

HITTING

***** Fastpitch softball batters have to react to a pitch as quickly as major league batters do *****

When a major league baseball pitcher pitches at 90 miles per hour from 60 feet 6 inches, it takes the ball .46 of a second to reach the batter.

When a high school age fastpitch softball pitcher pitches at 55 miles per hour from 40 feet, it takes the ball .49 of a second to reach the batter!

TO DEVELOP INTO A GOOD HITTER YOU NEED TO WORK ON AND DEVELOP THE FOLLOWING:

Confidence- Feeling comfortable with your swing so that you can repeat it and feel you can handle any pitch thrown in any situation.

Consistency- Following the same routine each time you hit so you are in the right position and mentally ready to hit.

Discipline- Putting in the practice time needed to become a good hitter and learn the proper mechanics. Having the mental toughness to hit pitches according to the situation and count.

Balance- Being able to set up, take your swing and finish in balance. This allows you to keep your head steady and on the ball and shows you have the right mechanics. Every time you step into the batters box and before each pitch you need to follow the same steps. By following the same routine you will establish consistency in being set up the same way each time ready for the pitch. You will also be mentally prepared for the pitch and the situation and be ready to focus only on the ball.

Stance- Set up far enough from the plate so that when you extend your arms the fat part of the bat covers the plate. Learn what this distance is so when you look at your feet you know how far they should be from the plate. Generally if you hold the bat in your lead hand you should be able to reach out and touch the outside edge of the plate with the end of the bat. Your feet should be a little wider than shoulder width apart with your weight on the balls of your feet. Slightly flex your knees so you can bounce a little to unlock your legs and bend forward a little at the waist to establish flexing at the waist to unlock your body.

Grip- To grip the bat you should rest the bat handle on your fingers and close them around the bat. This allows the bat to rest at the base of the fingers in your hands not running down the palms of your hands. You should line up your knuckles when gripping the bat so the middle (or door knocking knuckles) form a straight line. These steps are critical to allow your hands to turn and provide maximum bat speed through the hitting zone. You should grip the bat without squeezing it to tight. Your hands will tighten when you swing to the proper pressure to hold onto the bat. Gripping too tight locks up the wrists so you cannot generate maximum bat speed.

Bat Position- Rest the bat on your back shoulder. This is a good position to take your grip on the bat as it allows you to look down your knuckles to see they are properly lined up. From your shoulder pick the bat up and move your hands so the knob of the bat is even with your arm pit and lined up behind your back shoulder. This puts the bat at the top of the strike zone so the only move required is to pull the knob of the bat through the ball. (The higher the competition level and faster the pitching, you may need to adjust by not positioning your hands as far back behind the shoulder.)

Cocking the trigger- In order to explode with your move forward you must first move your weight back slightly to the inside of your back foot. This is timed to the pitchers movement. When the pitcher begins her move to the plate you should slightly rock back to the inside of your back foot. This starts your stride forward into the pitch. Step with your front foot 2-3 inches forward toward the pitcher landing on your toe lightly like you were stepping on ice.

The turn and pull through- We do not call this the swing because we don't want to swing the bat, or have the bat leading our hands into the hitting zone. The hips start the move through the ball and always lead the hands. Turn the hips through and squash the bug, pivoting on the front of your back foot. This creates an inverted L with your back leg and back, allowing your weight to transfer to the inside of your front foot and

keeping your head centered and steady over your back foot at the finish. Your hands must go directly to the ball in a straight line across the chest to the ball, like a karate chop with the lead hand. Pull and lead with the knob of the bat to the ball and drive with the lead elbow with a slightly downward pull to the ball. The knob of the bat should move in a straight line to the ball and feel as though you are trying to hit the ball with the knob of the bat. This can't happen, because with your hands, set up properly the back hand (or top hand on the bat), will roll over the bottom hand and accelerate the barrel of the bat through the ball.

The Finish- Accelerate the bat all the way through to your back. This allows you to have maximum bat speed through the hitting zone. You should finish in balance with your back leg in the inverted L position, with your belly button facing the pitcher. Your head stays still and your back shoulder comes under your chin. In between pitches the hitter needs to re-think the hitting situation and get ready for the next pitch. Don't stand frozen in the batter's box in the hitting position. Rest the bat on your back shoulder, relax your arms and hands and rethink the hitting situation and count to define your zone. Go through your routine and regain your focus and get set back up to hit.

