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**KEEP IT SIMPLE FOR SUCCESS**

**“Reaching Potential Demands First-Rate, Two-Strike Execution”**

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**Denver, Colo.**—I have often been asked to crystallize my thoughts concerning two-strike hitting. This has been an area of concern since baseball’s earliest days.

The ability to “put the ball in play” when hitters’ backs are against the proverbial “wall” has tormented many from baseball’s earliest days. In this article, I’ll present some ideas that can bring both players and coaches to a better understanding when dealing with this vital part of the hitting game.

The principal reason two-strike hitting is so difficult is because it is the **ONLY** time a hitter must guard against every pitch, every pitch speed, and every pitch location in the pitcher’s arsenal. It is for this reason that so many hitters fail with two strikes! If you’ve followed my hitting articles, you should already know that no player can “guard” both sides of the plate on any given pitch. The beauty is that he doesn’t have to—until he gets two strikes on him. Then “concessions” must be in order.

We can really simplify this subject by saying at the outset, that if a player stays “inside the ball,” and employs good rotational mechanics, the only thing keeping him from becoming a good two-strike hitter is the mental approach he takes to the plate.

First, to be a good two-strike hitter, a player has to “know” himself. I know, I know. I sound like a broken record on this point. But to deal effectively in situations where there might not be a “next” time, we’ve got to come to grips with “who we are” if we are to achieve. What kind of hitter am I? Better “off speed” than fastball hitter? Do I like the ball up or down in the strike zone? Do “like-handers” or “opposite-handers” give me the most trouble?

Second, to be a good two-strike hitter, a player must have a “plan” when he goes to the plate, and this plan is arrived at by knowing himself **FIRST**. He then gets his hitting plan from watching the pitcher, from his warm-ups before the first inning to his most recent pitches to the previous batter. What pitch is he having trouble getting over? Is he an “against the count” pitcher? What pitch does he throw when he’s behind in the count? Does he have a dominant “strike out pitch?” Do I feel “comfortable” against this guy—or does he just have to “throw his hat on the mound” to get me out?

Answering these questions honestly can make the difference when the game is “on the line,” and it all starts with the opposing pitcher’s first warm-up pitch. If you’ve done your homework, you have some choices. If you’re facing a top-drawer pitcher who’s making tough pitches that day, you may not want to “let” him get two strikes on you. In this case, you would expand your hitting zones and be more aggressive trying to put the ball in play, and not have to get to a two-

strike count. If you feel there's no way that pitcher can get you out that day, you might want to shrink your strike zone somewhat and look for "your" pitch, knowing he "can't" strike you out.

Against pitchers like Pedro Martinez, Randy Johnson, Curt Schilling, Kevin Brown, Eric Gagne, *et al*, very few—if any—hitters have a "dead red" area. Few, if any, feel "comfortable" against pitchers of this caliber. But everything in baseball is relative, meaning that even in *your* league, there are pitchers of this "caliber" relative to the others. So, in this instance, you probably won't elect to wait for "your" pitch—you'll probably never see it that day. Open up your hitting zones!

In other words, effective two-strike hitting implies knowing your strengths and weaknesses, who the pitcher is that day, and how "comfortable" he is to hit against. Doing your homework before each at-bat can add plenty of confidence and points to your OPS (on-base percentage + slugging percentage: baseball's benchmark for productive hitting).

You've often heard me mention how quickly at-bat situations can change. This, in turn, will affect your two-strike hitting approach. If you have the potential to "go yard," and you represent the tying or winning run deep in the game, you may not want to make any concessions with two strikes. In a situation like this, there is no two-strike hitting. Your team needs the long ball from you. It's "outhouse or penthouse." Other times, and if you're not a "power" guy, or you don't represent the tying or winning run, contact, and just "putting the ball in play," is warranted. As a hitter, you have to be aware of these things and "hit according to your type."

