



Ask Mike ...

Special to the Collegiate Baseball News

©Copyright Mike Epstein, 2004. All rights reserved.

The daunting task of change

Denver, Colo.—I was in a psychology lecture at the University of California (Berkeley) the first time I heard the phrase, “The mind—once expanded—never returns to its original size.” It intrigued me then as much as it does now. For this to occur, you’ve got to give it an opportunity.

To become better—and smarter—than we presently are, we must be open to change. What’s more, it should be a never-ending process. Just think about the countless books, videos, and gadgets you have bought in your quest for a solution to correctly hit a baseball consistently *hard*. Probably more than you care to remember.

Coaches and parents tell me they have “libraries”—virtually every book and videotape ever produced—and *still* don’t have it “right.” In fact, most are more confused than ever.

In reality, folks, there should be no confusion. There are only TWO hitting *systems*, rotational and linear. All you have to do is choose the one technique that fits the player’s hitting type. Generally speaking, singles / contact hitters are linear, line drive / gap and pure power hitters are rotational. Really, quite simple.

Both techniques weight-shift. The difference is that rotational hitters weight-shift to a “balance point” and then immediately rotate around a stationary axis; the linear hitter weight-shifts through the balance point from the back leg to the front leg. Again, quite simple.

Since there are only two hitting systems, a hitter’s and coach’s choices are thankfully limited. But, every player *should* have a choice and *should* hit according to their type. My personal experience indicates that the rotational hitting system allows the hitter to make the on-the-fly adjustments that the rigidity of the linear swing lacks. That’s one of the reasons why I teach it and why its permanence in quality hitting technique has withstood the test of time.

Others may see it differently. As a facilitator of information, I have no problem with disagreement so long as those who dissent take the time to *equally* compare and contrast the benefits of both systems. But we don’t. We opine, often vehemently and dogmatically, against something we know very little about.

As I travel around the country speaking at baseball shows and staging seminars and clinics, I have come to the conclusion that the biggest reason coaches / parents won't / don't consider an alternative to their hitting woes is that they don't know where to start! Where do I get the information to teach the "other" system *correctly*?

Nearly everyone teaching hitting today is a product of the ultra light, ultra resilient aluminum bat / Astroturf generation. We teach what we are familiar with and understand. To "change" requires gaining "new" knowledge and information. If it is not available, we scoff at the notion. It's only "natural" to shy away from the "unknown."

Hope springs eternal

As we begin a new baseball season, "hope springs eternal" for most of us. I *still* get excited thinking about it!

The payback for a successful season begins many months before the "first pitch" is thrown. Many changes and adjustments are usually forthcoming to ensure future success. The *successful* head coaches and managers are continually asking questions. Staying "current" is a priority.

Most hitting instructors tell their players that hitting is a continual "process of adjustment," yet I am truly astounded at how few coaches and parents heed this good advice they dole out to their players. Because they, themselves, won't / can't change or adjust. Sure you can.

Start with a blank page

At this point, I am chuckling, because I know that the following information will be agreed with by most coaches, but few will take any action and will pay a price for their indifference.

The wise hitting coach should end every season with a "blank" page. Building on top of the "old" can limit what is possible and often makes anything "new" more ponderous and complex than necessary—no matter who you are or what your goals may be. Starting "fresh" can lead you to innovations that wouldn't be possible otherwise. And, please remember that my primary goal writing these articles is to make you "ponder" and think of the possibilities you can gain from brand new ideas.

Hitting coaches should start with a blank page, not a blank mind. Take advantage of all the input you have received and everything you have learned since your last hitter went to the plate the previous season. Start over with the technical details (mechanics) and review all the information that was available to you and the hitting world *at that point in time* in relation to *your* hitters and what you saw opponents doing.

The next time you need to create a new solution, begin with a blank page. If your difficulty is with having so much "white space," write down on one side of the paper what you're unhappy with or want to change. On the other side, next to each dissatisfaction, write whatever you know *right now* about the qualities of a *better* hitting technique. This will get your creative juices flowing. Always be as specific as possible.

