



The Top 25

*A selection of the best posts from
BaseballByTheYard.com in 2017*

*By Coach Bob McCreary
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Well folks, 2018 is almost here! Hopefully 2017 was a good one for you and your family both on and off the field. As we all know, life is filled with many ups and downs. This is why my dad always said that “baseball players make good people.” Players can face more adversity in one baseball season than many people will face in an entire year. Baseball toughens people and forces them to deal with the ups and downs in a positive way. Those who are able to do it keep playing the game. Those that don’t find something else to do with their time.

My hope is that the written and video content I have posted to BaseballByTheYard.com over these past seven years has helped you experience more ups in the game than downs.

I finish most of my videos by saying “Best of luck on your baseball journey.” Baseball is, in fact, a journey. It’s also a journey that has no end. That’s because nobody is capable of reaching true mastery in the game. To an outsider, this may seem like insanity to strive for something that is unreachable. That description is fine with me. It certainly does take a different type of person to handle all the frustration that is built into the structure of the game. Many kids can’t handle that and choose to move into sports/activities that are a little more ego-friendly. Others revel in the physical and mental challenges the game of baseball dishes out regularly. Baseball By The Yard was created for those people.

What follows in this eBook is a compilation of what I feel are the Top 25 posts from the past year. Some I chose based on my own personal interests within the game. Others were selected because they generated a lot of conversation and/or sharing. Either way, I hope you like all my picks.

Much of my readership find their way to the site by word of mouth so if you are responsible for some of those people, thank you very much! I hope to continue giving you reasons to share.

At the end of this eBook there are links to several products I have listed for sale. A special thanks to all of you who have made purchases in the past. Those funds certainly go a long way in helping to keep the lights on at BaseballByTheYard.com.

Best of luck to all of you in 2018!

Coach Bob McCreary

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#1 Teaching launch angle is a waste of time

If you work with baseball players below the AA or AAA level (and 99% of baseball coaches do) then there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to use the term “launch angle” in your instruction.

Three stories ...

I grew up watching a lot of Yankees games and loved to watch Don Mattingly hit. I remember listening to an announcer talk about his hitting progression by saying that

Mattingly never was a power hitter until he reached the major league level. Prior to that he was a line drive hitter who showed opposite field gap power to left center. When he reached Yankee Stadium, major league level coaches taught him how to pull the ball more and generate some lift. Only then did he start being known as a home run threat. His first year ever with 20+ home runs was his first full year in the majors. Prior to that, his highest total was 12. That was when he split time between AAA and the big leagues.

When I played in the Cape Cod League in the summer of 1988, Jeff Bagwell was one of many future major leaguers I played against. It seemed like every time Bagwell swung the bat, a laser into the opposite field gap was the result. He didn't spend much time in the minor leagues (2 seasons) but it is worth mentioning that his highest minor league home run total was a whopping four. It wasn't until his age-25 season that he finally reached 20 home runs.



Today, Josh Donaldson seems to be the poster boy for the whole “*swing up*,” “*launch angle*,” and “*who cares about strikeouts*” mentality that is sweeping baseball. This is largely because of Donaldson’s outspoken comments in favor of the concepts. However, let’s look at some of Donaldson’s stats before he got to the big leagues.

At Auburn, Donaldson never had more than 11 home runs in any of his three seasons. And that’s with an aluminum bat. To add to that, it’s interesting to note that he had more walks than strikeouts his last year as well. It wasn’t until he reached AAA in the A’s organization that he hit over 10 home runs (he had 18). He was also 24 years old that season. In fact, he was 27 years old when he finally hit 20+ home runs in the major leagues.

One could argue that all three were never taught the “correct way” to hit until they reached the major leagues. They might contend that if the three players I mentioned had that instruction much earlier then their success in driving the ball out of the park would have begun sooner as well.

I don’t agree.

These players (and virtually every other major league hitter) were able to get to the major leagues by consistently hitting the cover off the ball to all fields at every level. When they showed the additional consistency of doing this off of great pitching then (AND ONLY THEN!) did they start to tinker with pulling the ball and getting more lift to produce more home runs and RBI’s. This usually does not happen until the hitter approaches his mid-20’s. There are always exceptions to this but that has been the standard for every generation of ball players.

This is why I believe teaching a younger player (little league, middle school, high school, and most college players) the concept of getting lift on the ball (promoting “launch angle”) is a total waste of time. It’s like trying to teach a kid how to fix a transmission on a car without first teaching him how to use a screwdriver.

No matter how complicated coaches make it, successful hitting is still pretty simple. Take good swings and consistently hit the ball hard to all fields. Focus on that and let them learn all about “lift” and “launch angle” when they get to the big leagues.

#2 Parents and playing time

Ask a coach about dealing with parents and you are likely to get several eye-rolls and a few choice words. I'm not sure who said it but the best quote about this came from a coach who said

"My dream coaching job is at an orphanage."

Of all the issues related to the parent-coach relationship, playing time tends to be the hottest topic. It is also the toughest to deal with.



I'm not sure when it became the parents job to inquire about playing time but it clearly is now something many parents feel empowered to bring up with coaches. If you are one of those coaches, it is important that you give some thought ahead of time to how you are going to deal with these situations. When I coached at the high school level I put my policy in writing and gave it to parents at a pre-season parent meeting. A big reason for having that meeting was to head off problems by going over team procedures with parents and address their concerns and questions before the season even started. If you do not have such a meeting, I highly recommend you have one. (More on parent meetings in a future post.)

When it comes to discussing playing time with parents, there are basically two ways to handle it. You either discuss playing time or you don't. Some schools and organizations make that choice for their coaches and some leave the decision up to the individual coaches. Both choices come with pros and cons so give it some thought. At the high school level, my pick

was to never discuss playing time with parents. I offer my reasons below. If you disagree, rock on. Do what you are comfortable doing. If you have not fully decided how you want to manage this, consider what follows:

Option #1 – Discuss playing time with parents. People that advocate for this position tend to point to the benefits of open communication between coaches and parents. If disagreements arise then get the sides together to discuss the issue and let people air out their differences. Although conflict can hurt some feelings, it's better than letting things fester under the surface where it can build up and create larger problems in the future. Also, if parents are paying in the form of fees and/or taxes then some will conclude that they have the right to speak up if they feel something is not being run well in the program that they are ultimately paying for.

As I said earlier, I am not a big fan of this option. I also know that some coaches may be forced into this option by superiors that believe in a parent's right to discuss playing time. If that is the case for you then you may want to consider the following piece of advice which is ...

Invite all the parents involved. Here is an example.

Let's say your back-up shortstop's parents are upset and want to argue for more playing time for their son. Since they naturally are going to politic for their son deserving more playing time, they are also, in essence, advocating for someone else's son to play *less*. If that is the case then invite the starting shortstop and his parents to the meeting as well so that the interests of the starter are represented. It would not be fair to discuss the playing time and/or abilities of another player who is not present or at least represented.

I bet you can guess what usually happens next. The parent demanding a meeting backs off the idea when they know the other kid and/or parents will be there too.

Option #2 – Do not discuss playing time with parents.

At the high school level and above, this is the option I think is best. My main reason is that, in my opinion, nobody benefits from such a meeting. Everyone loses. If there is no win-win, there is no point in having a meeting. Here's why nobody wins.

We all know there are dozens of reasons why playing time varies in the game of baseball. Let's say after the parent meeting, for some reason other than the meeting, their son starts to play more. Now I have angry parents and players who think that I am letting a few parents influence who plays and who doesn't. If that is the perception, I lose credibility from players and parents. I will also get more demands from other parents to meet because of the perception that meetings with the coach will help *their* son. The player doesn't benefit because his teammates think his mommy and daddy are still calling the shots. Team chemistry suffers because rumors start flying about preferential treatment. And on it goes.

