

Bunting 101

When you are one of the players fighting for a roster spot every year, you try to develop skills that will make you more versatile and more valuable to your team – at any level. As a player in the big leagues I realized that one aspect of the game that sometimes gets overlooked is bunting, so I figured I could increase my value by working hard to be a good bunter.

Bunting has been in the news a lot lately, especially here in Baltimore, because of the injury suffered by Orioles center fielder Luis Matos. For those of you who don't know, Matos suffered a pretty severe hand injury when his top hand was hit by a pitch while he was attempting to bunt. Normally an injury like this would not have received much attention, but because Matos had his top hand wrapped around the bat, instead of the traditional grip between the thumb and forefinger, it seems as though the play has been analyzed over and over again.

When I played, I also wrapped my top hand around the bat, but I do not teach that method to youth or high school players. The reason I held the bat that way was that I felt it gave me more bat control, which is important when most pitchers throw 88 mph or faster and when you have to face big league breaking and off-speed pitches. As a professional I also had enough confidence in my reflexes and the pitchers' control to be able to hold the bat that way and not get hurt. It just felt best to me. As with a lot of baseball skills, at the big league level, the way you hold the bat when executing a bunt is a personal preference. At the lower levels, however, I prefer to teach the traditional method. I will get into that shortly.

Our Philosophy on Bunting

Bunting is a difficult skill to master, so I encourage players to begin practicing it as soon as they begin facing live pitching (either coach pitch or player pitch). If you teach players the right way to bunt at a young age it will give them plenty of time to perfect the technique and to be comfortable when they get older.

When it comes time to play the games, however, at the youngest youth levels we believe that the focus should be on hitting. Hitting is a much bigger part of the game than bunting, and players at the youth level should be given every opportunity to develop as hitters by swinging the bat in game situations. Bunting is a skill that can help a team win games, but the focus at the youngest ages should be on developing good baseball players instead of winning. Certainly

as players progress up the ladder into the 11- and 12-year-old age groups and start having opportunities to play in district, state, regional and national tournaments, playing the game the right way and helping the team win is emphasized a bit more.

It is important to keep in mind that even in these situations we are dealing with young, developing baseball players. It would be a shame for an 11-year-old to be labeled a “good bunter” and have many of his opportunities to hit taken away from him. Yes, there is a time and place, but please remember that as youth coaches your job is to prepare your players to be able to continue playing the game competitively every step of the way. By all means teach bunting and have your kids practice it without losing site of the fact that hitting is what brings the kids the most joy. Winning is not everything when you are dealing with younger baseball players.

Mechanics of the Sacrifice Bunt

As you probably have guessed from my opening statements, there isn't one perfect way to bunt. For the basic sacrifice bunt we recommend that the batter simply pivot on both feet, keeping the knees slightly bent and the feet about shoulder-width apart to provide a good base and promote balance. Some players feel that they can see the ball better by “squaring” around and bringing the back foot forward so that it is parallel to the front foot. While many hitters through the years have been effective bunters using this approach, we believe that “squaring” around makes it very difficult for the batter to get out of the way of an inside pitch. This position also allows you only to bunt. If you want to pull back and attempt to slash or even take a full swing it is very difficult if you are square to the pitcher.

After pivoting it is a good idea to first point the bat toward the pitcher and transfer all your weight to the front foot. This should help get the bat out in front of home plate in fair territory, which gives you the best possible angle to keep the bunt in play. The top hand should slide up the bat to a point just below the label with the bat gripped between the thumb and index finger. By holding the bat loosely and not back in the hand it will leave a space that will allow the bat and hand to give and act as a shock-absorber. This should help the batter deaden the ball more effectively.

The bat should start at the top of the strike zone. Any pitch above that starting point should be left alone, because it is a ball. The head of the bat should be tilted so that it is slightly above

the hands when contact is made. This makes it easier to push the ball down to the ground, avoiding a pop-up. Avoid stabbing at the ball or dropping the bat head, both of which make it more difficult to get the ball on the ground. Bend the knees and keep the bat in the same position to bunt low pitches. The bottom hand is used like the rudder of a ship to angle the bat in the direction you want the ball to travel. The bat should give a little bit as the ball approaches to soften it. Thinking about trying to catch the ball with the bat can help players better understand this concept.

Batters shouldn't worry about showing the bunt too early when sacrificing. The placement of the bunt is what's most important, not the element of surprise. One mistake that many hitters make when bunting is to try to make the bunt too perfect in hopes of getting a hit. The object of a sacrifice bunt is to advance the runners who already are on base. Try not to bunt the ball directly to the pitcher. For the most part if you make the pitcher come off the mound in one direction of the other to field the ball, your goal will be accomplished.

By Bill Ripken