

The 2-Strike Approach

For the past few years, the topic of the 2-Strike Approach in Hitting has sometimes become an issue of debate. Researching as much data as possible has given me some clear insight to the value of the 2-Strike Approach; not only when you have two strikes, but keeping the approach to hitting as simple as possible to begin with.

When the hitter's back is against the "wall", the ability to put the ball in play has been an undue stress since the early days of the game. I'd like to go over my ideas for coaches and hitters to consider when dealing with such a vital aspect of the hitting game.

Let me first say, Two Strike hitting is difficult! It's the only time when the batter must protect against every pitch, every pitch speed, and every pitch location that may be thrown next by the pitcher. This is very difficult primarily because it's almost impossible for the hitter to guard against pitches on both sides of the plate at the same time. Sure there are methods... "Look away, turn on the Inside" for example enables the batter to prepare for an outside pitch in which he waits longer on, and then reacts to the inside strike because it's easier to speed up your timing / hands, than slow them down. But once the batter has two strikes, the mental stresses become greater. The batter feels the pressure, he thinks about not wanting to strike out, etc. He has compounded the difficulty of Hitting even greater. The beauty of all this is that he can choose an approach that eases this pressure and mechanically allows for execution IF some concessions are made on his part.

You've all heard about some of the common attributes of successful hitting ... "Stay inside the ball", or "employ good rotational mechanics"... and really the only thing keeping a player from becoming a good two-strike hitter is the MENTAL APPROACH he takes to the plate. You first have to choose to make adjustments.

You first need to know yourself. What kind of hitter am I? Am I better at off-speed or fastballs? Do I like the ball up or down? Do "righties" or "lefties" give me more trouble? Know your strengths and weaknesses as a hitter so you can adjust in what you look for and how you approach the type of pitching you face.

Second, you must have a game plan when you go to the plate. This is your entire approach to hitting a certain day against a certain pitcher. From the dugout as you watch the pitcher, to the on-deck circle, from the pitches you see him throw before an inning to what the previous pitches were to the batter in front of you and on what counts. What pitch does he throw when behind? When ahead? Is he having trouble with a certain pitch? What pitch is he coming with on 0-2, 1-2 counts? You have to determine the answers and get your game plan together. Know what you can do. Stay within yourself and your approach. Know the plan so you can develop a sense of confidence before you get to the plate. If the pitcher is very dominant and is "on" that day, you may not want to work the count deep or allow two strikes on you. Expand the zone from the start and make sure you get your cuts from the start. If you think you have the advantage, then shrink the zone some, and look for your pitch only.

In other words, being an effective 2-strike hitter means knowing your strengths and weaknesses, who the pitcher is that day, and how comfortable you are as a hitter against him. Do your homework before and after each at-bat.

The "game situation" also affects the 2-strike approach. If it's late in the game and you definitely feel confident about hitting the pitcher, and you have the capability to drive the ball, then continue to meet the ball and hit it solid. If not a power hitter, then your approach is to put the ball in play, and at least make the defense make a play. However, when you are down by multiple runs, this is a time when even power hitters must become baserunners and help get the offense going.

In getting to know yourself, you should know that there are basically three types of hitters. The singles/contact hitter with speed, the live drive/gap hitter with average speed and occasional power,

and the pure power hitter usually lacking speed. The live drive gap hitter makes up about 70% of all hitters with the other two about 15% each.

Coaches and players should take into account the type of hitter, so the best approach to training can be achieved. Knowing what drills to do as a hitter and how to be more effective as the type of hitter you are is key. Obviously if you don't have speed, you don't want to train yourself to hit down on the ball in your swing, or become a slap-hitter, etc! Coaches, you can't clone hitters to all swing the same way. Be aware of what you're working with.

Now let's make a note... All types of hitters become the singles/contact hitter with two strikes in almost every situation the game will present. Because for the most part, we don't come to bat, every at-bat, where we represent the winning/tying run. More often, we must do some things mechanically that will allow us to put the ball in play. I'm not saying just stick the bat out and hit the ball with no authority. I'm saying to control the bat, be short to the ball and look for *solid contact – not power – with two strikes*.

HOW DO WE GAIN MORE TIME in the box. When you are taking a two-strike approach, you WAIT as long as possible to see what pitch is coming and location. Hitters can gain more time in a two-strike count if you make concessions... 1) You shorten up on the bat. 2) Move closer to the plate. 3) Utilize inside-out swing. – this significantly shortens the path of the swing, and a shorter stroke can get to the ball quicker. 4) Look to go middle-away with the pitch. 5) Rotate less and you end up with more accuracy with the bat because you are more compact. 6) Remain square or slightly open with stance – this opens up the hitting zones more.

