

# Mike Epstein Hitting

“Bringing Hitters and Potential Together”™

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*Ask Mike ...*

***The myth of hitting coaches: How we’ve made soccer the fastest growing sport in this country***



“Fortunately for him, he began as a pitcher. A pitcher is not expected to hit. Therefore, he can follow his own system without any coaching interference. Ruth made the most of this opportunity.”

**Ty Cobb on Babe Ruth (1925)**

**DENVER, Colo.**—Few of us know that major league baseball had no hitting coaches until 1975. This being the case, it begs the question: just how important can the position be if the industry went over 100 years without ever sensing the need for including them on coaching staffs? Do hitting coaches REALLY help hitters develop – or do they perform a minimalist function, at best? Or worse, would hitters be better off – dare I say - WITHOUT them?

How does one logically explain how some major league hitting coaches have been fired SIX times for failing with various teams - and then get re-hired again by another team in the same industry? Could YOU get away with something like that in YOUR industry? Hardly. Yet, year in and year out, we see the “usual suspects” lined up and re-hired for failing. Imagine!

Perhaps Ty Cobb was right 80 years ago (above): hitting coaches only get in the way. After all, we’re BORN with the “natural” swing. Why, then, do coaches feel duty-bound to change it?

Correct hitting technique should conform to the Laws of Physics, which, surprise! surprise! IS the “natural” swing. The ultimate goal of the baseball swing is the creation of kinetic

energy produced by the “torquing,” or separation, of the upper and lower torsos. Optimizing the release of energy in this way has been the calling card of 95% of baseball’s Hall-of-Fame hitters (and EVERY pitcher). Why then, don’t we emulate the “best” instead of teaching mechanics that bear absolutely no visual or mechanical resemblance? Defying the Laws of Physics has always been a dead-end road.

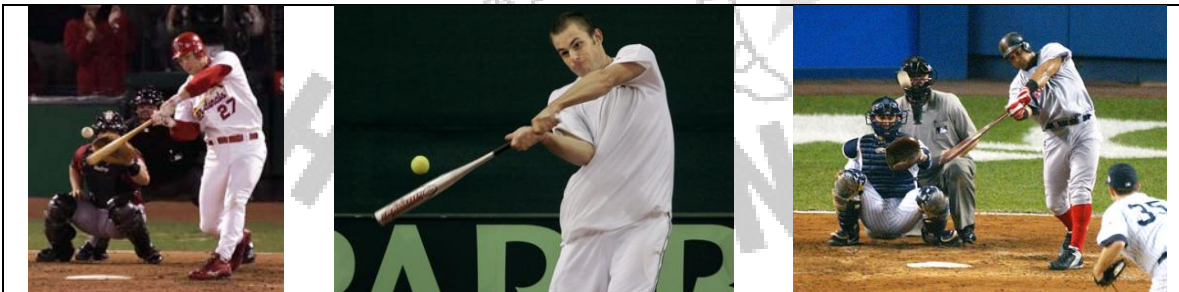
## ***Emulation***

Clearly, “emulation” has been the key to learning hitting technique over the years. It has always been the primary instructional tool. In fact, my mentor, Ted Williams, asked me one day during spring training in 1969, “You want to be a good hitter, Mike? Watch the good ones; they’ll show you everything you need to know.” He said many times that learning to hit was a product of watching and copying. Hitting coaches? We didn’t need them then; why do we think we need them now?

As coaches, we must be able to see and understand the changes taking place today, because your players already see them and are copying them. Make no mistake here: they dutifully watch “Baseball Tonight” and have TiVO. They can slow swings down for frame-by-frame analysis and repetitively replay them. They see EXACTLY what the major league hitters do and will emulate their technique despite what YOU as the coach believe is “correct.” GOOD HITTERS WILL DO WHAT WILL GET THEM AHEAD. Even if you aren’t teaching what they see, I’ll guarantee your most productive hitters are already doing them. What kind of credibility do coaches have when their players see something altogether different on TV than what they are being told to do? Hitting coaches? Who needs ‘em?

