

Hitting with the Pro's

Tony Gwynn: Three Hitting Keys

Here are three fundamental keys that can help any hitter at any age or experience level: First, stay balanced through your swing. When you stride, make sure you land in a balanced position. If you keep rolling forward over your front foot or fall backwards, you're not in a balanced position. When the front foot lands, you want to be balanced and still like somebody's going to take a picture of your follow-through. The second key is to bring your bottom hand, the one that's closest to the barrel of the bat, right to the ball as its being pitched. That helps you stay on the ball and helps keep you from pulling away, which is one of the most common hitting flaws you see for young players and major leaguers. The third key is to know yourself as a hitter. You need to know what you can do and what you can't do, and, most importantly, know what you want to do. That's the only way you're going to be able to make adjustments to your swing and to your approach. And to be successful, you're going to need to make adjustments. Gwynn, who retired at the conclusion of this season, won eight National League batting titles (1984, 1987-1989, 1994-1997) and led the league in hits seven times. He has also batted at least .300 in an NL-record 19 consecutive season.

Todd Hollandsworth: Stay Back For a Strong Hitting Position

The main thing I concentrate on as a batter is staying back on the pitch and keeping myself in a good hitters position. There's a tendency among a lot of hitters, especially those who don't trust their quickness and bat speed, to get a little overanxious and lunge at pitches. You can easily guess what happens: Hitters get out on their front foot and lose their timing and bat speed, resulting in a loss of power and inability to drive the ball. At that point, even if he or she is lucky enough to make contact, it's not going anywhere. Granted, staying back on a pitch is easier said than done. Physically, it's just a matter of keeping your weight on your back leg. The mental part is trickier, though. Part of a pitchers game is to get a hitter off balance by changing speeds. That's why even major league hitters get fooled on pitches every inning of every game. But by taking a lot of batting practice, you can gain confidence in your ability to recognize pitches and stay back that extra split second it takes to swing with precision and power. That doesn't mean you'll never get out in front of a good change-up again, but better pitch recognition and confidence will help reduce those instances. Todd Hollandsworth, a seven-year veteran who was the NL's Rookie of the Year in 1996 with Los Angeles, has kept his batting average on the high side of .300 since joining the Rockies midway through 2000. He credits manager Clint Hurdle, who was previously Colorado's hitting coach. Todd Hollandsworth uses an Old Hickory J143

Tim Salmon: See the Pitch with Both Eyes

There's a big nose bridge between your eyes, and if you don't turn your head to the pitcher, then you're only going to see with one, or one and half. One of the most important things in hitting is seeing the ball and watching it as it leaves the pitchers hand. The first thing I like to do when I take my stance is to get my back foot set, and then put my front foot down where I can comfortably turn my neck and see the pitcher easily with both eyes. If you're a right-handed hitter like me, that back eye is your dominant eye.

It's important to get your head turned enough that you don't have your nose in the way. If you close your front eye and still see the bridge of your nose, then you aren't turning your head enough. Tim Salmon, who is entering his 10th full season, all with Anaheim, is the Angels career home run leader (247) and has a career OPS of .902.

Shawn Green: Tee it Up For Results

I work every single day off a batting tee in an effort to keep my swing right. I don't like to hit into a net like a lot of guys, so I typically go to the batting cage. I like to have 50 feet or so in front of me because I want to see the direction of the ball coming off the bat. Then I just try to hit line drives right through the middle because when you do that, you can't really take a bad swing. One of the best things about hitting off a tee like this that you can do it on your own, too. You don't have to have an extra hitting coach there to tell you what you're doing right or wrong. Just by doing it and hitting the ball in the right place, you're going to take a good swing. And it doesn't take a long time, either. You don't need to take 200 or 300 swings. It's better to take 50 to 100 good swings and focus more on the quality than the quantity. Shawn Green established new career highs with 49 home runs and 125 RBIs for the Dodgers in 2001.

