

## Practice Plan: Hitting Progression



By Cal & Bill Ripken

Hitting is everyone's favorite part of baseball, and it's a major aspect of the game. So it's no surprise that you're probably going to spend half your practice on hitting.

That means it's important to set up a hitting progression that moves your hitters through several different phases of drills. This allows them to work on different aspects of their swing, to get a lot of repetitions, and to prepare themselves to face live pitching - which should be the very last aspect of the hitting portion of your practice.

Drill work is your chance as a coach to talk to your players about what they're doing wrong in their swing and help them use the drills to correct those mistakes. That way, when you get to live pitching, the hitters can let go of all the little tweaks they're thinking about and focus on hitting strikes and driving the ball to the big part of the field.

So, what drills can you have your hitters progress through on their way to facing off against live pitching?

### Soft Toss

The standard soft toss drill in which the tosser pitches from the side and slightly in front of the hitter is an excellent drill for working on a proper grip and developing bat speed.

We are not worried about the lower half of the body in this drill. The only thing that the hitter should be thinking about is a proper, loose grip with the knuckles lined up and attacking the baseball.

A loose grip with the knuckles aligned unlocks the wrists and allows for a quicker, stronger swing. Have the hitter think, "Loose hands, quick bat," and tell him or her to try to swing harder each time.

### Tee Work

All good hitters gather their energy by taking their weight back before going forward: "You have to go back to go forward."

The best way to work on weight shift is by hitting off of a tee, because the ball is just sitting there, motionless.

Have your players exaggerate the weight shift by leaning to the back side and even lifting that front leg up so that they really get a feel for going back before going forward.

They'll adapt in game situations and develop the timing that they need to be successful.

The key to the tee drill is for the hitter to go straight back and straight forward, swinging down to the baseball and watching it all the way until contact is made. Players should try to hit line drives. Upper-cutting should not be permitted.

### **Soft Toss from the Front**

Before any professional hitter steps in for live batting practice he will do this drill.

A coach sits behind an L-screen 10 to 15 feet in front of home plate tossing balls underhand toward the hitter. The batter simply tries to drive the ball to the “big part of the field,” attempting to hit line drives up the middle or in the gaps.

For players who are pulling off the ball, we will toss it toward the outside of the plate and still ask them to “use the big part of the field.” If a player is pulling the ball slightly but hitting hard line drives that is fine, but if a hitter starts pulling weak ground balls the approach needs to be changed.

### **Lob Toss**

This is another great drill that you will see consistently in a big league setting.

The coach sets up similar to soft toss from the front, except maybe a little farther away from home plate.

Pitches are lobbed with an arc similar to slow-pitch softball. The hitter wants to wait as long as possible, “letting the ball get deep,” before trying to drive it up the middle or the opposite way.

This drill is designed to help a batter train his or her body to be patient and not dive forward too soon. Young hitters don’t realize how quick their hands are and how long they can wait before actually swinging.

This drill is great for players who shift their weight forward too soon and hit off of the front foot.

### **One-Arm Drill**

The biggest flaw in young players’ swings is that they tend to have a long, looping swing that travels on a slight upward path and seems to almost come around the baseball. They don’t take the barrel of the bat directly to the ball.

The best way to work on this is by doing the one-arm drill.

Have the hitter remove the top hand from his or her normal game bat and toss balls lightly from in front of home plate. Some players will struggle with this at first, but even the youngest will get the hang of it.

Allow them to choke up or tuck their elbow into the side of the body if necessary. Have them take five or 10 swings with two hands, five or 10 with one hand and then five or 10 with two hands in succession.

You’ll notice an immediate difference. If the players perform this drill consistently and continue to build strength, the direct path they should take to the baseball will become natural in game situations.

### **Short Toss from Behind**

This is a drill for players who don’t follow through, as well as for players who tend to get tied up and struggle to reach full extension.

The coach tosses the ball toward home plate from behind the hitter. The player sees the ball coming out of the corner of his or her eye and then has to really get the bat moving to catch up to it. Extension and follow through are the natural results.

### **Stickball**

This drill is performed with a skinny bat, like the Hand-Eye Bat from Rawlings, and smaller balls – plastic, foam or leather. It is designed to enhance a player's balance.

Have the hitter spread out into a stance that is wider than normal, eliminating the stride. The coach sets up as in traditional soft toss, but this time the tosses will come more rapidly.

Have the hitter swing as hard as possible each time and then reload as quickly as possible. As soon as the hitter reloads, the next toss should come.

Let the hitter dictate the pace, but this drill should happen more rapidly than regular soft toss.

The smaller ball and barrel size will automatically ratchet up the batter's concentration level.

If the player cannot maintain his or her balance so that he or she can reload quickly, either the stance needs to be altered or a lighter bat should be considered.

### **Live Pitching**

Keep in mind that the time to tinker with a player's swing is during drill sessions.

Once kids get into a cage and start facing live pitching, resist the urge to teach and tinker.

We want our young hitters to have uncluttered minds when they come to the plate. All that they should be worried about is seeing the ball and hitting it.

Too much instruction can lead to paralysis by analysis.

When we were struggling at the plate as big leaguers and Dad was coaching at third base, he often would simply yell, "See the ball come up to home plate and hit it."

That was his way of reminding us to clear our minds and just let the skills we have developed take over.

Keep that in mind the next time one of your kids is at the plate with the game on the line!