

# Prescriptions for Hitting Ills

After years of running camps and clinics all over the country and countless hours watching tournaments at our complexes, as well as time spent working with our own children and following their progress, we have developed a sense for the common mechanical flaws that tend to hinder young hitters.

We've also fielded numerous questions from coaches concerning the problems they frequently see and the best methods of correcting them. With games getting into full swing, this is best time of year to help young hitters understand why they aren't hitting as well during games as they do in batting practice and to assist them in developing the consistency they crave. With that in mind we present the following list of common mechanical flaws and the prescription for each:

**Symptom:** The batter seems to be fighting with him or herself. The swing is compact, but bat speed is lacking and the swing never seems to have a complete follow through. This is sometimes known as "muscling" the swing.

**Prescription:** Standard soft toss drill (from the side)

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "Loose hands, quick bat."

How many times have you heard a parent or coach tell a kid to get his or her back elbow up at a youth baseball game? It happens all the time. For some reason this has become a rallying cry for parents and coaches everywhere, but the fact is that when a hitter tries to get that back elbow up, the top hand naturally rotates so that the knuckles are not aligned properly and the bat handle slides into the palm instead of the fingers. This leads to a slow, cumbersome swing that limits bat speed and range of motion.

When hitting, the proper way to hold the bat is loose and in the fingers with the "door knocking knuckles" aligned. This allows the wrists to unlock, promoting a fluid swing and increased bat speed. We use the soft toss drill to concentrate specifically on the proper grip and hitting the ball as hard as possible.

For this drill we eliminate the lower half by asking the hitter not to even think about his or

her stride. We ask the hitter to wiggle his or her fingers to make sure that the bat is being held loosely and toss the ball from the side to a point in front of home plate. The goal is for the hitter to drive the ball into a target on a net, hopefully developing a feel for what it means to hold the bat properly and involve mainly the hands, wrists and forearms in the swing.

**Symptom:** The hitter's movement is only forward and he or she seems to hit with all of the weight on the front foot. The swing is lazy and doesn't generate much power.

**Prescription:** Standard tee drill

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "You have to go back to go forward."

So many young hitters stand ready to hit and then lunge forward as the ball approaches. While they may make contact consistently, their swings don't pack much of a punch. The hips never fully rotate and the bat listlessly comes to a stop not long after contact. These hitters lack proper weight shift.

The misconception is that weight shift involves taking the body weight forward to hit the ball. That is only a half truth. To generate maximum power and core involvement in the swing, all good hitters shift their weight to the back side, where they gather their energy, before exploding forward. To throw a more powerful punch, a boxer pulls back before extending forward. Likewise, a cobra that is about to strike recoils before attacking. "You have to go back to go forward."

All good hitters possess a weight shift, and we like to utilize the batting tee to help young hitters get a feel for shifting the weight back before coming forward. When a ball is sitting on a tee, it is stationary, so the batter can easily work on weight shift without having to worry about a ball coming toward him or her. A rhythm and feel for going back to go forward can be developed through repetition and hopefully will carry over into live hitting over time.

For this drill have the hitter exaggerate the weight shift to the back side so that the front leg comes off the ground, almost like a pitcher, before exploding forward. Have the hitter swing hard, attempting to drive the ball right through a target on a net. Make sure to

remind the hitter to watch the ball and to go straight back and straight forward.

**Symptom:** The hitter either steps toward third base as the ball approaches or rotates the front shoulder away from the pitcher well before contact is made. In other words, the batter is not keeping the front shoulder in long enough.

**Prescription:** Short toss from the front

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "Use the big part of the field."

Many young hitters "bail out" or take their energy away from the field by allowing the front shoulder to fly open too soon when swinging. This can be a result of fear or because they feel like that is the only way they can really swing hard. Either way it is important for them to learn what it feels like to keep that front shoulder in as long as possible.

The best way to accomplish this is by tossing balls underhand to the outside portion of the plate from 12 to 15 feet in front of home (Behind an L-screen, please!). Tell the hitter to try to hit the ball hard to the "big part of the field," with a line drive up the middle or toward the opposite-field power alley being ideal.

Some kids will pull line drives when executing this drill. That is fine as long as the approach is proper. Weakly pulled ground balls are an indication that the front shoulder is not staying in and should be avoided.

If a hitter is hitting consistent line drives, mix in a few inside tosses just to keep him or her honest and to provide a realistic feel for hitting balls in different locations. Hopefully after plenty of repetitions your hitters will begin to naturally take the proper approach in game situations.

