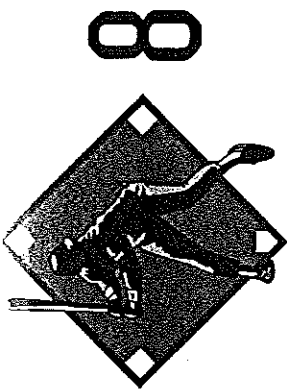
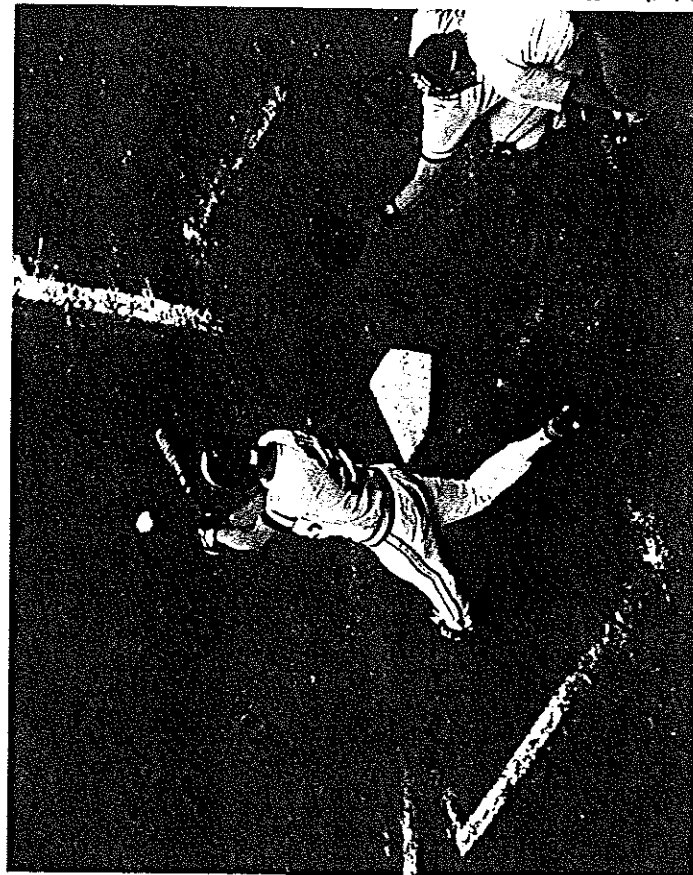


From the book "Playing Better Baseball", by Rick Wolff.



# MASTERING THE MENTAL SIDE OF HITTING



© Anthony Nestle

We've already discussed the physical side of hitting. It may seem easy—keep your weight back, extend your arms, hold your head steady, and so forth. But every hitter knows that frustration is the name of this game. The sooner you come to understand that the life of a hitter is a hard one, the sooner you can begin to extract some fun from this game.

Now, that last sentence may seem a bit contradictory, but it's true. Once you get to the point where you understand that hitting is full of frustration, then you can start to focus on your strengths as a hitter and begin to enjoy your accomplishments.

Think of it for a moment. First off, it's very difficult to perfect your swing. It takes weeks, months, years of hitting off a batting tee, hitting soft toss, strengthening your wrists, and taking batting practice—and that's just to get rid of built-in flaws like hitches and lunges and other habits that can mess up your stroke.

Then, once you've mastered the mechanics of your swing, you have to go out and do it in a game. That means standing in the batter's box, facing a pitcher who's only 60 feet away throwing a rock-like sphere at up to 100 miles per hour. The pitcher hopes to throw strikes, but who knows? He may let one slip toward your body. So a certain amount of physical danger and fear is involved in the art of hitting.

To make it more challenging, the pitcher can make the ball do different things. It can curve, dip, slide, slow down, and drop. And, of course, he does these things without telling you. (By the way, back in the early days of baseball, in the late 1800s, the batters were permitted to dictate to the pitchers where and how they would throw every pitch! Unfortunately for hitters today, those days are long gone.)

