

When the double play is in order, the pitcher will attempt to get a ground ball, usually with pitches down in the zone. If the hitter is a pull hitter, the pitcher will probably try to keep the ball away in hopes of having the hitter roll over and hit a ground ball to the second baseman or shortstop, depending on whether he is right-handed or left-handed. The preceding would also apply with a runner on third base and less than two outs. If the pitcher gets two strikes on the hitter, he may go for the strikeout. With a runner on third base the hitter should not forget which is the pitcher's best pitch.

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Players who understand how pitchers are trying to get them out, know all the information available on the opposing pitcher, and understand the dictates of the game situation will be better offensive players. Of course, better offensive players create a better offensive team. Base runners must know the arm strength of the outfielders and the catcher. The complete offensive player knows that the pitcher is a creature of habit. If players and coaches observe the abilities and tendencies of the opposition and use the information intelligently, their team will have a competitive edge. Using these focus points during the game should make them a much better offensive team.

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# 3

## **Using Signals for Hitting and Base Running**

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Mike Gillespie

Because we ask our players to do so much offensively, we have many signs and must constantly review them with the team. We have found in college baseball that our opponents are tireless in their efforts to pick our signs. So although we want to keep our system simple, we must be deceptive enough to ensure that someone outside our group cannot determine the meaning of our signs. Consequently, we find it helpful to have alternate systems or at least to change indicators game to game or inning to inning. One option is to have different signs for different players. Coaches must continually review their signs with the team and regularly alternate systems if they expect their players to know the systems and execute with confident aggressiveness whatever it is they are being asked to do.

### **Establishing a Functional System**

Our communication of a sign may be as simple as talking to the hitter or possibly the on-deck hitter before he leaves the dugout. For example, we may tell the hitter that if he gets on, we will steal or hit-and-run on the first pitch so he should ignore what might be a dummy sign. Some teams use

the on-deck hitter or hitter in the hole to communicate to the hitter information gleaned from the catcher, that he's setting up in or away, for example.

We ask that the on-deck hitter look for a sign before he leaves the on-deck circle. Once he becomes the hitter we want him to drop one foot out of the box to look for a sign after every pitch or pickoff attempt. Before he gets back in the box, he should allow the runner to take his lead. We demand that the batter do this quickly, and we attempt to give signs promptly to avoid slowing the tempo of the game unnecessarily. Some teams ask that the hitter and base runners acknowledge signs to ensure that no one has missed a sign.

When "situational hitting" is called for, such as when we have a man at second with none out or a man at third with less than two outs and one or more infielders back, we communicate to the hitter that we expect him to "play the game" by selecting a pitch that he can hit to the right side, up the middle on the ground, or other appropriate tactic. We likewise specifically convey to the runner at third what he is to do on a ground ball. Of course, we as coaches must be mindful of a player's capabilities before we ask him to execute a specific skill.

We expect a base runner to look for a sign immediately upon reaching a base, after every pickoff attempt, or after any foul ball, and he must anticipate a verbal sign from the base coach. The runner should be mindful that the hitter is waiting to get into the box until the runner takes his lead. Once he has his lead, the runner must be reading the catcher's signs and the pitcher's grips. The runner's system of relaying signs might be a movement of either hand or foot, or a turn or tilt of the head. The runner will first communicate that he has picked a catcher's signs or a pitcher's grips by calling out a phrase or using some hand sign. We will then alert the hitter.

## **Deciding Who Calls Pitches**

In college baseball it is not uncommon for either the head coach or the pitching coach to call the pitches, rather than having the catcher call the game. Those who go by this philosophy believe the coaching staff has a greater knowledge of the scouting report than does the catcher and is better suited to match a pitcher's strengths with a hitter's weaknesses. The coaches may also have experience with a particular opponent that tells them when a team likes to hit-and-run, squeeze, or attempt a certain first-and-third play, and they call pitches accordingly.

Those who prefer that the catcher call pitches believe the catcher has a better feel for how the pitcher is throwing and has a better perspective of any adjustment a hitter is making. These same coaches feel that traditionally the catcher runs the game much like the quarterback in football. Has anyone noticed that the quarterback virtually never calls the game anymore? Nor does the middle linebacker call the defense, or the point guard determine the offense or defense in basketball.

The suggestion that players offensively decide whether or not to hit-and-run, squeeze, or double steal would be met with much skepticism, to put it mildly. Why is pitch calling different? I have also noticed that if the team loses, it is the coach, not the catcher, who gets fired.

## **Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign**

Our system of sign giving to call pitches to the hitter has been limited only by our imagination. We make liberal use of verbal signals, typically using a phrase that is common baseball terminology—“line drive,” “base hit,” “good hitter,” and “come on now,” to name a few. Sometimes we use a dummy phrase, meaning nothing.

Our offensive touch system makes use of an indicator. The hot sign may be two signs after the indicator, and we may use a double indicator and require that we lock in the sign with some specific touch at the end of the sequence. A wipe-off may start the sequence over, and there will always be one or more “nothing’s on” signs. The player should have a sign to ask for a repeat of the coach’s sign. We use an “ignore it” sign, which means “ignore the sign I’m about to give,” and we also use a “thinking about it” sign to tell our player that we are considering a certain play within the next couple of pitches. We make particular use of this sign when we are considering a squeeze, steal of home, or first-and-third play.

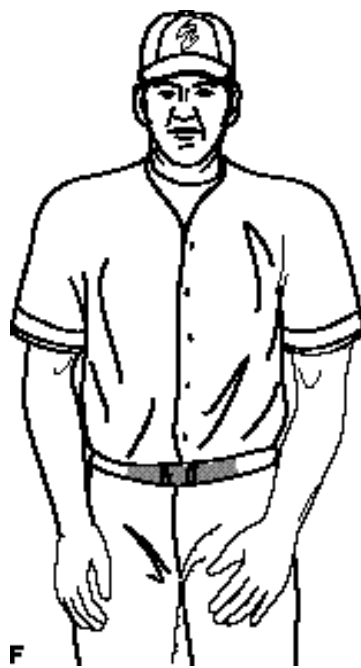
Another method of sign giving we like is using a separate set of signs between the head coach and the first-base coach, who employs his own verbal signs to the runner for a steal or delayed steal. This is simply another way of protecting against the possibility that our opponent will pick our signs.

## **Picking Opponents’ Signals**

Like so many teams, we are seeking to pick the signs and pitches of our opponent, and we must constantly be on the alert for the other team’s attempts to pick us. We listen for a word, phrase, whistle, or other form of communication, and we try to locate the source from which it is coming. Commonly it is someone in the dugout, a base runner, a base coach, or a player in the bullpen, but we’ve encountered teams that put someone behind the outfield fence or in the stands behind the catcher. Some opponents even have someone studying TV monitors in the dugout or clubhouse. We also scout ourselves: Can we pick our own coach, pitcher, or catcher? Does our pattern of sign giving or some telltale body language give us away? We must remember that by videotaping games on television, our opponents have the opportunity to study our signs, so we must prepare accordingly.



A sample set of signs: The indicator is the right hand touching the left wrist, and the steal sign is the left hand swiping the bill of the hat on the next touch. To complete the set, the coach must wipe his chest in a downward motion with either hand on the last touch. So, (a) the coach touches his ear, (b) wipes his hand across the chest, then (c) touches his left wrist with



his right hand (indicator). This is immediately followed with *(d)* a swipe of the bill of the hat by the left hand (steal), *(e)* a touch to the belt, *(f)* a wipe down the leg, *(g)* a touch of the face, then *(h)* a wipe down the chest to “lock-in” the sign and complete the set.

When trying to steal our opponents' signs or a pitcher's pitches, we have had our greatest success when we have coaches or players on our team committed to the task of searching for some pattern or telltale movement. This obviously requires patience and sticking to it.

We typically chart the touches utilized by the coach in an attempt to associate a certain touch or sequence of touches with a particular play. Certain signs such as the "take" or "swing-away" are often very simple with no attempt at camouflage or deception, and some coaches get careless about how they use their indicator; careful charting may reveal these parts of a sign system.