***How Does A Hitter Arrive At "Knowing" Himself?*** All the player's experiences playing baseball go into this equation. He is the sum total of every pitch, every at-bat, every inning he has ever played. And over this time frame, he has learned what "type" hitter he is. "Types" fit into three groups. "Contact/singles hitters" for the smaller, fleet-of-foot player, "line drive gap hitters" who possess average-to-good foot speed and occasional power, and "pure power" types that don't run very well, but have true long ball potential. Most hitters fit into these three types, and knowing where YOU fit in, goes a long way in determining your two-strike hitting plan. My experience suggests that approximately 70% of players fall into the "line drive/gap" type and 15% in both the "singles/contact" and "pure power" categories.

***"Cloning" Hitters.*** While we're on this subject of hitting "types," this is probably as good a time as any for all us instructors/coaches to get on the same "page." Because most hitters fall into these three types, we MUST be sensitive to the fact that not everyone can do what we teach. As *instructors, we have to adjust our hitting knowledge—and what we teach—to the player and his intrinsic ability.* Sadly, many times I tutor players who confide that their coach teaches everyone the "same" mechanics, regardless of size, strength, or foot speed. We must guard against allowing ourselves to be caught up in this potentially harmful practice.

Last summer, a college player from the University of \*\*\*\*\* came for lessons. He was a big, strapping kid. 6'4" and 240 pounds. Strong as an ox. I asked him to take a few dry swings for me. After watching him, I told him I was really "excited." He asked why, and I told him I very rarely come in contact with a player as strong as he—and with such great foot speed.

He looked at me, incredulously, and blurted that he had NO foot speed whatsoever. So I asked him why he swings "down" at the ball if he can't run. He said that's what his coach taught, and EVERYONE had to hit the same way. Players 5'4" were taught to hit the same way as players 6'4"! I know you're smiling at this point and saying, "yeah, Mike, but that isn't ME. I don't do that." Think again. It runs rampant in baseball. What a terrible waste of ability!

His coach, possibly unaware of the consequences of his actions, was keeping this player from realizing his “dream.” I told him I had no interest in teaching him a technique that would upset his coach, and perhaps cast him in an unfavorable light in his eyes. He said he wasn’t worried about that; his dream was to play professional baseball. Over the next seven days, this player learned mechanics more suited to his “type.” He returned to school and hit 9 home runs in the fall. No one else on his team had more than two. At the conclusion of “fall ball,” his coach came up to him and said he didn’t like his swing. He wanted him to go back to swinging down—the mechanics he taught.

While we’re on this subject, it is interesting to note, as a “general” rule, ALL hitting types become “singles/contact” hitters with two strikes. Because, for the most part, we don’t come to bat, every at-bat, where we represent the winning run. More often than not, we must do some things mechanically which will allow us to put the ball in play. *Contact—not power—becomes the name of the game with two strikes.*

**How Can We Gain More Time?** A large part of being a good two-strike hitter is the ability to “wait” as long as possible to determine what type of pitch it is and where it is going. There are a number of ways a hitter can gain more time when confronted with a two-strike count. Over the years, many have been taught to “choke up” on the bat, move further away from the plate, move deeper (further back) in the batters’ box, and to concentrate on hitting the ball up the middle, or the opposite way. Some have been instructed to “close down” their stance somewhat, which offsets the hitter’s contact points back further, and can gain him some extra time. All these have worked for many players over the years.

Another way, which I have found very effective, is for the player to move CLOSER to the plate, “open up” his stance, and utilize the inside-out swing. By doing so, the player significantly shortens the path of his swing. His stroke is shorter (can get to the ball quicker), he rotates less, and has more “accuracy” because he is more compact. My experience also suggests he will “open up” his hitting areas more effectively this way rather than by closing down his stance. I also recommend this approach to all the “singles/contact” hitters I teach, because their greatest asset is their foot speed; the last thing they should want to do is jeopardize their contact-ability by increasing the length of their stroke.