Finally, let's assume you do everything perfectly well. You have a great swing at a pitch, and you gain that momentary inner satisfaction as the bat meets the ball solidly, only to see an outfielder race over and make a wondrous diving catch of your line shot. All you get for your effort is an 0-for-1.

## THE ZEN OF BASEBALL

Why am I telling you all this? Because in the Zen-like world of baseball, mastery of hitting a ball is, at best, an ethereal, day-

to-day occurrence. Just because you do it today doesn't guarantee that the same magic will happen again tomorrow, or for that matter, on your next at-bat.

What does all this mean? In short, few actions in sport involve as much pure concentration as hitting a baseball. Even the most minor distraction can affect your stroke. One thing, however, is for sure. The more you practice your swing, the closer you come to obtaining that sense of perfection at the plate. Of course, no batter has ever been perfect; no one has come close to hitting every pitch perfectly. But if you work at it long enough, you'll be amazed at how much more proficient you'll become with the bat.

## COPE WITH FRUSTRATION

While it's nice to talk and dream about becoming a Zen master with your hitting stroke, in the real world you'll have to deal with frustration more than you'd like. As we all know, the best hitters in the game fail most of the time.

But that's not the point. The best hitters in the game learn to cope with their frustration, to keep their emotions in check, and to look at the hitting experience as a chance to evaluate every swing scientifically. Talk to any major-league hitters—and these are the best in the business—and they'll tell you that you won't start becoming a better hitter until you put anger behind you and start thinking scientifically.

What do I mean by "frustration"? I refer specifically to those situations in which you are so upset by your performance at the plate that you feel compelled to throw your helmet, shriek obscenities, or argue with the umpire. Maybe you take your hitting woes out into the field with you and allow a bad at-bat to affect your defensive play. Or perhaps you take the game home with you, and spend the nights calculating your sinking batting average and worrying about your next day's performance. Your mood swings become noticeable to your family and friends; they can tell how you did in a game just by the way you carry yourself around the neighborhood or the house.

As you might imagine, this isn't the way major leaguers conduct themselves. True, major leaguers are guilty of many sins, such as occasionally hotdogging on the field, or being

greedy, or whatever, but when it comes to coping with the daily frustrations of the game, they've learned those lessons long ago.

Brook Jacoby, for years a rock-steady, hard-hitting third baseman for the Indians, was recognized by his peers for always keeping an even temper—through hot streaks and cold streaks alike. I once asked Brook how he learned this essential lesson about the game.

"I remember when I was in junior high," replied Jake. "I used to go nuts if I didn't do well in a game, and I would become moody and sullen. But then one day, my Dad told me in no uncertain terms that if I wanted to keep on playing baseball, I would have to learn to keep my emotions under control—that by giving in to my emotions, I was making myself a worse player, not a better one."

That's a valuable insight, and it's one every young player should start to learn. Giving in to your emotions does two negative things:

1. It shows everybody on the field that you're angered with your last at-bat, that you didn't succeed, and that you're giving into that "I failed; therefore I'm angry" syndrome. To any scouts who are watching, this could be a tip-off that you're not mentally mature enough to sign a pro contract or move on to a higher level of ball.
2. Once you let your emotions control you, you lose control of your well-practiced, well-rehearsed approach to hitting. Anger only gets in the way of your achieving your goals.

Let me explain. Let's say you're fooled badly by a curveball. If you throw a temper tantrum, then your mind and body focus on having a fit. What you should really be thinking about is why you were fooled by that curve and how you can make the adjustment so you aren't fooled again. As you might imagine, making the proper adjustment calls for a calm approach, not a tantrum.

## CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS

There is no question that you must learn to control your emotions. So here's a little advice that I've given ballplayers for years.

Make a deal with yourself. Give yourself exactly five seconds after each at-bat to feel and vent your emotions. Whether you strike out or hit a home run, whether you pop up or get a base hit, give yourself a window of exactly five seconds to express your emotions.

Here's the catch. Once those five seconds have elapsed, that's it. You can't allow any of your emotions to come through. The clock starts ticking immediately, so you can't postpone those five seconds. Once the time is up, you have to maintain yourself and carry yourself like a real pro.

