

Hitting Fundamentals

Kids fresh out of tee-ball or coach-pitch softball (hopefully not out of our program) invariably have flaws in their stance, stride, swing and finish -- like the tee-baller's exaggerated wind up before the swing (a rotation instead of a lateral move). Players continue to refine their flaws throughout their "slow-pitch" careers so they can hit the ball harder and farther. Coaches may try to teach better hitting techniques, but kids generally don't change because they know what works. Then, of course, as the players progress into higher levels of the game, they encounter faster pitchers, and inevitably the techniques that worked in the past become liabilities. Good "slow-pitch" power hitters become lousy fastpitch hitters because:

- the exaggerated wind up or negative move (rotating the arms and shoulders, with little control, before the swing) increases the distance the bat has to cover to reach the hitting zone, and contributes to late, sweeping swings;
- the long stride and the early shifting of too much weight to the front foot locks the hips -- as a result, the legs contribute little towards the quickness and power necessary to hit pitches in excess of 50 mph and the player puts herself in a position (with all her weight on her front foot) to be totally fooled by the change-up;
- an early extension of the arms, whether preceded by an exaggerated wind up or not, results in a sweeping swing with no hip turn -- the result is slow bat speed and loss of the power generated by the legs.

Teaching the fundamentals necessary to overcome these poor hitting techniques can be a frustrating experience for both coaches and players. All of these flaws inhibit progress in achieving the most important objectives of the fastpitch hitter:

- achieving maximum force with minimal effort
- using live and independent hands
- increasing the speed of the bat throughout the swing - slow to fast speed
- hitting through a long zone - staying on the plane of the pitch as long as possible

Everything about the fastpitch swing must be tailored to achieve these objectives. The discussion that follows highlights the key elements necessary to achieve a fundamentally sound fastpitch swing. These techniques should be taught when the players are young, before they get locked into habits that must be changed as they get older.

All descriptions that follow are for right-handed hitters.

Grip

- the knocking knuckles of both hands should line up and the bat should be gripped in the fingers, not the palms
- the top hand grip should be somewhat loose -- to achieve this,

the index finger should be loosened somewhat and can be extended upwards against the side of the bat instead of around the bat

Stance

- assume an athletic position -- stand upright with the feet not much wider apart than the shoulders; put slightly more weight on the balls of the feet; bend slightly forward at the waist; knees should not be locked
- the stance should be balanced and comfortable with slightly more weight on the back foot, the foot farthest from the pitcher
- the hands should be at shoulder level (see first image below)
- the right elbow should be away from the body, not in a down position next to the body

Negative Movement

- just as in throwing a ball, the hitter should make a move back towards the catcher -- this is a lateral move, not a twisting motion
- the right elbow should remain away from the body
- the right knee stays inside the right foot
- the belly button will be behind the head

Stride (including toe touch and heel plant)

- after the negative move, the batter makes a positive move to toe touch
- the batter can move her stride foot forward (no more than 2 - 4 inches) with the toes pointing out at a 45° angle to the pitcher
- the belly button will be in line with the head -- this completes the lateral movement of the body
- use the front hip as the axis of rotation
- after toe touch, slam the heel down
- hip rotation begins at heel plant

Swing

- the left elbow leads the hands
- the left elbow stays above the wrists, the wrists stay above the hands (see image at right)
- the left elbow should extend away from the body, right elbow drops
- as the knob of the bat and hands are moving towards the ball, the arms naturally begin their extension, but should not reach full extension until the bat reaches the hitting zone in front of

home plate

- watch the ball hit the bat
 - the right palm should be behind the bat at contact
 - the back heel is up at contact and may even leave the ground -- "big toe to China" -- at the end of the swing, there will be little weight on the back foot
 - the weight should stay behind the front leg (see image at right)
 - at extension, the bat points toward the pitcher, fully extended
 - after contact, the weight shifts back to the right foot and the right heel goes down
- Finish**
- the hands and bat should follow through to a position above the left shoulder

Adjustments during the swing:

Inside to outside -- prepare for the inside pitch, adjust out

High to low -- prepare for the high pitch, adjust to low

Fast to slow -- prepare for the fastball, adjust for the off-speed pitch or change-up

Tip: Soft toss drills and batting cages have their limitations because they do not adequately simulate the difficulty of getting the swing and timing right to hit a pitched ball. As an alternative to these drills, try conducting batting practice in an open area with a minimum number of players necessary to retrieve balls. The coach/pitcher should throw the ball at the same speed encountered in a game and should use a windmill or underhand delivery. Try using baseball or golf ball-sized wiffle balls during this drill to cut down on the number of players needed to retrieve balls. Stand fairly close to the batter when pitching and interrupt the drill as frequently as necessary to provide instruction. Only try to correct one thing at a time. Overcoaching is something to avoid. Becoming a great hitter is a time-consuming process.

Drills:

Back arm drill -- use a "skip the rock motion" (right elbow leads the hands)

Front arm drill -- start with bat over right shoulder, lead with left elbow, make sure left elbow stays above the left wrist and the left wrist above the hand

Walk through drill -- mark back foot, step back out of box diagonally, use crossover step to where back foot should be, step towards tee hitting the ball