We have found that an effective method of decoding a catcher's system is for a runner to return to the dugout and report the sign and pitch sequence to our "007," our code breaker. For example, the runner may report that the catcher flashed 4-1-2-3-2 and the pitch was a slider, and then flashed 1-2-4-1-3 and the pitch was a change. "007" records it and may determine that the first sign after a 2 indicates the pitch. Complex systems may require many runners to report to the code breaker what they observed.

We expect everyone on the team to be involved in picking pitches. The most common give-aways are a pitcher's show of different grips or hand movements, subtle changes in his motion, finger movement of the glove-hand forefinger that is outside the glove, and even facial expressions and flexed forearm muscles. Catchers may have their fingers exposed to base coaches, they may move to a target early, or they may hold the glove a certain way on certain pitches.

Sometimes infielders are moving or talking, and on rare occasions an outfielder's movement can betray what the pitch is. When the pitches are called from the dugout, we assign a group of at least three players the task of trying to break the system. Through a process of charting the coach's touches or actions, we occasionally are able to determine what's coming. We find that picking pitches is often simple and that determination and tenacity make the difference in whether we are successful in this area.

We've also found it effective to make dummy calls, that is, to make calls as though we have pitches when in fact we don't. A pitcher may become distracted, lose focus or concentration, and make a mistake that results in a hit.

We have observed that teams who are complete in their preparation are ready to exploit any opportunity to get an out on defense or enhance their offense. Having hitters know what's coming is just one area that might be a difference maker.

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Signs are the vehicle by which communication is accomplished in baseball. Games might be won or lost for no reason other than a sign that is successfully delivered or missed completely. The challenge is to be simple in the design of a sign system, yet complex enough to keep opponents from being able to decipher the system.



# 4

## Hitting Strategy

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Mark Johnson

A baseball fan may go to the ballpark, watch a game, enjoy it, and go home completely unaware that he missed the game! Of course, the fan saw the obvious aspects of the game, but he may have missed the inner part, the game within the game—the emotions, the matchups, the strategies of the game on and after every pitch. The outcome of the game involves much more than running, throwing, fielding, and hitting. It's not that simple. The beauty of baseball is often found in the interplay of emotions, matchups, and strategies that unfold with each passing moment.

Why would a team bunt in the second inning of a scoreless game with a man on first, no outs, and the five-hole hitter at the plate? Why would a team play the infield in during the second inning of a scoreless game with runners at second and third and the three-hole hitter at the plate? Most managers will not play their entire hand early in a game, but they do lay down some cards that others can see. The preceding hypothetical situations could provide clues about how the manager feels about both teams' pitchers, offenses, bullpens, and defenses. Remembering a manager's early decisions may be useful as the game progresses because they can provide valuable insight into a team's strategy.

Baseball fans are said to second-guess more than the fans of any other sport. Many fans have played the game in one form or another—at a picnic, in the backyard, or in some type of organized league. Many see it as a rather simple game of pitch, hit, run, catch, and throw. Baseball also has the enduring quality of time between pitches. The game is *made* for second guessing. Its structure gives people a second chance to make a decision after they have seen the results of the first decision. And unlike many other sports, baseball often offers only two choices. If the first choice failed, a second-guessing fan could end up a genius—and many fans do! And why not?

Second-guessing is one of the great pleasures in going to the ballgame, and yes, it brings a fan closer to the game within the game.

## **Guidelines for Effective Hitting Strategy**

A rock-solid rulebook on hitting strategies does not exist. Too many variables change from pitch to pitch. Each player has different talents and abilities. Few can execute all the skills needed to set the rule. Some can execute the hit-and-run, some can bunt, some are difficult to strike out, some can hit behind the runner, some can hit for power, and some can hit for a high percentage. But few can do it all! Some hitters match up better with certain pitchers. Also, players tend to hit better at some times than they do at others. Players are influenced by the moments they have just passed through. Some players, if they have just come through a negative experience, will respond with more determination, whereas others will break down and call it a bad day.

Conversely, hitting strategy may have absolutely nothing to do with the hitter. A strategy may be designed simply to test a weakness of the opponent. Variables will always be present, and, of course, they are what make the game entertaining and intriguing. Most people who have been around the game a long time can attest to witnessing some successes with a strategy that broke the rulebook. They've seen the first-and-third, two-out suicide squeeze with the third baseman playing even up with the bag. They've seen an unsuccessful steal attempt with two outs and a nine-hole hitter batting .125 at the plate. They've seen a successful first-and-third double steal with no outs and a speedy three-hole hitter at the plate. At this point we should simply note that a good manager will play percentage baseball until the variables change his thoughts.

We should also realize that a good manager and a good hitter have more information to assist their decision making than anyone else does, including fans, parents, and, yes, baseball men. The manager and hitter are aware of variables that no one else knows about. They may not bunt in a bunting situation simply because the hitter is a poor bunter or because the next hitter does not match up well with the pitcher. Or a manager may bunt with a man on second and no outs simply because the hitter cannot hit the ball to the right side.

Despite the many variables that affect hitting strategy, the manager or coach should know some simple general rules. These are guidelines to consider when developing a strategic plan, and they can be adjusted to fit each unique situation.

- *Consider the skill level of the players.* Strategies vary greatly with the level of play. In the lower level of skill development (preadolescents

and adolescents), games are usually lost more than they are won. In other words, teams usually beat themselves with poor defensive plays, lots of bases on balls, poor base running, and so on. Teams that end up in the win column usually put the ball in play and force defensive mistakes with bunts, steals, and hit-and-run plays. At this level, the more ground balls that are hit, the better the chances for victory. Make the defense play.

As the skill level rises to a good high school level or certainly to the college level, defensive skills are much better. The double play becomes an inning-ending feature, catchers hold down the running game, pitchers have better moves to first base on pickoff attempts and a quicker delivery to home plate, and the first-and-third double steal doesn't work as well. Simply put, the defense will not offer as many opportunities or outs as it does at the younger level of play. A coach or manager must pick spots for strategic hitting more wisely.

At the professional level, of course, the defense seldom gives an opponent more than three outs. The skill level is so good that rarely do you see an attempted first-and-third double steal. The players control more of the game because of their skill level. Gambles do not often pan out at this level. Opponents will not lose the game; they will force a team to win the game. More often than not, a manager's role is concerned with matchups.

Therefore, good hitting strategy for one level may be poor strategy for another. Pay attention to the skill level of the players as you plan strategies.

- *Don't overstrategize.* Young coaches, in particular, tend to do too much maneuvering and do not allow the players to control the outcome of the game. They neutralize their team's talent by dominating the games with bunts, hit-and-run plays, and so forth. The talent of the players wins or loses most games, not the strategies of the coach or manager! Once the game starts, coaches and managers increase their chances for victory by letting their players play rather than forcing the action with a lot of strategic moves.
- *Set the right tempo.* Managers sometimes use hitting strategies simply to set the tempo for the team, to let players see the manager's aggressiveness and belief in the players. Some strategies are set not necessarily to win the game at that moment but to establish the mind-set of the players, their roles, and their responsibilities. A manager may allow a hitter to hit on a 3-0 count. This tactic sends a message not only to that hitter but also to the entire team. This approach goes against percentage baseball, but it may pay dividends in the mind-set of the players. In like manner, a manager may hit-and-run in the first inning to set the tempo.