Try that approach during your next few games. Remember that five seconds doesn't last too long. Once it's gone, you've got to be a pro. Do major leaguers do this? You bet. Two good examples of players who keep their emotions in check are Jeff Bagwell of the Astros and Mike Piazza of the Dodgers. Whether they hit one into the upper deck or strike out with the bases loaded, they keep their emotional level under control.

## A BATTING SLUMP: WHAT IT REALLY MEANS

There's always been a lot of talk, and a lot of theory, about batting slumps and how to get out of them. But before you start turning your attention to curing a slump, you first have to define what a slump is—and isn't.

Let's take two games as examples. In one game, you go to bat four times. On your first at-bat, you get jammed by a pitch and hit a weak flare for a base hit. On your second at-bat, you get fooled by a curve, make weak contact, and get on with a swinging bunt. Then, on your third at-bat, you check your swing and hit a pitch that barely loops over the first baseman's head. On your fourth at-bat, your seeing-eye grounder makes it through the infield for another hit. So, as far as the box score

(and your batting average) is concerned, you went 4-for-4—a perfect day!

In game two, you come to the plate four times and are not once fooled by a pitch. You line out hard to third base, hit a deep fly ball to center that's caught near the wall, hit a one-hop bullet to the shortstop, and, on your last at-bat, your sinking line drive is snatched off the grass by a diving right fielder. Another day at the ballpark, another 0-for-4. You go home with nothing to show for your day's efforts.

But let me ask you this: Of the two performances, which sounds more like a slump? If just getting hits means you're not in a slump, that first game is fine. But from a professional hitter's point of view, the second game is the better effort, by far. Why? You were just lucky—flat-out lucky—to get on base in game one. If the goal of hitting is to avoid being fooled by the pitcher and to hit the ball hard, then you failed. In contrast, in game two you hit rockets every at-bat, even if your batting average fell a few points.

Here's the key: All pro players, coaches, and scouts know that over a season, the batter who consistently hits the ball hard will have a high batting average. It makes no difference whether you go hitless on a particular day, because in the long run you're going to have many days when those line drives aren't caught.

## LOOK FOR A QUALITY AT-BAT

Some batting coaches in pro ball go so far as to gauge each at-bat as being quality or nonquality in form. Coaches use the distinction to educate and inform the batter about whether he was ready and prepared for each appearance at the plate, whether he was off balance, whether he was fooled by pitches, or whether he even had any good swings.

The idea behind a quality at-bat rating is a solid one. Rather than judge your performance on whether you got a hit or made an out, you now evaluate each plate appearance by whether you or the pitcher was in command.

Now, this kind of rating doesn't always jibe with your batting average. You might have four quality at-bats in a game, but

have no hits to show for it. Conversely, you might collect four scratch hits, but have no quality at-bats. Let's say that you have four at-bats in a game and you do the following:

First at-bat: After falling behind in the count 0-2, you foul off several pitches until you finally draw a base on balls.

Second at-bat: After going ahead in the count 2-0, you get an off-speed pitch that you hit as a high fly ball to center field.

Third at-bat: With the count at 2-2, the pitcher throws you a hard slider. You're able to reach out and slap the ball the opposite way for a flare that happens to fall in for a hit.

Fourth at-bat: Facing a tough relief pitcher, you line a shot that's just barely foul on the first pitch. On the second pitch, you swing over a sharp curveball. You take the third pitch just inside for a ball. On the fourth pitch, you hit a solid one-hopper directly at the shortstop, who quickly converts the ball into an out.

How would you judge these at-bats? Well, according to the official scorebook, you would have been 1-for-3 with a walk. All things considered, that's a decent day's work—a .333 batting average.

Now, look at each at-bat from a quality point of view. On the first at-bat, you had to work out of a deep hole of 0-2 to get a walk. That means you were sharp at the plate, didn't swing at any tempting pitches, and transformed that potential strikeout into a positive—you got on base. That's a quality at-bat.

On the second at-bat, it's true that you got ahead in the count. But you were then fooled by an off-speed pitch and you lofted a high fly ball—an easy out—to the center fielder. That's not a quality at-bat.

