



As your players are introduced to drills in practice, their experiences during these drills – and your subsequent discussions about their experiences – will help them develop the skills necessary to execute certain tactics and strategies successfully in game situations. Chapter 8 from the Babe Ruth League Coaching Education and Certification Program offered by ASEP provides information to help you teach your players team fundamentals, as well as individual offensive and defensive skills. As this chapter provides a lot of valuable information on skills and drills, we are going to feature different sections over the next few email blasts.

CHAPTER 8 - SKILLS AND DRILLS

OFFENSIVE SKILLS - HITTING

Hitting:

Good hitters perform the skill in one fluid motion. What makes hitting so difficult is that several key components must be combined to generate that one fluid motion. The key components to any good swing are proper grip; a balanced stance; weight shift; a short, soft stride; the swing; and the follow-through. Here are some key points to focus on when teaching your players to be better hitters or when developing other skills:

- **Place your players in small groups.** Be sure to use key buzzwords that can help them remember how to perform the skill. Demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill, and don't forget to explain why the skill should be performed that way. Describe and demonstrate the drill that will help them improve the skill you have introduced.
- **Observe your players.** Note what they are doing well and what they might need to improve.
- **Bring your players together to talk about how they've performed so far.** Ask them questions about the proper way to execute the skill and why it should be done that way. If they don't come up with the answers on their own, guide them toward the correct responses or demonstrate the proper way to execute the skill without speaking.
- **Ask some or all of the players to demonstrate the proper technique and to repeat the key buzzwords for you.**
- **Once the players get the hang of the drill, introduce a point system or some other method for them to perform the drill in a competitive setting.**

Batting:

- **Grip**

- The bat should be gripped loosely in the fingers with the middle, or door-knocking, knuckles aligned. This allows the wrists to unlock, creating more bat speed.
- The grip tightens naturally as the bat moves through the hitting zone.

- **Stance**

- The stance is just a starting point. Hundreds of stances exist. The key is for the player to be comfortable.
- Any stance must provide good vision of the pitcher, balance, and plate coverage.
- Having the feet about shoulder-width apart with a slight bend in the knees should provide proper balance.
- Make sure you can see the pitcher clearly with both eyes.
- Stand in a position that allows the bat head to reach the outside portion of home plate; this is called plate coverage.
- A good starting point for the hands is about even with the back shoulder.
- Many parents and coaches tell young players to get their back elbow up; this is incorrect and leads to improper grip and extra muscle tension.

- **Weight Shift**

- Every good swing incorporates some sort of a weight shift. You have to go back to go forward.
- Weight shift can be used as a timing mechanism; the weight is shifted to the backside as the pitcher prepares to deliver the pitch, allowing the energy to gather and be taken forward as the pitch approaches.

- **Stride**

- A short, soft stride allows your head and eyes to stay on the same plane, providing better vision.
- The stride should be toward the pitcher, keeping the front shoulder from pulling off the pitch too soon (taking the energy away from the ball toward third or first base instead of toward the ball).

- **Swing**

- The ideal swing is short and quick, using the hands, wrists and forearms.
- A level swing is best. With the hands starting at the top of the shoulder, this will seem like a slightly downward swing to the ball.

- **Following-Through**

- The follow-through can be one-handed or two-handed.
- If the other aspects of the swing are in place, the follow-through occurs automatically.
- If the follow-through is not complete, the bat slows down as it enters the hitting zone.

- **Error Detection and Correction for Hitting**

- **ERROR** – A hitter over strides and lunges at the ball. **CORRECTION** – Have the player widen his or her stance and reduce or eliminate the stride.
- **ERROR** – A hitter doesn't get his or her hips into the swing properly. **CORRECTION** – Tell the hitter to open the front toe a little bit, pointing it slightly toward the pitcher and to possibly open the stance a bit. The back toe also can be turned slightly toward the pitcher to keep the hips from getting locked up.
- **ERROR** – A hitter pulls his or her head and front shoulder away from the pitch. **CORRECTION** – Work on having the batter step directly toward the pitcher when hitting off of a tee and toss balls to the outside of the plate from a short distance, having the hitter attempt to hit the ball up the middle or the opposite way. The batter needs to develop the ability to adjust the stride based on pitch location when necessary.