On the other hand, if their son starts to play less after the coach meets with the parents, his parents may think the coach is mad at them for questioning the line-up and is now taking it out on the player by not playing him as much. Other rumors fly, I lose credibility, parents are angry at each other, and on and on it goes.

Either way, if the meeting is held, nobody benefits. The coaching staff, the player, his parents, the team, all the other parents, and the program as a whole. All lose. If everyone loses then there is no purpose for the meeting. Thankfully, my administrators were all very supportive of that policy and backed me 100%. Many coaches are not so lucky. Whether you are able to pick your option or whether one is decided for you, spend some time before the season begins to outline how you want to manage parents who want to meet.

It's not the most fun part of coaching but if you think ahead and game plan a bit, it usually makes things much easier.

#3 If you know a young player, make him watch this

Young American kids typically wear \$80 spikes. They use \$300+ mako bats. They play on nice fields and they carry baseball bags filled with 20 pounds of other gear. Some are the best players in their area. They have dreams of playing professional baseball and assume their previous success in the game will carry well into the future.

Very few of them realize who their real competition is. If you have or know a young baseball player who is passionate about the game, please have him watch the video below. It focuses on Robinson Cano and the city of San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic. It also highlights a talented 15 year old third baseman.

If you around 15, he and many others like him are your true competition no matter what your local papers say.

How do you stack up? Is it in your blood like it is theirs?

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv-QaMJURmA>

#4 If you can't play catch, you can't play baseball

The last part of the Bible is referred to as "The Last Days" and lists seven prophecies that some claim will predict and lead us towards the end of the world. If my memory serves me, the first prophecy is "*No child shall be able to play catch.*" If that is true then we are well on our way to the end of the world.



Have you seen kids play catch lately? It's brutal. It's also a shame because as the saying goes, "*If you can't play catch, you can't play baseball.*"

Every play on defense is basically a game of catch.

Take a 5-4-3 double play as an example. The third baseman sets his feet and catches the ball. He sets his feet again and makes an accurate throw to the second baseman. The second baseman sets his feet to catch and then sets his feet to throw to first base. The first baseman sets his feet and catches the ball.

Set your feet and catch. Set your feet and throw. Pretty simple, right?

If you want an indication of the state of youth baseball in America today then just watch a group of kids play catch. Just make sure you watch from a distance so you don't get drilled by a bad throw. It is increasingly painful to watch young kids (unfortunately, even older ones too) try to catch a ball and return the throw accurately even at short distances. Apparently, the

New York Times agrees with me since they recently published an article about the topic. It is worth reading.

Article Link: *They can hit 400-foot homers, but playing catch? That's tricky.*

#5 Color Coded Mindsets For Baseball

If you have been in the Marines or are in the gun world, you probably have heard of Colonel Jeff Cooper. Cooper was considered to be one of the world's top experts on the use and history of small arms (handguns).

Among many of his books was one that introduced a color coding system to teach people the mindset that is required to go from a normal, relaxed state all the way to a full-blown gun fight. His color codes are as follows:



- **White** – Complete lack of awareness, not paying attention at all
- **Yellow** – Attentive, but relaxed
- **Orange** – Focus is directed at an immediate potential threat
- **Red** – Game on. There is a definitive threat in your environment

It was Cooper's opinion that too many people walk around in White and are almost completely unaware of what is going on around them. As coaches, we know we have players like this too.

Even though baseball is not a life and death situation, the same color codes can be applied to the mindset needed for the game.

White. One can argue that a player should never be in this color when they are near a field. Good players are always alert to what is going on around them. Players who are in White are the ones who get drilled by a teammate's errant throw during warm-ups. It's the oblivious guy in the outfield who gets hit by a batted ball during BP. It's also the guy who forgets how many outs there are while in the field or on the bases. Don't be in White. Ever.

Yellow. Yellow will keep you safe and allow you to pick up things other player might miss. This mindset is required for players prior to the game and bench players during the game. It will get you to pay attention to the opposing pitcher warming up prior to the game. It will get you to watch the other team take infield practice to look for weaknesses and arm strengths. It will allow a bench player to notice when a pitcher tips off his curveball and how he pitches batters like yourself that are ahead of you.

Orange. The player who is in Orange is in the game. In orange he has his head on a swivel and is constantly looking for relevant information in his environment. This is because at any time the ball may be hit to him and he knows he better be ready. If he is not directly involved in the play, he still knows he will need to be somewhere on every play. It could also apply to the batter on deck who knows his time to hit is approaching. His focus narrows to what might impact him directly in the very near future.

Red. When the pitch is about to be delivered to YOU or when the ball has been hit and it's coming to YOU is when a player shifts to Red. It's game on and your entire focus is on the pitch or the play. It's not a time to be thinking of how many outs there are or who is on base. All those variables are absorbed during the Yellow and Orange phases. Naturally, a player may have to adjust mid-play if the circumstances change but most of what a player should know to make the play should have occurred before the ball was pitched or hit.

Many players do not get this thinking correct. Some spend too much of their time in White. These players cannot be depended on. Some players spend all their time in Yellow. These players are great at picking up information but have trouble narrowing their focus when it's game-on for

them. Other players may always be in Red. Those players are a nervous wreck and tend to suffer from tunnel vision. They do not get the benefit of an expanded perspective during the Yellow and Orange phases.

Just like Colonel Cooper pointed out, a player cannot successfully “flip the switch” and go from White to Red and be successful. Each level of mindset helps prepare the player for the mindset required at the next level. We all know that the “*Don’t worry coach. When the game comes, I’ll be ready*” line usually doesn’t work so well.

All players need to know the different mindsets required and when they are needed. Getting it right is the only way to truly prepare for competition.

#6 How to read a hitter’s swing

To play infield at the higher levels requires physical talent but also a lot of awareness. Look around you and you’ll begin to notice a lot of information that you can use to become a better infielder even before the ball is hit.

Today’s video post involves analyzing a batter’s swing before he even gets to the plate to better determine where he might hit the ball.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXZJ0Q6PUZc>

#7 Within three pitches

Successful pitching at any level is not rocket science. Get ahead and force them to put the ball into play.

There are very few situations in the game where a strikeout is necessary. 2nd and 3rd and no outs would be an example. Every other situation calls for the pitcher to force the batter to put the ball into play.



A great rule that pitchers should follow is to try to get the offensive team to put the ball into play within three pitches. Doing so results in the following benefits:

- Less walks.
- Lower pitch counts. That means going longer into games.
- Hitters get used to swinging early in the count and start to swing at pitches out of the zone.
- Umpires get used to calling strikes and are more likely to give a pitcher the close pitches.
- Infielders and outfielders stay alert. More alert means less errors.
- Quicker innings means more rest for your defense.

Three hour baseball games are not fun. Neither is taking a pitcher out in the third inning because he's thrown 75 pitches. To throw less pitches and get your teammates to like you again, live by the mantra ... "*within three pitches.*"

It's not rocket science and it works.

#8 The importance of being aggressive early at the plate

As all of my readers know, baseball is a very cerebral game. The difference between winning and losing & succeeding and failing at the game often is more about what is going on between the ears and not in the physical things you can see.

No area of the game is immune to this either. Think better and you will have better results.



One of the million examples of this in a game is when hitters are very aggressive early in the game and early in the count. I certainly don't mean out-of-control aggression where hitters are swinging at everything thrown at them.

For this example, I am referring to hitters that take a very healthy swing that is right on time on pitches they can handle early in the count and game. If hitters in a line-up do this well, it typically changes most pitchers' thinking immediately.

Here are two different scenarios ...