Hitting Zones- Hitting requires mental discipline, assuring you take advantage of the count to hit pitches that you have the best chance of hitting. Every hitter has a zone that if they get a pitch in that area, they will have a high success rate in hitting. There are other areas that even though the pitches are strikes they are not high percentage pitches to hit. To be a good hitter you must take advantage of the count to look for high percentage pitches when you are ahead in the count. When you are behind in the count your hitting zone has to enlarge as you cover a larger area of the strike zone. You are a much better hitter hitting pitches in your good zone, so when you are ahead in the count you must be disciplined enough to hit only pitches in this zone.

HITTING DRILLS - from a Ralph Weekly article

The two most common and frustrating problems in hitting deal with the stride and the hands to the ball. This article discusses drills that will help with these problems.

Part One - The Hands

1. Wall Drill

Stand close to a wall or barrier. Place the nub of the bat against your belly button and the barrel of the bat against the wall. Using only that distance, execute your swing without the barrel of the bat striking the wall or barrier.

2. Tee Drill

Kneel with a standard batting tee parallel to your body. Place the nub of the bat to your belly button and the barrel against the tee. Using only that distance, execute your swing without the barrel of the bat striking the tee or knocking the tee down.

3. One Hand Off Tee

Kneel parallel to the tee. Take 25 swings with the forehand and 25 swings with the backhand. Work on keeping the hands in and drawing a line across your chest as you take the bat to the ball.

4. One Hand Toss

If your right handed, hold the bat in your left hand in the ready position. Toss a ball up with your right hand and draw a line across your chest as you drive the ball. This forces you to keep your hands in and execute a proper swing. Reverse for left handed hitter.

5. Knob Of Bat To Tee

(follow though) - Place a ball on the tee. Set up properly with stance and hands. Take the nub of the bat to the ball on the tee. This again emphasizes proper hand movement and a short compact swing. Repeat 25 times.

Part Two - The Stride

Teaching proper techniques requires a lot of repetition and a lot of patience. The key is the hips lead the hands, and the stride (pre and post) is the instrument that ignites the lower body and allows the hips to explode to the ball. A short, compact stride to a closed front foot starts the swing, the back then rotates, whipping the hips toward the closed front foot. This lower body action triggers the hands and thrusts the entire body into the ball in a controlled powerful motion. It is important that the back hip and hands stay inside the ball and stay together.

1. Plumb Bob

Take a balanced stance. Hold the bat by the nub at your belly button and let it dangle between your front and back leg. Trigger and take your step. If the bat moves forward with your step, you are committing to early. If the bat remains stationary, you are fine.

2. Shadow Drill

Take a balanced stance with the sun behind you. You will cast a shadow. Place a softball on the head of

your shadow. Trigger and take your stride. If the shadow of your head moves forward of the ball, you are committing too early.

3. Chair Drill

Take a balanced stance with your back leg touching a chair. Trigger and take your stride. If your back leg comes away from the chair, you are committing too early.

OTHER HITTING DRILLS...

MIME DRILL

Have player stand facing a fence. Have her hold up her hands, palms facing the fence.

Trigger swing, but use only lower body driving back knee towards ground, rotating hips.

Keep her head and upper body facing forward makes her focus on the lower body and what it needs to do for a proper swing. This also helps player realize that the swing is two parts meaning the swing starts from the ground up.

IN CAGE

Practice bunting left handed before swinging away. This makes player focus on ball. (It doesn't hurt to have a player or three who can bunt from the left side!!) I always have player start her round in the cage bunting from right and left side.

HANDS TO THE BALL

Have player take proper stance. Hands should be out from shoulder, slightly back, back elbow up. Take bat out of players hand while telling her to leave hands in position. Hold her glove in strike zone. Have her take left hand and draw line across chest and directly towards glove, driving her hand into her glove.