Rafael Palmeiro: Keep your Front Shoulder In

As a young hitter, the main thing to concentrate on is making sure your front sides stays in. A lot of kids tend to open up too soon. Their front shoulders fly out or maybe they're jumping at the ball too much. I use the front shoulder as a key. If the front shoulder can stay on the ball, then the rest of your torso from your hips down to your feet will stay in line, too. If the front shoulder flies out, your waist goes with it and you're not going to have very much success. Even major league hitters, myself included, sometimes find themselves flying open at the plate. When you get into a rut like this, the batting tee can work wonders. If you pull off the ball when you're hitting off a tee, you'll usually hit either the top of the ball or the rubber underneath it. You'll know you're doing it right when you're hitting the ball solid into the net. That positive feedback tells you that your front shoulder is staying in. You'll also find that keeping your shoulder in enables you to see the ball better, because your head and hips will be staying in, too. The tee is an especially good way for young hitters who are beginning to develop a solid swing because the repetitions help you form good habits. On August 30th, Rafael Palmeiro became the only player in major league history to hit at least 38 homers in eight consecutive seasons.

Phil Nevin: Repetition Makes Good Hitters

Repetition is the common denominator of all good hitters. The more swings you can get, the better you're going to be. When you're a Little League-age kid, you're typically playing different sports in different seasons: soccer, football, basketball then you get to baseball season, pick up a bat and just go play. It's great for young kids to be exposed to all different sports and activities available to them. But if you decide eventually that baseball is your sport and something you want to focus on, you're going to need to spend more time at it. Everything is feel in this game. The more good swings you get whether it be hitting off a tee, soft toss or a live batting practice the better for teaching your muscles what a good swing feels like. Tony Gwynn was a guy that never stopped hitting. He hit all winter because he just

never wanted to lose that feel, that stroke. Myself, I do some work before I get to spring training, but once I get to Arizona, I want to get lots of repetitions everyday to train my muscles and regain the feel of a good swing. Phil Nevin, a seven-year veteran, led San Diego in batting (.306), home runs (41), RBIs (126), slugging percentage (.588) and on-base percentage (.388). He signed a four-year contract extension with the Padres during the off-season.

Nomar Garciaparra: Set a Routine in the Batters Box

People give me a lot of trouble about all the things I do in the batters box, but everything I do gets me ready to hit. It puts me in the right frame of mind and gets me comfortable. It's like a signal to my body that it's time to hit. I think it's a very individualized thing. I wouldn't tell another player to pull his batting gloves down tight or to kick his toes to the end of his shoes. That's the way I like to feel when I hit everything nice and tight. For somebody else, it might be something else. Pudge Rodriguez crosses himself before he steps in to the box for every pitch. A lot of players establish routines for when they step into the box. To me those aren't superstitions; it's a system you use. You do everything the same way every time and you set up a consistent habit that turns into a hit. It keeps you in the game and it sets you up a chain of events that's predictable no matter what stadium you're in or what pitcher you're facing. Nomar, the AL Rookie of the Year in 1997, is a three-time All-Star. He entered the season with a career batting average of .333 and had won two consecutive AL batting titles.

Mike Sweeney: Swing Shoulder to Shoulder

The one thing I talk to kids most about is a hitting concept that my dad taught to me when I was a young boy. He called it shoulder-to-shoulder. When you get set in the batter's box as a right-handed hitter, your chin should be almost resting on your left shoulder as you look toward the pitcher. The concept is that as you swing, you want to really focus and see the ball hit your bat, so you want to try to keep your head down in position until your back shoulder, your right shoulder, comes through and meets your chin. If your head is coming out, it becomes almost impossible to get that back shoulder to your chin. Shoulder to shoulder is all about keeping your head down and training yourself to stay on the ball through contact. When you're practicing this, you're not even watching the ball. I started using this tip when I was 5 years old and my dad taught it to me and I still use it today as a 28-year old in the big leagues. I go back to this shoulder-to-shoulder concept all the time. Often in batting practice I'll take my whole round just practicing shoulder-to-shoulder: watching the ball from the pitchers hand until it hits my bat. I won't even follow where the ball goes when I hit it. It's my remedy and my cure-all. I go back to it all the time. Mike Sweeney, an AL All-Star selection the past two seasons and one of the games rising young stars, batted .302 with 29 homers and 99 RBI for the Royals in 2001. He also placed second in the league with 46 doubles.

