

TORRE'S TAKE

with Joe Torre

Hitting a baseball is considered to be one of the most challenging skills to perform in all of sports. Contacting a round ball with a round bat squarely takes a lot of practice and good instruction. And while many experts claim quite accurately that good pitching and solid defense wins games, ultimately a team must hit the ball and score runs to come out on top.

Let's use this space to examine some of the most important habits that enable a young person to hit a baseball correctly. To begin, I think it's important to teach the fundamentals without asking a boy or girl to become a robot. If one of your players develops a unique habit in hitting a baseball (e.g., an open stance) and it does not impact the quality of the swing, think twice before trying to correct something that may not need fixing.

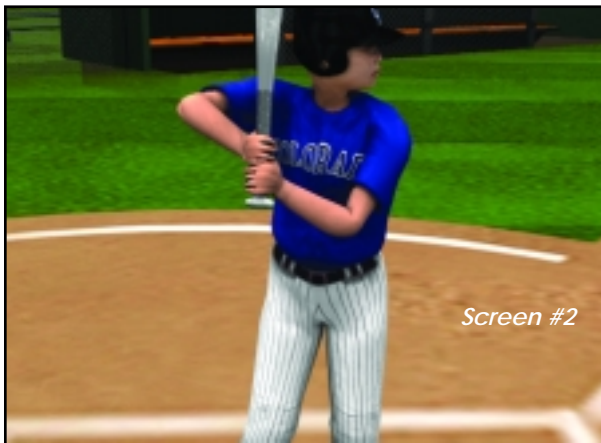
Also, remember that many young people are afraid of getting hit by a baseball. This reaction never has been and never will be a sign of a player's toughness (or lack thereof), so please refrain from making any related comments to the player, especially around the rest of the team. Instead, you might use your role as a coach to address this issue proactively and identify some solutions.

With respect to technique, you should start in a good, balanced athletic position with your knees bent and shoulder-width apart and your hands at the top of the strike zone (see image #1). Hold the bat so that it is comfortable in your hands with your knuckles aligned (see image #2).

Once you have a good, comfortable set up, it's time to react to the pitch. This is where the skill of hitting gets a bit harder. I always like my players to prepare to hit just as the ball is leaving the pitcher's hand. At this point, the hitter should stride toward the pitcher at the same time he brings his hands back and up (see image #3). This movement with your hands will help the hitter keep his weight back until making contact with the ball.



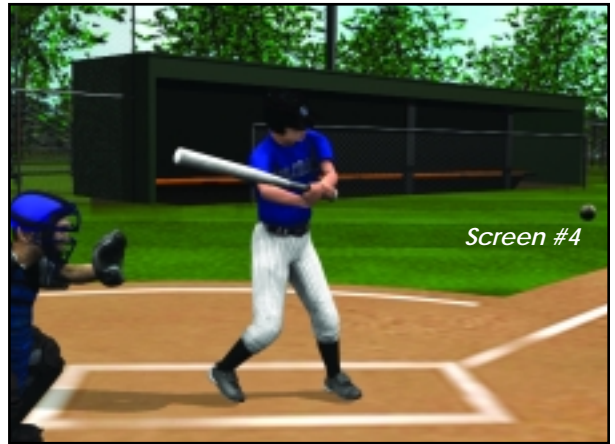
Screen #1



Screen #2



Screen #3



Screen #4



Screen #5

Now it's time to swing and make contact. It's essential for the bat to travel on a downward plane to the baseball (see image #4). This can be a pretty challenging technique to reinforce. Many young players try to lift the ball and make an upper-cut swing in an attempt to make contact. Intuitively, many young players think that the best hit is a long fly for a home run. Instead it's those line drives and sharp grounders that give the player the best chance to make it to first base and further.

As you make contact with the ball, be sure to transfer your weight to the front side of your body, ensuring you get the maximum amount of power of your swing (see image #5). Do your best to keep your head still and on the baseball throughout your entire swing. Finally, make sure to follow through, ending your swing in a balanced, athletic position. After all, your next step needs to be a quick one toward first base.

One error to look for is that many players will "bail out" and turn away from the ball as it nears the plate. If you can help your players overcome the fear of being hit, this problem will be diminished pretty quickly.

Since this skill can be so difficult to master for young players, give your players plenty of repetitions and encouragement. There are few better feelings in baseball than making solid contact and seeing the ball jump off the bat.