



General Guidelines For:

Reading the Batter at the Plate

Getting Batters Out – Part I

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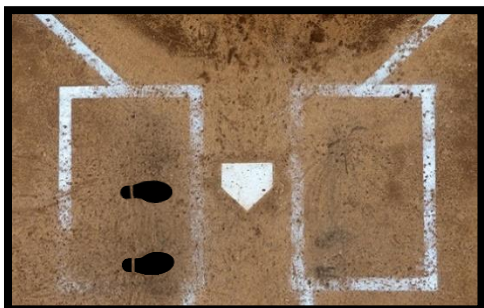
Reading the Batter at the Plate – The Basics

"The hitters tell you what you need to do." - Clayton Kershaw

Before a pitcher ever throws his first pitch, a batter has already given the pitcher (and catcher) all the information they need to get him out. He has already tipped off if he can hit a fastball or a curve ball/off speed. If he has difficulty hitting the inside or outside pitch. If he likes the ball high or low and so on.

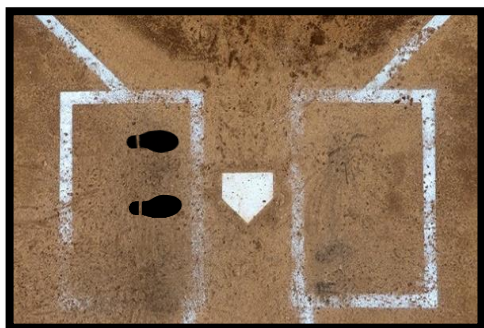
Following are good general guidelines to assess what type of batter a pitcher is facing. These guidelines will cover the majority of batters, but not all.

Batter Set-up: Mid-Deep to Deep Back



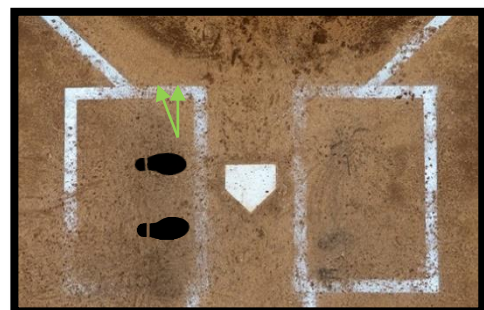
When you see a batter setup Mid-Back to Deep Back, it strongly suggests the batter has confidence that he can hit the curve ball or off-speed pitch but has trouble with the fastball. He's setting up deep because he's attempting to give himself a little extra time to see the ball and a couple extra milliseconds to swing the bat. Fastballs typically are his weakness. Usually means they also have a slower bat speed.

Batter Set-up: Front of Midline to Front of Batter's Box



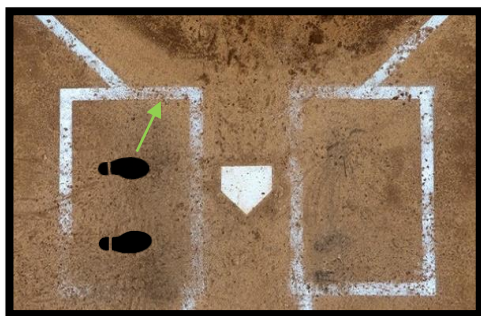
When you see a batter setup in front of the Midline of home plate to Front of the Batter's Box, it strongly suggests the batter has confidence that he can hit the fastball but has trouble with the curve or off speed pitch. He's moving up because he's trying to get the pitch before any possible break. Curve or off speed typically are his weakness. Usually means they also have good bat speed.

Batter Set-up: Crowding the Plate



When you see a batter crowding the plate, it strongly suggests the batter has confidence that he can hit the inside pitch but has trouble with the outside pitch. He's crowding the plate so he can try to "reach" a pitch that is thrown on the outer side of the plate. He's trying to protect against his weakness and outside pitches typically are his weakness. Usually means they have good bat speed. These batters also tend to step straight at the pitcher while a few step slightly away from the plate. Therefore, these batters tend to have the ability to hit to all fields.

Batter Set-up: Off the Plate



When you see a batter off the plate, it strongly suggests the batter has confidence that he can hit the outside pitch but has trouble with the inside pitch. He's off the plate because he doesn't like pitches in on his hands. He backs up because he has trouble getting around on inside pitches. Inside pitches are typically his weakness. Usually means they also have a slightly slower bat speed. These batters also tend to step into the plate. Because of this, these batters normally do not drastically pull the ball much since they routinely step toward the plate.

A Batters Stance

Tall Stance



A batter with a tall stance likes the lower pitches. He stands very tall to really extend his hands down to get to the ball which generates great power when he swings. They "see" the ball better away from them. Also, if you try to pitch him up out over the plate, he is going to be able to extend the same way that he does down. These batters' typically loose power and have difficulty when the ball is middle in or up and in or low and away.

The other issue these batters have is because they are standing tall, when they go to "load" and start to stride getting into an athletic hitting position, their eye level changes - it drops. Since they are bending at the knees, their vision moves down adding to any movement the pitched ball potentially has already.

