

Tee Drill Variations

At our camps we always have talked about utilizing each hitting drill to develop a specific component of the swing. For example, with soft toss we work on the proper grip – loose and in the fingers with the middle knuckles lined up – and having a quick bat (since a loose grip unlocks the wrists and allows for greater bat speed). When players hit off of the batting tee, since the ball is stationary and easy to hit, we like to have them focus solely on their weight shift – gathering all of their weight and energy by shifting their it to the back foot before exploding forward (“you have to go back to go forward”). When we do short toss from the front we throw the ball to the outside part of the plate and ask the kids to keep their front shoulders closed by hitting the ball up the middle or the opposite way.

Using hitting drills to work on the different components of the swing allows players to get the feel for each individual piece of the swing before facing live pitching. It’s impossible for a player to think about mechanics and complicated hitting instruction when a hard ball is being thrown at him or her. That’s why we use the drill sessions for instruction and prefer to call batting practice “free hitting.” During batting practice we simply observe and let the kids have fun, making notes about what drills they need to spend more time on in practice to improve their swings.

Let’s be honest. Getting kids – or adults, for that matter – to hit off of a batting tee, concentrating on the same thing over and over, can be challenging. At some point boredom sets in. There are some major flaws that often become evident when a player hits off of a tee, and that can be the easiest place to correct the flaws since the ball is stationary. If you are confident that your players have grasped the concept of weight shift, consider incorporating the following drills as part of your tee work, never losing sight of the fact that the primary objective of tee hitting is to develop proper weight shift.

Dropping the Hands

One of the most common mistakes young hitters make is to drop their hands as the ball approaches. This tends to lead to a long, upper-cut swing in which the shoulders don’t remain level (back shoulder drops) and the bat crosses through the same plane along which the pitch is traveling for only a very brief time. This problem can become very evident when players hit off of

the tee, because they tend to drop their hands and back shoulders in an attempt to elevate the ball.

A variation of the tee drill that Jorge Posada and Tino Martinez used can help correct this problem. They would put a ball on the tee and raise it to the top of the strike zone. With the ball in that position they shift their weight back and then come forward, attempting to swing down to the ball. The object is to hit a hard line drive by staying on top of the ball. To accomplish this there is no way that a batter can drop the hands.

Hitting the Outside Pitch

Another common mistake young hitters make is pulling their front shoulders away from the ball (“pulling off” the pitch) as it approaches home plate. Many times this is a result of fear. Earlier we talked about using short toss from the front to correct this problem, but sometimes it can be easier to start by using the batting tee. Again, we want the players to focus on shifting their weight back before coming forward. Often times, however, when the kids come forward they take their stride, their front shoulder and, ultimately, their energy away from the pitcher. This will cause them to lose power when hitting any pitch except one on the inside part of the plate, or it will cause them to miss the pitch on the outside half altogether. The best weight shift in the world can be rendered meaningless if the movement forward isn’t a short, soft stride toward the pitcher.

If you try the short toss drill with a player who is experiencing this problem and it still doesn’t seem to help, consider going back to the batting tee. Move the entire tee in such a way that it simulates a pitch on the outside half of the plate. Have the batter assume a normal stance, shift the weight back before coming forward with a short stride toward the pitcher (or slightly toward the ball) and attempt to hit a line drive to the opposite field. If the player is pulling weak ground balls or hitting the ball off the end of the bat, he or she is “pulling off” the ball and needs to concentrate on taking the stride and the front shoulder more toward the pitcher or the ball. Before correcting players who are struggling with this, be sure that they aren’t simply taking their eyes off the ball before contact.

One word of caution before trying this variation of the tee drill: Most coaches don’t understand

the proper tee placement for hitting the outside pitch. It's not good enough just to move the tee to the front part of the outside of the plate. If you look at still photos of the great hitters, they hit the inside pitch will out in front of home plate, the pitch down the middle slightly in front of home plate and the outside pitch several inches behind the front edge of home plate. Hitting these pitches in this manner allows the bat head to take the most direct path to the ball, which means that the hitter's mechanics are fundamentally sound. This increases the batter's chances of driving the ball.

So, when setting up the tee to simulate an outside pitch in the location that it should be hit, move the entire tee so that the ball is over the outside part of the plate about four to six inches behind the front edge (toward the catcher).

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