- *Play for the big inning early and be more aggressive.* Many games are won in one big inning. In the early innings of the game, managers should play for that big inning. Sacrificing outs to move runners rarely produces big innings. With no outs early in a normal game, unless an excellent bunter or hit-and-run player is at the plate or an excellent base stealer is at first, play the game out and let the hitter hit.
- *The more outs there are, the more a team should gamble.* If you have three outs to work with and a man on first, play it out for a big inning. As the number of outs increases, the team must do something that is against percentage baseball. Hit-and-run plays and steals should occur more after one out. If the team is well behind midway or late in the game, however, gambles are not recommended.
- *The latter part of a game belongs more to the manager.* Managers pay closer attention to matchups that might require pinch hitters, pinch runners, or better bunters. Most managers will give up some defensive skills to produce a key run late in the game. Remember, in baseball you cannot hold the ball or run out the clock. The pitcher must throw to the hitter. If you are at the key spot, substitute offense for defense and then hope the ball doesn't find your offensive move when that player takes the field!
- *Play the short game early when facing a dominating pitcher.* Use the bunt, try the hit-and-run, and move runners.
- *When behind late in the game without the tying run at the plate, play straight-up baseball.* Of course, the objective in hitting strategy in baseball is always to get ahead or stay even with your opponent as the game materializes. That way, all hitting strategies are alive and well. When behind late in a game and with the tying run not at the plate, most teams must play the game straight up because they cannot afford to give up outs to advance runners. A team is at the mercy of lower percentage baseball; that is, they must rely on extra-base hits, bases on balls, and multiple hits in an inning. They may even have to change their hitting strategy in counts by taking a called first strike in the latter part of a game.
- *Avoid falling into patterns.* Although most managers and coaches have philosophical beliefs and tendencies in hitting strategies, they should avoid falling into a pattern. An aggressive bunt defense can improve percentages to get a lead runner out if the defensive team can anticipate that a bunt is going to be attempted. A pitchout on a hit-and-run can ruin an inning if the defensive team calculates correctly. In like manner, the defense can switch the middle infielders if the offensive team always tries the hit-and-run in certain situations. Managers would be wise not to fall into patterns.

## Role of Hitters in the Lineup

Itchy Jones, the Hall of Fame coach from the University of Illinois, has done a tremendous job of identifying how to determine lineups in chapter 1. Unfortunately, once the game starts, roles change because the lineup is usually different every inning.

Should the mind-set be different for the hitter depending on where and when he bats in the current inning? Yes, it should. We have often heard that every at-bat is different—different pitcher, different circumstances in the game, different counts, different situations facing the hitter. The role of the hitter in an inning changes because of his place in the lineup. As we discuss this, realize that a team does not want to weaken the talent the hitter brings to the plate by asking him simply to fill a role, but a team must establish a collective mind-set so that everyone understands the requirements of the various roles.

The ultimate leadoff hitter in an inning is one who will force the pitcher to throw strikes and, in most cases, force the pitcher to throw five or six pitches in the at-bat. This hitter can take a strike and not panic. He knows he can put the ball in play. He will often take a strike on a 2-0 or 3-1 count unless it is his pitch, in his zone. In some cases he will take it anyway.

Unfortunately, the leadoff hitter in your batting order sometimes leads off only in the first inning. Within a span of five or six games, everyone in your batting order will probably lead off some innings. The surest way to get on first base is by way of a base on balls. The chance that a team will score increases dramatically when the leadoff hitter reaches first base. For that reason coaches always say to the pitcher, "Get the leadoff man out, and your inning is halfway over!" The leadoff man must force the pitcher to throw strikes, and if the pitcher gets behind in the count, he must be willing to take a strike.

The hitter who comes to the plate with no one on base and two outs faces a different situation. On the 0-0, 2-0, or 3-1 count, he is looking to drive the ball with the idea of getting into scoring position. He knows that although a base on balls is good, it will still take a couple more hits to score him.

The leadoff hitter must realize that he can make a huge contribution to his team's chances of having a big inning by getting on base. Taking the 3-1 strike is frustrating to an "individual" hitter, but not to a situational hitter. He realizes that the pitcher has missed on three of his last four pitches. The percentages say he will not now throw two strikes in a row.

If the leadoff hitter gets on, the key player in that inning will always be the next hitter. To keep the inning alive, the objective of the second hitter is to move the base runner into scoring position and, if possible, get on base as well. If he makes an out but moves the runner, the at-bat is still solid. Hitting the ball to the right side will increase the chances of moving the runner

because the hole there is larger with the first baseman holding the runner and because the throw to second from a right-handed first baseman or second baseman is a lower percentage throw than the throw from the shortstop or third baseman, who are on the left side of the infield. That said, it is not wise, particularly early in a game, to take hitting strengths away from the hitter. At most levels of play the hitter should hit with his strengths and not give himself up to hit to the right side. If the runner is critically important, the manager can ask the hitter to execute a sacrifice bunt.

Obviously, the role that the three-hole hitter plays in the inning depends on the situation. If the runner remains at first with one out, a hit-and-run may be his objective that inning. If the runner has advanced to scoring position, the hitter's objective is to drive in the run. If the three-hole hitter comes up with no one on and two outs, he looks for pitches to drive, and he aggressively but intelligently gambles on turning a single into a double.

## **Plan Before Going to the Plate**

Year in and year out, a larger percentage of games will be won by the team with the highest on-base average rather than the team with the highest slugging percentage. Many studies have been conducted concerning productivity of ground balls, fly balls, and line drives. Studies at the NCAA Division I level conclude the following:

- For every 10 ground balls hit, 3 will fall in for a base hit, and the on-base average is 42 percent.
- For every 10 line drives hit, 8 will fall in for a base hit, and the on-base average will be 84 percent.
- For every 10 fly balls hit (including all home runs), 2 will fall in for a base hit, and the on-base average will be 29 percent.

Keep in mind that these statistics apply to top amateur baseball players who are skilled defensively and play on surfaces that are usually better than those of other amateur fields. One could certainly argue that the batting averages and on-base averages would increase with less skilled defenses or with poorly manicured fields. And although either condition would mean more base hits on fly balls, the increase for ground balls and line drives would be even greater. It is simply easier to catch a fly ball than it is to catch a ground ball, throw it accurately to a base, and have it be caught. In like manner, line drives are harder to catch than fly balls; fly balls can be run down more easily than line drives.

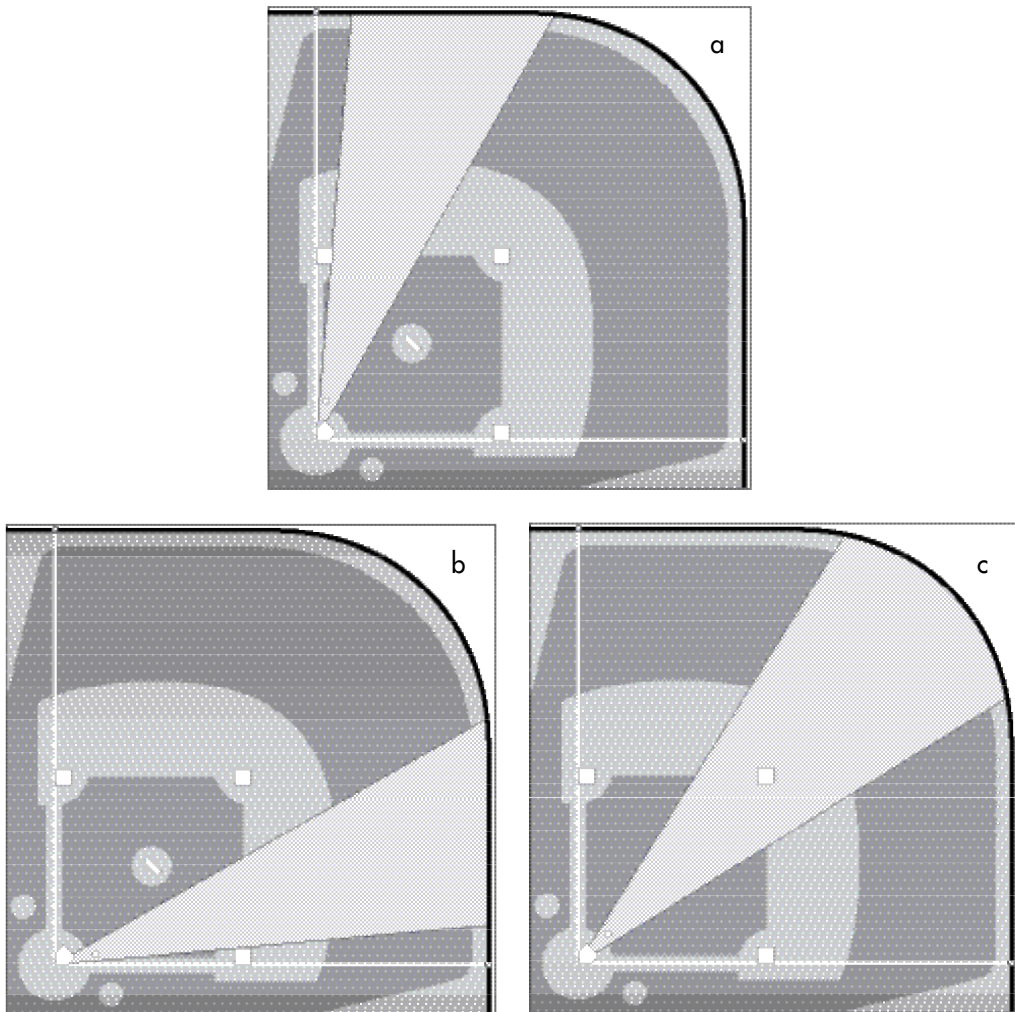
If you are playing any level of amateur baseball and believe that on-base average wins more games, then line drives and ground balls are the route to take.