## ***We’re all born with the “natural” swing***

Why do I show this photo of world class tennis player Andy Roddick between two major league hitters? Because this is the very FIRST time Andy Roddick had ever swung a baseball bat! No one ever taught him how to hit so therefore he was spared the baggage and pre-conceived biases that come with all hitting instructors. Hitting coaches? Who needs ‘em? Hitters are BORN with the natural swing; coaches take it away.



Scott Rolen

Andy Roddick

Manny Ramirez

Just yesterday, our neighbor brought over his five year old grandson visiting from Florida. His dad asked me to look at his swing and make some comments. I watched his dad pitch some baseball-sized wiffle balls to him. After seven swings, I told his dad that there was no advice I could give him – except one thing: “Don’t let anyone change what he’s doing. He’s got a great swing!” He was born with it. Like Andy Roddick and millions of others.

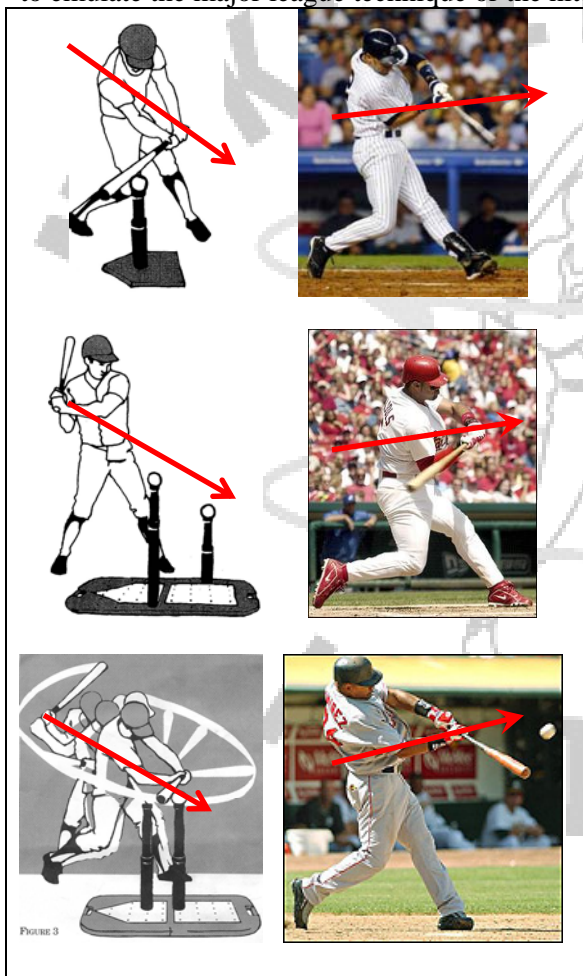
## Where does it start?

Since hitters are born with “natural” swings, the ideal - and most efficient - software is inherently built-in. Then, when youngsters become old enough to begin Tee Ball and/or Little League, coaches (dads) “re-program” their software to swing down, squish the bug, watch the ball hit the bat, and to not dip the back shoulder. (Check the rear shoulders on the hitters above.)

Improper programming (coaching) and second-rate software (technique) predispose many youngsters to fail from the get-go, and is one of the primary reasons why baseball loses so many good athletes to other sports. Few tasks, if any, are as athletically-demanding as hitting a baseball.

The following drawings come from an instruction manual that came with a Hitting Tee and was promoted by the manufacturer as the “major league way to hit.” If the instruction manual is correct, why are Derek Jeter, Albert Pujols and Manny Ramirez doing something totally opposite? DO WE TEACH WHAT WE REALLY SEE?

Sooner (hopefully) than later (too often the case, if at all) a hitting “makeover” must happen to emulate the major league technique or the hitter’s development stalls and he drops out.



