

# Improving Contact and Lowering Strikeouts

Dave Gasser: JUGS Sports

When Pete Rose hit 288 the year after winning an MVP for the National League, the Cincinnati Reds met with him to consider lowering his salary for the year after such a disappointing season. Today, 288 might be one of the top ten batting averages in the National League. What's happened? Many would argue that the increased velocity and spin rates make hitting harder. Many would point to the number of polished relief pitchers at the end of the game lower averages, as modern hitters do not have as many at bats against tiring starting pitchers they have seen at least three times in a game. To be sure, both these new realities of the game are true and the increased challenges are real.

But modern hitters are better trained. Improved batting machines can allow hitters to train to hit increased velocity. These machines can also offer practice against breaking balls that mirror the challenges they face. Slow motion video of their swings can help them find flaws in their mechanics that were not available thirty years ago. And modern technology lets them look at video of the pitchers they are going to face to see the shape of the pitches any particular pitcher will throw to them their next at bat on a video screen in the dugout prior to an at bat. To be sure, all these developments are true and should be helping hitters keep pace with pitchers in the modern game.

Some sound hitting mechanics have been forgotten in the rush to develop new and improved swing mechanics. If they were used by young, developing players, the number of times a hitter makes solid contact would increase and strike outs would decrease. What are a few of these ideas?

The great contact hitters of the past, Tony Gwynn, Rod Carew, Kirby Puckett, Kenny Loftin and Pete Rose, all had a few things in common. When they got into their stance, they did not have a high back elbow. They were not giving any thought to creating a "launch angle" that regularly misses under the ball. Their focus was being very short to the back of the ball, and not letting the barrel drop below the baseball as it approached the hitting area. This relaxed back elbow slightly below the back tip of the shoulder creates a shortened track of the bat head to get the barrel on the plane of the ball. This creates a "short to the ball, long through the hitting area" approach that greatly increases hard contact.

The longer, more circular launch angle can generate more bat speed. No question. But being long on the back side simply makes it much harder to arrive on time and on plane with the ball. As more and more players are worried about their swing speed and exit velocity, several negative consequences have greatly impacted youth baseball. Games seem to take forever. Instead of balls being hit consistently, balls are getting thrown back to the pitcher after another swing and

miss as the players in the field get ready over and over for absolutely nothing to field or react to. Defenses go to sleep and more errors result. Batting averages and on base percentages plummet. More and more young kids are getting bored by this slow paced game of inaction. They are quitting the game. None of these trends are good.

If we used modern training aides and improved teaching strategies and incorporated a few of the tried and true techniques of the great contact hitters, the game would improve. Getting shorter to the back of the ball makes it easier to hit the ball to all parts of the ballpark based on where the ball is pitched. Modern shifts showed just how unlikely it is for most “launch angle” oriented swings to hit the ball with any authority to the opposite field. This is a red flag that the art of solid contact to all fields has been lost. Its time to change this trend.

Try this approach. Have a hitter raise their back elbow well above the back tip of the shoulder. Make sure that a long looping angle is created as a result. Place a ball on a hitting tee toward the top of the strike zone and hit a few off the tee. Then, turn on a pitching machine and count how many times a pitch thrown with decent velocity toward the top of the zone is squared up in ten pitches. Now relax the back elbow slightly below the back shoulder. Ask your hitters to get the back hand palm up to the back of the ball as directly as they can. Then get through the baseball with the barrel at an angle that will cut the ball in half. Have the back hand stay on that line, palm up, all the way to full extension during the swing. Repeat the tee and machine challenge. Ask the hitter which approach made it easier to hit the ball hard. I’m confident the second option will get better results. If not, I’m wrong and ignore the advice. But if it gets better results? Isn’t our job as hitting instructors to help players succeed as hitters. Isn’t hard contact success? Do we really need to know the exact exit velocity of a hit ball? Can’t anyone tell by the crack of the bat and how quickly a ball gets into a gap that a ball was hit well?

Here is a second “old school” concept that should never have gone “out of style”. With two strikes, choke up an inch or two. Expect the ball on the outside third of the plate and look away. Expect a high fastball on the outside and adjust down. The lower it gets, the easier it is to manage away. If by some chance they come inside on you while looking away, just react in. Never be fooled by a fastball with two strikes guessing breaking ball. Work on recognizing off speed pitches and learn how to hold your back side in place long enough to adjust to a slower speed. That is the only way not to get blown away by a two strike fastball. Most pitchers throw away with their best stuff with two strikes. So don’t be surprised by the obvious. Look away and adjust in. Develop a stroke that hits the ball where it is pitched. Expect fastball and slow down for off speed. Make these two strike concepts habits and, once again, you can have a lineup of hitters that are hard to strike out.

As good as modern pitchers are, and as hard as young pitchers are throwing, should we not consider developing young hitters to meet the challenge they are asked to face? My hope is that you consider learning from the past along with profiting from advancements happening in today's modern game. Equipment and practice opportunities have improved exponentially. More swings are possible in practice now. Let's make sure the habits that are created by increased opportunities are as fundamentally sound as possible.