Hitters on Team A come out of the gate and ease their way into the game. Most of the batters take early pitches to get a feel for the pitcher and the

strike zone. The pitcher gets ahead typically with fastballs, gets a lot of 0-1 counts and then proceeds to go to work with off-speed stuff. The pitchers' confidence increases which makes his command and overall pitching better. If he didn't warm-up properly before the game, hitters on Team A allow him to get his legs under him and "warm-up" over the first couple innings. Team A's hitters try to flip the switch the second time through the order but now they are facing a fully warmed-up pitcher with lots of confidence and good command.

Hitters on Team B take a different approach. They come out swinging.

Right from the first inning, hitters attack pitches that are in the zone early in the count. They take even healthier swings in fastball counts and are right on time at the contact point. Some pitches may be hit but many of them might be swung at and missed or hit foul. When this occurs, the thinking of the pitcher and whoever is calling the pitches (catcher and/or coach) usually shifts in the hitters' favor. In short, doubt starts to creep in. When hitters are aggressive early in the count/game, the pitcher (and pitch-callers) realizes that they better be careful about laying that first pitch in there in the future. The hitters that already hit the ball hard will probably continue to do so and the hitters that swung through or fouled off the pitch may start to square them up. As a result (and this is the key!), they start to do something different. Instead of laying that first pitch over the plate, they start to try to move it to the corners and/or low. They start to add more off-speed or breaking pitches to early pitches in the count. When that occurs, more 1-0 and 2-0 counts will begin the surface and the confidence shifts from pitcher to batter. Add to this the fact that most young pitchers don't warm-up properly and you now have a very toxic environment for the pitcher.

In Team A's scenario, the hitters are more in a mindset of fear in that they are behind in the count, are more likely to see more quality pitches (especially off-speed pitches), and have a greater likelihood of striking out because all of that is being done by a very confident thrower on the hill.

The pitcher in this scenario has very little fear and simply continues to do what he has done to get hitters out which is to just throw strikes.

In Team B's scenario, the fear shifts to the pitcher. The aggressive swings have led to the pitcher being more tentative. More hitting counts emerge.

Hitters gain more confidence and the pitcher is now more likely to have the mindset of fear. He recognizes that he can no longer "just throw strikes."

He has to throw to smaller areas of the strike zone which, of course, is much harder to do.

All this is why coaches would always rather have a team that is too aggressive than not aggressive enough. It is much easier to calm hitters down and channel their aggression to pitches inside the strike zone than to inject aggression into hitters that start out with very little.

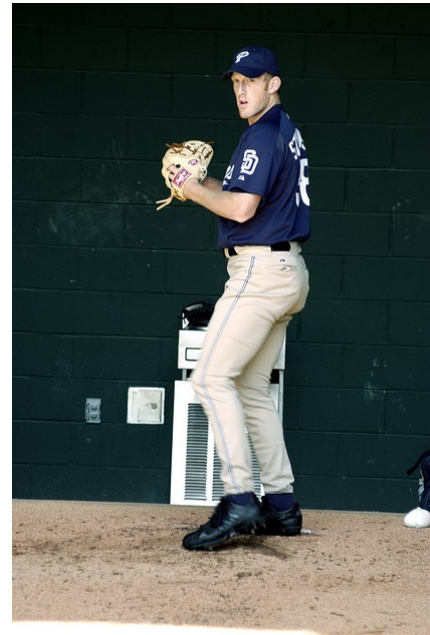
#9 You only “pitch” when you are in the stretch

How many times have you seen a pitcher warm-up before a game or throw a bullpen between starts and never (or almost never) throw any pitches from the stretch? I lost count.

Think about it ... when you are pitching in a game and you are in a jam, that means runners are on base, correct? And if runners are on base, you'll now have to “pitch” to get yourself out of the jam, right? And if you are in a jam and have to bare down with runners on you'll be pitching from the stretch, correct? Knowing all that, wouldn't it be more valuable to throw the majority of your practice and bullpen session pitches from the stretch?

Always remember that the Wins and Loses go next to your name as the pitcher. How you pitch with runners on base will ultimately determine which one it ends up being.

Want more W's? Practice mostly from the stretch!



#10 How to throw a safe curve ball

Oh, boy.

I can envision, with fingers shaking, people hitting the ALL-CAPS button to send off some hate-mail over the title of this one.

Breeeeeeeeeeeeathe.

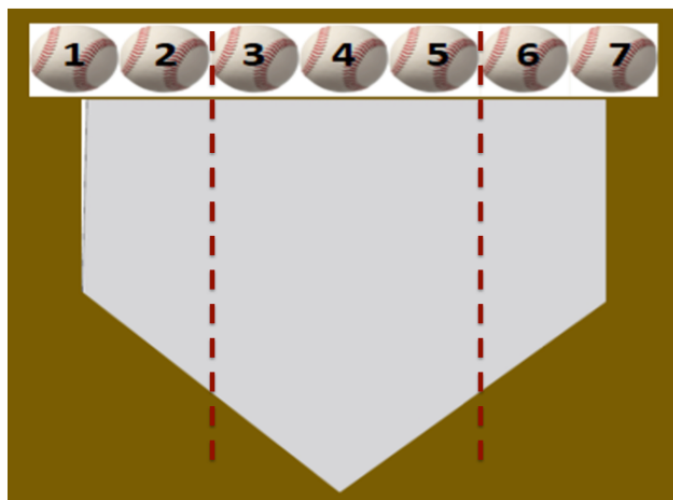
Today's video tip shows a type of curve ball that I was taught in high school that does not require the pitcher to do some of the things that can lead to additional stress on the arm. As I state immediately in the video, there is no such thing as a "safe" pitch in baseball. I also do not condone young players throwing curve balls. Today's tip is for players who have been deemed by qualified people to be physically mature enough to better handle the rigors of a curve ball. As always, proceed with caution with any pitch you throw.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvND5Swbnlo>

#11 Command of your fastball is priority #1

Home plate is 17 inches wide. Baseballs are about 3 inches in diameter which means the strike zone is going to be about 6 baseballs wide. In reality, it often is 7 baseballs. At the younger levels one can argue that it is likely to be more like 9 baseballs wide. For our purposes today, we'll go with 7.

Look at the diagram I created above. Most of your success over the course of the season will depend on your ability to throw your fastball to numbers 1, 2, 6, **and** 7. Notice that I didn't say "or" 7. A pitcher must be able to hit the 1-2 area when needed AND be able to accurately hit the 6-7 area when needed as well. Miss the area you want to throw to or only be accurate to one of them and you are asking for trouble. You'll hit more batters, will fall behind in the count, and probably will be ducking a few line-drives as well.



This off-season, work to become more athletic and iron out those mechanics but never lose sight of the primary purpose of successful pitching – to have great command on both sides of the plate.

I'll leave you with this quote from Hall of Famer Greg Maddux during his pitching days.

“I try to do two things: locate my fastball and change speeds. That’s it. I try to keep as simple as possible. I just throw my fastball (to) both sides of the plate and change speed every now and then.”

#12 10 reasons to front-toss

There are several ways to practice hitting. Live BP and hitting off a tee are popular ones. All have value but in my opinion and all things considered, front-toss is king. Here are ten reasons why in no particular order.

Safety disclaimer: Whenever you front-toss, please use caution and make sure the screen in front of the thrower is of good quality and free of holes. Be careful of balls ricocheting off poles and the ceiling of cages.

Players should always wear helmets when tossing.



1. It mimics the direction the ball will be coming from in the game.

This is the problem with soft-toss. Soft-toss is ok but the batter is seeing the ball from the side which is not what he will be expected to do during the game.

2. Anyone can do it. Let's face it ... coaches who can consistently throw great live batting practice are rare even at the higher levels. It's almost nonexistent at the lower levels. Front-toss is easy. The coach can sit in a chair or stand so very little movement is required. The throw can be underhand or overhand, whichever the coach prefers. The shorter distance also allows for lots of swings without the coach having to go right to the chiropractor afterwards.