**Symptom:** The hitter is striding too early, causing him or her to either swing before the ball arrives or to be forced to keep the hands back and hit with all of the energy spent and with all of the weight on the front foot. This hitter most likely struggles with off-speed and breaking pitches.

**Prescription:** Lob toss

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "Let the ball travel."

Often this hitter is the one who trains exclusively on pitching machines that throw balls at

speeds exceeding what he or she is used to. The player gets into the habit of striding as soon as the ball is fed, because that is the only way to catch up to the pitch (at least that's the thought process). These hitters sometimes step even before the ball leaves the pitcher's hand and end up being way out in front of the pitch or using only their hands – minus the lower half – to hit the ball.

To alleviate this problem, it helps for players to get a feel for waiting as long as possible before starting the swing. You want them to let the ball "get deep" or to "let the ball travel." By tossing higher-arching, slower pitches to them from maybe 15 to 20 feet in front of home plate (from behind an L-screen, of course) and asking them to wait as long as possible before swinging, you can help players get a feel for staying back and being patient. Ask them to try to wait long enough to hit the ball up the middle or the opposite way, and after a while they will start to trust the quickness of their swing and stop trying to cheat by striding early.

**Symptom:** The batter drops the hands down as soon as the pitch is delivered, causing the body to move forward before the hands and creating a long, looping swing. This allows the bat to spend a short amount of time along the same plane as the pitch, which creates a slower swing that is less likely to produce solid contact.

**Prescription:** Start with the high tee drill and then move on to the one-arm drill.

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "Take a direct path to the ball."

Once again, when a player drops his or hands first, this may be an attempt to swing a bat that is too heavy as hard as possible. Check and see what size bat the player is using and then determine if a lighter model might solve the problem.

For players who drop their hands and then start the swing forward from a lower position, the solution isn't as simple as telling them to swing down to the ball or to take a more direct path to the ball. They think that they are swinging down. You have to show them what it feels like to take a direct path to the ball through drill work and let their muscles adapt to that sensation.

There are two good drills to help accomplish this. First, take a standard batting tee and raise it to the absolute top of the hitter's strike zone. Tell the batter to start the bat in the

normal firing position and then to hit a line drive into a net with a target. There is no way that the player can drop the hands first and still hit a line drive when the tee is high. The more the player does this, the more natural it will start to feel.

The second drill, the one-arm drill, is a bit more advanced, but we've found that it can be performed very effectively by almost any age group. Younger players may have to use a lighter bat or choke up quite a bit to execute it, but that's okay. For the drill, set up 12 to 15 feet in front of home plate and toss balls firmly either overhand or underhand to the hitter. Let the player hit five tosses with two hands on the bat, then have him or her remove the top hand and attempt to hit the ball five times using only the bottom hand. Allow the hitter to tuck the elbow into the body for leverage if necessary. The muscles in the arm will have to work hard to get the bat head to the ball, which when done many times should promote a more direct two-handed swing. Let the player hit five more tosses with two hands after the one-handed swings. The hitter should feel the difference and positive results should emerge quickly.

**Symptom:** The hitter doesn't finish the swing.

**Prescription:** Big ball tee drill and short toss from behind

**Ripken Catch Phrase:** "Get to it and through it."

A large number of young players make contact and then don't follow through. Their swings stop almost immediately after the ball is hit. It doesn't matter to us whether a player has one hand on the bat or two when the follow through occurs (as long as both hands stay on until contact is made); many great major leaguers have used both approaches. But, if the swing is not wrapping all the way around the body (preferably at shoulder level or below) once contact is made, that means the bat is slowing down at the point of contact and the hitter is not generating maximum bat speed.

We have a couple of drills that address this situation. The first is the big ball tee drill. A big rubber ball, like a playground ball or a kickball, is placed on a batting tee. The hitter follows all of the principles of the standard tee drill by exaggerating the weight shift and then attempts to hit the big ball as hard as possible into a net. The repetition of generating enough bat speed to hit that bigger, heavier ball hard, should help the batter

follow through naturally when hitting a real ball.

The second drill that promotes a proper follow through is short toss from behind. A coach tosses a ball from several feet behind the batter toward where the pitcher would be. The hitter's job is to hit the ball as hard as possible into a net as it crosses the plate. By having to catch up with a ball moving away from him or her, the batter should have to generate enough bat speed to make the follow through automatic. Repeating this drill should help the player develop a natural follow through when hitting against live pitching.

**By Cal and Bill Ripken**