Mid Stance



A batter with a mid-stance is a little more difficult. They are already in an athletic position so chances are when they load and stride their eye level will remain pretty consistent. Their preferred low hitting zone isn't as low as the tall stance player and isn't as high as the lower/ squat stance. Call them "middle of the road". Here you will need to check their position in the batter's box (up, back, crowding, off). Also make sure you check their swing plane when taking practice swings (technique covered later).

Lower/ Squat Stance



A batter with a lower or squatted stance likes to see the ball as close to eye level as possible. These are the batters you want to throw low. They don't like swinging at pitches "too far" away from eye level.

This doesn't mean any of these types of stances won't make contact if you follow these general guidelines. They will, but not consistently and usually if they do it won't be for power. One rule of thumb that hasn't changed over the years is to stay away from the mid-thigh. That pitch can be hit from any stance.

Batters Swing Plane

Another simple way a batter tells you where he likes a pitch is to watch him take his practice swings. Whether it's when he's on deck or taking a few swings before getting in the batter's box. When batters take practice swings, most are unconsciously practicing their preferred swing path. It's where they are the strongest and the most comfortable swinging. Let the batter take as many practice swings as he wants. He's telling you where he wants to swing so he can hit the ball hard.

All batters have hot and cold zones. Hot zones are where they can consistently make great contact. Their practice swings will go right through their hot zone. A batter's practice swing path is pretty much genetic. They will naturally swing where they are strong. It's the swing that they have grooved and practiced. So, you either want to be above it, below it, in front of it or behind it.

You don't have to have spray charts or a lot of specific data on the batter. Quite frankly, you don't need big data or spray charts. You look right at the batter because he's telling you his weaknesses. Where to pitch him. Look at his practice swings, his stance tall or low, crowding the plate, up in the box, etc.

A Pitchers Mistake

To this day, pitchers are erroneously being taught to throw to their strengths. The correct mindset and for long term success as a pitcher is you need to pitch to a batter's weaknesses. Pitcher's can learn from this quote in a book that's even on West Point's recommended reading list, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

"You can be sure of succeeding in your attacks if you only attack places which are undefended."

Here, Wang Hsi defines "undefended places" as "weak points"; where the enemy is lacking in capacity. We can apply this approach in baseball. Pitchers want to attack where batters are "lacking in capacity" to exploit their "weak points".

Here's an example. I was coaching a team where many players had already committed to play college ball. It was the same with the team we were facing who were also coached by a former college DI baseball head coach.

My ace starting pitcher was getting beat up. In the first two innings the opposing team had accumulated several hard hits and had scored 5 runs. My pitcher was frustrated even though he was actually hitting spots (mostly low and low and away). I allow pitchers and catchers to call a game so they can learn.

After the second inning, I asked if he had noticed anything about the batters. He responded *"Not really."* I then asked him when he went back out to pay attention to the batters and to remember what I had been discussing about how to read batters while in the batter's box and their swings. Notice that just about every batter was standing almost straight up. In addition, their swings were a bit "loopy". They are trying to manipulate a higher launch angle by "looping" their swing. They are

telling him that their strength is hitting the low pitch. I advised both the catcher and pitcher to throw pitches belt high or a bit higher and in. And since he was a RHP, to mix in his change-up against right handed batters since it would tail into the batter. That's their weak point.

His response was *"My school coach said I should keep the ball down."* My next question was *"How is that working for you?"* He smiled and said *"Not well."* I responded *"Good pitchers learn to adjust and you're a good pitcher."* I could see he struggled at first to throw those suggested pitches the next inning. But after a couple of batters, he started spotting those inside pitches. For the next four innings while he was in, the opposing team added just one additional hit. In the first two innings, he threw 43 pitches and allowed 10 hits and 5 runs. By comparison after adjusting, the next four innings he only threw 45 pitches and allowed only 1 hit and no runs.

After the game he said that it was very difficult initially to throw those mid inside pitches and was concerned when I told him to throw more change-ups. Even though his change-up wasn't his strength, it didn't matter because it was the batter's weakness. For years pitchers come up hearing *"You have to keep the ball down"* from every coach - Little League to the majors. He himself had always been coached to throw most pitches low or low and away. I reinforced that those aren't bad pitches. But for it to be a good pitch selection, you have to read the batter first. Is it the right pitch at that time for that individual batter? Pitchers need to pitch more to a batter's weakness versus what the pitcher thinks is his own strength. Although there are times and situations you should.

Not to say these results would happen every time, but I am saying a pitcher must adjust to what each batter is telling him. Good batters and opposing coaches know pitchers are being taught to throw low by default. You cannot be a pitcher who always throws a certain way. Pitchers and catchers must learn to read each individual batter and situation then adjust accordingly if warranted.

While strikeouts are nice, good hitters will still hit. Lose the ego. Part of your pitching arsenal is your defense. The other position players on the field. That's why they are there - so use them. Have batters hit your pitch - not their pitch. Which we will briefly discuss in the next part.

