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Look Ma – Hitting with One Hand



Hall of Fame baseball player Ted Williams once said that hitting a pitched ball is the toughest thing to do in all of sports. Of course he would say that since that's what he was known for and making that statement certainly makes his accomplishments more important. It's also probably fair to say that he never tried the luge, high jumping or rhythmic gymnastics – all sports that are still in the Olympics while softball remains out. Still, he's probably not far

from the truth.

Softball players certainly know how tough it is. Facing down a pitcher who is standing 35, 40 or 43 feet away and who can make the ball dance, sing and recite the combined works of Shakespeare is difficult under the best of circumstances with the best of swings. If anything is wrong in the swing it makes it that much harder.

Of course, figuring out something is wrong is about as tough as figuring out that Hollywood is totally out of ideas if they're remaking Beverly Hills 90210, Knight Rider and The A Team. You can pretty much determine you have a hitting issue by watching what happens when you hit. If you consistently swing and miss, pop up, or dribble weak ground balls to the infield it doesn't take an advanced degree in astrophysics (fancy term for

it as close to the contact point as you can before it happens.

This drill will help you in a couple of areas, although I'll admit looking good isn't one of them. First, it's nearly impossible to drop the bat head and flatten out the swing from this starting position (although there are certainly some who will try). The upside-down hand forces you to keep the bat head up through the swing, and makes it uncomfortable to drop the back shoulder too soon. It also removes the possibility of bat drag – that power-killing condition where your back elbow gets ahead of your hands during the swing. I don't care how flexible you are, your back elbow isn't going anywhere with your top hand upside-down. If it feels really strange, you probably have some bat drag going on.

At the other end of the swing, isolating the bottom hand will show right away if you're swinging all the way through the ball or coming up short. In a two-handed swing, it's easy for the top hand to take over too early. You start the swing, you get part way through, then start firing the top hand before it's time. This especially happens when a right-handed hitter throws right-handed or a left-handed hitter throws left-handed. (The lucky ones like me, who throw right-handed and hit left-handed, are less prone to that because we're not as used to using the top hand.)

With an upside-down top hand, you're really forced to pull the bottom hand through all the way if you want to hit the ball hard. For some of you, and you know who you are, it may be the first time you've ever used your bottom hand completely. At least for hitting. Again, if it seems strange or awkward, that's good.

Once you get the feel of what your bottom hand should be doing, it's time to move on to the top hand. This top hand-only drill can be very revealing.

Again, many hitters tend to rely too much on their top hands. They

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rocket scientist; cool, huh?) to see you need to change what you're doing. The hard part is knowing what to change.

That's why I like one-handed drills. When you're using both hands to hit, there are many moving parts that have to fire in the right order. It's a lot to keep track of, and if you miss something critical in the hitting motion you could spend a lot of time practicing to fail instead of succeed. With one-handed drills, though, you can really isolate on a few key movements so you can focus on doing a few things right rather than trying to catch everything.

Where to start depends on what your issues are. If you're tending to swing under the ball, either popping it up or missing it completely, you're probably dropping your hands. If you're making contact but the ball isn't jumping off the bat, you may be swinging to the contact point instead of through it. (If you're doing that horrible "slap your back when you're finished swinging" movement that was popular a few years ago and is still hanging on in some circles, you're definitely stopping your swing short. And not doing your back much good either.) No matter what, one-handed drills focusing on the bottom hand will help.

Place the ball on a tee and line up as you normally would. Choke up on the bat a couple of inches and get into your stance. Then take your top hand and turn it over so your hands are on the handle thumb-to-thumb. Yes, you read that right. Trust me, ol' Coach Ken hasn't quite lost it completely yet – although there are those who would beg to differ. Take a full swing, holding onto the bat as long as you can with the top hand. At some point, of course, you will have to let go of the bat but try to make

think the top hand is their dominant hand. Yet if you do a one-handed drill with only the top hand you'll find that's not really the case.

It's hard to swing the bat with only your top hand, even if you choke up to the top of the tape/handle wrap and you're built like a brick outhouse (like me). If you try to develop the power too early it makes it even tougher. But if you keep the bat head up and wait until you're well into rotation before you unleash it you'll find it's a whole lot easier.

You'll also find exactly where the top hand should take over. It's not at the beginning of the swing. Instead, it's really right around the contact point. Its job is to accelerate the bat head into contact and allow you to reach extension – that point where the end of the bat is pointed at the pitcher as if to say, "Yeah, baby, I'm coming after you!" (Bet you didn't know Austin Powers could hit.) Getting fully through to extension will also save you a lot of money on ice because you won't be bruising your back from constantly hitting it with the bat.

These are not one-time drills, or just things to do when you have a particular problem. One-handed drills, especially the bottom hand drill, should be a regular part of your practice routine. The more you use them, the more effectively you'll be able to get the bat into the path of the ball in a way that makes it explode in the opposite direction.

Want to talk more hitting theory or offer another suggestion on any aspect of the game? You can email me at kkrause342@aol.com. And be sure to check out my Life in the Fastpitch Lane blog (<http://fastpitch-lane.softballsuccess.com>) for more thoughts, musings and comments on this great game.