



The Psychology Of Hitting

People have often remarked that hitting a baseball is one of the hardest tasks in all of sports. A baseball is thrown the 90 feet between home plate and the pitching mound at 75-95 MPH. No matter how fast or slow the pitch, the batter has less than a second to make these decisions. At the slower speed of a 75 MPH curve ball, the batter has 0.82 seconds to see the ball, determine the spin and location of the pitch, and make the decision to swing. If the pitcher is able to throw a fastball at 95 MPH, the decision interval drops to 0.65 seconds. That's a difference of 0.17 seconds between the experience of hitting a slow pitch and a fast pitch. It is little wonder that an All-Star baseball player fails to hit the ball fairly two-thirds of the time while an average player fails three-fourths of the time.

With that kind of time interval and percentage of failure, there is little margin for error in a baseball swing. As a result, the timing of the swing mechanics is critical to successful hitting. A hitting coach is invaluable to assess the mechanics of your swing and make recommendations for the proper technique. At the plate, getting a hit requires exact timing between the rotation of the hips and the action of the hands when you decide to swing at a pitch. Ideally, the hips and hands work in unison and are released at the same time. If the pitch fools the hitter, you will often see the batter release the hips and try to hold back their hands to either put the ball in play or foul it off.

Pressure can cause the same reaction. If a player is pressing or trying too hard, the hip and hand action is "out of sync". The hitter commits the hips ahead of the hands and pulls their head and eyes off the ball. The player "jumps" at the ball and throws the rhythm out of balance. When runners are in scoring position, players can often respond to the increased pressure to get a hit by falling out of rhythm.

Hitting is an emotional event. Player's management of the pressures of the game can affect the whole team, for better or worse. One player's failure can increase the pressure on another player to "pick up the slack" and cause that hitter to try too hard. As each batter makes an out, the failure can become contagious and the whole team can fall into a hitting slump. Conversely, getting a hit, especially in a critical situation, can create a positive impact, reduce pressure on subsequent batters, and create a situation where "everybody hits". A good pitcher can prevent this momentum from building by striking out a player in a critical situation. Putting men on base raises a team's expectation that is about to score. Players on the team can actually feel the emotional ebb and flow as the game progresses.

There are other times where a person's life events and problems are the source of the tension that can affect a player's ability to hit. Contract problems in a professional player can often cause the players to press to prove themselves worthy of a new contract or live up to the expectations of a new contract. Similarly, the high school player who is looking to

get a college scholarship can try too hard and throw off their timing. A series of hitless at-bats can cause a player to try too hard to break the pattern. Personal problems outside of the sport can be brought onto the field and interfere with the ability to hit. An unresolved fight with one's girlfriend or parents can distract the player internally and interfere with the natural swing.

Telling a player who has lost their swing rhythm to "watch the ball" does not solve the problem. The head does not control the body. The player has to restore their trust in their natural athletic ability to restore the timing between the hips and hands. The best method to restore trust and faith in oneself is through cross training. As a sports psychologist, I have had success in helping to break batting slumps with baseball players by getting them to play other sports that they enjoy. It reminds them of their basic athletic ability and restores the trust in themselves.

TIPS IMPROVE YOUR BATTING AVERAGE

1. **Don't change your swing:** If you start to enter a batting slump, the worst thing you can do is fool around with your hitting style. Once your mechanics have been set by your hitting coach, stay with that style. Check with your coach to see if they can notice any bad habits that may have re-emerged and look to restore your original swing.
2. **Restore your confidence:** increasing your trust in your natural athletic ability can restore Confidence. Cross training with a sport that you like reminds you of your basic talents and can relax you at the plate.
3. **Use the sharpshooter technique:** Sharpshooters pick a small part of their target to aim. This process enables them to relax, assume that they will hit the target, and changes their mental focus. Batters can do the same thing when they practice. Hitting objects smaller than a baseball like pebbles, kernels of corn, or a smaller ball, are all examples of practice techniques that can employ the same psychological techniques that the sharpshooter uses.
4. **Practice, practice, practice:** Practicing hitting helps to create a motor memory of your swing. The stronger the memory trace, the easier it will be to trust your swing under pressure.
5. **Use visual imagery:** Watching videotapes of yourself hitting helps to sharpen the mental image of your swing. The clearer the image, the easier it will be to trust it.
6. **Stay emotionally clean:** Living a healthy life without letting conflicts fester is not only the most satisfying way to live, but will also keep you free of the life stresses that can interfere with your ability to play a sport.



23 Tennyson Rd Mortlake 2137
(p) 02 9736 2677
(f) 02 9736 2688
info@activatecricket.com.au
www.activatecricket.com.au