As a reference point to ensure understanding, hitters should normally

- hit the inside pitch to the pull side (figure 4.1a),
- hit the outside pitch to the opposite side (figure 4.1b), and
- hit the pitch down the middle to the middle of the field (figure 4.1c).

This set of guidelines is an absolute in hitting. Successful hitters rarely deviate from this absolute, although there are exceptions for exceptional hitters.

Unless a hitter is in a guess count (3-1, 2-0), his initial thought is to work from a plan that the next pitch will be in the middle of the plate and high in



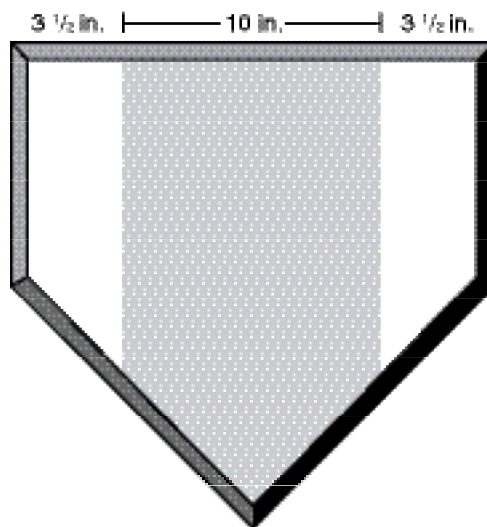
**FIGURE 4.1** Hitters should normally (a) hit the inside pitch to pull side, (b) hit the outside pitch to the opposite side, and (c) hit the pitch down the middle to the middle of the field (right-handed hitter).

the strike zone. His mental plan will be to hit a line drive up the middle. Although plans do not always work out, the hitter should note that with this plan he can more easily make adjustments as the pitch is thrown. If we say that the middle of the plate is 10 inches wide, then we must adjust to around 3 1/2 inches for the outer half and 3 1/2 inches for the inner half of the plate (see figure 4.2). In reality, most hitters, either consciously or unconsciously, work from the premise that the pitch will be more toward the inside. Obviously, in this case greater adjustments to the outside pitch in the strike zone become necessary and are often unsuccessful. In like manner, a hitter will have fewer pop-ups or foul balls if he starts with the expectation that a ball will be pitched up in the zone. Adjusting the swing down is much easier than adjusting the swing up, and the results are normally more productive.

Successful hitting requires aggressiveness. The pitcher starts the action; he throws the first blow. The hitter must be prepared to respond aggressively. Aggressiveness will overcome many flaws in a swing.

The hitter has only a little time to make the decision to swing the bat. He should plan on swinging! Aggressive, good hitters have already made half of that decision. Rather than making two decisions, either to swing or not to swing, the aggressive hitter will make only one decision—not to swing. He is already planning to swing.

Good hitters will primarily use the middle of the field. That is, the balls they hit will travel between the shortstop and second baseman or to the power alleys in the outfield. Although there are exceptions, you will find that high-average hitters do not consistently pull or push. Pitchers have a much easier time beating the pull hitter or push hitter. The tough hitters are those who consistently use the middle of the field.



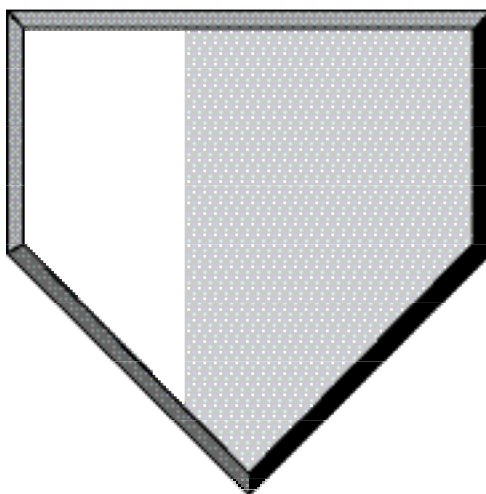
**FIGURE 4.2** In a 0-0 count, look for a pitch in this zone and adjust off this location.



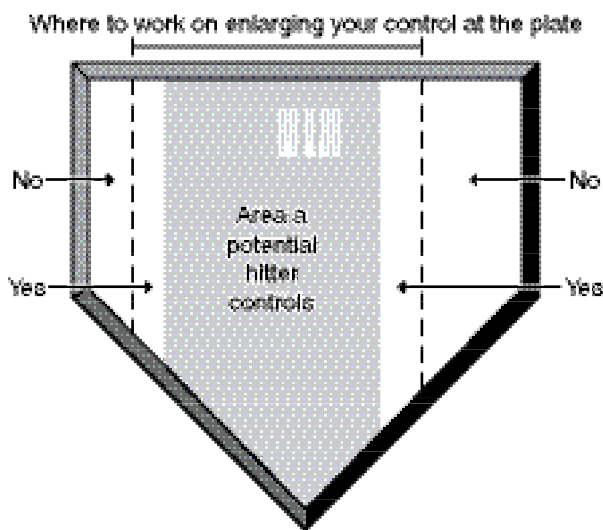
Few hitters, even good hitters, can control both sides of the plate. It is simply too wide an area. Thus hitters must make a choice. Most will pick the inside area to just past the midway point of the plate. Unless the hitter is exceptional, choosing the inside part of the plate is a poor approach. If we chart and study pitchers, particularly in amateur baseball, we will notice that over 70 percent of the pitches in the strike zone are from just inside the midway point of the plate to the outside corner (see figure 4.3). Many more outs are made on the outside half of the plate. When learning to control the width of the plate, a wise choice is to choose the area that includes a little inside the midway point of the plate toward the outside corner.

Note also that when a hitter is trying to increase the area of the plate that he can control, he should work from the area he *can* control toward the more poorly controlled area. If he can control the outside half of the plate and wants to enlarge his skill at controlling more of the plate, he should not go to the inside corner. He should work on increasing his control from the middle of the plate slightly toward the inner half (see figure 4.4). The good hitter will tell you that RBI hits are usually hit to the middle of the field or opposite side because most pitchers, with a runner in scoring position, will work the outer half of the plate with fastballs, curveballs, or sliders. For the pitcher, that's where the outs are. Obviously, we are talking percentage baseball here, but this trend has been around since the game began.

As long as we are discussing percentage baseball, we must also point out that with few exceptions, the fastball is an easier pitch to hit than the breaking pitch. The hitter should make an effort to hit a fastball. Ralph Garr, a former major-league hitter who has held some Atlanta Braves' offensive records, once made a statement that relates to this premise concerning the fastball: "The best way to hit the curveball is not to miss the fastball!" He



**FIGURE 4.3** Seventy percent of strikes are in this zone (right-handed hitter).



**FIGURE 4.4** When a hitter is trying to increase the area of the plate that he can control, he should work from the area he *can* control toward the more poorly controlled area.

made every effort to hit the fastball because he knew he could hit it better than he could the curveball. Early in the count, it is wise to give away both corners of the plate (two to three inches on both sides) and look for a fastball to hit to the middle of the field. Many good hitters make a living doing just that. The hitter can't win every at-bat, but he can put the percentages in his favor.

We've discussed a lot of the thinking that goes on as a player walks from the on-deck circle to the batter's box. Having a plan and visualizing it is critical. But once the pitcher releases the ball, the hitter has no time to think and hit. The hitter must be relaxed and focused enough to let his reflexes take over in the mental picture that he has established. Thinking and having a high-percentage plan is critical, and it must be rehearsed in mental pictures. The hitter must visualize his plan, his swing, and where the ball will go. If he wants success, he must first visualize it.