For example, you may be dissatisfied with your team's lack of power and extra base hits. If you (now) know that a player's legs are the strongest and largest muscle mass in the body, ask yourself why you

are teaching “Hands to the ball” and “Hands before hips” when you should be taking advantage of this information. Perhaps a “hips before hands” technique, incorporating “torque,” would cure the problem.

Or, you’re dissatisfied with too many of your players who can’t keep their weight from coming forward, and “lunging.” Even though you tell them to “Stay back,” they still struggle with it. Perhaps you (now) know that if you also teach “Swing with level shoulders,” lunging is a natural result of this verbal cue.

Old ways still have their place, but one of the realities of the hitting profession is that much of what worked in the past to help you become successful *may be what keeps you from surviving in the future.* We must continue trying to compete as best as we can, yet still devote some of our energies to cultivating explorations of *common sense* changes.

The competent head coach should be able to tell you which current ideas are stuck in the past. At least once a year, the head coach should ask his assistants what needs to change and / or what's holding their offense back. Have them list five things that haven't changed but should. Keep the survey anonymous and limited to a few questions.

For example, “Why do we teach our hitters to hit the “top-half” of the ball, when we teach our pitchers to also get the hitter to hit the “top-half” of the ball? This is illogical and must be questioned. Hitters *must* counteract the pitcher’s strategies and do just the opposite!

As a hitting instructor, keep asking yourself some questions, too. If you were starting out as a hitting coach today, would you teach the same things you were taught when you were still an active player? What already seems outdated based on how the team is producing? Look for trends that don't make sense. If you normally have trouble scoring runs, you may have something going on there. Are you recruiting the “right” players? Do your instruction methods need changing?

Head coaches should ask themselves if their hitting coach (or those in charge of hitting) is competent, or just a “good” guy. We often confuse the two. My guess is the problems may be in the form of “sacred cows” and what we “thought was right.” Believe me when I say very few have the courage or inclination to address them, much less effect changes. Only the successful ones do.

Letting go

Sometimes you don't need to eliminate all your current “thoughts” on hitting, you just need to confront them by updating your information and teaching methods. If your players aren't hitting, maybe what you're teaching is out of date. Maybe your hitting coach has skills more worthy of another staff position. You don't have to throw out the baby with the bath water.

You and your staff might reinvent your strategies and teaching practices only slightly, but you *must* be willing to let some stuff go. It takes time and energy to think “outside of the box,” but step back to brainstorm better ways of doing things. The most important thing about the white board is the “white.” Once you white-board a solution, you're on your way to improvement and staying current.

The truth is that the stuff you don't want to talk about is the stuff you really DO need to talk about.

Best advice? Don't procrastinate with difficult decisions. The health of your team and its hitting may depend on taking action now. Understand you may need to do twice as much as you think, and you may need to do it sooner than you think. Facing your current methods requires good, ongoing communication with your

coaches AND players. Be ready to explain the reasons behind the changes you're making. You've got to have confidence you're doing the right thing. What's right is not always pleasant. In fact, *change is never pleasant*.

Changes and adjustments are not only necessary to stay current, but downright difficult and require "work." Therefore, most of us will unfortunately shun this approach. Yet, we continually ask our players to "change and adjust." Do you really think it is any easier for them than it is for you?

Many of the coaches I meet are very bright, enthusiastic, and excellent teachers. Those I talk with tell me that instead of doting on the negatives of change, they have found it much more fruitful to emphasize the positives. "I'm really excited for you guys. I heard a coach talk (or read about) about some hitting things I never thought about before. They really make sense. I am convinced these ideas can have a positive effect on all of us." It's the "selfless" coach that gets ahead and becomes successful.

Taking our "egos" out of the equation and ridding ourselves of "what we thought was right," opens up the "white sheet."

