

April 2008 NEWSLETTER

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Featured Article:

Conquering the Curveball

by Dave Hudgens - article provided by HittingWorld.com

All Major League hitters can hit a fastball, but only the best have a solid plan to hit the curveball. No one can hit the great curveball - the curveball low and away, the hall of fame pitcher's pitch. Even the best hitters don't swing at that pitch until they get two strikes. So why then would anyone provide instruction on how to hit a pitch that no one can hit? Because even the best pitchers cannot consistently throw their off-speed pitch in a great location for a strike. Therefore, you don't have to hit

the un-hittable curveball. Your job is to be prepared and to be in a good position to hit the pitcher's mistakes and take advantage of his weaknesses.

With all of that in mind it may surprise you to find out that the easiest pitch to hit in baseball is a hanging curveball, or an off-speed pitch up in the strike zone. This is true however only if you are in the right position to hit it. Thus the secrets to conquering the curveball are:

- Preparation & studying the pitcher's habits
- Knowing the proper keys to hitting the off-speed pitch
- Practicing curveball drills

It is that simple. You will never be able to hit the un-hittable curveball, but don't worry, no one can. You will however be able to hit the hittable curveball consistently if you do your homework and practice your techniques. A word of caution - if you find yourself out front, off balance, and not recognizing the pitch, you will consistently have problems with the breaking ball. Without a solid foundation, you will not have success with this pitch or any other pitch for that matter. From the viewpoint of either a parent or a coach, there are two key points you want to look for as you view your hitter:

1. If your player pushes forward, or is slightly out front, it is important that his front knee does not go over his front foot. If he is in this position, he is too far forward to hit the breaking ball. He's lunged forward and now he's in a poor position to hit that pitch.
2. Check to see if the hitter is consistently swinging at breaking balls out of the strike zone. Many hitters swing at pitches out of the strike zone because they have committed their weight transfer too soon. Once again, this is the reason pitchers throw off-speed pitches to begin with - their goal is to disrupt the balance of the hitter.

Preparation

The first key to mastering the curveball is for you to learn how to prepare for it. You need to have a definite battle plan, your personal curveball strategy. You need to know:

- Who is pitching
- What type of pitches he has
- What command he has over his pitches
- What command he has THAT DAY over his pitches

This preparation should start before the game even begins, depending on your situation. If you have scouting reports it is an obvious advantage. However scouting reports are not always correct. You need to see what the pitcher has that day. When you go to stretch before the game begins, position yourself in a place to where you can see the opposing pitcher warming up in the bullpen. At this point you should be thinking:

- Which of his pitches you would most like to hit
- Which of his pitches you want to lay off
- Which angle his release point is coming from
- What are his best pitches
- Which pitches he can and can't control
- What is your plan - are you going to hit the ball to right centerfield or left centerfield?

You should remind yourself:

- Never swing at a pitch you haven't seen
- If you are hitting up in the order- take a pitch
- If you are hitting down in the order- watch what he is throwing previous hitters that might be like you.

Since recognizing a curveball is so difficult to do, you must get into a routine to practice it. My suggestions for your routine:

- When your own pitchers are throwing in the bullpen and practicing, ask if you can stand in and see how early you can recognize the ball out of the hand.
- When you are taking batting practice, have the pitcher mix in some curveballs. It is not even important if these pitches are strikes, what you are trying to do here is practice recognizing pitches.
- When someone else is hitting during batting practice, stand behind the cage and work on seeing the pitcher's release point.
- Before you hit in the on deck circle, work on seeing the ball out of the pitcher's hand. If you don't recognize the ball until it is halfway to home plate, it is too late. It is almost like telling the pitcher to pitch from 30ft instead of 60ft.

The Proper Keys to Hitting the Curveball

Here are the vital tools for success against the curveball:

- Early recognition. Note that the better a pitcher's curveball is, the tougher it is to recognize. The harder a curveball is, the less you'll see the trajectory of the ball pop up out of the hand. The harder a pitcher throws a curveball, the more difficult it is for him to control.
- Get a good one to hit.
- Look for the 12/6 rotation of the seams just after release.
- A pitcher will slow his arm down on a poor curveball and his delivery will change.
- You must keep your hands and body back; your weight should stay back at least 70%. If you commit your hands early, you will have no chance to have success with this pitch. That is why early recognition is so important.

The pitcher wants you to swing at the curveball that starts in the zone and breaks out of the zone. It is no secret that most hitters get themselves out on curveballs that are out of the strike zone. Pitchers have success when the curveball breaks late, and this pitch is a very difficult pitch to lay off, especially with two strikes. Again that is why preparation and knowing what type of breaking ball a pitcher has is so important. If you know you can't hit someone's curveball, don't swing at it until you get two strikes.

If you find yourself out on your front foot, or pushing forward, don't swing! The only time you want to swing when your weight is forward is if you have two strikes and you are trying to battle. The reason you don't want to swing from this position is that when your hands are forward, your weight is forward and this is a poor position from which to hit.

A curveball that starts at the knees or slightly above will generally break down and out of the strike zone. The curveball that starts a little bit high will generally break into the strike zone. It is critical that you don't go up to hit the breaking ball, but allow the breaking ball to come down to you. That is why it is so important to know what type of break each pitch has, and what kind of command the pitcher has of these pitches.