## How to Work the Count

Simply put, the hitter must make the pitcher throw strikes. A base on balls has a 100 percent on-base average! The batter should not help the pitcher by swinging at balls out of the strike zone. The success ratio for a hitter over a full season is often in direct correlation with the count when he hits the ball. This is proven every year as researchers, coaches, and players survey results in relationship to the count. When the hitter is behind in the count (1-2, 0-2), the batting average will normally be 150 to 200 points lower than

when the hitter is ahead in the count (3-1, 2-0). The critical counts, the 0-0 and 1-1 counts, swing the success-failure rate at a greater range than any other count. In short, swinging at balls out of the strike zone can greatly increase the success ratio for the pitcher.

A hitter may face 12 counts on each at-bat. Some counts increase the hitter's chances, some favor the pitcher, and others are neutral. Table 4.1 presents the three categories of counts. Obviously, the object is to stay out of the pitcher's counts. How does the hitter do that? He knows the strike zone and does not swing at balls that are not strikes. In addition, he stays off solid pitcher's pitches when in hitter's counts.

Working the count correlates heavily with the confidence of the hitter. Good hitters can still hit when behind in the count, although they know that the percentages are not quite as good. Remember, some at-bats belong totally to the pitcher. If he has good stuff and controls the corners of the plate, he will win. Fortunately for the hitter, most pitchers will make mistakes. The hitter must be ready.

## Ways to Advance Runners: Situational Hitting

Few observers doubt that the emphasis placed on situational hitting has diminished over the past 15 or 20 years. With the advent of the higher powered aluminum bat, the designated hitter (DH), and high salary premiums placed on home runs, RBIs, and slugging percentage, the element of the game involving situational hitting has become somewhat lost at most levels of play. For the baseball purist, situational hitting is one of the beauties of the game. That facet of baseball is still there, however, and careful observation will reveal that most championship teams use this important area of the game. Anyone can win blowout ballgames, but the championship teams are crowned because they win a larger percentage of the close games. In many cases they win because they execute situational hitting. Teams that

**TABLE 4.1** Twelve Counts a Hitter May Encounter

| HITTER'S COUNTS | PITCHER'S COUNTS | EVEN COUNTS |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------|
| 1-0             | 0-1              | 0-0         |
| 2-0             | 0-2              | 1-1         |
| 2-1             | 1-2              |             |
| 3-0             | 2-2              |             |
| 3-1             |                  |             |
| 3-2             |                  |             |

advance to the playoffs do so because they have good pitchers who can beat good hitters. If the hitters have the ability to execute situational hitting, they can still win!

Situational hitting simply means that hitters hit to the situation presented on that particular at-bat. With no one on base and no outs, the at-bat is different from the same situation with two outs. With a man on second base and no outs, the at-bat is different from the same situation with one out. In most cases situational hitting does not require as much talent as pure hitting does. Consequently, players can learn situational hitting and use it with some success against dominating pitchers.

Situational hitting brings these other important advantages to the team:

- Less skilled offensive players can contribute to the team's offensive success.
- The player who gives his at-bat to the team concept through situational hitting is identified as a team player.
- Teams that work on situational hitting in practice will learn how to control the bat and the strike zone at a faster rate than those who do not work on this area of hitting.

Baseball includes many distinct situational hitting areas. The following are some of the major situations that the manager or coaches can emphasize to the team.

## **Bunting and Fake Bunting**

The sacrifice bunt, drag bunt, fake bunt slash, fake bunt slash hit-and-run, safety squeeze, and suicide squeeze are all forms of situational hitting because they move base runners.

The sacrifice bunt is the purest way to advance runners. Normally, it also has the highest probability of producing an out on the batter-runner. The drag bunt is a little more risky, but if done well it will increase the chance that the batter-runner, as well as the base runner, will be safe. The fake bunt slash, like the drag bunt, throws in an element of surprise and can catch the defense out of position. This play is not as high a percentage play as the sacrifice bunt, but it can lead to a big inning. The fake bunt slash hit-and-run, which adds a steal attempt by the base runner and a required swing, is even more risky, but it too can lead to a big inning. Use these strategies with no outs and, with the hit-and-run, use a 0-0, 1-0, 1-1, or 2-1 count because the pitcher is more likely to be throwing a strike.

The safety squeeze is executed with a runner on third. The hitter executes this bunt in much the same way he does the sacrifice bunt although he puts more emphasis on bunting away from the pitcher and perhaps more firmly, particularly if the corners (first baseman and third baseman) are play-



Photo courtesy of Texas A&M Sports Information

The drag bunt can be a good way to advance runners and, when done well, will increase the chance of the batter being safe as well.

ing back. The suicide squeeze is an all-or-none play in which the runner on third commits to home plate before the batter bunts the ball. Obviously, the suicide bunt is much more risky, and a manager must pick a count when he can expect a decent pitch to bunt. Normally, both of these bunts are done with one out. (The best times to bunt and hit-and-run are covered in more detail later in this chapter.)

## Man on Second in a Nonforce Situation, No Outs

The two main situational hitting areas are at-bats that occur with a runner at second and no outs and with a runner on third and less than two outs.

With a man on second, no one on first, and no outs, the hitter must step up for the team. His at-bat must move the runner to third or possibly score him. The objective is to hit behind the runner. One school of thought says that the hitter must hit all balls to the right side. Another, and perhaps better, approach is to try to hit the ball to the right of where the runner on second leads off. This larger target gives the hitter a better chance to control a wider area of the strike zone with authority and perhaps drive the runner in for a score. One drawback of hitting to that area is that the ball hit back to the pitcher will not move the runner. The base runner's rule is always to advance to third on a ball hit at him or behind him, except if the ball is hit to the pitcher. Take your chances on the latter school of thought. You'll not only move more runners but also drive in more runs.

In this situation the right-handed hitter must lay off the strike thrown on the inner third of the plate early in the count. He should look for a pitch



Photo courtesy of Texas A&M Sports Information

The left-handed hitter hits the inside pitch to pull side to advance the runner on second base in a non-force situation with no outs.

thrown on the outer two-thirds of the plate. The hitter must be sure to keep his power base (keep his weight within both feet) and let the ball get a little deeper (closer to the plate as opposed to out in front of the plate). He wants to be sure to lead with the knob of the bat so that that he stays on the inside of the ball. The hitter should not completely give away his at-bat. He must be aggressive and drive the pitch. Obviously, the surest way to get the runner to third is by sacrifice bunting, but particularly early in a game, the team should go for more than one run. The hitter must just remember to stay off the inside pitch that requires him to pull the ball.

A left-handed hitter should stay off the pitch in the outer third of the plate early in the count. He is looking for a pitch that he can drive to the middle or right side of the field. He has it easier than the right-handed hitter does.

Teams should work on this area of situational hitting. With less than two outs there are many more ways to score from third than from second.

### **Man on Third, Less Than Two Outs**

This circumstance requires a different kind of at-bat. Remember that RBIs are always better than hits! Get the runner in for the score.

Let's look at the infielders. Are they back, halfway, or in? Regardless of where they are playing, the hitter's point of emphasis should be to stay above the ball in the approach and not overswing. What he must avoid is popping up or striking out.

With the infield back a simple ground ball will almost always score the runner unless it goes back to the pitcher. Many coaches emphasize hitting to the middle of the field because the shortstop and second baseman are too far away from the plate to throw out a runner trying to score, whereas a ground ball hit hard to the corner infielders may get the runner thrown out at the plate trying to score. Although this concern is legitimate, an emphasis on hitting up the middle may be too restrictive for some hitters. Emphasizing line drives or ground balls with good bat control is a good rule. More experienced hitters sometimes like to drive the ball in the air for at least a sacrifice fly or even more. This approach may produce too many pop-ups or short fly balls, so unless the hitter is highly skilled, I do not recommend it.

With the infield playing in or halfway, the hitter should approach the situation the same way. The probability of driving a ball through the infield increases when the infielders play closer to the plate. For that reason, coaches don't like to play in. They don't want to help the opposition create big innings.

