

# in the circle

with Michele Smith

## Keys to Writing a Great Batting Line-Up for your Team



**E**ach year, I do a series of player camps and clinics as well as coaching clinics.

Most players and coaches recognize how important it is for the players to hone their skills by working and training with great teachers. It is just as important, however, for coaches to seek out opportunities to learn and grow. The coach is the leader and the better the leader, the better the troops. I can always pick out the better coaches in a crowd...they are the ones who ask the questions. They are the ones who want to be the best they can be so that they can, in turn, help their players to reach their greatest potential. Knowing that, I try to listen closely

to the questions asked at my coaches clinics so that I can understand what information the coaches need the most.

One question I hear quite often is 'How do I write a line-up?' Coaches, have you ever looked back over your score cards after a tournament to see where a couple of shifts in your line-up might have yielded more runs? I believe in ALWAYS going back over the game, or score cards, to fully understand and analyze what the team did and how the athletes performed in their roles. This month's article will cover some of the information I address in my coaches clinics about writing up a batting order and how to best utilize your athletes. While it is always a good idea to re-evaluate the line-up after each game, it is even more important to try to start out with the best line-up in the first place. So, let's take a look at how to do that.

**Number 1 Hitter:** The 'lead off' should have speed—lots of speed! More than likely, she will be your fastest runner on the team. She should also have a good eye--be able to take walks and draw walks. There is a big difference between getting walked and drawing a walk; you get walked on balls due to poor pitching, you draw a walk by fouling off pitches, wearing down the pitcher and working the count until ball four is finally thrown. Your #1 hitter should also hit for an 'above average' batting average and most importantly have an even better on base percentage than her batting average. Your #1 and #2 hitters are often called 'table setters' as they will, hopefully, be on base when your best hitters get up to the plate.

**Number 2 Hitter:** The #2 hitter should also have speed. Additionally, she should be a good bunter and have the ability to move runners into scoring position--which will hopefully include your lead off batter. A lefty in this spot is a bonus. If you have an athlete who is an average or below average hitter but has great bunting skills--bunts well, slaps well, good at hit and runs--then this is a good place to 'hide' her; especially if you have a lead off hitter that is on base more than 50-60% of the time. The last thing you want to do is sacrifice or 'give up' one of your best hitters just to gain a base. Best case scenario is to 'give up' a weaker hitters' spot to move runners and then have your best hitters at the plate when those runners are in scoring position.

**Number 3 Hitter:** This player is usually the best batting average hitter on the team with an ability to hit for power as well. She should be 'clutch,' be able to hit with runners in scoring position, be able to work the count while still being aggressive and attack good pitches no matter when that pitch arrives during the count. Usually, she runs well when on base and is one of the best athletes on the team. She should have power, but be more of a 'power for average' hitter who does not strike out very often. Your #3 should be one of the best hitters on the team with a reputation for drawing fear out of the opposing pitchers.

**Number 4 Hitter:** This should be the best 'power hitter' on the team with the ability to hit for a good batting average as well. Typically, her average is not quite as high as your #3 hitter, but she should hit for more power

than your #3. She should be able to perform well with bases loaded, but she should also know how to handle herself when a base is open. If a base is open and she is being 'pitched around,' she should lay off bad pitches and take the bag. Your #4 hitter should help your #3 hitter get better pitches, because any smart pitcher will avoid walking the batter in front of the power hitter in the line-up.

**Number 5 Hitter:** Your #5 hitter should be a good 'batting average hitter' and also have power...or you risk your #4 hitter being walked to get to this batter. In other words, she is protecting your #4 hitter. A weak #5 will cause your #4 to be pitched around--and if your #4 is unable to take walks, then she will most likely find herself chasing pitches outside the strike zone. That scenario will make her entirely ineffective. Your #5 hitter should be able to be 'clutch' and 'thrive' in situations where opposing teams might walk the #4 hitter to get to her. This hitter is the one who takes it personally when a team walks the batter in front of her to get to her spot. This should be the hitter who will be determined to make them pay for that decision.

**Number 6 Hitter:** This hitter can be viewed more or less as a second lead off. She should have a good on base percentage and have some speed. She should have the ability to hit in the runners on base, but she should also be able to start an inning and run well once she is on base herself. The #6 hitter is also protecting #5, who is protecting #4. Good teams always have strength throughout the middle of the order.

**Number 7 Hitter:** The #7 hitter should be like your #2 hitter, a strong bunter, but she should also be able to maintain a good batting average. She should be strong at the 'short game' as well as be good with 'hit and runs.' This hitter must be aggressive on good pitches and be able to work the pitcher during the later part of the game.

**Number 8 Hitter:** Most of your 'average' batting average hitters will hit in the 7 and 8 spots. If they can act like #1 and #2 hitters--or like the 'table setters'--this is a bonus for the team. Specifically, your #8 hitter should be able to bunt well and work the pitcher into deep counts like the #7 hitter before her.

**Number 9 Hitter:** When the #9 hitter is proficient at getting on base, she is often viewed as a second lead off. Any time your #9 is getting on base, your team should be scoring lots of runs. A good #9 hitter is almost always a key member of any team that is explosive and has high scoring line-ups. She should be fast and able to run well and aggressively when on base in front of your lead off batter.

Some key points to remember: Always put strength behind strength or you will be taking the bat out of the hands of your strongest batters. Good pitchers will walk stronger hitters to get to weaker hitters. Don't be afraid to put a good hitter who is under performing in front of one of your best hitters. Many batters who are not performing to their expectations may not be getting good pitches to hit because of where they have been placed in the line-up. Often times, when these hitters are placed in front of the best hitters on the team, their pitch quality will go up because the opposing pitcher will prefer to go right at them versus pitching around them to get to the stronger hitter.

These are my general ideas on how to use a line-up to get the most out of your team--in other words, how to score the most runs during a game. Scoring runs is also the single best thing you can do for your defense. Even though I am acutely aware of the value of good pitching, I often say, 'an explosive offense is a team's best defense.'

Remember, it is very important to re-evaluate each game after the fact. It will help you to get a clear picture of who hits the best out of which position and enable you to make any necessary adjustments to your line-up. The information is there, you just have to reflect on it. Enjoy teaching the game...but, don't forget to let the game teach you!

Good Luck, Michele