel, he should move his knees down to bunt the ball. If the batter has to drop his barrel to bunt the ball, he has not bent his knees adequately, and subsequently will likely pop the bunt up and have an unsuccessful sacrifice attempt.

Lastly, is the angle of the bat. The batter can use the baselines as his guide when angling the bat. The batter should establish this angle very early. If he is trying to bunt the ball toward third base, he should point the cap of the bat at first base (lefties would point the knob.) When bunting toward first base, the batter should point the knob of the bat at third base (lefties would point the cap of the bat.) The batter should not have to change the angle of the bat to bunt the ball, only the height of the barrel. Again, this is accomplished by moving his knees up and down and not moving the barrel of the bat.

Good sacrifice bunting comes down to three things: commitment, confidence and technique. If a coach can inspire his team to include these three ingredients into their bunting game, there is great potential for success. Although the art of bunting is not easy, it can be simplified. The simplification of bunting can increase the percentages of your team's success of getting men in scoring position.