This situation does not require a great offensive player. The hitter should stay on top of the ball, control his swing, and put the ball in play. He should stay out of the strikeout count by hitting early in the count and not being as

selective on thrown strikes. A hint for the hitter is that every coach becomes annoyed when a hitter takes a called third strike in this situation. The batter must give in and put the ball in play! The chances for good things to happen are great, even on poorly hit balls.

## **Hit-and-Run**

A well-executed hit-and-run is another play that the baseball purist rates highly. The offense uses the hit-and-run in two situations. The traditional one is with a man on first or men on first and third. The other hit-and-run situation is with men on first and second.

### **Man on First or Men on First and Third**

To execute the hit-and-run, signal the man on first to attempt to steal second. Either the second baseman or shortstop will break to the bag to receive the throw from the catcher. The hitter swings and tries to hit the ball to the unoccupied area, either second or shortstop. Normally, the second baseman will cover second with a right-handed hitter, and the shortstop will cover second with a left-handed hitter. For our purposes, we will assume this to be the case.

The hitter has a clearly defined situational hitting objective. He must address three areas:

1. He should swing at the pitch unless it is in the dirt or so far out of range that he cannot make any contact. In both of these situations, the pitches will be so poorly thrown that the catcher will be unlikely to catch the ball cleanly and throw the runner out. The hitter must remember to swing at the pitch. Even if he misses the ball, the catcher will have a somewhat tougher time throwing the runner out at second.
2. The hitter should hit the ball on the ground. If he cannot hit the pitch to the proper area of the infield, he should at least hit it on the ground. The runner will make it to second and will be in scoring position. A fly ball can create double plays and in most cases will result in an out without advancing the runner to scoring position.
3. He should hit the ball to the designated area. Besides swinging at the ball and hitting it on the ground, he must hit to the unoccupied area of the infield.

To execute the hit-and-run properly, the hitter must not overswing. The priority must be a solid, controlled swing. His power base (keeping his weight within both feet) must remain solidly intact. He must make an extra effort to stay on top of the ball. This requires approaching the ball with the barrel above the hands and the hands higher than the front elbow. He leads



the swing with the knob of the bat toward the ball and allows the ball to get depth (closer to the plate). He must attempt to stay inside the ball on the swing. The idea is to hit the top half and slightly inside the ball. The hitter must stay back and avoid overswinging.

### **Men on First and Second**

Essentially the same execution is desired in this situation although hitting the ground ball to a particular area of the infield receives less emphasis. Remember that the third baseman will now be moving to cover third and another hole is available. The hitter should put the ball on the ground.

## **When to Bunt, Fake Bunt, and Hit-and-Run**

This section covers the best times to put different hitting strategies into action, including the bunt, fake bunt slash, fake bunt slash hit-and-run, hit-and-run, safety squeeze, and suicide squeeze. When contemplating these six strategies, remember that variables weigh in heavily. What is right for one team or one level of play may not be right for another team or a different level of play. We cannot escape this dilemma by saying, "All things being equal, this is the strategy," because all things are never equal; there are simply too many variables. With that stipulation, we will address the various strategies in general terms.

### **Sacrifice Bunt**

Very simply, the manager or coach should sacrifice bunt when he deems the run important to the outcome of the game. If a manager is willing to give up an out and in most cases an inning for the run, it must be important. Variables? If the defense can't handle the bunt, bunt more. If you have an ace on the mound who has a chance to hold the opposition's runs to a minimum, bunt early and often. If the opponents have an ace on the mound, bunt more because your team is less likely to produce multiple hits in an inning. Normally, you should play for the big inning in the early part of the game and use your short game in the latter part of the game. If you have a ball club that hits poorly, bunt more. Have your weaker hitters bunt more than your good hitters. Try to bunt when you have good hitters coming up next in the lineup. Normally, sacrifice bunt only with no outs. With the DH in the lineup, you should not have any dead-out hitters. When behind by two or more runs late in the game, the sacrifice bunt is not a good strategy. The list can go on almost forever. Remember, the general rule is to bunt when one run is important to the outcome of the game.

With men on first and second, a team should elect to bunt only when none are out. In this case the manager normally regards the man on first to

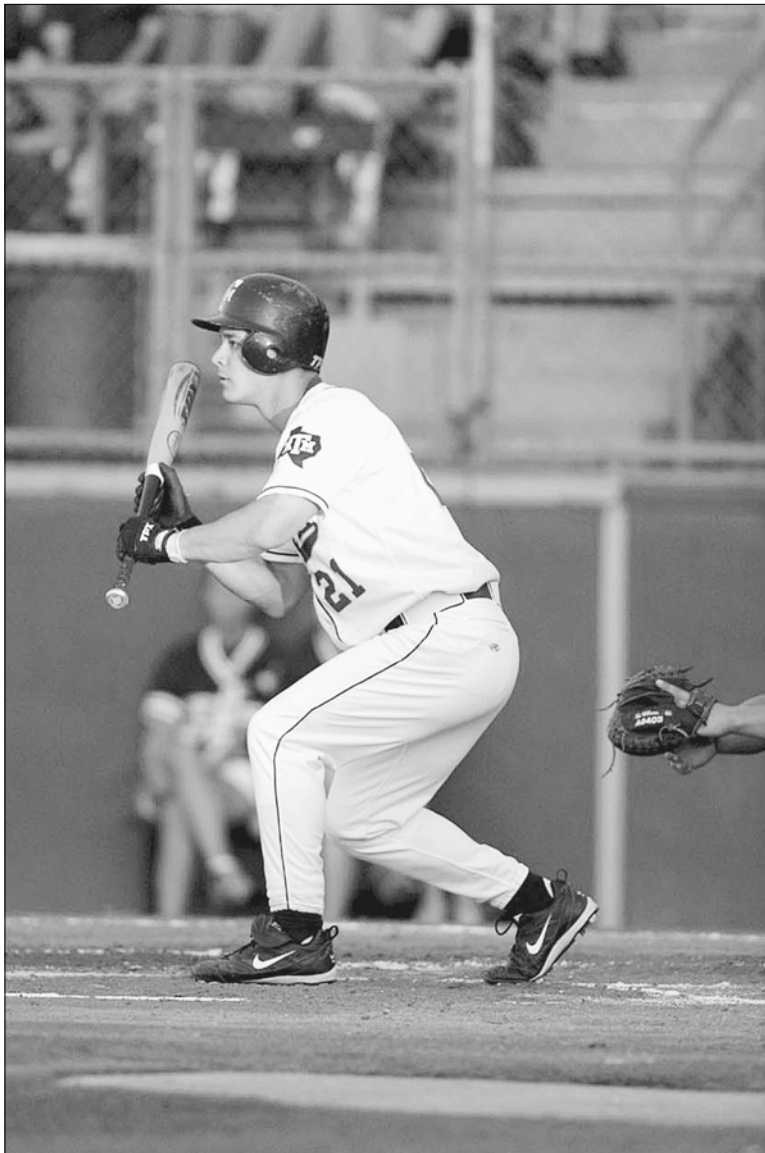


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Sacrifice bunt when it is deemed that the run is important to the outcome of the game.

be a critical run. This strategy will usually keep the offensive team from hitting into the double play and allow the team two outs to drive in the two runs as opposed to three outs to drive in one or possibly two runs. This strategy is usually employed with a weaker hitter at the plate and better hitters coming up next. The batter normally executes the sacrifice bunt on 0-0, 0-1, 1-0, or 1-1 counts. Some coaches let their good hitters swing away until they get a strike.

## **Fake Bunt Slash**

The hitter executes the fake bunt slash by showing a bunting stance to the defense in the hope that they will charge the corners of the infield and perhaps even that the second baseman will start toward first to cover that bag. The hitter then draws back to his hitting stance and proceeds to hit if it is a strike. Obviously, this strategy works best in what the defense perceives to be a bunting situation. The manager will usually use this strategy rather than the sacrifice bunt when he feels that the run is not as critical to the outcome of the game. He may also use it if he feels the defense is playing aggressively for a sacrifice bunt. Remember, a general rule is not to allow the defense to take the sacrifice bunt away from you when you consider the run critical. This play is less likely to move the runner than the sacrifice bunt; however, if it does work, you've moved the runner and increased your chances that the batter-runner will be safe at first. This play can be used earlier in a game than the sacrifice bunt, when the idea of playing for the big inning is still intact. This play, like the sacrifice, should be used with no outs and on 0-0, 1-0, 0-1, or 1-1 counts. This play can discourage the opposition from employing an aggressive bunt defense.