3. Accuracy. The short distance allows for more accurate throws.

Coaches can throw more strikes which takes less time to move through hitters. It also allows pitchers to locate their throws so hitters can work on specific areas of the strike zone. Inside, outside, up, and down in the zone are easily able to be practiced. Mixing all those up also gives the batter something that is realistic to their at-bats.

4. Off-speed pitches. Front-toss can allow batters to work on both change-ups and curveballs without the thrower having to actually throw those pitches. To throw a change-up, the thrower simply takes a little velocity off their toss. Batters learn to keep their hands back. For curveballs, throwers arc the ball more which mimics the downward action of a curveball for the hitter.

5. Sliders and cutters. If you are facing a pitcher that has a good slider or cutter, just move the screen over a little towards the batter's box the batter is in. When you toss the ball it will travel across and away from the batter mimicking those pitches.

6. Lefties and righties. Along with #5, moving the screen over one way or the other can mimic the angle of the pitch that would come from righties and lefties. To mimic a lefty, I just move the screen in front of me to the left a little and use my left hand to underhand the ball to the batter. It takes some practice but it allows the batter to see a lefty's angle without having to find a good left handed BP thrower.

7. Replicates velocity. The shorter distance of the toss mimics the faster pitches that come from hard throwers during games. And the thrower doesn't have to research Tommy John surgery in the process.

8. Promotes swing efficiency. Coupled with #7, front-toss forces hitters to get rid of any unnecessary movement in their swing. The hitter doesn't have a lot of time so they naturally cut out the extras or they will not consistently get the barrel to the contact point.

9. Develops good rhythm. If the thrower uses the correct tossing motion (this will be shown in an upcoming video), batters get a chance to practice the same rhythm they will need to repeat over and over in games.

10. It doesn't take a lot of space. As you will see in my upcoming video, my son and I do front-toss in a small cage I set up in my studio. You can even set up two front-toss areas in a long cage and have both hitters in the center – separated by a net – hitting towards both ends of the cage. You can even set up the thrower in front of the backstop and toss towards the plate. The batter who is standing backwards at home plate hits towards the backstop so the rest of the field can be used for other things. It's tough to think of a drill that can be done by just about anyone that accomplishes all that front-tossing can do. Stay tuned for a video in the near future where I demonstrate a lot that was written in this post.

#13 Tip for catchers to help their coach on close pitches

“COME ON, UMP! WHERE'S THAT PITCH? LET'S GO!”

Sit close to a field and you will hear a lot of variations of the phrase above. Quite often, what follows will be the umpire calling time-out, taking his mask off, and telling the coach(es) to pipe down or else they will be watching the rest of the game from the parking lot.

The coach-umpire dynamic can be a tricky one when a coach feels his pitcher is being squeezed on close pitches. Coaches want to say something effective when it is appropriate



but not say something on every single close pitch. If they do then the coach is usually seen as just a loud mouth who thinks every pitch his pitcher throws should be a strike and every pitch the opposing team's pitcher throws should be a ball. Nobody likes those coaches, especially the umpires. The coach also has the problem of not always having the best angle to read the pitch. Coaches often have a better angle than the umpire on high vs low due to their sightline being off to the side of home plate. The umpire, however, has a much better angle than the coach on inside vs outside pitches.

So, how does a coach effectively argue inside/outside pitches if the umpire has a much better view on those pitches?

Answer: Teach your catcher how to properly tell you. They have the same view as the umpire.

The photo at the top of this post is **NOT** an effective way for a catcher to tell his coach that the umpire just missed the previous pitch. If the catcher does this, he is bound to get an earful from the umpire for showing the umpire up in front of everyone. That's never a good idea.

The tip for catchers and coaches is to devise a simple covert sign that relays the message "*The ump just missed that pitch.*"

If the coach is in the dugout to the right of the catcher, the catcher might put his right hand on top of his right knee after the call. If the coach is to the left, he might do something with his glove. Maybe pull a string or shake it in some way. Whatever the sign is, it let's the coach know in a much more secretive way that the ump just missed that inside or outside pitch.

If a coach thinks a pitch was a strike and his catcher DOES NOT give him the agreed upon sign then the coach keeps his mouth shut. If he gets the sign then the coach is more likely to get a lenient umpire after the comment. The umpire begins to notice that the coach only says something on pitches that arguably should have been called a strike thus giving the coach more credibility in the eyes of the umpire.

Be aware, however, that experienced umpires know that catchers sometimes do this. If you make the sign too obvious or too frequent, the umpire will catch on and will not be pleased. Catchers also need to know

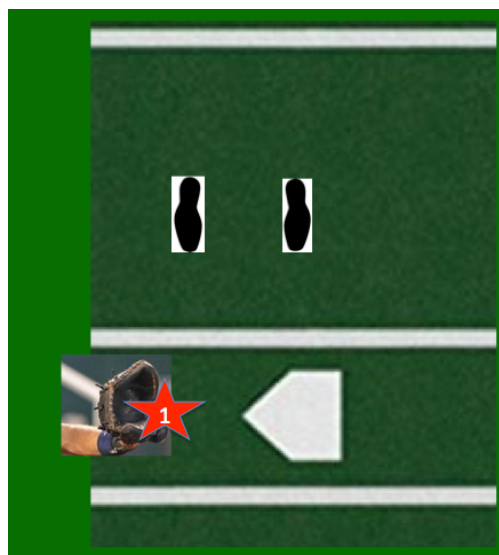
that they have to be completely honest in their judgement of pitches. If a pitch legitimately could be called either way by the umpire, the catcher should NOT give the sign! The sign should be reserved for only those pitches that are clearly missed by the umpire.

Getting your message across to an umpire without crossing the line is a difficult balance for a coach. As in the examples above, getting an honest tip from your catcher can be a big help.

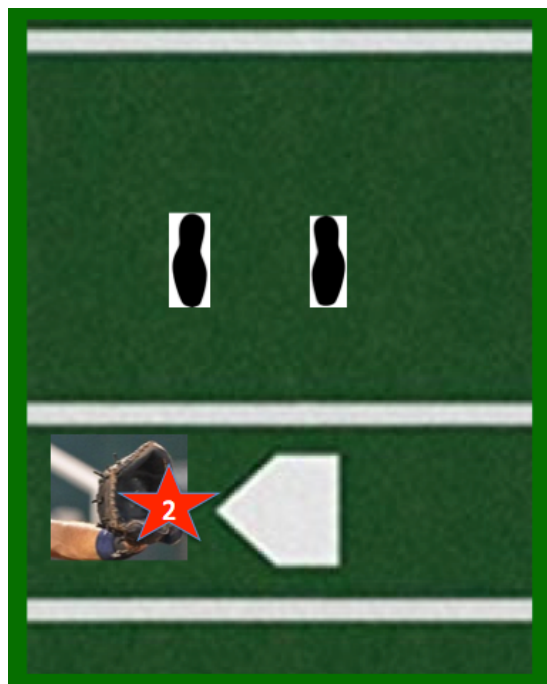
#14 Beating a slow pitcher with your feet

Ask any Major Leaguer who they would rather face – a hard throwing guy bringing it 93mph or a soft throwing guy who throws anywhere from 75-86 mph – and I bet well over 85% of them will say “*bring on the hard thrower!*” To counter slow pitching, many coaches suggest/demand that their batters move to the front of the batter’s box. Unfortunately, this often plays right into the pitcher’s strengths. Here’s why as well as an alternative.