Here's how to start

For the past twenty-five years the only books available to the hitting community were about linear hitting, a technique devoted to the now-outdated ultra light, ultra resilient aluminum bats and rock-hard artificial playing fields. These bats and conditions don't exist anymore. Still, our hitting instruction resists asking the tough questions and finding appropriate solutions to keep up with baseball's changes, simply because the vast majority of those now coaching were weaned on linear hitting.

However, as good information becomes more readily available, coaches are indeed changing. Many more than you might imagine. Many of you can remember (although some are still in denial) just a few years ago when you were teaching hitters to get their weight "forward" on to a rigid front side, "Squish the bug," and "Swing down." Jeez, even swinging "level" has its drawbacks, much less swinging down through the ball.

Have you, personally, ever physically attempted to swing "level" at a pitch at your knees? Or, tried "keeping the barrel of the bat above the hands" on a pitch at the knees? If you would only try doing these things, the changes needed would be obvious and much easier to make.

If you are now instructing hitters to "*Stay back*" and "*Don't let your weight come forward*," you are teaching the elements of rotational hitting! Why do we have such a difficult time admitting we've changed? Why do we let our egos cloud reality? The smart coach is the one who stays on "top" of change and admits he has found a better way (if, indeed, he feels that way).

The problem is, we go with the current "buzzword" ("Stay back") because it's easy to do, but shy away from learning how to teach the *complete* rotational system correctly because it's too "tough." Too lazy? Maybe not; perhaps you just didn't have enough information to teach it correctly.

One of the big mistakes hitting instructors make is they inadvertently *combine* both hitting "systems." Hitters *can* hit with a "hybrid" technique, but I personally do not recommend teaching this. Hitting systems do NOT mix; each has its own set of laws and axioms. These altogether-different hitting techniques merge in the minds of those who do not have a total conceptual grasp of the "new" system they are teaching. In other words, if you have been reared as a linear hitter, you must refrain from mixing the system you already know with the "new" system of which you may lack the correct

information. The two techniques are incompatible for all but (perhaps) the elite hitter. Outside of the aforementioned “weight-shift,” the two systems mix like water and oil.

In response to the confusion, misinformation, and the staggering 30% decline in offense since the advent of the minus 3 aluminum bat, I have written an interactive CD-ROM teaching manual for those desirous of learning how to correctly teach the rotational hitting technique. To my knowledge, *there has never been a teaching manual on rotational hitting available to the hitting community*. We have never had a reference guide for teaching it. “The Epstein Teaching System: How To Hit Your Potential In Just 7 Days!” changes this. Here at our Denver academy, we say, “*One Program. Seven Days. Zero Excuses.*”

But, the fact is, I’m not smart enough to “invent” a new hitting technique. Rotational mechanics have been used by 95% of baseball’s Hall of Fame hitters. Over one hundred years of solid history with seemingly no end in sight is offered as visible proof to the skeptics.

As an alternative, I have “re-packaged” this golden information in a way that *anyone* can understand and teach. Step-by-step, movement-by-movement. Information, in and of itself, is meaningless and of little value *unless* it can be understood, internalized, and used effectively by its participants.

This information is not “revolutionary,” as some detractors would phrase it. Far from it. Rather, it is *reactionary*. We’re intelligently reacting to baseball’s changes. We entered the Rotational Hitting Era all over again in 1995. As a result, players and coaches cannot be without this information. To do so is to slide to the end of the pack and perhaps forego a singular opportunity for personal success.

We only got a “taste...”

When you read Ted Williams’ book, *The Science of Hitting*, which came out in 1970, you are reading one of the truly groundbreaking books on rotational hitting of its time, or any other time. Actually, it was the *only* book I can think of that ever talked about rotational hitting. Many of the ideas he espoused in his book and verbally communicated to me over the years paved the way for my new interactive CD-ROM teaching manual. I will always be indebted to him for his counseling and guidance.

When Ted said, “The hips lead the way,” he gave us priceless information how to “hit with effortless power.” I have since labeled this biomechanical truism, “torque.”

