



HIGHER GROUND

with Bobby Simpson

What Ted Said

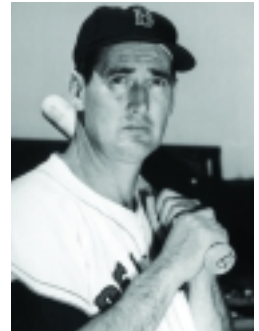
One of the greatest Major League Baseball hitters of all time was Ted Williams. In 1941, he was the last person to hit over .400 in a season. About thirty years later, in 1972, Williams spoke to the players and coaches of the Kansas City Royals Baseball Academy in Sarasota, Florida. The Academy was basically a creative venture never before or after attempted by a MLB team, but for about 3-4 years the Royals signed players who excelled athletically in baseball and other sports (point guards, wide receivers, etc.) and attempted to develop them into major league baseball players. In their efforts to do that, they brought in experts in all areas of the game, plus hypnotists, nutritionists, psychologists, physicists, vision experts, light and color gurus, and everybody imaginable.

During 1972, I worked for the Academy conducting tryout camps and instructing players

on their Gulf Coast Rookie League team. I would have loved to have been present when Williams spoke on hitting for about two hours, but at that time I was an assistant baseball coach at Florida State and just preparing for the summer work for the Royals. However, I religiously watched and read all the instructional material at the Academy and his taped presentation was easily one of the best.

He said that he used to ask all the best hitters what he needed to do to be great. In the end, he decided that the most important thing was to Get A Good Ball To Hit. To him, more important than all the stuff that he heard about feet, knees, hips, elbows, and hands were the recognition, decision, and action concerning which pitch to hit.

Let's explore this concept for a few minutes and hopefully arrive at what I call a Duh Moment.



Just take whatever swing you currently have, unaltered with any change in physical mechanics. Go right now with whatever you got (questionable grammar, but good communication). Now that we understand the starting point in plain English, let's look at some home plate math.

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First, ask yourself a few questions. What is your favorite pitch? That's the one you hit best. Is it up, down, inside, outside? What combination is it? Before you say waist high down the middle, be sure to consider the level at which you play and if that pitch is available very often. Now, if you got your favorite pitch ten times in games, how many times would you hit it hard? For the sake of this journey to Duh-Land, let's say that you would hit it hard seven times out of ten. Of course, some of these would not result in hits, so let's assume that you would get five hits.

Now, consider your least favorite pitch. Maybe you'd

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hit it hard one or two times out of ten and maybe one of those would result in a hit. Are you feeling closer to the Duh Moment? Would you rather get a hit fifty percent of the time or ten percent of the time? My wife describes much of my Duh Stuff as plain old common sense and she is right. Unfortunately, common sense is not always so common and far too many hitters are willing to swing at the pitcher's pitch instead of their pitch. The result is pitchers winning battles that hitters should win.

So, what's so good about what Ted Williams said? Why am I writing about it? What can we do about it? What's so good is its simplicity and accuracy. We often take a complex skill like hitting and make it more complicated by using big words and attempting to clone the humans involved. Our job is to realize that Jack Stallings (the head coach at Florida State when I was there) was so right when he advised me that "the more difficult and complex the skill, the simpler we should make our explanation." Williams could get deep in his discussions, but he always came back to say that the most important thing was to Get A Good Ball To Hit.

I am writing about it because too many hitters violate this simple, effective concept and let the pitcher dictate the terms of the battles at home plate. I write about it because I spend a ton of time instructing hitters and I want them to win the battles. I write about it, because I am also a high school math teacher and this just makes good sense mathematically. It's a

simple matter of simple percentages.

What can we do about it? That's also simple, but not necessarily easy. First, we can learn what pitch or pitches we hit best. Williams had a famous chart of baseballs in all locations showing what his batting average was on that specific pitch. We may not go to that extreme (maybe not have enough data), but we can learn more about our best zones for success. We then make this a constant, integral part of our hitting practice (smart work instead of just hard work) and give ourselves a number of strikes while practicing. With no strikes, we only swing at our pitch. With two strikes, we swing at the umpire's pitch. With one strike, we can choose to adjust somewhere in between or stick with our no-strike approach. We control the pitch selection process in practice so we increase the odds of doing well in the game.

Whatever you do, if you really want to improve your hitting in just a short time, Get A Good Ball To Hit.

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