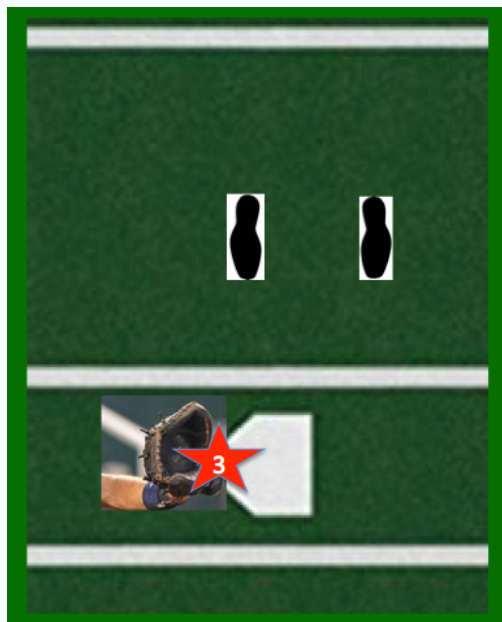
In this graphic, a batter stands in his normal spot and flails at a pitch that is slow and caught at the dirt at Star #1.



To adjust, the batter is told to move closer. The pitcher, in turn, throws it slower and the catcher catches the ball at Star #2. The batter flails again.

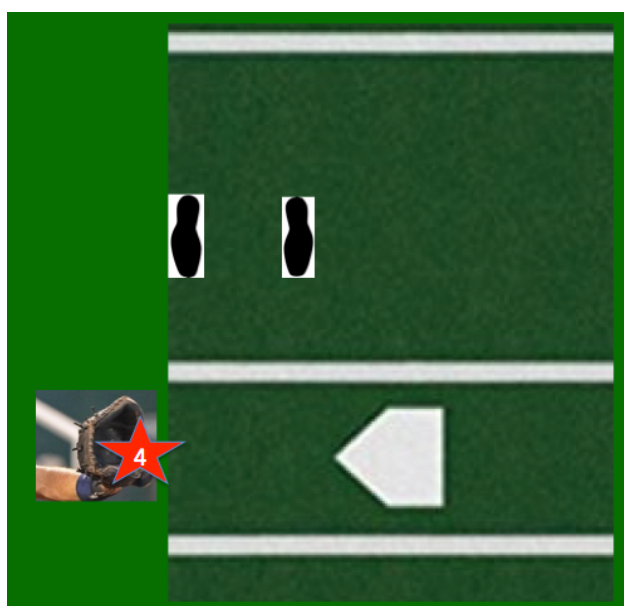


The coach flips and tells his batters to move to the very front of the box. The pitcher responds by throwing it even slower and the catcher catches it at Star #3. The batters flail again.



The reason why this strategy of moving up in the box often fails is because each adjustment the batter makes causes the pitcher to adjust more to his *strengths* which are throwing the ball slower and lower. Each time the batter moves up, the pitcher throws slower and lower to counter. This benefits the pitcher because he just does more of what he is good at doing ... throwing slow and low.

Another option that may have more success is to do the opposite. Have a batter move as far back in the box as possible as shown in this graphic.



This seems counter-intuitive but think about what the pitcher is forced to do now. He is forced to throw the ball *harder* because the batter has forced the catcher back as far as he can. If the pitcher wants to reach the catcher, the pitcher has to throw the ball *harder* and *higher*. Throwing the ball harder and elevating it are NOT his strengths. He gets out by throwing slower and lower. Doing that now, however, just bounces the pitches farther in front of the catcher. Ball one, ball two, etc.

No adjustment is perfect but this “back-of-the-box” method has worked for me and my teams just as much, if not more, than forcing hitters to the front.

The key to hitting adjustments is trying to get the pitcher out of his strengths and into his weaknesses. Moving to the back of the batter's box can do just that with slow pitchers.

#15 The mini wind-up for pitchers

Learning how to pitch can be a difficult thing for young pitchers. Bad balance, not staying on their line, and simply bad body control add contribute to young pitchers not being to consistently throw strikes. Usually less movement is better when instructing young pitchers which is why many coaches recommend young pitchers throw from the stretch.

However, as they get older, they have to learn how to use more of their body to handle to increase in pitching distances. This can be helped by learning the wind-up delivery.

In today's video tip, I explain and demonstrate a more simplified version of the wind-up that can help older pitchers transition into a full wind-up to get more out of their body and yet stay efficient in their delivery.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biyg9yoMXus>

#16 Confidently unorthodox

“When you catch the ball, use two hands.”

“On grounders, square up and get in front of the ball.”

“Don’t show-off and flip the ball with your glove. Take it out with your hand and throw it properly.”

The comments above are certainly in the “old school” camp of baseball coaching. You can’t go wrong with teaching players at all levels those basic fundamentals and drilling them constantly. If you do, your players will make more routine plays. That typically prevents the offensive team from having big innings (3+ runs per inning) and ultimately puts you in a position to win more games and be a good team.

However, I’ve never had an interest in just having my teams be “good.” A lot of teams are good. I’ve always wanted my teams to be “great.” Of course, many coaches are limited to the players they have access to in their school or community teams. Being able to select the players you want certainly can make “great” much easier.

However, there are some things you can do as a player and coach that can more quickly turn a good team into a great one and maybe even an average team into a good one. To do so, you’ll have to be a little unconventional and be willing to step out of your comfort zone.

In the area of fielding, this may involve doing some drills that go against traditional orthodoxy as listed above – using two hands, square up, etc. Here are several unorthodox drills that my teams have done with very good results.



One handed fielding and catching. To become a great fielder involves making your glove feel as if it is an extension of your arm as opposed to a tool placed on your hand. The way you get there is to do as many one-handed catching and fielding drills as possible. Master one-handed fielding and two-handed fielding becomes a piece of cake. It also gives you a much better advantage when you have to move left or right to make glove side catches or backhands. Players really can only make those plays one-handed so the dilemma becomes ... *How do we expect them to do it if they rarely practice them?* Add a lot more one-handed drills to your practice routines and you may be surprised how much better your fielders get.

Don't let them get in front of the ball. I am convinced that one of the big reasons why young players have such a hard time fielding balls to their backhand side is because coaches spend most their time hitting balls right at fielders while harping on them to "get in front of the ball." As a result, players grow up thinking that to backhand the ball means to be lazy. Although this is the case in some situations, great players know that backhanding some balls is preferential to getting in front of them. Even if they could, in fact, get in front of it.

My teams do a tremendous amount of backhand and forehand drills. All this (one-handed) work to both sides will more closely replicate the balls they will get during the game. Rarely will players get balls hit directly at them. They will have to move.

Good players get in front of virtually all ground balls and make most of the plays. Unfortunately, when they get a ball that must be backhanded, they often flub it. Great fielders have very high confidence in their ability to backhand and forehand grounders. They tend to get to more ground balls because their focus is getting straight to the ball hit to their left or right instead of circling around it.

Being great at backhands and forehands along with squaring up to balls when appropriate gives great fielders more options that can be selected to fit each type of grounder.

As I've said a billion times before, when you get older, the game gets faster. Teaching fielders to be "confidently unorthodox" at a young age can help them better match the speed of the game as they get older.

#17 Who are you chasing?

We've all seen many underdog players or teams overachieve. On the flip side, we've also seen many incredibly talented players and teams underachieve. Both seem to happen so often that there must be a reason.

Of course, there is never just one answer but if I had to pick one that stands out the most it would relate to who or what the player or team was chasing.

Being an underdog implies that there is someone or some team above you to chase. This has two very important benefits for the underdog.

First, it allows the underdog to clearly see what is separating them from the top of the pack. It could be that the player or team throws more strikes. It could be that they make better contact or make less errors. Whatever it is, the underdog can easily determine their deficiencies and work to improve in those areas.

Second, and it goes hand in hand with the first, it allows the underdog to focus on the *process* of improving instead of just the *results*, meaning the wins. When you focus on the process, you get to experience many "micro-wins" along the way. Every good bullpen or batting practice session is a micro-win. Every extra sprint after practice is a micro-win. Lots of little wins means you frequently feel good and confident about yourself and your progress. Outsiders help add more confidence as well. People are a lot more positive and supportive when they do not expect you to win all the time. That typically means your respect and praise from others like coaches, fans, friends, and parents has more to do with how well you play



as opposed to the final score. How well you play depends on the *process* which is largely under your control. When you feel you are in control, anxiety and stress levels tend to decrease and we all know that lower stress and anxiety means better performance in baseball.

