

HITTING THE CURVEBALL

I was chatting with a young coach about his team's play in the previous summer's tournament season. He said some positive things about his players, before adding that the team's demise came early due to a lack of ability to hit curveballs.

"Not only did our hitters look weak against the curve, but it took away their confidence in hitting the fastball. They'd swing at a low curve and then..."

"...and then take a fastball right down the gut?" He nodded. That's what happens.

I added, "A good off-speed pitch will make a fastball quicker, and leave hitters caught between the two speeds like deer in the headlights."

The young coach laughed and said, "That's exactly what happened. Were you at our games?"

I wasn't at the games, but I've played, coached, watched and analyzed hundreds of games in my life, and I've seen how young hitters who deal well with the fastball can have their confidence evaporate quickly with a little embarrassment.

First of all, young players are trained on fastballs. Most coaches do not give their players sufficient practice at hitting curveballs, and for good reason – there are other, more fundamental things to work on at practice.

A RADICAL APPROACH

I have a radical approach to dealing with this problem. My approach is simple: I do not allow my players to swing at curveballs.

What?

I do not allow my players to swing at curveballs, even on two-strike counts. Yes, you read that correctly.

You mean players are supposed to stand there and take a called third strike if it's a curveball?

Yes.

You're kidding...

No, I'm not kidding.

That's crazy! How can your team possibly win with that kind of approach?

Well, in six summers in Peewee AAA ball, my Monarchs teams compiled a 119-30 record, captured Provincial championships three times,

won two silvers and one bronze at National Championships. A part of that success was our discipline at the plate. My players did not swing at breaking balls.

THE LEARNING CURVE

The first part of the learning curve is to teach and develop effective **Backside Rotational** hitting technique, in order to allow hitters to track pitches a millisecond longer. BR hitting keeps the head and eyes still and weight back, the better to track pitches before committing to swing. BR allows hitters to read curveballs better.

I combine wiffle pitching and live batting practice to train athletes to lay off the curve (a) by recognizing the curveball coming out of the pitcher's hand, (b) by picking up the different rotation on the ball, and (c) by recognizing the different trajectory of the curveball – it typically bubbles above the plane of the fastball.

If players swung at a curve in practice, their turn at the plate was over. We'd work in at-bats, three hitters at a time. You swing at a curve, you go to the back of the line, performing shadow-swings along with the hitter at the plate. Swing at a curve, you're out of there. Simple, repetitive training.

I'd repeat this exercise until hitters began to *recognize* the curve. When a particular player showed this ability to recognize the curveball on a consistent basis in practice, I'd green-light him to swing at curves on two-strike counts in games. If he maintained his discipline in that situation, I'd turn him loose, give him permission to swing at good pitches to hit, regardless of the type of pitch. There were only a few players who received this go-ahead.

DISCIPLINE

When players are allowed to swing at curves without any discipline in place, they tend to look bad, get fooled by the curveball. Against good opposing coaches, this results in a steady diet of curveballs – and a lot of strikeouts, embarrassment, frustration, and an inability to help the team move runners. The disciplines that I teach and develop are put in place to protect the hitter, to hide from opponents his inability to hit the curveball, to keep earning him as many fastballs as possible.

If you can't recognize the curveball, you can't hit it. When a player has a hard time accepting the imposed discipline – laying off curves completely – I go over my reasoning.

By refusing to swing at curves, while you may suffer a half-dozen more called third strikes, you'll also get at least a half-dozen more walks and a lot more fastballs to hit.

If you do swing at curveballs? You'll strike out at least a half-dozen more times, rarely walk, and see fewer fastballs. It's strategy, and with young hitters it not only benefits the team immediately, but in the long run it teaches them to read (and hit) the curve.

KEVIN'S MAGIC SUMMER

Kevin Griffith came to me from Little Mountain. During the spring season he hit some bombs and struck out a lot, mostly on curves. He'd swing at every curveball he saw. When I told him he was not allowed to swing at curveballs on the Monarchs, he looked at me like I was stealing ice cream from him. I told him that, in the spring season, he'd swung at approximately 100 curveballs. I told him that I'd seen him hit three of them.

Kevin didn't like me for a while, but he accepted my orders. I worked extra with him, taught him to recognize the curveball. He hated laying off them. He would glare at me angrily on his way back to the dugout after taking a called third strike on a curve, which happened a few times early on.

It took Kevin a while to make both the psychological and physical adjustments, but when he did, the lights came on. He started to murder fastballs, because he was already visualizing them, looking for them. Pitchers would try curves, have some success, but when you don't swing at curves, opponents throw them less often! Why? Because curves are hard to throw for strikes, umpires aren't as good at calling them, and there are more wild pitches and passed balls on curves, allowing runners to advance. The curveball carries a higher price tag for the defence.

We won the Provincials that summer. Kevin's bat helped to carry us. We flew to Summerside, PEI, for the Nationals. A lot of players had been given permission to swing at the curveball by then – some only on two-strike counts - but Kevin was still on a zero curveball diet. In PEI,

Kevin mashed. He took the curveball. He murdered fastballs.

In seven games, Kevin Griffith batted .576 and had 16 RBI, a new Nationals record at the time. Those numbers, against the best young pitchers in Canada, were nothing less than outstanding. Kevin hit four homeruns, 11 extra-base hits, and had the highest batting average in the tournament by over a 100-point margin. At the Awards Dinner, Kevin was selected first-team all-star, won the trophy for Best Hitter and the plaque for Most Extra-Base Hits. How he was denied the Tournament MVP Award, I'll never know. They gave it to Ontario's catcher, who had five HRs and batted .463.

In the semi-final against a very strong Nova Scotia team with a huge kid on the mound throwing 75 mph heat, we trailed 6-4 in the bottom of the sixth inning. Kevin came up with two runners on base. He'd already gone 2-for-2 with a walk and three RBI. On a 2-1 count, Nova Scotia's pitcher hung a curveball. Kevin waited back, read it, and turned on it. It traveled around 330 feet, over the big scoreboard in left-center field, bounced in the parking lot and out into the street. What a bomb.

We were ahead 7-6, won the game 8-6. As he rounded third, I gave Kevin a high-five. "Sorry," he said, smiling, knowing that he'd swung at a curveball. I laughed.

"It's okay, kid," I yelled as he trotted home into the waiting arms of his ecstatic Teammates, who were jumping up and down like they had pogo-sticks for legs.

Not swinging at curveballs all summer, Kevin Griffith had learned to recognize one, the one Nova Scotia's ace left belt-high, and it caught a flight out of town. I must say, Kevin Griffith picked an excellent time to learn how to hit a curveball.

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