Many contact hitters employ an inside-out swing. Staying inside the ball is an integral part of hitting success. No matter what type of hitter you are – this concept works for EVERYONE. There are many Hall of Famer's that incorporated an inside-out swing to increase their batting averages, OBP, and ultimately benefit their team's chances on winning that much more. There are many players that come to mind, but one great one stands out, Ted Williams. Joe DiMaggio, Derek Jeter, Wade Boggs, and even power hitter Frank Thomas are a few more you should recognize that also employ an inside-out swing. Now I'm not saying they had inside-out swings all the time, at least not like Derek Jeter has, but they all incorporated an adjustment when they had to.

Ted Williams was asked many times about his hitting philosophy... here's what he said about two-strike hitting... *"Two strikes, choke up a little. Hit the ball hard through the middle."* And about the inside-out swing Ted said, *"The inside-out swing is ideal for big swingers that strike out often and the ideal protective swing on a two-strike pitch."* Many HOF players went from good hitters to great hitters by learning how to employ an inside-out swing.

The inside-out swing... Keep your hands inside the ball, and by using good lower body mechanics, whereby the hands have the ability to wrap around the rotating body as the arms extend to contact. This is how a hitter picks up more time in the box... the elusive commodity that all hitters never seem to have enough of. Now you can wait longer, see the ball longer (and better) and this allows you to more effectively hit the off-speed and breaking balls easier. It's worked for many years and its still working with today's outstanding hitters. Edgar Martinez, Barry Bonds, and Albert Pujols to name a few. You do not have to "shorten" your stroke... the inside-out swing effectively does this for you.

Ted Williams was a great guess-hitter. He had great intuition to figure out what pitch was coming and what part of the zone he was looking for. He guessed quite a bit and did this early in his at-bats. With two strikes however, he conceded to the pitcher and adjusted. He figured that he couldn't afford to guess wrong at that critical time and needed to cover the plate and put the ball in play.

Reaching a hitters potential demands good two-strike execution. From what I've found and tried to convey here, is that great hitters became great because of their ability to hit with two strikes. So the quality of a hitter's technique lies in the superiority of his two-strike execution. Each time you are able to execute with two-strikes, you build more and more confidence. You know that you can get the job done with two strikes and with striking out being the number one stress of any hitter; you are

minimizing that stress the more you build your confidence. An example, when you know that you can utilize an inside-out swing, and get the barrel on a inside fastball, obviously you know that you can handle any pitch the pitcher may come with. Why? Because the inside fastball gives you the lowest amount of time to execute or react – having to hit the ball more out in front, while other pitches needing to get deeper in the zone which allow more time.

How many times do we see a batter lunge at a pitch the moment he gets two strikes? Why? Because he's worried and anxious about the pitchers fastball or he's guessing curve ball and is trying to hit the ball out in front. These are deadly mistakes. Now knowing that you can handle the pitchers fastball with your inside-out swing, you can actually be more prepared for the off-speed pitches and have confidence to stay back longer and see the pitch better because you know he cannot get the fastball by you. So utilizing the inside-out swing with two strikes gives you the "comfort" needed to handle "two-strike pressure". How great would it be to know you can handle the pitchers fastball, can still sit on a good pitch and be more selective – even with two strikes!

I should mention here, do not employ a two-strike approach to every pitch of every at-bat. No matter what type of hitter you are, early in your counts you need to be free to swing with authority and play the game. Playing the game brings on many situations and your job may be hitting to the opposite field to move a runner over or driving a ball to the outfield to score a runner from Third. Part of your approach should entail knowing what your job at the plate is with each at-bat, then figuring what pitch will enable me to do my job, and then focusing in on pitch you are looking for. After that, "See the ball"! Make your adjustment when you need to.

Bottom line is you need CONFIDENCE to be a successful hitter. Having a game plan for every approach you make during each at-bat should enable your mind to think about what you are going to do, instead of worrying about what negative could happen. With two strikes, its normal to feel the pressure, but having an approach to handle the bat with more control, giving yourself longer to see the ball, and knowing that there's no way this pitcher will beat me now, is simply going to raise your On-Base Percentage and lower your Strike out total. Which do you want to provide yourself and your team?

Good luck, continued success, and like Ted Williams always said, "Get a good pitch to hit!"

If you have questions or need help with your game, email me or contact Hit & Run Baseball and we will be more than happy to assist you in any of your baseball needs.

Yours in Baseball,

Coach Jackson