The player or team at the top has a very different perspective.

First, top teams and players are already at the top so they tend to stop chasing anything. When you are at the top, everyone chases *you*. This shift can cause talented players and teams to stop moving forward.

Underdogs keep looking upward and therefore tend to move in that direction. The top-dogs too often look backwards at the other players/teams and end up moving towards them (backwards) as a result. Like the saying goes, “*You can’t drive a car with your eyes on the rear-view mirror.*”

Second, when the player or team becomes the top dog, their focus tends to shift toward the *results* (winning and stats) more than the *process*. That’s because they are now *expected* to win. Unfortunately, especially in baseball, wins, losses, and many popular stats (batting avg., HR’s, etc.) have a lot to do with what the other team does and therefore removes a lot of it from the top-dog’s control. Feeling that lack of control breeds more stress and anxiety which can lead to lower performance, less winning, and lower stats. Confidence suffers too because they don’t allow themselves to experience all the micro-wins that occur throughout the *process*. People around them change as well. Coaches, fans, friends, and parents tend to become more critical when their top-dog loses because the top-dog was *supposed* to win the game. To those people, losing must have meant you played very poorly. That, of course, may not have been the case. Put all this together and you can see why the top-dog’s confidence and performance can spiral downward so quickly.

So how do you combat this if you are the top-dog? The answer is **you must find something to chase!**

Here is an example from my own career.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, I was always upset at the poor baseball weather from November thru April. Not only did I hate cold weather in general, it annoyed me even more because I knew there was some kid in the Dominican Republic or Florida or Texas who got the chance to play just

about year-round. Of course, I thought that was very unfair. When I was snowed in, I pictured that kid outside in short sleeves playing baseball. When our game was cancelled because of rain or sleet, that kid's game was still on! Probably under the lights! That kid irritated me. I couldn't get that kid out of my head. Thankfully, this imaginary player in my head always gave me someone to chase. I realized early on that my real competition wasn't another kid at my school or that rival school next door. It wasn't even that stud across the state. My competition was that kid I pictured in my head.

No matter what award I won or stats that I put up, I knew that kid was out there somewhere. And he was probably better than me. I hated that kid. Without knowing it, I had created a scenario in my head where I was always the underdog. As a result, I was always chasing someone.

Your season is right around the corner. Who are *you* chasing?

#18 Accelerate the barrel through the zone

One of the hundreds of baseball sayings my dad passed on to me growing up was, "*The ball will not jump off the bat by itself. You have to make it jump off your bat.*" I find myself saying that to many of the hitters I work with these days.

Younger kids who are learning the game often fall victim to the "*just make contact*" mentality. Because they are not yet confident in their



ability to hit the ball well, they are satisfied with just putting the ball in fair territory. That is somewhat ok when you have two strikes but too many hitters have that mentality even when they are ahead in the count. When they do, it often results in their bat decelerating through the hitting zone.

Feared hitters accelerate the barrel through the hitting zone in order to attack the ball. These hitters are feared because pitchers and catchers know that if they make a mistake with a pitch over the plate they are going to pay for it. Pitchers who pitch with fear tend to nibble at the plate and typically fall behind in counts. Hitters that decelerate the barrel through the zone are not feared. Even if the pitch is left out over the plate the best the hitter is going to do is hit a single, maybe a double at best. When pitchers know this, they pound the strike zone without fear since the costs of doing so are minimal. Pitchers get ahead and the balance of power shifts to the pitcher.

Being a good hitter is a lot more than just having sound swing mechanics. Much of it has to do with entering the batter's box with the attitude of *"If I get a pitch I can handle I'm going to murder it."* That mentality by itself will usually cause you to accelerate the barrel through the contact zone without even thinking about it.

#19 What are your hitting cues?

Every hitter has a unique set of strengths and weaknesses.

Some are great at pulling the ball but not so great at staying back and going the other way.

Others are just the opposite.

The important thing is to know what they are. If you do then you can better address them in



practice and then turn them into cues for the game.

I mentioned batting cues in a previous post called Hitting: The five stages of focus. I mentioned that when a hitter is into the “On-deck” stage, he needs to narrow his focus to a few keys or cues that will help him succeed in his upcoming at-bat. Here is what I wrote.

On-Deck. Focus begins to narrow.

- **Recognizing the situation you will be batting in. Runners on?, outs?, score?, inning?, bunting situation?, etc.**
- **Much less focus on overall mechanics and more on a batter’s “keys” – hands back, stay on top, be aggressive, etc. NOTE: Each batter should create a short list of “keys” that are specific to their individual success. Ask a coach if you are not sure what they might be. Keep your thoughts to these keys only. Stick with short positive phrases like “Stay on top” or “aggressive through the ball.” Avoid negative commands like “Don’t loop the bat” or “Don’t swing at bad pitches.” Tell your body what you want it to do as opposed to what you don’t want it to do.**

Of course, the keys or cues you create for yourself are going to depend on your strengths and weaknesses. If you have been getting jammed a lot lately then saying “stay back” is not going to help you. Conversely, if you are rolling over and hitting lots of ground balls to the shortstop then saying “get the barrel out front” isn’t going to help you either. Pick the cues that are most relevant to you at the moment and change them as needed.

Hitting is a constant string of adjustments not only on the physical side but on the mental side as well.

#20 Sometimes you have to pack the parachutes

I recently heard an inspiring true story from a friend/coach. It goes like this ...

Captain Charlie Plumb was a fighter pilot in the 60's during the Vietnam War. While on a mission, his jet was shot down. He was able to eject but unfortunately for him, he had to parachute down into enemy territory. He was quickly captured by the communist Vietnamese and sent to a prison camp. He spent the next six years surviving as a POW under the Vietcong.



Several years after his release, Captain Plumb was eating in a restaurant with his wife when he noticed a man staring at him from a couple tables away. He didn't recognize the man and grew uncomfortable with the man who kept staring. The man eventually got up and walked over to Plumb's table and said *"You're Captain Plumb. You flew jet fighters in Vietnam. You were on the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down. You parachuted into enemy hands and spent six years as a prisoner of war."* Captain Plumb responded with *"Yes. I'm Captain Plumb. How in the world did you know all that?"*

The man replied, *"Because, I packed your parachute."*

Plumb apparently couldn't sleep that night because he wondered how many times he walked by the man (and others like him) while on the ship before his final mission and hadn't once given them the time of day. The

man literally saved his life and Plumb now realized that he never once thought about the guy who packed his chute let alone thanked him for it.

People undoubtedly thanked Plumb for his service and probably praised him for his bravery in handling his grueling captivity. However, Plumb (and everyone else for that matter) never once thought about the man/men who made every event after being shot down possible ... the guy(s) who properly and meticulously packed his parachute.

There are several take-aways from this story but here is one for the baseball world.

Sometimes, your job is to pack the parachutes. Sitting on the bench and being a role player is the hardest job in baseball. This is why role players at the MLB level are never young/rookie players. The mental toll it can take to perform that role well can be overwhelming. It takes an experienced and very emotionally mature person to handle that job. Now imagine a 9 or 10 year old who has that role for the first time. But in baseball, as in life, not everyone can be the glamorous pilot. On any team there will be stars and there will be role players. Everyone wants to be the star pitcher or the stud three hitter and get all the publicity and accolades. Captain Plumb's story reminds us that every role on a team has value. It's hard to take pride in activities that are never/rarely recognized but never lose sight of your value to your team.

If you are currently a role player, keep working hard every day and maybe someday *you* can be the star.
Until then ... pack a mean parachute.