- **ERROR** – A hitter swings late. **CORRECTION** – This error may be a product of a bat that is too big or a swing that is too long. Try having the hitter remove the top hand from the bat while attempting to hit balls tossed by you from a short distance. Then have the hitter swing with two hands and see whether he or she gets the bat to the ball in a more direct path and starts getting to the pitch a bit more quickly. Trying a smaller or lighted bat is a good idea, too.
- **ERROR** – A hitter takes good cuts but always misses the ball. **CORRECTION** – Have the hitter exaggerate watching the ball until the point of contact in all hitting drills. Start with the Tee Drill, in which the ball is stationary. If a batter is swinging over top of the ball, ask him or her to try to hit the bottom half of the ball during drills and vice versa for a hitter who consistently swings below the pitch.

Hitting Drills:

Each of the following hitting drills allows a hitter to concentrate on one or two specific components of the swing. The drills should be performed over and over in the following progression to develop the muscle memory that the players will need to react quickly without thinking when they actually hit.

- **Tee Drill**

- Goal: To introduce the importance of developing a swing that has the proper weight shift.
- Catch Phrase: *You have to go back to go forward.*
- Setup: 8 to 10 balls (or more), a bat, a batting tee, and a hitting backdrop (net, screen or fence – with softer balls only).
- Description: Players adjust the batting tee to a height where they need to swing down slightly

- **Soft Toss**

- Goal: To use the proper grip (holding the bat loosely in the fingers with the middle, or door-knocking knuckles lined up) to generate bat speed.
- Catch Phrase: *Loose hands, quick bat.*
- Setup: Buck of balls, a bat, one person to toss or a toss machine, and a hitting backdrop (net, screen or fence – with softer balls only). Never hit real baseballs into a fence.
- Description: Batter takes his or her stance and the tosser kneels across from hitter, slightly in front of home plate (in foul ground, not in the direction that the ball will be hit). Balls are tossed underhand so that the batter can hit them out in front of the plate. The hitter should concentrate on having a loose grip in the fingers with the door-knocking knuckles lined up. This allows the wrist to unlock, promoting a quicker swing using the hands, wrists and forearms. Think, *Loose hands, quick bat.* The drill is best if done into a screen with a target, but also can be done into a fence using plastic balls. This is not a race. Do not toss the next ball until the batter is comfortably back in his or her normal stance.

- **Short Toss From the Front**

- Goal: To teach players to keep the front shoulder in when striding by tossing balls softly to the outside part of home plate.
- Catch Phrase: *Use the big part of the field.*
- Setup: A bucket of balls, a bat, an L-screen, a stool or chair for tosser to sit on, an open area or baseball field to hit toward.
- Description: Coach sits on a bucket or chair behind a screen about 10 to 12 feet in front of home plate. Tosses pitch as underhand, but firmly, to the outside part of plate. Batter tries to keep the front shoulder in and drive ball up the middle or the other way. Some batters naturally will pull the pitches, which is okay if that is their natural swing, they take their front shoulder toward the pitcher and they hit line drives. Players should be trying to avoid weakly pulled ground balls. Most young hitters take their front shoulders and energy away from the pitcher, which causes them to pull off the ball and also causes their head and eyes to come off the ball.

