

# Key Concepts in Hitting

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The key to being an effective teacher and coach is to develop a simplified, comprehensible approach to instruction. When working on batting skills, my goal is to develop hitters who understand the key concepts in hitting. What follows is a summary of those concepts, starting with the mechanics of the swing: stance, stride, swing, position at contact, and follow-through. I teach what I call linear hitting versus rotational hitting to create more power through the ball. The following describes a linear hitting motion, with a “short to, long through” approach.

## Stance

The stance may vary from player to player, but there are some characteristics of the stance that have general applications. The feet should be about six inches (15 centimeters) wider than shoulder-width apart. A stance that is too wide will inhibit weight transfer and hip rotation. One that is too narrow may produce a long stride, causing too much head movement and poor ball tracking. The knees should be slightly flexed, with the upper torso bent slightly forward (toward the plate) at the waist. The head is turned toward the pitcher with both eyes level, and the chin is near the front shoulder at the start of the swing.

There are three types of stances: open, closed, and square. In the open stance, the hitter is turned 30 to 60 degrees on the balls of her feet toward the pitcher so that her front foot is about two or three inches (five to seven centimeters) farther from home plate than the back foot. The weight is distributed evenly on both feet. In this stance, the hips are more open to allow for a shorter swing. The disadvantage of the open stance is that it limits plate coverage on the outside third of the plate.

In the closed stance, the player's front foot is moved about two or three inches closer to home than the back pivot foot. The hips are closed, restricting hip rotation. In this stance, the right-hander can drive the ball to right field. The disadvantage of the closed stance is that it prevents the batter from reaching pitches on the inside of the plate.

The square stance is the most workable because it gives the hitter the best plate coverage without any disadvantages. No matter what the stance, successful hitters stride to a square position to get maximum coverage.

Complete plate coverage is an important aspect to consider when choosing where to stand in the batter's box. The depth in the batter's box depends on the nature of the hitter and the type of pitcher throwing. The farther back the hitter is in the batter's box, the more time she will have to read the pitch. In most situations, I'll have my players stand in the back of the box. Against average pitchers, they have the option of moving up in the box. This will decrease the reaction time for those hitters having trouble waiting on the ball.

A player's grip on a bat is equally important. The hands should be set near the back shoulder and should be no more than three to six inches (7 to 15 centimeters) from the body. The lead shoulder is pointing at the pitcher or is slightly closed in the stance. To find a proper grip that ensures maximum power at contact, the player should let her hands hang freely in front of her with palms facing each other. She should grip the bat and pull the bat up to starting position without allowing her fingers to move again. The bat should be held in the fingers of the hands with the grip placed at an angle in the top hand from the base of the pinky to the middle of the index finger. The second knuckles of each hand are aligned when gripping the bat.

When the hitter is in her stance, her focus is soft with her eyes relaxed and looking at the pitcher. As the pitcher's hands come apart, the batter should change the focus to the pitcher's release point (a hard focus). We all know what it feels like to stare with a hard glare at something. That is a hard focus.

## **Stride or Trigger**

As the pitcher is moving toward the release, the hitter is beginning to initiate some preparatory movement—either a stride or a trigger. The stride or trigger establishes timing and helps achieve a strong and powerful position to start the swing. During the stride, the batter takes a small step toward the pitcher. If she does not use the step, she should use a movement that helps get the swing going. The stride should be soft, closed (45 to 90 degrees in relationship to the plate), soon enough in relation to the pitch, and only a few inches. During the stride, it is comfortable for some to initiate a small movement of the hands in a C pattern. As the pitch approaches, a coiling action begins. The front side (shoulder, hip, and knee) slightly turns in, and the back knee also turns inward. During this coiling action, the front shoulder should be lower than the back shoulder. The hands should always remain inside the back shoulder.

## **Swing**

The swing begins from the bottom up. The back knee will begin to move in as the hitter shifts her weight toward the ball with the legs and hips; the hands and shoulders stay back. As the ball approaches the plate, the hitter pushes off the back foot to start the linear movement. During the movement of the legs and hips, it is vital that the head and eyes remain level and still. The hands begin to move toward the pitcher, not toward the plate, to stay inside of the ball. The hitter needs to keep the bat above forearm level (a line passing from the elbow through the hand), and the front arm maintains a 90-degree angle. The shoulder-elbow-wrist motion unlocks similar to a Frisbee throw. As the bat head moves closer to contact, the top hand begins to rotate so that at contact the palm is nearly facing up. The back leg continues to drive into a now firm (not locked) front leg, and the back foot begins to turn toward the pitcher. This method of approaching the ball helps ensure that the hands stay inside the ball to allow for a more powerful contact position.

Stress to the hitter to drive the front shoulder to the ball. If the front shoulder pulls away from the ball, one or more of the following problems will happen:

- The head will come out of the proper position, and eye contact with the ball will be reduced.
- The back shoulder will drop down, which creates an unlevel position for the shoulders in their approach to the ball.
- The hands will drop, creating a loop in the swing.
- The back leg will collapse and eliminate any positive hip action in the swing.
- The coverage of the outside part of the plate will be reduced.

The front arm starts the hands toward the ball while the back arm finishes. The batter should allow the front shoulder to track the ball from the pitcher's hand to the contact zone. As the bat is approaching the ball, the arms remain bent. If the arms are extended too early in the swing, the swing arc will be too long, and the hitter will sacrifice bat speed and power.