SOFT TOSS

We do a lot of soft toss in practice. We feel this can accomplish a lot if done with a purpose. Always teach proper mechanics and finish that swing. We use different objects, small whiffle balls, colored balls (throw two up, call one color out to hit. Try hit/miss/hit. Hit ball, then try to miss the next one, then hit. They really need to focus to miss!

FROM CIRCLE TO BOX TIP

Emphasize to your girls that getting mentally as well as physically prepared to hit must be done not only before the game but before your at-bat as well. Your at-bat begins when you step into the on-deck circle. Get your intensity level, aggressive attitude and swing mechanics properly prepared in the circle, then carry them with you into the box. Intensity and aggressiveness must be practiced!!!

FOOTWORK AND HIP ROTATION

Most of us are familiar with the term "swish the bug". To show kids how, place ball on outside of their back foot near ankle. When player "swishes the bug" or pivots back foot properly, the ball should be "kicked straight back. A good hip rotation drill is to place bat across belt line with both hands and pull hips and bat through hitting zone. Place ball on tee and have player try to hit ball off tee, finishing with "belly button facing pitcher".

THE CHANGE-UP

One thing we tried last year when are team was struggling with the change was to place two pitching machines on the mound. Players were given ten fast balls from one machine, then ten from the other throwing the change. We then mixed it up for ten. Keeping your weight back is critical.

60 SECOND DRILL

What you do is, get someone to time the player for 60 seconds and make them swing as many times correctly as possible. While you are timing the player make sure each swing is done correctly.

TOSS DRILL

Younger players tend to concentrate on hitting every ball tossed and mechanics may break down if used a lot. Just an enhancement of the traditional soft toss drill. I find that, especially with young hitters, they will get on information overload. Sometimes you have to force them to use what they have learned...without thinking about it. Merely put two or even three "tossers" into the mix when doing the soft toss drill. Time the tosses so that the batter has only enough time to pull the hands back, reset their balance and swing. I find

that this gives them a true feel for the swing....without getting too bogged down with information.

Basketball Drill

This is a great drill for teaching follow-through. Get a couple of old basketballs and take most of the air out of them. Place them on one of those orange cones you see at construction sites. Have the batter take her normal swing and follow-through right through the basketball. **HAVE THEM WEAR HELMETS!!!** Use regular sized bats for this drill.

DROP DRILL

Use some type of back-stop and a bucket or old milk crate. Have one player hold the ball at shoulder height and drop it straight down into the strike-zone. The batter must see the ball and react fast enough to hit it. This drill teaches the batter to take their hands straight to the ball. Have the player dropping the balls, drop them at different times so the batter does not "cheat". The batter can watch the release of the ball, but cannot move prior to the ball being dropped. This drill has increased our team bat speed a lot. We use this drill in warm-ups before every game and as a team.

DIFFERENT OBJECT

Try golf whiffle balls, small coffee can lids (thrown like frisbees), pinto beans, etc., anything that has them concentrating on a smaller than usual target and hitting something that moves, rather than moving in a straight line. This will improve their concentration and teach them to follow the ball all the way in.

MISS/MISS/HIT

Use a series of three pitches to teach them to watch the ball. The first pitch, the batter swings over the ball. The second pitch, swings under the ball. The third pitch the batter hits the ball. Repeat this drill until they can do it every time. After that, you can really fine tune this: Pitch 1 - just nick the top of the ball. Pitch 2-Just nick the bottom of the ball. Pitch 3- Hit it right in the middle of the ball.

TWO-BALL SOFT TOSS

Get two different color whiffle balls (say red & white) or mark half of the balls with a different color dot. Works better with whiffle baseballs or even golf whiffle balls. Its easier to toss smaller balls plus helps hitters in focus and coordination. Toss the two balls at the same time (from same hand) and ask the player to hit one of them, either red or white. This helps players to coordinate, focus and react to hit the correct color ball.

BUNTING

Have players bunt into hula hoops or squares drawn into dirt for points. Down lines = more points.

ADVISE ON BUNTING

Teach this skill early and often!! When your 8 year old get to 12U, they will be welcomed with pitching, good pitching and will need to know how to bunt. Teach slap, drag, sacrifice, this will come in handy when you need that run to score from third base!!