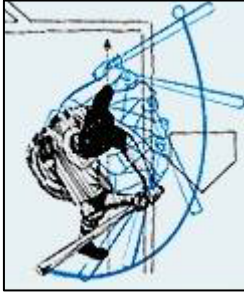
On the other hand, when a player closes down his stance (placing his lead foot closer to the plate than his rear foot), the angle of his stride clashes violently with his deepened contact area. When a player closes down his stance, and resulting stride, he effectively “closes off” to the pitch “in” and “down and in.” With two-strike hitting, the idea is to “open up” your hitting zones, not close them down. And, by closing down in his stride, he not only runs out of hip rotation, resulting in an upper body swing with loss of bat quickness and bat speed, but also blocks off a significant part of his strike zone: the areas “in” and “down and in.” In the major leagues, giving the pitcher an extra 25% of the plate to work with usually gets you a one-way ticket to a bus league.



Harry Heilmann

***The Inside-Out Stroke Is Normally Used For Contact.*** Staying “inside the ball” is an integral part of hitting success. It makes no difference what “type” hitter you are, this concept works for EVERYONE. My article for the Collegiate Baseball News, “Staying inside

the Ball," goes into much more comprehensive detail about its merits and why it should be on every player's "hit list." I encourage you to (re)read it.



The inside-out stroke enables the hitter to wait longer. Coupled with proper lower body rotation, the player is able to contact the ball deeper in his hitting zones. Harry Heilmann, a line drive/gap hitter and Hall of Fame outfielder for the Detroit Tigers in the '20s—who hit over .400 twice in his career—said he went from being a “good” hitter to a “great” hitter when he learned how to inside-out the fastball on the inside corner—when he had two strikes. This is a wonderful piece of information for all hitters.

What he was telling us was that by being able to keep his bat 90° to the oncoming pitch on the inside corner, he was able to hit the ball back through the pitcher's box. When we look at the illustration, we can see exactly what he was saying. We can ONLY effect this by doing two things. 1) by keeping our hands inside the ball, and 2) by using good lower body, rotational



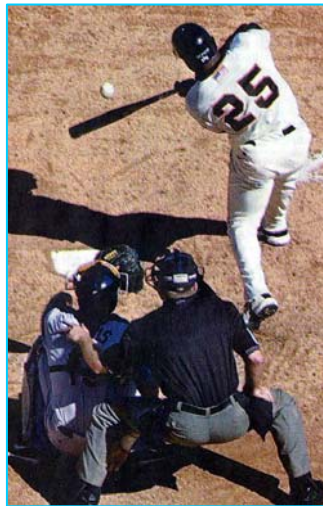
Edgar Martinez

mechanics, whereby the hands have the ability to “wrap around” the rotating body as the arms extend to contact. This produces the correct inside-out swing. When a hitter is able to do this, he picks up more TIME, the elusive and valuable commodity hitters never seem to have enough of. And, with two strikes, he doesn't have to be as “conscious” of the inside fastball—he can wait longer—which then makes hitting the off speed and breaking pitches much easier. It worked in Heilmann's day—and it's

still working today with baseball's current crop of outstanding hitters.



Albert Pujols



Barry Bonds

A player who quickly comes to mind when I think of the inside-out stroke is Edgar Martinez (left) of the Seattle Mariners. He puts on a clinic when he hits. If you get a chance to see him on TV, or are lucky enough to see him perform at the ballpark, watch closely and you'll see what I mean.

But there are too many others to mention here.

All we have to know is if they're getting all the headlines—and making all the money—they're usually the best examples.

Executing the inside-out stroke correctly will enable the hitter to get to the pitch more quickly. He will not have to shorten his stroke. Again, it is worth noting that ALL styles should become

singles/contact hitters with two strikes. The hitter has to “give in” to the pitcher by shortening his stroke and gaining valuable time. I am continually telling hitters that when they have two strikes, they can’t anticipate pitches or “guess” with the pitcher. They can’t afford to make a mistake here. They have to concede to the pitcher and just put the ball in play.

Let’s face it. With two strikes, the fight for time becomes amplified. The hitter is now dealing with his “largest” strike zone and also loses the benefits of “anticipation” as an aid.