Luis Gonzalez: Relax and Let Your Hands React

You would think that being a professional hitter I would try to analyze everything and have all sorts of scientific theories about the mechanics and fundamentals of striking a baseball. That's not the case with me. I try to keep things as simple as possible. I try to pick up the ball right out of the pitchers hand and hit it through the middle of the field right back at the pitcher. As time goes by and you build up more

experience through batting practice and live game at-bats, you'll find that your hands begin to react to the baseball. If the balls inside, you're going to end up turning on it and hitting it down the line or, if the pitch is outside, you'll hit it the other way. It just depends where the ball is pitched. You definitely don't want to try to do too much with the pitch, either, because most times the pitch is going to dictate where you hit it. In fact, it's usually counterproductive to be thinking about how or where you're going to hit the ball. First, pitchers are not known to cooperate very much. Unless it's a home run derby, they try their best to throw the ball where you can't do anything with it. Plus, the more you tense up out there, the longer your swings going to be, and the tougher it is to hit the ball. So, again, just try to see the ball and hit it. Relax and let your hands react to the pitch. Luis Gonzalez had a career year in 2001 (.325, 57 HR, 142 RBIs) and came back to bat .288 with 28 homers and 103 RBIs for the DBacks this season before separating his left shoulder in a collision on Sept. 23rd. He underwent successful surgery on Sept. 30th to repair the shoulder but will miss the playoffs.

Jay Bell: Batting with Wood Takes Extra Mettle

Having a good approach will make it easier when you try to make the transition from metal to wood bats. I grew up playing with aluminum bats, so I know it takes some transition when you go to a league where wood is the rule. Everybody talks about hitting for greater distance with metal, but I've found that solid contact is a bigger issue for me. With wood, you find that you'll get a lot deader action when you don't hit the ball on the fat part of the bat. If you get jammed inside with metal, the ball still jumps off the bat, but the contact with wood on the handle is not as strong, and sometimes it breaks the bat. That's one way I think wood forces you to be a better hitter. To make solid contact and drive the ball, you have to be precise about where you're hitting the ball. I go up to the plate with an idea of what kind of pitches the pitcher is throwing, and I visualize how I'm going to handle it while I'm in the on-deck circle. You hear about some players who were great hitters in college or high school and then they couldn't make the transition to hitting with wood in professional ball. I feel like if you have a good approach to hitting; it's not going to be so difficult. You're going to be able to make adjustments when they're pitching inside. A good way to work on making solid, sweet-spot contact is to hit with the batting tee. You'll train yourself to hit on the right part of the bat. The ball isn't moving, so you can hit it precisely. You can hit the ball on different parts of the bat to get a feel for solid contact and what the ball is going to do when it doesn't hit the good wood. Jay Bell, a two-time All-Star, has played 16 seasons in the majors with the Cleveland Indians, Pittsburgh Pirates, Kansas City Royals, and, currently the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Harold Baines: Before you Rip It, You Have to Grip It

Hitting starts with putting your hands on the bat. For an experienced player, you just do whatever feels most comfortable. Some guys choke up on the bat. I like to hold my bottom hand around the knob of the bat. You don't really hold the bat in your hands, but you grip it with your fingers. It's kind of like what they teach you when you take golf lessons, you want to hold the handle like a bird: tight enough that the bird won't fly away, but loose enough that you don't crush the bird. All those muscles in your wrists and forearms have to react quickly. You don't want to have your arms all tensed up when a fastball is on the way. Hitters try to stay relaxed at the plate, and that's why you see some thrown bats

and lots of guys who use batting gloves and a ton of pine tar for better grip. Everybody finds his own way to do it. I start out loose, and then tighten my grip as I go through the swing. It all starts with picking the right bat. I swing a 34 1/2 inch, 32-ounce bat. That's the right balance for me. Harold Baines, the first overall draft pick in 1977, returned to his original franchise, the White Sox, for the third time in 2000. He entered his 22nd season just 145 hits shy of 3,000.