- **One-Arm Drill**
 - Goal: To develop a short, quick swing that takes the bat head on a direct path down to the baseball.
 - Catch Phrase: *The ideal swing is short and quick.*
 - Setup: A bucket of balls, a bat, one person to toss, and an L-screen.
 - Description: Can be done by players of all ages once they can make contact consistently with pitched balls. Coach stands or sits about 8 to 10 feet in front of the batter behind a screen and tosses pitches overhand or underhand. Batter hits the first five pitches with two hands, then takes the top hand off bat for the next five pitches, using a normal game bat. Try not to choke up if possible. Batter can choke up or tuck the elbow into the side for more leverage if necessary to complete the drill successfully. The one-hand reps should be difficult. This drill should help the batter take the bat on a more direct path to the ball.
- **Free Hitting**
 - Goal: To let the players use all of the skills they have developed in the hitting drills without coaching. This can be a live batting practice on the field or in a batting cage. A coach can pitch or a pitching machine can be used.
 - Catch Phrase: *Observe first before teaching.*
 - Setup: A bucket of balls, a bat, an L-screen, a coach to pitch, and a batting cage or field for hitting.
 - Description: Coach pitches or feeds a pitching machine, allowing the players to hit without instructing them. Mental notes are made about mechanical flaws and which drills can be used to correct them. Don't give the kids too much to think about when facing live hitting, because it can cause them to think too much and hinder their ability to react properly to the pitches.

Make it fun. The above drills can be turned into a game or contest.

Bunting:

Hitting isn't the only offensive skill players should master. The key to a good offense is to maximize your at-bats and advance your runners. Bunting can accomplish both. It also provides players with another way to get on base. Teach each of your players the fundamentals of bunting and allow plenty of practice time for each player to master the skills. When runners are on first or second base, a successful sacrifice bunt advances the runners into scoring position.

To execute the sacrifice bunt, as the pitcher starts his or her delivery, the batter pivots on both feet so that the toes point forward. This puts the batter in an athletic position, allowing him or her to avoid getting hit with an inside pitch, and it provides adequate vision. The feet should be about shoulder-width apart, with more of the weight on the front foot. The back foot stays where it is. After pivoting, the hitter slides the top hand up so it is just below the bat's midpoint, holding the bat between the thumb and index finger so that the bat protects the fingers. The bat should start at the top of the strike zone to reduce the chance of fouling off pitches or popping up. The bat should be out in front of home plate to provide the best possible angle for keeping the ball fair. Players should bunt low pitches by bending the knees instead of dropping the bat below the hands. The bat head should be above the hands as the ball makes contact with the bat. Let the ball hit the bat and give with the pitch slightly. Use the bottom hand to guide the bat and push the ball in the desired direction. It's okay to show the bunt early in a sacrifice situation.

The fundamentals to bunt successfully for a hit are essentially the same as they are for the sacrifice bunt, except that the player shows the bunt much later.

- **Error Detection and Correction for Bunting**
 - **ERROR** - Players pop up when they bunt. **CORRECTION** - Make sure the bat head stays above the hands and that the hitter bends the knees to bunt low pitches and does not drop the head of the bat.

- **Bunting Drill**

- Goal: To practice sacrifice bunting or bunting for a base hit to specific areas of the field.
- Catch Phrase: *Catch the ball on your bat.*
- Setup: A bucket of balls, a bat, a pitcher, and four cones.
- Description: Set up two cones down the first-base line about halfway between home plate and the mound. One should be about 3 feet inside the baseline, the other about 8 to 10 feet inside the line toward the mound. The same thing should be done on the third base line. A coach can throw from a shortened distance with players taking turns bunting. The idea is to stop or push the ball between the cones. Try not to make the bunts too perfect. Make the pitcher come off the mound to field the ball. Stress that players pivot instead of squaring to bunt. Have them start with the bat at the top of the strike zone with the barrel of the bat above the hands in an angle, bending their knees for lower pitches and leaving pitches above hands alone. Players should give with the pitch to deaden the ball and use the bottom hand to guide the bat and push the ball in the desired direction. Once the players master the sacrifice bunt, this drill can be used for suicide squeeze bunts and bunting for a hit.

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