

Practice Plan: Hitting Progression

Hitting is everyone's favorite part of baseball, and it's a major aspect of the game. So it's no surprise that you're probably going to spend half your practice on hitting.

That means it's important to set up a hitting progression that moves your hitters through several different phases of drills. This allows them to work on different aspects of their swing, to get a lot of repetitions, and to prepare themselves to face live pitching - which should be the very last aspect of the hitting portion of your practice. Drill work is a hitter's chance to correct mistakes, so when the hitter faces live pitching, they can let go of all the little tweaks they're thinking about and focus on hitting strikes. So, what drills can you have your hitter's progress through on their way to facing off against live pitching?

Tee Work

All good hitters gather their energy by taking their weight back before going forward: "You have to go back to go forward." The best way to work on weight shift is by hitting off of a tee, because the ball is motionless. The key to the tee drill is for the hitter to go straight back and straight forward, swinging down thru the baseball and watching it all the way until contact is made. Players should try to hit line drives. Upper-cutting should not be permitted, so be careful of the tee position (as you do not want to create a "V" in the hitter's wing).

Soft Toss

The standard soft toss drill in which the pitcher tosses from the side and slightly in front of the hitter is an excellent drill for working on a proper grip and developing bat speed. The main point of emphasis with the hitter should be is a proper, loose grip with the knuckles lined up and attacking the baseball. A loose grip with the knuckles aligned unlocks the wrists and allows for a quicker, stronger swing. Have the hitter think, "Loose hands, quick bat," and tell him or her to try to swing harder each time.

Soft Toss from the Front

Before any professional hitter steps in for live batting practice he will do this drill. Sit 10 to 15 feet in front of home plate tossing balls underhand on a line toward the hitter (for safety purposes, if using hard baseballs, sit behind an L-screen). The batter simply tries to drive the ball to the "big part of the field," attempting to hit line drives up the middle or in the gaps. For players who are pulling off the ball, toss toward the outside half of the plate and have the hitter use the opposite field. If a player is pulling the ball slightly but hitting hard line drives that is fine, but if a hitter starts pulling weak ground balls the approach needs to be changed (let the baseball travel deep in the hitting zone). Watch for hitters "stepping in the bucket".

One-Arm Drill

The biggest flaw in young players' swings is that they tend to have a long, casting swing that travels on a slight outward (or upward) path and seems to almost come around the baseball. They don't take the hands, or the knob (and barrel) of the bat directly to the baseball. The best way to work on this is by doing the one-arm drill. Have the hitter remove the top hand from his or her normal game bat and toss balls lightly from in front of home plate. Some players will struggle with this at first, but even the youngest will get the hang of it. Allow them to choke up or tuck their elbow into the side of the body if necessary. Have them take five or 10 swings with two hands, five or 10 with one hand and then five or 10 with two hands in succession. You'll notice an immediate difference. If the players perform this drill consistently and continue to build strength, the direct path they should take to the baseball will become natural in game situations.