When he said, “you’ve got to be ‘level to the ball,’” he made clear to us how the vast majority of baseball’s productive hitters hit so many hard line drives. I term this “matching the plane of the swing to the plane of the pitch.”

When he said “you have to *go back to go forward*,” he made us aware of the importance of “closing on top” and not letting our hands come forward as we open our hips in our stride. I call this “winding the rubber band.”

When he said a hitter’s bat must “flatten out” when he launches his swing, he was talking about “hand torquing.” Over the years, we have confused this with “wrist hitting.” This natural hand movement of the rotational swing can add velocity to our swings and power to the balls that we hit.

And when he said a hitter has to “wait and be quick,” he was talking about bat QUICKNESS, not bat velocity. “Bat quickness” is the time-lapse from launch to contact. This is also a result of the “torque” phenomenon.

While Ted's information was ingenious and perceptive in its content, it was unfortunate that he never told us *how* to physically execute these hitting tasks. He would tell us *what* we needed to do, but he left it up to us to figure out *how* to do them.

As a result, we were left scratching our collective heads, resorting to emulation, "tips," and a trial-and-error approach to learn this difficult task. In other words, there was no manual, or guidelines, how to teach this glorious hitting system. All we had for reference were the books on linear hitting.

Why?

After putting on a seminar presentation, I am literally mobbed by coaches and parents. Truthfully, I'm no smarter than the next clinician; I present information just as they do; it's just a different technique than what's been taught over the past twenty five years.

The most popular questions I am asked, include:

"How can anyone refute what you just showed us?"

"Why have we been taught to do something so radically different from what the major league hitters do?"

"I'm angry! I feel like I wasted my opportunity to continue playing."

"I feel like I've destroyed some promising careers."

"I've spent a fortune trying to understand what you just showed."

"Where do I start?"

"How do I teach it?"

What these players / coaches / parents finished seeing is the way it really happens. "The hand is quicker than the eye, but the video camera doesn't lie." What one sees is what one gets! But I pique the hitting community's interest by pointing out things that normally go unnoticed.

The most common questions I get is, "Now that I understand what the good hitters do, what's my "next" step? How do I teach it to my players / son / daughter?" "How do I learn it?" This question, in itself, is incredible to me. Line up 100 people and ask them to change an acquired habit and most will simply ignore your suggestion. No one wants to change. Everyone wants to be "comfortable."

The fact is, however, that we become mediocre when we are comfortable. Changing one's habits is a difficult task. However, if you put logical, common sense information that people can actually see "happen" in real-time, their pre-conceived biases quickly fritter away.

We now have no such excuses; we can instantly find the right information. It's now available for anyone to learn and to take advantage of!

I have said many times that hitters must have a hitting technique that allows them to make on-the-fly adjustments to the oncoming pitch. But, most of us never get to the white sheet, so many are not taught mechanics that allow this because, once again, it requires "work" and "thought" to change and "keep up with the competition." That is why I seem to always wind up preaching my definition of the "perfect" swing. I personally define the perfect swing as "the adjustment the hitter makes to the pitch he gets." If a

hitter is taught anything short of this common sense approach to hitting, they better be elite athletes. Hitting a baseball consistently hard is too demanding not to utilize a “system” which allows this.

Clearly, if you want to hit ground balls, my CD-ROM hitting manual is not for you. It is geared to those whose goals are run production, high slugging percentages, and lots of extra base hits. The goals of every hitter.

So, the next time you need to create a new solution, begin with a blank page.

Except now, filling up that blank page won't seem as daunting or intimidating. You now have the answers; they're readily available for everyone. Those who take pride in their instruction will now know where to find it.

The wise coach / instructor / player will take advantage of this “golden egg.” It's never been available until now. It will open your eyes to the utter simplicity of teaching and understanding the movements that fuel the productive major league swing.

If nothing else, you can absolutely count on the fact that, “The mind—once expanded—never returns to its original size.” That, in itself, is worth the investment. It means we're making progress.

Why make such a tough thing as hitting—*tougher*?

Good luck, continued success, and “get a good pitch to hit!”