On the third time at the plate, the pitcher threw you a tough pitch on the outside corner. If you had taken the pitch, you would have struck out. If you had tried to pull it, you would have hit an easy grounder, also an out. Instead, you waited on it, and did the only thing you could with it—you slapped the pitch the other way for a hit. True, it may not have been a solid line drive, but you got enough bat on the ball to make it count. That's an excellent piece of hitting—working with what the pitcher has dealt you—and that's a quality at-bat.

On the fourth trip to the plate, you knew the relief pitcher was good and you were ready for him. You got in some excellent

strokes, and when you did hit the ball fair, you hit a one-hopper shot to the infield. Yes, the infielder made the one-hopper into an out, but if you had hit the ball anywhere except right at him, you would have had a hit. Chalk this one up as a quality at-bat too.

In sum, you had three quality at-bats out of four chances. That's considerably better than .333. So by any professional standards, you had a terrific day at the plate.

### KEEPING TRACK OF YOUR QUALITY AT-BATS

At the conclusion of each game you should keep a diary of every at-bat. Remember that you're not interested here in whether you got a hit or what your batting average is; as explained above, you can have four poor at-bats yet come away with four hits. Instead you should be judging here whether each at-bat was a quality one or whether it was not up to your hitting potential.

After each game, describe briefly whether and why each at-bat was a quality one or not.

#### Game date

**At-bat # 1**—A quality at-bat because I took the pitcher deep into the count and then lined a one-hopper right at the shortstop.

**At-bat # 2**—Not a quality at-bat. I got fooled by a breaking pitch, which I popped up to second. Didn't wait long enough on the curve.

**At-bat # 3**—A quality at-bat because I waited on the same curve that I popped up last at-bat and drilled it to the gap for a double.

**In sum:** By keeping track of quality at-bats you can, after a while, figure out whether you're seeing the ball well at the plate or whether you might be heading into a slump. The point is not to worry so much about your batting average, but instead to concentrate on making every at-bat a quality one. The more quality at-bats you have, the more hits you'll have.

Ultimately, if you have consistently good quality at-bats your batting average will rise to a high level.

These distinctions between your quality at-bats and your daily batting average are important because there may be little

correlation between the two. You may have a high batting average but relatively few quality at-bats. Likewise, you could have a low batting average with many quality at-bats.

The beauty of the quality at-bat evaluation is that you don't even think about making any changes in your stroke or stance unless you have a string of poor at-bats. If you're getting top-notch swings and you're making solid contact—even if your batting average doesn't show it—don't give in to the temptation of making changes.

That's not always easy to do. But in the long run, you'll benefit more by looking at your quality at-bats rather than your batting average. The more honest you are about your quality at-bats, the better you'll swing the bat. The upshot is this: If you have consistently good quality at-bats, your batting average will rise to a high level.

## WHERE SLUMPS BEGIN

Every baseball coach has a theory about how and why batting slumps begin. I have one too. In my opinion, a batting slump starts when you're hitting well!

Let me explain. Start with a batter who's doing well at the plate. He's hitting the ball well, seeing it well, not getting fooled, and his batting average is way up there. The batter is feeling very comfortable at the plate.

Perhaps, though, the batter has gotten a bit too comfortable. I've watched pro players for years. A player doing well at bat always says that he's "seeing the ball real well," that he's not getting fooled. The ball is easy to see and easy to follow.

During a slump, the same batter will tell you that he's not seeing the pitch well, that he's lunging at pitches, and that he's off balance in his stride. The batter will say, "You know, I got a fastball right down the middle, but instead of hitting a line drive up the middle—like I did last week—this time, I fouled the pitch back. I just missed it."

A batter who has been waiting well on curveballs and hitting them hard to the opposite field is now pulling those same

curveballs into easy grounders. "I can't understand it," says the batter. "I don't understand why I'm not hitting that pitch well."

If you have enough at-bats like these, where you get your pitch but don't hit the ball well, before too long you convince yourself that you're in a slump. For too many hitters, that means going through a wholesale reevaluation of their batting stroke plus endless hours of misery and worry.

