



Baseball / Softball

Hitter's Checklist

Consistent Hitting Through Preparation

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It is often said that the hardest thing to do in sport is to hit a baseball. It requires great timing, explosive power, flexibility, vision, and concentration. These things are so difficult to do a great baseball/softball player often fails at getting on base two-thirds of the time. This reality, combined with the excitement of the game and desire to do well on the field often leaves the most critical of hitting needs—focus—difficult to achieve.

A ball player that is able to effectively focus at the plate often has a strong presence in the batter's box, sees pitches early, notices their rotation, displays great plate discipline, and hits the ball well often. Unfortunately, there are many things that can wander into one's mind when digging into the box and awaiting the pitcher's delivery such as: "What's the count?" "What pitch am I looking for?" "Keep your weight back," etc. Though many of these thoughts might be reasonable, very few of them ought to be carried into the batter's box. Certainly this makes sense, but it is also much easier said than done.

A common sport psychology myth is that great players do not think when they are playing well. In essence suggesting that

ball players empty their heads of all thought when at the plate. This would suggest that an athlete, when playing well, is "thoughtless." There are few circles in life where "thoughtless" would be perceived as a good thing, and this is certainly true on the diamond. Great hitters are extremely efficient in their thinking. In other words, they think just the right amount, neither filling their

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heads with excessive chatter, nor trying to achieve a "clueless" state by emptying their heads completely. Their purpose is clear and their minds are focused on simple targets. Concentration on the playing field is about thinking the right thing at the right time. A good player that understands this principle and creates a systematic approach to hitting can be finely focused for every pitch.

A good way to achieve this state of focus is to develop a hitter's mental checklist. In essence as a hitter gets physically ready for an at-bat by grabbing equipment and warming up, he/she should also prepare mentally by systematically going through a checklist of thoughts and ideas that must be attended to and effectively managed. The utility of a checklist is analogous to a grocery list. Preparing a grocery list gives a shopper direction as they wander the aisles of the supermarket. Each time an item is crossed off the shopper moves closer to checking out and a successful trip to the supermarket. Finally, when leaving the store, the shopper is confident that they are ready to prepare meals throughout the upcoming week. Similarly a batter working through a pre-bat checklist can step into the box confident and focused on the next pitch.

There are a few foundations to a good hitter's checklist:

- **Take care of the body and the mind.** A body that is warm and ready to swing is useless without a brain ready to focus.
- **Get rid of big thoughts early.** While strategy, timing the pitcher, and swing mechanics are important, in the batter's box feelings and focus should be simple, so the batter can read the pitch and react accordingly.
- **Consistency is important.** Many average hitters have a routine they do prior to batting when games are going well, but unwisely stray away from it when they are nervous or struggling. A good hitter's checklist

Hitter's Checklist

In The Hole

Key Thoughts

- _____
- _____

Key Actions

- _____
- _____

On Deck

Key Thoughts

- _____
- _____

Key Actions

- _____
- _____

Digging In

Key Thoughts

- _____
- _____

Key Actions

- _____
- _____

Play Ball!

Key Thought

- _____

is most important when stakes are the highest and pitchers are the toughest.

- **Avoid the trap of thoughtlessness.**

Going through the actions of a hitter's checklist is worthless if one's mind is not cleared and they do not feel the way they want to feel when standing in the box.

A good at bat begins long before a pitch is thrown. Whenever possible, it ought to begin in the hole (3rd player in line to bat), and be a purposeful routine of thoughts and actions that leads to plate discipline and good swings. In the hole is clearly a time to assess the situation ahead and grab equipment (helmet, batting gloves, bat, etc.). Key thoughts at this point in time often have to do with reminding one's self of the game situation, the pitcher's strengths and weaknesses, and reminding one's self about necessary technical adjustments. Key actions revolve around checking equipment, pine-tarring the bat, and making sure one "looks good." These are important thoughts and actions—take care of them early, because they do not belong in the batter's box.

The on deck circle is the next important place during preparation. Thoughts begin to simplify and focus while the body gets warm. By watching even a small amount of baseball on television, one notices superstitious actions, swinging of multiple at bats, focused starts, and a variety of stretches. Key thoughts at this point in time revolve around final technical thoughts (such as turn the hips, keep the hands inside, etc.). Key actions are two fold, they are activities that help the athlete activate the body and feel ready, and they revolve around taking a few swings to time the pitcher. Timing is important

Figure 1. Hitter's Checklist

for the elements of the hitter's checklist. For example, it is too late to time the pitcher when standing in the batters box and likewise, few would appreciate it if a player were swinging bats to warm-up in the dugout.

After leaving the on deck circle, it is time for the player to get comfortable in the batter's box and settle in for a good at bat. This requires a relaxing action, such as taking a good slow breath to manage the excitement of digging in, and perhaps making sure to stand tall to project an image of confidence. Key thoughts at this time are simple and straightforward. Rarely should they extend beyond 2 – 3 words. They ought to either be a key swing thought, "quick bat," and/or a batter reminding him/herself of the pitch for which they are looking.

The body is now ready, the body is focused, and it is time for the final thought. The final piece of the hitter's checklist is the player visually picking up the pitcher's release point.

See figure 1 for a card that can help develop a purposeful hitter's checklist. At each stage one or two "key thoughts" ought to be identified. Key thoughts can be focus points (timing the pitcher), a few words to one's self ("stay back"), or reminders of goals. Also at each stage it is important to identify "key actions."

Key actions can be obvious such as grabbing a batting helmet or swinging a weighted bat, but also should include calming actions such as taking a deep breath when stepping into the batter's box. Note that just prior to the pitch being thrown there is only one "key thought." This is because the goal is to read the pitch and react. While developing the checklist, make the thoughts and actions as specific as possible. Take some time to write out a clear and tangible preparation plan that will be the most useful and easily remembered during the excitement of a game.

While this might seem like a complex process, purposely checking off thoughts and actions from in the hole to when the pitch is thrown is actually a simplifying process. At the beginning of the checklist thoughts are broad, focusing on strategy. At the end they are simple and focused on hitting. When an action or thought is completed, mentally check it off the list and move on to a finer focus. At the beginning of the checklist, the body is excited, but not ready. At the end it is loose and filled with relaxed-energy, which is necessary for the patient process of waiting for one's pitch, and then exploding through the contact zone. Committing to a purposeful hitting checklist will lead to consistent at bats, smarter baseball, and greater success on the diamond. ▲

About the Author

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