## **Fake Bunt Slash Hit-and-Run**

This strategy follows the same philosophy as the fake bunt slash with the additional feature that the runner will attempt to advance to second base as the pitcher throws to home plate. The hitter must attempt to hit this pitch, preferably on the ground. The gamble, of course, is that he must get a decent ball to hit and not swing and miss. This play can present havoc to a defense if they bite on the fake bunt and the shortstop breaks to cover second on the apparent steal attempt. The play leaves many potential holes in the infield and normally takes away the inning-ending double play. This play can also be used with men on first and second and no outs. Most managers prefer not to use this play with a left-handed hitter with men on first and second because the catcher's throw to third is easier if the hitter misses the ball. Use this play when the count is 0-0, 1-0, 1-1, 2-1.

## **Hit-and-Run**

As with all hitting strategies, the ability of the hitter to execute the relevant skill is a critical variable. This play can be incorporated with no outs or one out. If the batter hits the ball on the ground, the play has an excellent chance of advancing the base runners. Although the hitter is not sacrificing an out to move runners as he does when bunting, the play often results in the hitter making an out, so it is not a wise play with two outs. The manager normally calls this play with one out. The hit-and-run is executed with the

runners attempting a steal and the hitter hitting a ground ball to the vacated area, normally to the side opposite his hitting side. That is, a right-handed hitter normally hits to the second-base area because the second baseman normally covers second on steal attempts when a right-handed hitter is batting. The batter must swing on the pitch if it is catchable by the catcher. He must try to hit the ball on the ground to the vacated spot. If the batter executes the play properly, runners should end up on first and third. Most managers prefer to hit-and-run with right-handed batters because the base runner has a better chance to reach third on balls hit to the right fielder than he would with a left-handed batter hitting balls to left field. In the second situation, the left fielder would have an easier play at third. The hit-and-run is an excellent way to avoid double plays. Most managers will hit-and-run when they feel that the pitcher will throw a strike. Consequently, the strategy works best on 0-0, 1-0, 1-1, and 2-1 counts. The 2-0 count favors the hitter so much that many managers will simply let the hitter hit away. Obviously, the 0-1, 0-2, or 1-2 counts are not good gambles.

The situation with runners on first and third with less than two outs is also a good time to hit-and-run because the play provides a great chance to stay out of the inning-ending double play as well as score a run from third. This play is executed the same way as the play with a man on first except that the runner at third reacts to the hit ball.

Some managers also like to hit-and-run with runners on first and second with a right-handed hitter at the plate. The gamble increases with a left-handed hitter because a swing and miss usually presents an easy throw from the catcher to third. The play does create early movement of coverage on the steal attempts, which opens more areas of the infield. The hitter should simply try to hit the ball on the ground in this play.

## **Safety Squeeze**

The hitter executes the safety squeeze by bunting in a direction away from the pitcher. The runner on third commits to advance to home when he reads that the ball is down and not toward the pitcher. The hitter does not bunt if he does not get a good pitch. This play is normally called with one out, less than two strikes, and the infield, particularly the corner infielders, not playing the in positions. The offense can execute the play with the pitcher in the stretch or windup position.

The offense can also execute the safety squeeze with men on first and third and one out. This play reduces the possibility of an inning-ending double play, scores a run, and moves the runner on first into scoring position. One of the drawbacks is that the runner at third has difficulty getting a good jump on mediocre bunts. The runner has an easy read if the ball is bunted close to the foul lines, but he can run into an out at home plate if the bunted ball rolls toward, but not directly at, the pitcher, and he gets a bad

read or poor jump on the bunted ball. The play also has the potential of placing the hitter in a pitcher's count if he fouls off the first attempt. Many hitters will elect to bunt on any pitch because they are afraid they will lose the element of surprise. This is usually a poor decision. The safety squeeze is normally used to increase a small lead. The runner at third may represent the key run, but most managers will use the suicide bunt in that case. This play is used early in the count with less than two strikes.

### **Suicide Squeeze**

The hitter executes the suicide squeeze by bunting at the pitched ball regardless of where it is. The runner at third base will take a walking lead and break for home plate after the pitcher's arm starts back. This manager uses this play with one out. It works best if the pitcher is working from the windup position and the corner infielders are playing behind the base paths between their respective bases and second base. This all-or-none play is used when the run is deemed critical to the outcome of the game. The offense must disguise the play well. An early show of the play by the batter or runner can result in a pitchout. This play works best with a right-handed hitter because early detection of the play with a resulting pitchout is made away from the runner attempting to score. Obviously, the perfect scenario for the squeeze does not always exist. The infield can be in, and the pitcher can be working from the stretch. Although those conditions reduce the margin for error, the play can still work if the execution is good. The squeeze can also be run in a first-and-third situation. Even if the bunt fails, it prevents the double play and advances the runner to scoring position. The play is normally run on 0-0, 1-0, 1-1, and 2-1 counts.

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How do we score runs without the help of our opponents? In answering that question, our minds immediately travel to a picture of a hitter in the batter's box hitting a frozen rope. In many cases that scenario is the answer to the question, but if we agree with the familiar phrase that "good pitching will beat good hitting," we must realize that the offensive side of baseball must encompass more than just hitting a baseball. Teams that do not have a high team batting average can still score runs and win championships! They are usually highly skilled at executing a hitting plan, can work the count, and can advance runners through situational hitting and proper hitting strategy. Let the game within the game begin!

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# 5

## **Base-Running Strategy**

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Danny Hall

Base-running strategies must be formulated before the game starts. As a coach I want to make sure that I watch the infield and outfield to see how all the position players throw. I watch the outfielders to judge their arm strength, their accuracy, and how quickly they get rid of the ball. An outfielder may have a strong arm, but if he takes all day to throw the ball we will run on him. I also pay close attention to all the infielders, especially the catcher. If the middle infielders do not throw well we know we can run on them on relays and possibly double steals. If the first baseman does not throw well we might employ a double-steal play and run on his arm. I also want to get a release time on the catcher and judge his throwing accuracy. These judgments and observations help me formulate a base-running strategy for the game.

### **Home to First**

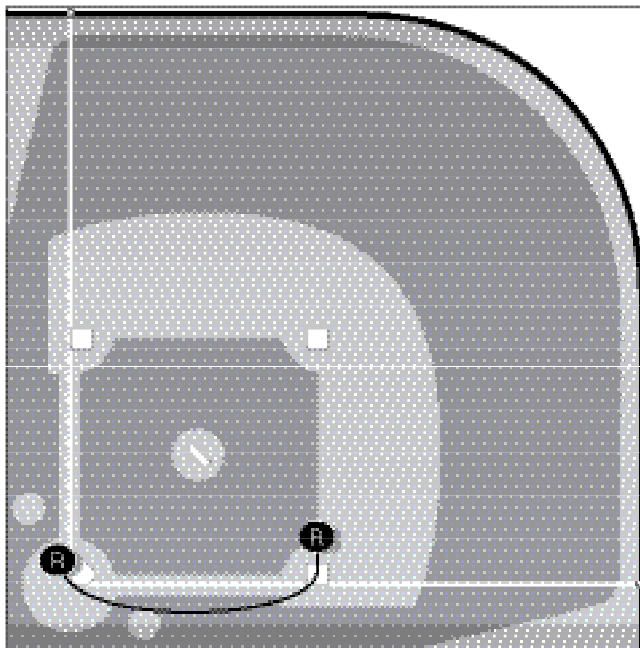
The key to getting a good jump out of the batter's box is taking a good fundamental swing and staying on balance. Once the batter hits the ball he should step with his back foot toward first base. If the ball is a ground ball in the infield, the hitter should only glance at the ball on his third stride out of the box. After this initial look he focuses on the front of the base and tries to step with either foot on the front of the base while leaning with the upper body, much like a sprinter breaking the tape at the finish line. If the hitter

looks at the batted ball while in the box, spends too much time looking at the ball while running down the line, or steps on the backside of the base, his running time will be slower.