## The makeover

When Little League was created in 1939, it established a field configuration featuring 60’ bases. That may have been OK back in 1939 when 12 year old youngsters were 5’3” and 115 pounds. Today, a growing number of these 12 year olds are over 6’ and clearly overmatch the field’s outdated playing dimensions.

Little Leaguers today can beat out ordinary ground balls; they’re too big and fast and overmatch the 60’ bases. Furthermore, most pitchers don’t have pinpoint control and the majority of pitches are thrown high in the strike zone. As a result, coaches teach young hitters to swing down through the ball and hit grounders, ostensibly for three reasons: 1) they can beat them out, 2) infielders often have difficulty throwing and catching, and 3) pitchers throw pitches up in the strike zone. Voila! Instant offense.

Personally, I have little problem with this LL approach; an error at that age level is as good as a hit. But does it benefit the hitter in the long run? Or does it only benefit the coach in his ego-driven quest to win?

In reality, there really isn’t a whole lot you can teach many of these young hitters

because of a lack of motor coordination and short attention spans. So why not leave them alone and let them take advantage of what they are born with? Could it be ego? Dads that “couldn’t hit water if they fell out of a boat” become instant hitting gurus and will argue incessantly (and passionately!) why what they teach is absolutely correct. If what they teach is correct, they must be smarter and know more about hitting than Cobb and Williams! Apparently this is so - to the misfortune of the players they come in contact with. Our quest to be “helpful” often triggers contradictory results.

“Swing down, watch the ball hit the bat, squish the bug, throw your hands at the ball.” Bingo! Quick and easy instruction my wife can teach. Pretty easy.

But is it right? What happens when players graduate from Little League and the bases jump to 70 feet? 80 feet? 90 feet? The “early maturers” of LL quickly find out that the longer base paths make it much more difficult to beat out their ground balls. And those kids that “lagged” a bit maturation-wise in LL now begin to catch up with them. Their arms get stronger, they begin diving for balls and their coordination improves. In other words, they start to make the routine defensive plays more easily; ground balls that one or two years earlier produced a base runner, are now easy outs. This becomes the hitter’s first taste of hitting reality: ground balls produce outs. Moreover, pitchers throw HARDER and have BETTER CONTROL and begin to throw DOWN in the strike zone. HOW DOES A HITTER THAT IS TAUGHT TO GROOVE A LEVEL SWING ABLE TO HIT THE BALL AT HIS KNEES? Most coaches never think about this. Do you?

Despite the new and larger field configuration hitters must adjust to, the problem is also exacerbated by the coaches. They don’t change! They continue to teach the same things they did when the field was much smaller. The result? Ground ball after ground ball!

How many times do you think a hitter can go 0-3 before he says to mom and dad that baseball isn’t “fun” anymore? Coldly, my sense is that WHAT we teach after Little League has allowed soccer to become the fastest-growing sport in this country!

Almost 35% of the 500 hitters we annually teach our 7 Day Hitting Program to at our academy here in Denver are between the ages of 13-16. The biggest reason they come is their inability to hit anything other than ground balls and being jammed. If they don’t (or can’t) change, they quit. Personally, I’ve never known a hitter that hit .150 that had “fun” in this game.

If the hitter doesn’t change his technique, it only gets worse (IF he is even able to continue playing). At the big league level, the reality is 80% of the balls hit on the ground are outs. That’s why major league pitching coaches teach pitchers to get the hitter to hit the TOP-HALF of the ball. Yet hitting coaches continue to teach hitters to HIT the top-half of the ball! (huh?) “Ground balls are good” they tell hitters. Right. In Little League. But a much different lesson is learned if the hitter continues playing.

