

# A Comprehensive Approach to Hitting

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Photo by: DeAnne Kobza



Any coach who has been involved with the softball world since the mid- '90's like I have is aware of the major changes that have taken place in the offensive part of the game. Where 5 runs once was considered a high scoring output, now top teams now average 8-10 runs per game. And where it took 14 seasons

to hit our 140<sup>th</sup> HR as a team, we have hit 143 during the past two seasons!

To be successful today, it's important that a program has a comprehensive offensive plan to offer. This article will focus on the aspects of hitting that I consider to be most important. Components of this program have come from other coaches, with UNL Asst. Coach Diane Miller most prominent among them. A comprehensive offensive plan addresses the following four aspects of hitting: Physical, Mentality, Emotional, and Visual. In-season hitting practice should address each of these aspects consistently.

**Physical:** Clearly mechanics are the fundamentals of hitting. Over time, coaches develop an approach that works with their player and programs. There are multiple philosophies that can be adopted. We focus on keeping swings as efficient as possible. This means getting the barrel to path of the ball as quickly as possible and staying on that plane as long as possible. A focus on swinging down and through the ball, as well as hitting the ball from gap to gap, also helps to keep the swing short. Launch angle is an adaptation that has developed in recent years. We don't use that approach, but it is successful for some programs.

To simplify a very complex skill, mechanics are divided into 5 phases: Stance, Load & Stride; Connection, Contact, and Extension. Lately when working with players I am most frequently offering suggestions on the load (keeping the back elbow in line), stride (staying on the power line), connection (starting the swing with the back elbow and knee-hip-shoulder unit, rather than flying out with the front shoulder), and extension (through the ball versus rolling over). We focus on the desired outcome, rather than what needs to be "fixed", and have a wide range of breakdown drills that help players to feel and master what we are encouraging them to do.

**Mental:** Understanding the strategies involved in producing runs for the team helps is important. Practice and skill work can be

used to help players develop what their minds should do, as well as how their bodies should move while swinging.

- Team-first attitude: A focus on producing runs for the team, rather than building up personal statistics, should be each player's priority. It's easiest to be successful when helping the team to win is the goal each AB.
- Situational hitting: Knowing what to do to advance runners is essential. A Quality AB chart helps to reinforce situational hitting and increase possibilities for success, and keeping the chart provides a role for more players.
- Count hitting: Players should understand how the count situation can be used to their advantage at the plate. They should understand what pitches to look for when ahead in the count. Coaches need to decide how they will handle the team approach to two-strike situations. For the most part, we simply expand the "swing zone" slightly to avoid called thirds, but don't change swing mechanics significantly.
- Knowing opponents: Compared with college coaches, the amount of advance scouting and film study high school coaches can do is limited but still important. Through In-game scouting, players and coaches pick up information about pitchers' grips, spins, tendencies, etc. That information can be helpful to some batters, while others prefer to keep their minds clear and simply read and react.

**Emotional:** Being at the plate is a high stakes situation that can involve a wide range of emotions. Players should understand the ways they can stay as calm and positive as possible.

- Routine: It helps players to develop a routine that they use before each pitch, helping them to be focused. Teach abdominal breathing to players and encourage them to use it before each swing as part of their routine.
- The ideal mental state is cool, calm, and focused on the present. Players know what it feels like to be relaxed and confident at bat. Keeping a clear mind and knowing how to stay focused on the task at hand is a skill that can be developed. The following strategies can be used to keep that frame of mind in as many situations as possible.
- Visualization: Players do best when they have a vision of what they want to happen. Picturing success increases the chances of experiencing it. This requires guided practice at first. Consider a team visualization period in practice some days, or have players do this on an individual basis.

- Practice handling frustration: If practice is always routine or easy, players will not learn to adapt. At times during practice, coaches need to put players in situations where they will not succeed. They need to be taught how to adjust to handle frustration in practice in order to do the same in games. Keeping a growth mindset approach, with emotions in check, will help players to see failure in terms of opportunities to get better, and learn how to adapt.

- Practice under pressure: We practice throughout the season to beat the best opponents we will face. This will require facing all kinds of pitchers- high velocity, great change-ups, great rise balls, etc., and present opportunities to make adjustments. Practicing end-game situations allows players to have a mental picture of what they want to do in those situations.

- Reading the spin of a pitch is important. Having players in the batter’s box during some segments of pitching practices can help with this.

**Implementing the plan:** Softball has become almost a year-round activity for those most serious about the sport. Each year can be broken down into phases. The off-season is a great time to develop skills such as swing mechanics, without the pressure of playing in games. Late winter and spring bring club softball. Because most of my players have been playing for months for their club coaches, the fall high school season is a time for adjustment and refinement, rather than making major changes. The suggestions we make are always from the point of view of helping the player to take ownership of her hitting game, rather than a “my way or you won’t play” approach. The reasons for suggestions are explained to players so that adjustments are by consensus rather than commands to be followed.

**Visual:** “Seeing the ball” is a common phrase in softball, and another important area for training. Good vision is an important first step in developing good timing. Players should learn:

- Soft vs. Hard Focus: Learning this concept helps players to be able to read pitchers and pick up the ball more easily.
- Tracking the ball: Use colored and numbered tennis balls, vary the size of the ball, and use devices machines to help players to track the speed and path of the ball. Start the progression by watching pitches, progress to bunt drills, then to full swings.

This comprehensive approach is the backbone of our offensive approach at LSW. It is flexible; adaptations are made every off-season, and throughout the season, as players and the game change. The key has been to get players to understand what we encourage them to do, and to believe this approach will help them and the team to succeed. I would be more than happy to discuss these thoughts and softball in general. Feel free to contact me at [mwatt@lps.org](mailto:mwatt@lps.org).