#21 How to improve your pitching machine

I'm not a gigantic fan of pitching machines mainly because they are so unrealistic to how a ball is going to be pitched to a batter. Here is a picture that shows the obvious problem.



No pitch will ever shoot out of a pitcher's belly button. The ball will usually be released above and to the side of the pitcher's head which is significantly higher than how a normal pitching machine is designed to work.

And that brings me to the most ingenious thing I've seen in a long time. It is shown in these next two photos.



Maybe some of you have seen this before but I had not until I worked at this high school camp in Lansdale, PA. The coach in this picture (Coach Kevin Harris of North Penn High School and Nor-Gwyn Legion) had custom legs cut to raise the pitching machine to release point level. A brilliant idea!

Now the pitching machine properly replicates the height of a normal release point for an average high school pitcher. Obviously, you can cut the legs to whatever height you need depending on the age/size of the players at your level.

A great idea and a great example of someone thinking outside the box to solve a basic problem with pitching machines.

#22 Footwork & timing for advanced infielders

Today's video tip is an advanced one for infielders. It involves better timing of the footwork on ground balls. I start by showing how the human body functions when walking forward and backward and then apply that to fielding. Fielding with this proper timing tends to improve gracefulness and smoothness through the baseball.

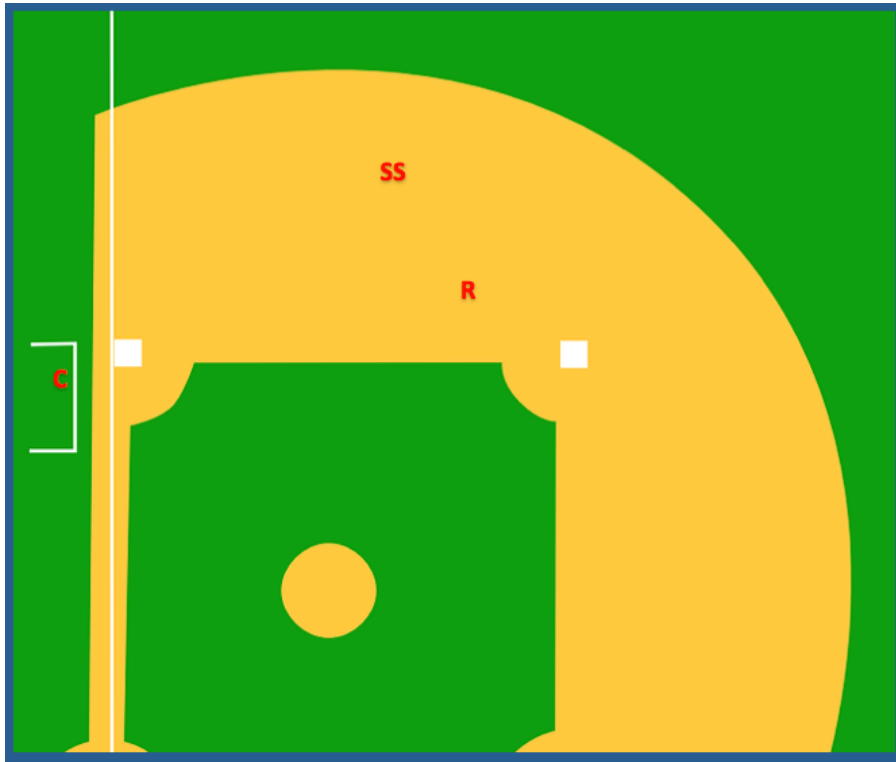
Practicing indoors this winter is a great time to focus on little things like this to create the habits that promote good fielding.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LFtHE1aYQ8>

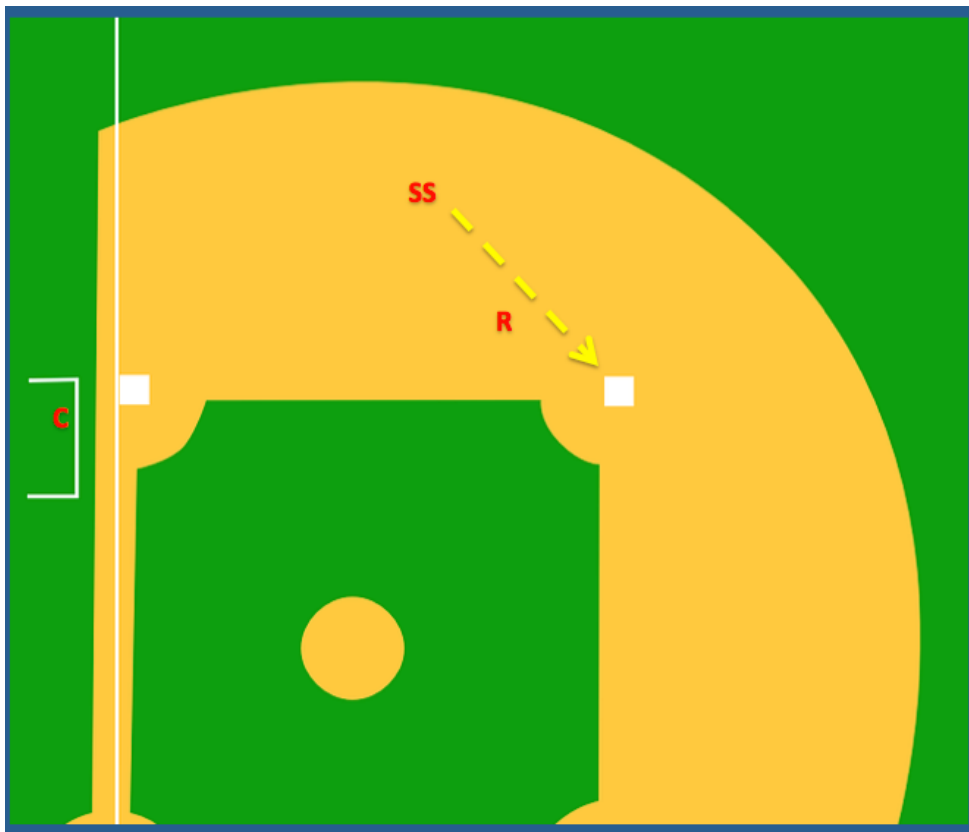
#23 The shortstop's priority when holding runners on

There are a boatload of little things that shortstops should do in order to effectively hold runners on at second base. However, one stands out as the top priority and that involves getting the runner (and third base coach!) comfortable with you being just off the runner's left shoulder.

Unfortunately, many shortstops position themselves here with a runner at second base ...



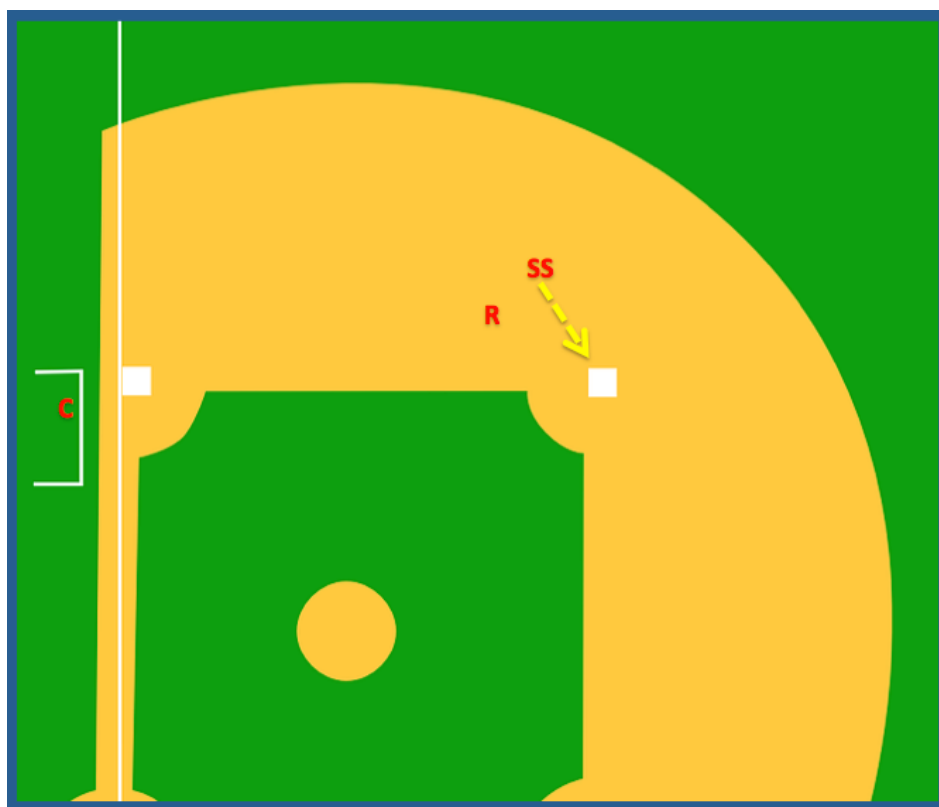
This next visual shows why this is a problem.