Back in 2000, Lou Piniella, then the manager of the Seattle Mariners, asked me to be his major league hitting coach. During one of our discussions, he commented to me that my observations about hitting “makeovers” were correct. He confided that when they bring players up from their Class AAA Tacoma club during the season, that he is usually disappointed because all the hitters do is hit “worm burners.” He said he keeps them around for a few weeks, only being able to use them for late inning defensive replacements and pinch running. They then get sent back to Tacoma, a scant 30 miles south of Seattle.

“Something happens in that short trip, Mike. They watch their Tacoma teammates swinging down and it suddenly dawns on them that this was NOT what they saw at the major league level. The next year in spring training, I see them asking Junior, A-Rod and Edgar questions about how they ‘do it.’” If hitters don’t make the necessary adjustments they don’t stay, or in other words, a return to what they already did before coaches took it away!

Those hitters that are lucky enough to get away with it are usually the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> men on the roster and there for their defense.



On the left you see Carlos Guillen of the Seattle Mariners in 2001. On the right is the same player with the Detroit Tigers in 2004. In 2001, Guillen hit 5 home runs, had a slugging percentage of .355 and batted .259. In 2004, he hit 20 home runs, had a slugging percentage of .542 and batted .318. Somewhere along the line, Carlos got it right! Or, as Yogi once said, “You can observe a lot by watching.”

Years ago, when I played for Ted Williams in Washington, he commented that he was still a youngster when he realized that ball games were determined by “line drives and fly balls - not ground balls.” How prophetic he was! Just think how many games were won in the late innings with home runs during this past championship playoff series. Amazing! How does a hitter accomplish this? HE SHOULD BE TAUGHT TO SWING “LEVEL TO THE BALL” – NOT “LEVEL TO THE GROUND.” When executed correctly, “timing” then determines whether the ball is hit in the ground (early), in the air (late) or a line drive (perfect).

Accordingly, hitters must make changes and adjustments to what they were taught early-on as a youngster. If they don’t, hitting becomes a lot like rolling a boulder uphill.

To further compound the issue, high school hitters must use heavier “minus 3” bats. While “throw your hands at the ball” may work with the ultra-light, ultra-resilient “minus 12” aluminum bats of Little League, it just doesn’t work with minus 3s! To be effective with a minus 3, the hitter must stay “inside the ball” (the physics Law of Conservation of Angular Momentum) and forego the “hands and arms” approach of Little League (“hands to the ball”). Using the ENTIRE body quickly becomes a necessity – not an option. As I said, it’s all about physics.

Then again, it’s much easier to teach “hands to the ball” than to learn to correctly teach the hitter to “stay inside the ball.”

In other words, hitters – as well as coaches – must change and adjust. If not, a player’s development slows down to a crawl. Hitters internalize this feeling of frustration because it is personal to them. Coaches don’t - because they don’t have to. I guess it’s just “too much trouble.” Sad.

### ***The “window of opportunity”***

During the off-season I assist professional players who have difficulty with this inevitable makeover. My reputation is that I can get this “done” in a matter of days. It absolutely beats the tried and true emulation process, which could take years - provided the player even has the ability to internalize and execute what he sees. Remember, not everyone has the inherent ability to make his internal camera go “click-click” and correctly mimic and execute what he sees. Neither the player’s agent nor the player can wait that long. These hitters must be put in the correct hitting positions with drills. They must de-learn and re-learn! If not, their window of opportunity could very well have passed them by. This holds true for hitters at any age level and experience.

I am extremely fortunate to have earned the only Letter of Recommendation for hitting instruction that Ted Williams ever gave out. His said his reason for doing this was quite simple: “Anyone who can reduce the emulation process from years to days has got my attention.”

Being able to understand this crucial transition - and having the knowledge to teach it - will enable the coach to assist the hitter getting to the next level. Not only will it improve your overall team offense, but you will also be helping your individual players hit their potentials. Either way, everyone comes out a winner!

However, if it continues to be “too much trouble” for coaches to keep up, we will continue to lose talented kids to soccer. Since we now know better we have no one to blame but ourselves.

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

*Mike Epstein*

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