***Proper Thinking.*** *In two-strike hitting situations, “proper” thinking helps the hitter to get to all his hitting zones and “time” every pitch.* The hitter has to prepare himself for every speed pitch in the pitcher’s arsenal that day. That’s why it is a good idea to see as many pitches as possible from that pitcher (make the pitcher pitch!). The best way I know of is to mentally prepare for the “in-between” velocities of the pitcher you’re facing. By this I mean, if the pitcher has three pitches, one 70 mph, one 80 mph, and one 90 mph, the hitter must prepare for the mid-speed (80 mph) pitch. If he only has two, say an 85 mph fast ball and a 75 mph slider, you’d gear up your pre-swing for the 80 mph velocity. By doing this, the hitter gives himself a “chance” to catch up to the faster speed pitch, yet still be able to stay back and put the off speed pitch in play. Gearing up for one of the extreme velocities would put the hitter at a grave disadvantage: too late on fastballs and too early on off speed pitches. With two strikes, “proper” thinking prevails.

Ted Williams told me that when the slider became popular, around 1950, that it was the hardest pitch for him to hit. From his earliest days, he felt no pitcher could throw a fastball by him, so he would “lay” for *that* pitch on *every* pitch because it was a mid-velocity pitch. I didn’t fall into that category! (and neither do the majority of hitters). Having ability like that will reduce *anyone’s* strikeout potential, but the point to be made here is that the average hitter *can* compensate for this by preparing for the mid-velocity pitch with two strikes.

***Reaching Potential Demands Good Two-Strike Execution.*** To me, *the quality of a hitter’s technique lies in the superiority of his two-strike execution.* By executing efficiently, he will bring a newfound confidence to his game. Once Harry Heilmann learned how to inside-out the two strike fast ball on the inside corner, and hit it back through the “box,” he KNEW there wasn’t a pitcher alive who could throw a fast ball by him. Likewise, when Ted Williams realized that he could “look” for the slider (mid-speed pitch) and STILL hit the cheese, he knew he was “on” to something. Statistics bore them out. ANYTIME a hitter can “forget about” a pitcher’s fastball, the confidence this brings him is overwhelming. This is what we call being “comfortable” at the plate against certain pitchers.

Being “comfortable” leads to “confidence,” and having “confidence” with two strikes is the name of the game for the hitter. The fastball “sets up” EVERY pitch in a pitcher’s repertoire. And when a hitter doesn’t have to worry about the fast ball—because he can catch up to it even when he isn’t “looking” for it—he should rarely be fooled. Now, the hitter can “sit” on his pitch, and be more selective—even with two strikes!

Hitters with little (or no) confidence normally fear getting to two-strike situations, and almost always open up their hitting zones prematurely to guard against it. The rule of thumb is when a hitter is ahead in the count, his strike zone should shrink; he can look for a “certain” pitch. When he is behind in the count, his strike zone should expand; he can’t be selective. The hitter with poor two-strike execution invariably lacks the confidence to get to two strikes. In essence, he is “always” hitting when he is behind in the count. Few have had success hitting this way. These hitters will swing at borderline pitches because they lack the self-confidence to hit effectively

with two-strikes. And by so doing, their batting averages and overall production radically tail off. *Reaching potential demands first-rate, two-strike execution.*

***Don't "Sell Your Soul" To Two-Strike Hitting!*** Many times I see players have success with their two-strike hitting approach and slowly gravitate towards adopting this hitting approach on a full-time basis. The player should *not* be tempted to do this, nor should the coach/instructor persuade the player to do so. In my opinion, there is little more distasteful in baseball than seeing a player who can really drive balls short-circuit his potential by adopting a singles/contact approach at the plate with less than two strikes. Leave singles hitting to the bona fide singles hitters. If you've got serious "pop" in your bat, keep working hard at being the *run producer* you're capable of being!

Good luck, continued success, and "get a good pitch to hit!"

Mike Epstein

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