Let's back up a step. Remember when things were going fine, and you were seeing the ball well? It's my theory that ballplayers set the wheels in motion for a slump when they become too relaxed at the plate. Instead of seeing that pitch all 60 feet, 6 inches, they start to assume that the pitch is going to be a good one and swing at it.

It's almost as though the batter has been seeing previous pitches all the way to the plate. Because of that intense concentration, he's "seeing the ball well" and "not getting cheated" on his swings. But let's assume that the batter is "seeing the ball" only 40 feet, or only 35 feet, on its way to the plate. By seeing the ball only 40 feet, I mean that instead of concentrating on the pitch all the way, the batter merely assumes it's going to be in a good spot to hit and swings at it. How many times have you (or a batter you've watched) taken your eyes off the pitch by jerking your head around at the last second? Don't forget that the most important element in hitting is keeping your eye on the ball; yet even major leaguers often fall victim to taking their vision away from the flight of the pitch.

Hence, if the batter's assumption that the pitch is going to be perfect is off by just a little bit, then his swing is going to be off just a little bit too. That would explain why a batter would wonder how yesterday he could crush the same pitch that he merely fouled off today. It explains how he pulled that pitch to short, rather than waiting on it and slapping it to right field. The batter's assumption that a perfect pitch is coming explains any combination of things that could screw up his perfect stroke.

## AND NOW, FOR THE REALLY BAD NEWS . . .

Here's the scary part. Instead of keeping his hard-earned stroke intact and focusing on each pitch all 60 feet, a batter may panic and start tinkering with his swing. He asks his coaches what's wrong. He asks his teammates on the bench to watch his stroke to see if something is flawed. Before you know it, a batter who has a perfectly good stroke makes all sorts of drastic changes and modifications. This really puts him in a slump, when all he had to do was concentrate more on each pitch all the way to the plate.

In sum, just be very careful when it comes to changing your swing and stance. Make certain that you make all the easy adjustments (like focusing on the pitch) first before you start reinventing your entire swing.

## MAKE SOMETHING GOOD HAPPEN

This expression is an outgrowth of having a quality at-bat. It simply means that when you come to the plate, recognize that you're on offense. It's your job to make something good happen for you and your team. Whether that means swinging away for a hit, putting down a sacrifice bunt, or angling for a base on balls, you—not the pitcher—should be in command of the at-bat.

To accomplish this goal, you have to be watching and observing the pitcher, and putting together your game plan. What kind of pitcher is this? Does he throw hard? What kind of curve does he have? Does he have a hard time getting the ball in the strike zone? Can I bunt on him? Does he tip off his pitches?

These are the kinds of questions you should have answered for yourself while you were in the on-deck circle or sitting on the bench. Too many young players warm up in the on-deck circle by swinging bats and chatting with their teammates or looking into the stands for their girlfriends. They don't even take a look at the pitcher to see what he's got!

**Remember:** Pitchers are creatures of habit. They often unconsciously repeat their pitching sequence to each batter so that they can keep themselves in a groove. If you watch closely enough, you'll see patterns begin to evolve. A pitcher might always start out with a fastball for strike one, then a curve for strike two, and then a change-up for strike three. Or you'll notice that on a 3-2 count, the pitcher always throws a fastball. These are the kinds of patterns and tip-offs you should be watching for. The more you know about the pitcher's tendencies, the easier it's going to be for you to make something good happen.

Al Goldis, the director of scouting for the Reds and an expert on hitting, says that all a player has to do is hit the ball hard twice a game. If you get four at-bats in a game, you might end up with a strikeout and a groundout for two of your at-bats. If you hit the ball hard on your other two at-bats, chances are good that at least one of those hard-hit balls will become a base hit, and maybe both will become hits.

This is Goldis' way of trying to take pressure off a young hitter. Sure, you *try* to hit the ball hard every at-bat, but give the pitcher some credit. He's trying to get you out—and he's got eight fielders behind him to help. But if you do succeed in hitting the ball hard twice a game, over time you'll accumulate a number of games in which you go 2-for-4.