It is also important when you are facing the same side pitcher that your approach is to the opposite field gap. This will keep your front side in, which is critical to having any success with this pitch. If the ball does hang inside, get the bat head out and pull it - don't try to guide the ball to the opposite field. When we talk about your approach being to the opposite field, that doesn't mean you are going to hit everything to the opposite field. A hanging curveball is one of the easiest pitches to hit. This is a pitch you can really do some damage with.

You can look for the fastball and still hit the curveball - all good hitters are able to do this. But it is almost impossible to look for a curveball and hit a fastball. If you are at the level to where you can sit on a curveball, and by that I mean looking for nothing but the curveball, remember mechanically now you can get into the position of power a little bit later. Many hitters look for the fastball and adjust to the off-speed pitch. Usually you get started back early and easy.

If you are sitting on a curve ball you are going to get started back a little bit later. You want the curveball to come to you. You don't want to go out to get it!

It is very important that you wait for the curveball to come down to you. The curveball that starts up and out of the strike zone breaks down into the strike zone. You must make sure to keep your body down. If you go up to hit the ball, and it breaks down, you will not be a successful off-speed hitter. As a hitter you not only want the curveball to come down to you, you also want to stay down and wait for the ball to come to you.

Another key to hitting the curveball is what I call hesitation. As a hitter, you should feel some sort of hesitation after your stride foot comes down. You have to find a way to keep your hands and the majority of your weight back. So what happens when the pitcher throws you a curveball and it is a hittable curveball? The feeling you should have is one of hesitation.

Know Your Strike Zone

Where many hitters get into trouble is swinging at offspeed pitches out of the strike zone. The best hitters command the strike zone. They know what pitches they want and where they want them. Your batting average and on base percentage will jump dramatically if you command the strike zone. This is what I call being selectively aggressive.

Your Goal

The best pitchers in baseball can not throw their offspeed pitch in a great location for a strike consistently. So don't be intimidated. Even if the pitcher has a great curveball, it may not be good that day and it won't be un-hittable every time. There is one important question to ask: Is anyone's curveball consistent outing after outing? The answer is definitely NO.

Your goal as a hitter is to have a good approach on the hittable curveball. This is just one of the pieces of the puzzle to becoming a master hitter. Success doesn't come overnight and only the most dedicated players will achieve their goals. It is my hope in putting this article together that you will have the same solid information at your disposal that the best hitters in the world have. 95% of players don't have a plan when they see a curveball - aren't you glad you do?

- Dave Hudgens has been involved with the best of baseball for over 30 years. He is currently the Minor League Hitting Coordinator for the Cleveland Indians. Prior to that he was a longtime hitting coach in the Oakland Athletics' organization

Featured Drill:

5 Curveball Drills

Here are 5 curveball drills taken straight from our Conquering the Curveball DVD (the second DVD in the Hitting for Excellence series).

1) Underhand Recognition Drill

This drill is designed to help differentiate between the speeds of a fastball and an off-speed pitch. I like this drill very much because it will help you recognize where the weight of your body needs to be. To do this drill:

- Coach tosses underhand from behind a screen sitting about 15ft. in front of home plate.
- Coach mixes change of speeds and locations. Changing the speeds allows the hitter to feel the hesitation.
- Hitter drives the ball right back up the middle.

2) Bounce Drill

This drill reinforces the hesitation that needs to take place when hitting a breaking ball. For example if you are looking fastball, and the pitcher throws a hittable breaking ball, if you continue on as if it were a fastball, you will be way out front. That is why it is so important to recognize early and hesitate until the ball gets to you.

To do this drill seated:

- The tosser sits behind a screen 15ft. in front of the hitter.
- The tosser bounces the ball 4-5ft. in front of home plate, allowing the ball to bounce into the strike zone.

To do this drill standing:

- The tosser stands behind a screen 25ft. in front of the hitter.
- Tosses the ball overhand, bouncing the ball 3-4 ft. in front of home plate, allowing the ball to bounce up into the strike zone.

3) Underhand Lob Drill

Since a major key to hitting the curveball is to allowing it to come down to you, this drill is designed to practice waiting for the ball to come down to you. To do this drill:

- The tosser positions himself behind a screen 10-15ft. in front of the hitter, lobbing the ball over the screen.
- The hitter must wait for the ball to come down to him. Stay inside the ball and drive it up the middle.

4) Drop the Ball Drill

The purpose of this drill is to teach the hitter to stay down on the ball. It also helps to develop quickness in the hands.

To do this drill:

- The tosser stands to the side of the hitter, far enough back so as not to be hit with the bat.
- Tosses the ball high in the air, dropping the ball straight down into the contact zone.
- Hitter should make sure he gets ready early and let the ball come down to him.

5) Back Toss Drill

It is very important when hitting a breaking ball that you stay inside the ball. This drill will help develop that habit as well as practicing the hesitation.

- Standing 5-6ft. behind the hitter and to his open side (45 degree angle) underhand toss the ball into the contact zone.
- The hitter should then concentrate on hitting the ball right back up the middle. This will give him the feel of staying inside the ball.



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