After the hitter crosses first base he should break down and look over his right shoulder in case of an errant throw to first base. Doing this will make it easier to advance to second on an error. The farther the hitter runs toward the outfield after crossing the base, the less likely it is that he will be able to advance on an error.

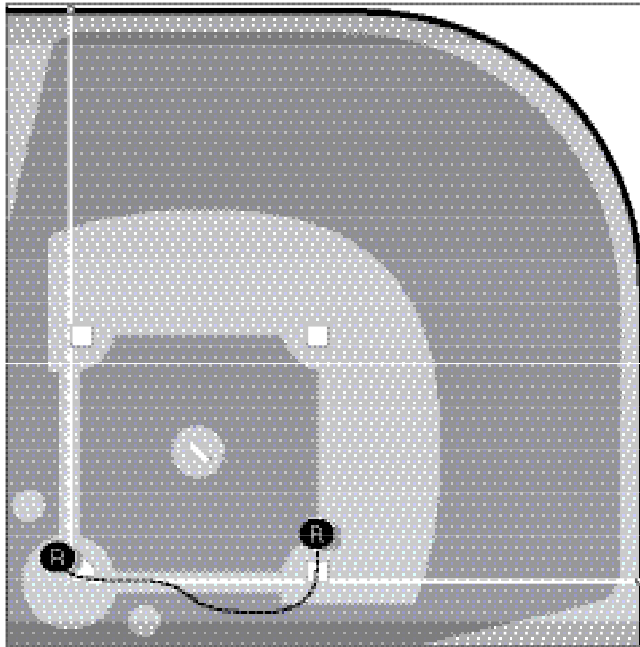
On a line-drive base hit or a fly ball to outfield, the hitter will immediately start to round the base as he leaves the box. His path will look like a semicircle (see figure 5.1). If the hitter hits a ground ball that goes through the infield, he will do a question mark turn at first (see figure 5.2). As he approaches first, he steps on the inside corner of the base and tries to be in a straight line toward second. He should always think that he is going to second unless the outfielder stops him by catching the ball or making a good relay throw. If the outfielder makes a good throw the batter-runner stops and returns to first while keeping his eye on where the ball is. The good base runner always knows where the ball is.

As a rule the turnaround rest will be short if the ball is in right field and longer as the ball moves from center to left field. If the outfielder catches the fly ball, I ask our runners to sprint three more steps after the catch. This



**FIGURE 5.1** On a line-drive base hit or a fly ball to outfield, the hitter will start to round the base immediately out of the batter's box. His path looks like a semicircle.





**FIGURE 5.2** On a ground ball that goes through the infield, the hitter will do a question mark turn at first. He starts to first, then rounds the base.

practice prevents the runner from slowing down in anticipation of the catch. We call it the three-step rule, and I know we advance some extra bases because of it after dropped or missed fly balls.

## Base Runners' Responsibilities and Keys

I ask our players to look to the third-base coach immediately after reaching a base. I like to get the sign to them early so that they can concentrate on their keys for steals. Giving the sign promptly also allows the hitter a chance to see it and then concentrate on executing at the plate. The coaches will remind them of the number of outs and tell them to see the line drive through the infield before breaking for the next base. This simple reminder helps the runner focus.

## First to Third

One of the best and most exciting plays in baseball is the runner going from first to third on a base hit. This is an important play with no outs or one out because if the runner gets to third, he can score without benefit of a base hit. The decision to go or not to go is up to the base runner unless the ball has

been hit behind him down the right-field line. In that case the runner must look at the third-base coach for the sign to advance or stop at second. In all other cases the runner can see the ball and the outfielders to determine his chances of getting to third. Runners should remember several general rules:

- If the outfielder fields the base hit while moving toward third, the runner may not be able to advance.
- If the outfielder fields the ball moving away from third base, the runner can advance.
- The depth of the outfielder and quality of his arm are always determining factors.
- The runner must never make the first or third out of an inning at third base.

## **Leadoffs**

When leading off first base the base runner takes his lead when the pitcher contacts the rubber with his pivot foot. The runner walks off the base with his left foot first and then his right foot as the pitcher looks to the catcher for the sign. He increases his lead by reaching with his right foot toward second while keeping his weight on his left foot. He replaces his right foot with his left until he has a lead that feels safe and comfortable. Ideally, he would have a 12- to 15-foot lead. By measuring his lead as described earlier, the base runner knows exactly how far he is from the base. He never takes his eye off the pitcher and never crosses his feet. His ability to read the move of the pitcher and return to first base dictates the size of his lead.

### **Primary Lead**

The primary lead is the lead that the runner uses to get off the base. He uses caution so that he doesn't get picked off while taking his lead. He always keeps his eyes on the pitcher and measures his lead with his feet so that he knows exactly how far he is from the base. Several factors dictate how far off the base he gets:

- The size of his primary lead is dictated first and foremost by his agility and reaction time. The good base runner who is quick and can react can take a bigger lead than the guy who is slow to react.
- The pitcher's move also dictates the size of his lead. If the pitcher has a quick move to first, he takes a shorter lead. If the pitcher has a slow move to first, his lead is larger.

- If he can react and dive back to the base, he can take a 12- to 15-foot lead. If he has to come back to the base standing up, he must take a shorter lead.

If he returns to first standing up, he should return with his right foot on the inside corner of the base. This technique makes it difficult for the first baseman to retrieve the errant pickoff attempt that is into the field of play. If he dives back to first, he should take a step back to first with his left foot, cross over with his right, and dive for the back corner of the base. The runner should turn his head to the outfield side and look for the errant pickoff attempt.

## Secondary Lead

The base runner takes his secondary lead as the pitcher is making the pitch. The runner executes the secondary lead by shuffling his feet to gain ground

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When leading off, runners should keep their eyes on the pitcher at all times and know the exact distance they are from the base.

toward the next base. He keeps his hips square to home plate and shuffles until the hitter makes contact or the catcher catches the ball. The runner must not stop until the catcher secures the ball. If he observes the catcher dropping to his knees, he keeps shuffling with the idea that he may advance on the ball in the dirt. As a general rule, we want our good base runners breaking for second base on all balls that the catcher attempts to block by going to his knees. It is difficult for the catcher to block and recover the ball in time to throw to second to get the runner out.

*Secondary lead: Return to first.* As the base runner shuffles on his secondary lead and reads a take by the hitter, he stops and returns to first immediately. He must keep his eyes on the catcher at all times. If there is a pickoff attempt, the first-base coach will alert the runner that the first baseman is coming to the base. The good base runner knows where the ball is at all times.

*Secondary lead: Advance to second.* As the base runner shuffles on his secondary lead and reads ground-ball contact, he immediately advances to second base by crossing over his right foot. If the ground ball is caught by an infielder, the base runner tries to beat the throw to second. If the ground ball goes through the infield, the base runner rounds the base and advances to third (figure 5.3) or stays at second base.

*Secondary lead: Line drive.* The general rule of thumb is that the base runner will freeze on all line drives. We tell them to see the line drive through the infield before advancing to second. If they follow this simple rule, they will avoid getting doubled off of first base.

*Secondary lead: Fly ball.* If the base runner reads a fly ball to the outfield, he advances toward second base with caution. If the ball is in right field, he cannot advance too far off of first. The more the ball is into center and left field, the closer the runner advances toward second. If the ball is caught, he returns to first quickly but must make sure to keep his eyes on the ball while returning. By keeping his eyes on the ball, the runner can advance to second on an errant throw by the outfielders. If the fly ball takes the outfielder away from the infield and away from first base, the base runner advances with caution to second base and possibly beyond second if it is a deep fly ball to left center or left field. We tell the runner to keep advancing as long as the outfielder has his back to the infield. Remember that if the base runner advances beyond second, he must retouch the base before returning to first on a caught fly ball. By advancing to second or beyond, the runner increases his chances of scoring on the fly ball that gets over the outfielder's head.

*One way lead.* This lead is used to bait the pitcher into throwing over to first base. The base runner takes a larger lead to entice the pitcher into throwing over. As soon as the pitcher makes a move, the base runner breaks back toward first base. The idea is to see the pitcher's move to first base.

*Lead at second: Advancing to third.* The runner at second will receive help from the base coaches with his lead at second. He should always keep his