So, depending upon how you define a slump, you can go in different directions. To me though, a batting slump doesn't start with an 0-for-4, or even an 0-for-8. You have to be a careful and objective judge of whether you're making solid contact with the pitch. If you are making good contact, then you have to be courageous and weather the storm until your next hit comes. If you're doing things right at the plate, then your next hit has a good chance of arriving on your next at-bat. Just make certain you don't fidget, fool around, or tinker with your batting stance or stroke.

If you're making good contact, questioning your stroke and making alterations will only louse up what you're doing well. That's not to say that you won't be tempted to change things—after all, you haven't got a hit—but keep your emotions out of it. If you're swinging well, just be patient.

On the other hand, if you don't feel comfortable at the plate, or if you're not making good contact, then you have to be honest about that too. Ask yourself to be more precise: Why does my swing feel like it's off? What can I do to adjust it properly? Be careful with your tinkering. Don't be tempted to make wholesale changes because you're temporarily frustrated.

Remember that anytime you make major changes in your stroke, it's going to take several at-bats before your body feels comfortable with those changes. Whether it's moving your hands back farther, choking up on the bat, moving your feet in your stance, or another kind of change, it rarely works perfectly on your next at-bat. It takes some time, and some more at-bats, before those changes begin to kick in.

## THE FIFTY AT-BATS FORMULA

I remember talking to Indians slugger Manny Ramirez when he was struggling with his batting average in the low minors. He told me that every day he felt pressured to get at least a 1-for-4, or even better, a 2-for-4. He explained that in high school, when he played only three games a week, he could keep focused on every at-bat.

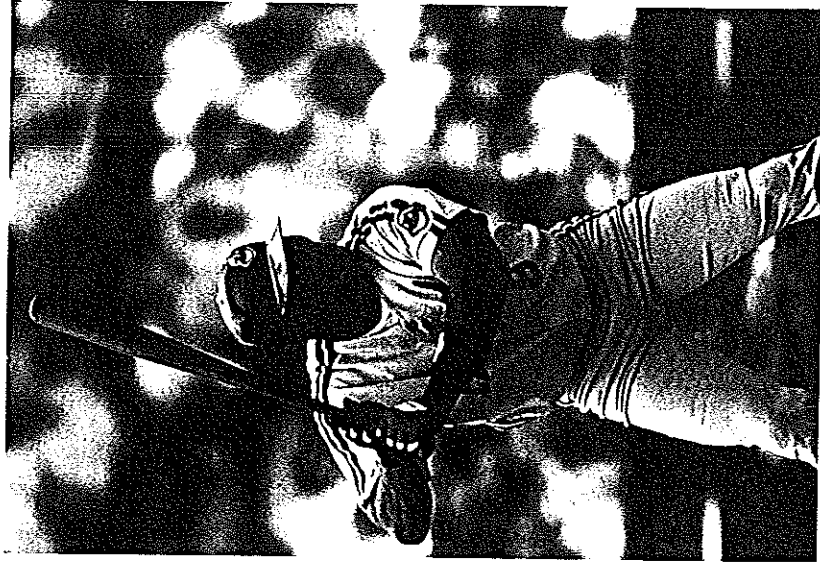
Now, in pro ball, where he played every night, it was difficult to keep hitting all the time. After going hitless for a few nights, Manny's batting average would tumble, and he felt even more pressure to get a hit.

I suggested to Ramirez that he stop keeping track of his daily performance and instead start focusing on every 25 or 50 at-bats. "You see, Manny," I explained to him, "You know that over the course of 25 at-bats you're going to get at least 10 hits. You're just too good a hitter. So, to get rid of the daily 0-for-4 pressure, just concentrate on blocks of 25 at-bats and look for 10 hits during that time. And when you get 10 hits, you'll be hitting .400."

This new approach worked wonders for Manny, and he's now learned to get away from the daily pressure and to focus only on the long-range picture of hitting.

## KEEP A DIARY TO STAY ON TRACK

You've probably heard on a telecast that many major leaguers keep a diary of each pitcher in the league. It's true. Some hitters, like Albert Belle, keep extensive diaries of each pitcher, which they refer to every day.



© VJ Sports Photography

Albert Belle keeps elaborate diaries of each pitcher he faces. He knows what to expect.

