

DEVELOPING A VISUAL TRACKING SYSTEM

When a player is learning to hit, keep in mind the woodchopper's action in cutting down a tree. The woodchopper swings his axe easily and naturally. The tree is always there, and he is confident that he will hit it. Replace the axe with a baseball bat and you have the makings of a sound baseball swing.

A good swing requires rhythm, timing and balance. Some players come by these qualities naturally; however, most hitters have to be taught. The hitter who keeps his head still, who doesn't pull his head off the ball or move it back and forth nor up and down, is very likely to have a smooth rhythmical swing. The position of the head allows the batter to track the ball with the eyes, and only if the head is correct will the hitter be able to develop this tracking system. What you are working with here is probably the most important phase of hitting. It is what makes hitting so difficult, and requires constant practice and repetition. A hitter must be able to focus sharply on the ball from the pitcher's hand until it hits the bat. A lapse from release of the pitch until contact can lead to failure to hit the ball.

Secondly, the hitter must be able to figure speed and rotation as fast as possible. In order to do this effective identification of speed and rotation the hitter must window frame the pitch at release and focus on the ball at that point. Failure to do this simple act will result in failure of a high percentage of batting attempts.

Why is velocity and spin so important? The main reason is: if the hitter figures velocity as soon as possible, and spin next, he will be more likely in correct position to hit the ball, whether they are fastballs, curveballs, sliders, or change-of-speed pitches. A hitter that is not too sure of velocity and rotation will be off balance in hitting the ball and swing too early at breaking balls or change-ups, and too late on fastballs. A hitter must determine spin as the pitch is thrown to adjust the plane of the bat on the ball. Good hitters study the release points of pitchers, and determine whether the ball will break or be thrown with red dot-spin as a fastball.

Examples of this visual tracking at the release point of the pitcher's hand is; if the release is overhand, the ball will usually jump out at the hitter, or the curve ball will break down. If the release point goes down more to the side of the pitcher, the fastball will sink and the breaking ball will break across the plate.

If a hitter visualizes his swing, he should see his body turning in the rotation of the hips and notice that his head must be perfectly still. Rotating the bottom part of the body tends to cause the head to move off the ball. Hips and head work in opposition to each other. As the hips rotate, the head and eyes must remain stationary to make proper contact with the bat on the ball. The faster the hips turn, the more power the hitter can generate providing his head and eyes remain steady and intact. Also, to insure that the hips rotate easily, the back knee and rear toe must also rotate toward the pitcher. Last, but not least, as the hips turn and power is generated, there is a less tendency for the bat to drop under the pitch enhancing the hitter's ability to hit line drives. To facilitate these rotary motions on the bottom half of the body, the hitter should maintain his stance with a straight or toe-in position on the rear foot.

A major fault in young hitters is their eyes leaving the ball way too soon. This problem is usually accompanied by turning the head too soon. If a hitter sees the ball well in batting practice, and works on wide to narrow focus, he is watching the ball from release to contact, and chances are he will start to do the same thing in the game.

The dominant eye principle is very easy to determine the player's master eye. Hold your hand fully extended in front of your face with your index finger and thumb in a circle. Look at the circle with both eyes open, and focus on a particular object inside the circle; then close one eye. If the circle does not move, the open eye is your master or dominant eye. The hitter must, however, make sure that he can see the pitcher with both eyes, and that the eyes are on a level plane.

It is impossible to see the bat hit the ball. By concentration with a level and steady head, most hitters with good concentration can follow the ball up to about a foot from the bat or a little closer. Usually the speed of the bat and ball prohibit seeing the actual contact.

A still head is a must. Any movement will cause a corresponding movement in the rest of the body. A still head will keep the eyes steady, preventing the necessity of some other adjustment. The steady head will prevent over striding, and the opening of the front shoulder too soon. The action of taking the eye off the ball or jerking of the head is a detriment to a sound hitting technique. Hitting requires **intense hand/eye coordination**, and increasing this coordination not only increases the chance of making contact, but also better contacts producing line drives.

Proper head position during the stance and swing improves vision by involving both eyes. The back eye is as important as the front eye, and vision requires both eyes to be level. It is difficult to focus on a pitch if the head is tilted and the eyes uneven. Incorrect head position can also cause the bridge of the nose to block vision from the back eye. Try to have the hitter's head straight up with the nose facing the pitcher. Both the eyes and head move back together to track the ball all the way to impact with the bat, and good vision is a must for the decision process.