**Hitting Fastpitch Softball**

**By Michele Smith, Olympic Gold Medalists**

Most players and coaches know me as a pitcher, but I am also a pretty decent hitter … if I do say so myself! During my career I was the top hitter in the Japan Pro League many times and know full well how important good hitting can be for a successful season. So, this month I decided to point out some keys to becoming a good hitter. This is not an article on head to toe hitting mechanics, but more ideas and concepts that have helped me over the years. If you will implement these concepts into your hitting, I believe it will make a profound difference to you and your team.

**Swing First, Then Hit**

Being a good hitter takes a lot of practice and patience… as well as perseverance. It is common knowledge that hitting is one of the most difficult athletic tasks to master, so it makes sense that it requires at lot of hard work and, if you’re lucky, good instruction from the start.

Most coaches understand that the proper hitting swing is one of the first things they need to teach their players, but I would encourage them to teach them how to hit without actually hitting the ball.

Often, we associate learning to hit with taking batting practice i.e. basically, the practice of hitting balls. I believe it is very important for players to learn how to properly swing the bat before they take on the challenge of hitting a ball. Right away, many young players want to hit a moving ball. When they first start this practice and are unsuccessful, it can be very discouraging. That’s why I believe you should first learn what a proper swing feels like and then practice that swing over and over until it becomes second nature. A good way to do this is with “dry cut”’ or “dry swings.” In fact, this is a hitting drill that you should do during every practice. I recommend you start each practice with 50 good dry cuts. (In addition, I encourage players to take at least 50 dry cuts each day on non practice days.) Then, after the swing is natural, you can progress to hitting a ball off the tee, then move on to soft toss, then front toss and, finally, coach pitch or live pitching.

Progression in all things in life makes transitions easier. We don’t teach infants to walk first then crawl. Likewise, you should not be taught to hit a ball before you have learned how to swing a bat.

**Choose Your Weapon**

It is extremely important to swing a bat that is the right length and weight.

A bat that is too short will prevent you from covering the strike zone and give you insufficient plate coverage, while a bat that is too long will result in a slow swing and make it much more difficult to hit the ball on the “sweet spot” of the bat. If your bat is too heavy, you can also expect to have a slow swing because your bat head will lag, making you late to contact.

Typically, if a bat is too long, it will also be too heavy. To find the right length bat for you, stand in the middle of the batter's box and touch the head of the bat to the inside, front corner of home plate. Angle your arm towards that same point and allow the bat head to rest in your palm. The handle, or knob, of the bat should fall somewhere between the middle of your palm and your wrist. If the knob is down by your fingers, the bat is too short. If it is above your wrist, then it is too long.

To find the right weight bat, grip the bat handle with your dominant hand and lift your arm (and the bat) straight out to your side at shoulder height. Hold that position for 10 seconds. If the bat is too heavy it will be difficult to keep the bat in that position. Also, swing the bat to see how it feels. Is it a balanced bat, or an end-loaded bat? If you are swinging an end-loaded bat and the bat head drags through the contact zone, then you might want to try using an evenly-loaded or evenly-weighted bat. As a general rule, most batters who do not have a strong top hand will prefer a bat that is evenly loaded.

**Grip It Good**

A proper grip on the bat will have a major impact on your swing. To get the most out of your swing, grip the bat with your hands together and your knuckles lined up. The “knocking knuckles” are the ones you use when knocking on a door. If your grip is not lined up correctly, the bat will have a tendency to jump as your wrists roll after contact. Keeping your knuckles lined up will prevent this and give you a smooth swing from start to finish. Also, don’t squeeze the bat so tightly that your knuckles turn white. Your grip should be relaxed. When you start your swing, your grip will naturally tighten around the bat. Your middle and ring fingers are your gripping fingers, and should stay in contact with the bat and maintain a good grip, while the thumb, index and pinky fingers should be relaxed and loose. A tight grip will produce a slow swing. A relaxed and loose grip will give you a much faster swing.