It's a good habit for you to start. Now, in the league you play in, you might not see the same pitchers repeatedly as big leaguers do, but you can keep track of your daily performance. I'm not concerned here about your batting average, but about the mechanics of your swings—whether you felt good at the plate, whether you hit the ball hard, whether you were fooled by a pitch, and so on.

The more you can remember and write down about each performance, the more you'll learn about yourself, about the patterns you go through, and about the adjustments that work for you. Such a diary becomes a wonderful book to review in the off-season as well, because you can pinpoint the nuances of your stance and swing that you might otherwise have forgotten over the long, cold winter months.

Of course, you should keep track of the other parts of your game, including your base running, your defensive play, and if relevant, your pitching performances. Most ballplayers study videotape of their performances endlessly. That's helpful, but the dedicated ballplayer will find that keeping a personal performance diary is an even bigger help.

## TAKE COMMAND OF YOUR AT-BATS

Some young batters approach the plate in a defensive mode. I find that odd, because a batter is supposed to be on offense, not defense.

It's not that these hitters aren't serious about their hitting, or that they don't hope to get a hit. No, not at all; in fact, many of these young hitters work long and hard hours at improving their strokes. But when the moment of truth comes, they tend to put so much pressure on themselves that they practically defeat themselves on the way to the plate. All the pitcher has to do is wind up and throw strikes.

Why does this phenomenon occur? Simple. Imagine working hard and long to reach your goal, only to realize that you'll have just a few chances to show your stuff during the course of a game. Psychological studies show that when a young hitter faces a pitcher in a game situation, his pulse usually skyrockets, and nervous anxiety becomes a major part of his performance. The batter must defeat not only the pitcher but also his own nervous anxiety.

## DON'T FIGHT YOUR NERVES

I have just two pieces of advice for young hitters dealing with this anxiety. First, understand and accept that you're

going to be nervous. Don't fight it; just understand that it's there. Many pro hitters, in fact, look forward to nervous anxiety. As one major leaguer once told me, "If I weren't a little bit nervous about hitting, then I'd really be nervous! After all, when those little jitters fill my stomach, that's my assurance that my body is set and ready for action. It's primed and ready to work. Without that nervousness, I'd be worried that I wasn't ready for action. Maybe too laid back, and as a result, not ready to bat."

Perhaps you haven't heard that insight before, but it's one worth remembering: Don't fight your nerves. Recognize that your nervousness means your body is ready for action.

The second piece of advice is this: When you get into the batter's box, put your hitting stroke on automatic pilot. You've heard this advice before in the book, but it's so important that it bears repeating. When the pitch is on the way, all you have time to do is figure out whether it's a strike or a ball, and whether you should swing at it. Be primitive in your approach. Don't clutter your head with thoughts and concerns about your stance or hand position or where your weight is. Just see the ball and swing. Let your instinctive athletic ability take over. You can make adjustments *between* pitches, but don't try it *during* the pitch.

Above all, whether you finish your at-bat with a home run or a strikeout, you should return to the bench with a feeling that you were ready and that you let her rip at the plate. That's all you can ask for when you hit.

The best part is that once you start to believe in this simple Zen-like philosophy, you'll begin to control your nervous energy and get good swings on each at-bat. You'll find that your defensiveness at the plate has been replaced by a feeling of self-confidence—that you, not the pitcher, are in control of your at-bats.

Pete Rose, who holds the record for most hits in a major-league career, used to say that when he got into the batter's box, the only thing he focused on was getting the fat part of the bat on the ball. That was his way of trying to eliminate the clutter in his mind so that he could focus on the task at hand. Every major leaguer has found a way of doing this; you too must find a way.



© Anthony Nestle

Take a look at pure power. When Frank Thomas bats, he transfers his power by fully extending his arms as he makes contact with the ball.