The shortstop has too long of a sprint to the bag should a pickoff be called or needed. Of course, as soon as the shortstop breaks, the third base coach will yell “BACK!” and the runner will easily get back before the shortstop gets to the bag.

In order for the timing and element of surprise to work, the shortstop must position himself off the left shoulder of the runner before the pitch from the get-go and then hustle back to a better location on the pitch. After doing this for several pitches, runners, innings, etc. both the runner and the third base coach will grow accustomed to you being there. Now when a pickoff is warranted, the shortstop only has a short sprint to the bag as shown here

...



If the pitcher spins at the proper moment (as soon as the shortstop breaks to the bag) then it will not matter if the coach yells to get back. The shortstop will be at the bag and the ball will be on its way.

Mastering the footwork and timing takes a lot of practice and attention to detail by shortstops and pitchers. Don't take the time to practice it to get it

right and you'll miss a lot of opportunities to get an out without having to throw a pitch.

#24 What are YOUR players doing on deck?

The photo to the right was forwarded to me by a good friend who said it was making the rounds on social media. As you can see, a total of four hitters are currently in their hitting routine. To see this many hitters involved leads me to think that Clemson demands this of their hitters as part of an official hitting routine they want their hitters to move through.

Most coaches would be satisfied if just their on-deck hitter was going through some sort of planned routine but a double-deck guy and triple-deck guy doing it too? That's pretty impressive!

Creating such a routine is of enormous importance because a good one gets you ready both physically and mentally. Below is a reprint of a post I wrote way back called *Hitting: Five stages of focus*. In it you will see that each



stage requires specific physical and mental adjustments that either get you ready for an upcoming at-bat or help you get over one you just had. All routines will vary based on each hitter's individual needs, strengths, and weaknesses so the content below is certainly not a one-size-fits-all.

More posts about hitting routines to come!

Hitting: Five stages of focus

Pre-game to Double-Deck. Focus should be broad

- *Physically preparing to hit. Batting practice, soft-toss, proper warm-up, proper mechanics, etc.*
- *Thoughts on hitting involve gathering information about the pitcher, staying positive, and noticing how the game is evolving*
 - *How does he pitch righties vs lefties?*
 - *Majority of pitches in or away? Up or down?*
 - *What seems to be his "out" pitch or "go-to" pitch when in trouble?*

On-Deck. Focus begins to narrow.

- *Recognizing the situation you will be batting in. Runners on?, outs?, score?, inning?, bunting situation?, etc.*
- *Much less focus on overall mechanics and more on a batter's "keys" – hands back, stay on top, be aggressive, etc. NOTE: Each batter should create a short list of "keys" that are specific to their individual success. Ask a coach if you are not sure what they might be. Keep your thoughts to these keys only. Stick with short positive phrases like "Stay on top" or "aggressive through the ball." Avoid negative commands like "Don't loop the bat" or "Don't swing at bad pitches." Tell your body what you want it to do as opposed to what you don't want it to do.*
- *Keep breathing deeply and slowly to relax the body and mind to control nervousness and/or anxiety.*

In the box. Focus is very narrow.

- *Focus on the pitcher. See the "whole pitcher" on the mound and gradually shrink your vision to his release point when he lets go of the pitch.*

- *All thoughts about mechanics are erased. After a pitch or swing, a batter can step out and give a positive reminder about one of his keys but that's all.*
- *See the pitch and just react. Trust your preparation.*

Post at-bat. *Keep it simple, keep it positive.*

- *Quickly process what went right and what went wrong.*
- *Shift to "defense thinking" as you run to your position. Hitting is over. Leave all hitting thoughts in the dugout.*
- *Give yourself a break. Hitting is hard. Find a positive no matter how small it may be. A first pitch swing at a pitch over your head resulting in an easy pop-up becomes "Good job being ready to swing at the first pitch!" in your head. You can just add "get a good pitch to hit" to your keys the next time you are on deck.*
- *Circle back to "Pre-game to Double-deck" focus when you return to the bench.*

Post-game. *Return to a broader focus.*

- *Honestly evaluate your at-bats. Three or four hard hit balls is a successful day at the plate regardless of how many turned into hits. Four hits off the end of the bat may have improved your average but it should be a sign of concern and a need for possible adjustments as well.*
- *Replace thoughts of "I'm awesome!" or "I stink!" with "what do I need to work on before the next game to get better?"*
- *Once again ... Give yourself a break. Hitting is hard. Find the positives no matter how small they may be.*

*With the use of these stages and creating their own **routine**, players hopefully will get a greater sense of control over their body and mind as a hitter. Great hitters have many of the same thoughts as others. Great hitters just do a better job of knowing what to focus on, when to focus on them, and for how long.*

#25 Base running – A yard makes a big difference

If you have been a reader of this site then you probably know the story of why I call it *Baseball By The Yard*. If you don't, watch the video on my [Home Page](#) that explains the story and the significance.

The other day I was working with some older base runners at a high school camp. I was emphasizing good angles and turns at first base and had them go from home plate to second base. After about 20 of them ran the drill, I marked on the ground the four main paths the players took around first base as seen by their footprints in the dirt. I marked each path with a solid line as shown in the photo. I called them all down to first base and asked them the following question.



“If the play at second base is going to be close, which path would you rather take?”

Every one of them pointed to path #1. They obviously realized that Path #1 will get them to second base faster. I then reiterated the proper way to round first base. To learn the proper way, click [HERE](#) for a previous post I did on that subject called *You do NOT run a question mark to first base*.

I placed a red arrow on the photo between the farthest paths players took after their first step past first base. About how far apart are those paths?

Yep. About one yard.

Every inch counts. It takes a lot of hard work and attention to detail to whittle down that yard so that you can keep succeeding in the game as it gets faster.

Those that do keep playing. Those that don't get weeded out.

Help support BaseballByTheYard.com!

For the remainder of 2017, the ebooks and seminars listed below have been discounted as follows.

The Off-Season: The guide to help prepare for next season.

Was 6.99. **Now \$4.99**

Coaching Course: Game charts - The ultimate teaching tool for coaches. Was \$67 **Now \$29.99**

Off-Season Pitching Guide: A 4-week plan for developing pitchers for game #1 Was \$4.99 **Now \$3.99**

40 Pitching drills, 30 Base running, 25 Outfield drills eBook bundle.

Was \$12.99 **Now \$9.99**

60 Infield Drills eBook

Was \$4.99 **Now \$3.99**

Time to hit! 60 Hitting drills eBook

Was \$9.99 **Now \$7.99**

For more information and to purchase, click [HERE](#).

As always, direct any questions, comments, and idea suggestions for future posts to

BaseballByTheYard@gmail.com

Best of luck on your baseball journey!