**Keep It Centered**

If you want to have a good swing, you have to have a good stance in the batter’s box. The swing happens fast and there is no time to correct or make up for a bad start. Begin by standing in the middle of the batter's box. Some players will adjust forward or backwards as they become more proficient hitters, but I recommend that beginning to intermediate hitters start in the middle, making sure their bat is able to cover all corners of the plate. If you can lean slightly forward and touch the outside corner of the plate with your bat head, you are probably in a good area of the box. Zone coverage is very important. If a pitcher sees that you are unable to reach an outside pitch, she will throw you there all game long. So, never move so far off center that you cannot completely cover the plate with your swing. Your feet should be shoulder width apart, and your weight should be balanced and on the balls of your feet. A slight bend in the knees and waist with the bat resting on your shoulder will keep you relaxed as you wait for the pitcher and umpire to get ready.

**Stride Right**

Now that you are positioned properly, wait for the pitcher to begin her motion and then stride out slightly before or slightly after the ball is released. For pitchers who throw a lot of movement pitches and change of speed pitches, I recommend slightly before release. Being ready and set at release will help you ‘track the ball better. The direction of the stride should be slightly toward the area in front of home plate. But, be careful to never step over the chalk line of the batter’s box or on home plate or you will be called out.

You should not step directly to the pitcher, or “in the bucket,” because it will be difficult to hit the outside pitch in that position. Remember to keep your hands back--or still--until after your stride foot is down. If your hands move forward too early, you will struggle with change-ups or off-speed pitches.

**Totally Track It**

You can’t hit what you can’t see! Many hitters are looking at the ball, but never really see the ball. They guess hit, or make up their minds to swing before ever seeing if the pitch is a ball or a strike.

It is important to learn to track the ball all the way from the pitcher’s hand to the point in the hitting zone and even into the catcher’s glove. Tracking a ball correctly like this will help you to see the ball as long as possible before having to make a decision on which pitches are strikes to swing at and which ones are balls to take. Learning to follow the ball from release to glove will also help your head and eyes to move down and back from front shoulder to back shoulder as they follow the path of the pitch. Track the ball all the way, with your head down, and you will be in a good position to make contact with the ball.

One of my favorite drills is to stand in as a batter while one of my teammates has her pitching practice. As she throws, I practice tracking her pitches. I take dry cuts, without a bat in my hands, to work on making game-like decisions on which pitches to swing at and which ones to let go. If I am swinging at balls and watching strikes then I know my tracking is off, which will result in my perception of the strike zone being off.

**Short To**

As the pitcher starts the first movement of her motion, lift the bat from your shoulder, keeping your hands close to your body, and make your stride. Once your front foot is on the ground and you have decided that the pitch is a strike (because you have tracked it properly), you should then move your hands to the ball. The movement should be short, quick and explosive. This is where the saying “throw your hands to the ball” comes from. Moving your hands to the ball will help you to keep your hands inside the ball, or between you and the ball. It is very important that your hands do not get too far away from your body or you will have a tendency to swing from outside, in instead of inside, out.

If you hit outside the ball -- or loop your swing -- you will be late to contact producing routine ground outs or pop-ups. You do not want a long, casting, slow swing. There is no power in that. You want a short, quick swing that will enable you to get your bat to the ball in time to make good contact.

**Long Through**

One of my favorite hitting tips is: “short to, long through.” Once you have made a short, quick swing to contact, you want to complete the swing with a long follow through into the field of play. You want your hands to travel through the contact zone on the same flight path that the pitch is on and extend out and into the field of play. You do not want to prematurely wrap the bat around your shoulder. Extend your hands and get a long, powerful follow through. Remember, “Short to. Long through!” And after that, run…fast!

Remember, there will always be a pitcher out there trying to get you out, so don’t help her by being ill-prepared in the batter’s box. Make sure you are learning the proper mechanics and practice consistently.

On top of that, try the things listed above. I have followed these simple hitting concepts for years and they have helped me tremendously throughout my career. I hope they will do the same for you. Good Luck with your hitting!