## BECOME A SMART HITTER

A resourceful, clever hitter has both the experience to recognize situations and the ability to execute skills. Here are several examples of smart hitters in action:

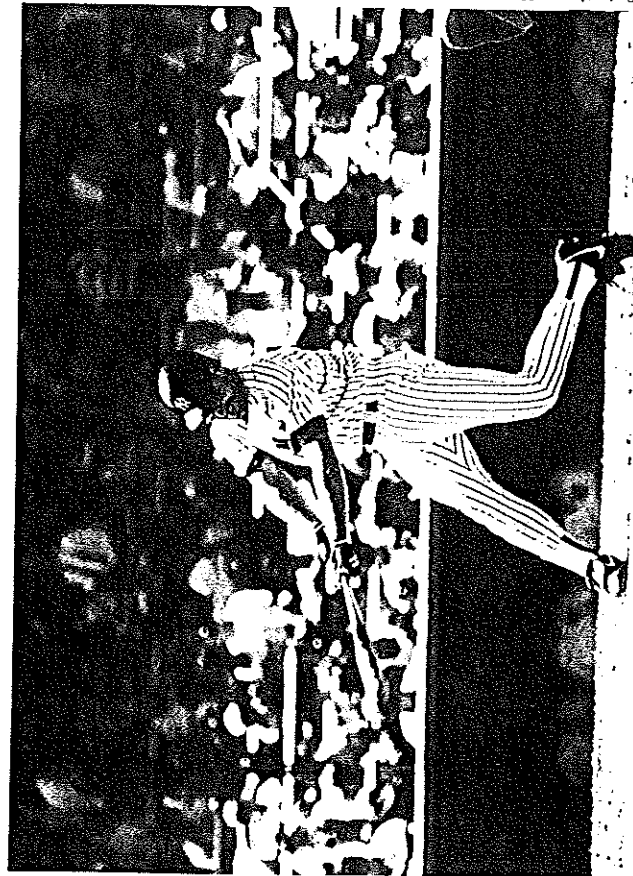
1. As the runner on first breaks for second, the batter waits just long enough on an outside pitch to slap it to right field, thus executing a perfect hit-and-run.
2. The leadoff batter watches the pitcher warm up. The batter's team is down by two runs late in the game. He notices that the pitcher is having difficulty throwing strikes. The batter patiently works a walk out of the tiring pitcher to get a rally started.
3. Observing a new pitcher coming into the game, the batter sees that the pitcher is breaking his curveball

into the dirt in front of the plate. The hitter simply waits for a fastball, which he rockets for a double.

4. A left-handed hitter wants to put down a bunt. He knows that the element of surprise will be greater if he waits until the count is 2-0. Sure enough, on that count, he gets a fastball and puts down an excellent bunt that catches the third baseman by surprise.

Becoming a smart hitter stems mostly from simple experience. In other words, few Little Leaguers would notice these nuances, and even high school players wouldn't often notice these things. But in college and pro ball, they are essential components of the inner world of baseball.

To educate yourself about these subtle parts of hitting, the best approach is to scrutinize the events in a major-league game. When you watch a game on television or at the ballpark, don't watch it casually. Put yourself in the batter's position. See what skills he brings to the plate. Ask yourself what he's trying to accomplish on every at-bat.



Learn from the pros. Wade Boggs is one of the best hitters to watch.

© Anthony Nestle

Watch Kenny Lofton hit. Will he bunt? Hit for power? Try to get a walk? Or just hit away? Observe Tony Gwynn, who knows precisely how he is going to swing at every pitch. Study Wade Boggs when he is batting. Will he slap the ball to left for a hit, or will he pull it? Watch Lance Johnson hit. Will he bunt? Take a pitch? Swing for a homer?

Find a batter you can pattern yourself after and watch him carefully. Make mental notes about what he does to succeed in the batter's box.

## A FINAL WORD

Hitting is hard. Real hard. Everybody in baseball knows that. It's a fact. Accept it.

Of course, you'll still want to become the best hitter you can be. Remember these recommendations about hitting:

1. Know your strengths and your liabilities.
2. Visualize what you want to accomplish in each game. Have a precise game plan.
3. Keep your emotions in check. Too much emotion will mess up your stroke.
4. Be able to determine whether you had a quality at-bat.

Above all, have the courage to press on. Remember, in baseball, there's always tomorrow.