Jason Giambi: Make the Pitcher Throw Strikes

Being selective at the plate not only improves your on-base percentage by raising your walks, I think it also increases your batting average because pitchers know that you're not going to swing at balls out of the strike zone. By swinging at better pitches, you get better wood on the ball and drive the ball harder. But even more important than individual performance is what being selective does for the team. Obviously, walks put more people on base. And when you take more pitches and get into deep counts, you get to see more of what the opposing pitcher is throwing and the whole batting order gets to see what that pitcher is doing. It also requires the pitcher to throw more balls than he wants. That's going to help as you get into the later innings and he starts getting tired. The quicker you can get into another team's bullpen, the better. If you wear out the starter and the relievers have to pitch, it's going to help you in the second or third games of the series because those same relievers may not be able to pitch on consecutive days. Jason Giambi won the AL MVP award in 2000 when he batted .333 with 43 homers and 137 RBI to lead the surprising Oakland As to the AL West title. He also led the majors with 137 walks and a .476 on-base percentage.

Edgar Martinez: Good Hitters Have a Plan

If you haven't made a plan before you step into the batter's box, you've already diminished your chances of having success at the plate that day. Like a builder needs a blueprint, a hitter needs a plan. You need to know what you want to do before you can do it. For me, the planning begins soon after the preceding game is over. I start thinking about the pitcher I'm going to face the next day and what kind of pitches he likes to throw. If it's a pitcher who throws a lot of fastballs and he likes to pitch on the outside corner, then my plan may be to not to try and pull the ball against that guy and to try and go back through the middle. That way I give myself a better chance to drive the ball to the other side of the field. If it's a pitcher who likes to throw inside a lot, use a sinker for example, my plan may be to try and stay inside the ball and occasionally try to hit the ball back through the middle. If it's a sinker I feel comfortable with, then I may try to pull it. It's also important to study the pitcher to understand which pitches he's most likely to use in given situations. What does he like to throw when he's ahead in the count? Is he more likely to throw a fastball with men on base? That sort of thing. Bottom line, I'm always aware of the way the pitcher pitches and how he uses his fastball and breaking pitch. According to that, I make a plan. If I've never faced a pitcher before, I look at video. I can usually have a pretty good idea by watching the way he pitches on the video. If I don't have a video of the guy, then I'll watch how he pitches to the guys in front of me. If that's the only tool that I have, then I try to make a plan based on the way he pitches to my teammate before I get to the plate. Hitting is a hard enough thing to do, even with a plan. It becomes almost impossible when you don't have one. Edgar Martinez, in his 16th season,

has batted above .300 the past seven seasons and 10 times overall. He's driven in more than 100 runs six times and his career OPS is hovering around .950

Denny Hocking: Tee it Up For Contact Practice

Hitting off a tee can give you great practice at making perfect contact, but you have to be very precise to make the practice count. I try to always hit the inside half of the ball. Doing that forces you to stay on the ball longer and it allows you to hit the ball the other way. I also want to move the tee around. I'll practice hitting pitches on the low outside corner of the plate usually taking that ball to right field. I'll move it up and down on the inside and outside corners of the strike zone. About the only thing I never practice is putting the ball right in the middle of the strike zone because you almost never get that pitch in the Major Leagues. It's not like kids tee ball where you're just teeing it up to see how hard you can hit it. Although Denny Hocking was drafted in the 52nd round in 1989 and was considered a long-shot to reach the majors, he has spent eight seasons with Minnesota and, through hard work, become one of the games top utility players. He's a switch-hitter with sure hands and a strong arm who's learned to play all over the diamond, skills that got him into the Twins lineup for 130-plus games in each of the past two seasons.