The Skills Needed to Successfully Lead-Off an Inning

by Todd Guilliams

Offense is more than a player’s batting average or a team’s ability to hit the long ball. It’s all about run production. It’s a player’s ability to achieve a high-quality at-bat and a team’s ability to create a big inning. High-Scoring Baseball (Human Kinetics, 2013), the most comprehensive resource available about the offensive side of the ball, will change the way you see and play the game. Written by renowned Valdosta State University hitting coach Todd Guilliams—and applicable to all levels of play—the book provides expert advice on the four offensive team goals and the six ways to create offensive pressure that gives every team a chance to be high scorers.

In this exclusive excerpt from Chapter Nine of High-Scoring Baseball, “Get ‘Em On, Get ‘Em Over,” Guilliams looks at the four key elements of successfully leading off an inning.

Leading Off the Inning

Every batter in the lineup has the opportunity to lead off an inning. One of the unique and fascinating elements of the game of baseball is that the leadoff batter in the lineup is guaranteed to lead off only in the first inning of the game. As a result, every batter in the lineup needs to have the skills to increase his odds of getting on base when he is the leadoff hitter. What are those skills?

Strike-Zone Awareness

The first skill is the batter’s ability to swing at strikes and take balls. In his 1970 book The Science of Hitting, Ted Williams wrote that the strike zone:

is approximately the width of seven baseballs, allowing for pitches on “the black” being called strikes.

When a batter starts swinging at pitches just two inches out of that zone, he has increased the pitcher’s target from approximately 4.2 square feet to about 5.8 square feet—an increase of 38%. Allow a pitcher that much of an advantage and you will be a .250 hitter.

(Will, 1990)

That point sounds elementary, but too many hitters swing at balls out of the strike zone and at pitches that are in the strike zone but are not good pitches to hit. Wade Boggs was quoted as saying, “My hitting zone is tighter than the strike zone.” The hitter must realize that a strike is better than an out. Taking a strike is OK because if the hitter swings at a low, knee-high strike early in the count, the best he can do is hit a ground ball. If he were to take that pitch, however, it is only a strike, not an out. The pitcher has his greatest advantage over a hitter when the hitter is overanxious.

Hit-by-Pitch

The second weapon is the hitter’s ability to hold his ground and get hit by a pitch. This issue is controversial in college baseball. The college rule states that a batter does not have to get out of the way of the ball, but he cannot intentionally try to get hit. When the ball is coming at them, some hitters become extremely jumpy, as if the ball had razor blades on it. Batters must learn the proper way to get hit by a pitch, primarily for safety, but also because reaching base by an HBP helps the team and is critical for a high-scoring offense. Pitchers are taught to throw inside, to move hitter’s feet to let the hitter know that the plate belongs to the pitcher. The hitter must be taught how to protect himself and hold his ground in the batter’s box.

Figure 9.1a

Figure 9.1b

Figure 9.1 Safely taking a pitch involves rolling to the inside and dropping the bat at the same time: (a) view from behind the plate; (b) view from the mound.
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This cat-and-mouse game between the hitter and pitcher determines dominance at the plate. The hitter must protect himself by turning his head, front shoulder, and front hip toward the backstop away from the pitcher, rolling to the inside and dropping the bat at the same time (figure 9.1). This action exposes the larger muscles in the upper back and protects the hands and face from injury. The hitter does not need to move his feet or snap his knees back away from the ball coming in. That reaction only helps the pitcher and reduces the batter’s opportunity to reach first base safely on an extreme miss by the pitcher. The ability to take a pitch and avoid injury is a learned skill that must be worked on in practice. Players must be held accountable for holding their ground and turning away from the ball properly every day in practice and games.

Bunt

The third weapon is the ability to bunt for a base hit. This weapon can be used against a pitcher who is really on that day or is a bad matchup for the hitter. His best opportunity to reach base might be to use a drag bunt or push bunt for a base hit. The threat of a bunt will also shorten up the corner infielders and decrease their lateral range, which could allow a weakly hit ball to find its way past one of the corner infielders.

Hit and Take

The last weapon is the hitter’s ability to hit. This method is the most difficult way to reach base because the odds are against the hitter. A good strategy for the leadoff hitter of every inning is to go to the plate sitting on a fastball up in the zone on the outer half of the plate. If he gets that pitch he takes his best swing. If the first pitch is a ball the hitter must look down at the third-base coach, who may or may not give him the take sign for the next pitch. On a one ball, no strike count, the hitter’s on-base percentage in major-league baseball goes up 10%. For example, if a hitter’s on-base percentage is .300 before the first pitch is thrown in an 0-0 count, his on-base percentage jumps from .300 to .400 when the count goes to 1-0. If the batter gets the take sign, the offense is playing the odds trying to get one pitch closer to the all-important walk. The walk is the number two predictor of a big inning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR • Todd Guilliams joined the staff of the Valdosta State University baseball team in 2008 and helped orchestrate one of the top 10 turnarounds in the country in Division II, taking the Blazers to a 36-18-1 record in 2008 and following up with a 43-21 mark in 2009 and a 43-17 record in 2010. As the team’s hitting and catching coach, Guilliams has put together one of the most prolific offenses in Valdosta State history, breaking the school record for batting average in 2010 with a .351 mark. In 2009 the squad led the nation and set a Valdosta State record with 113 home runs, ranking fourth in NCAA Division II history while finishing eighth nationally for the season with 578 runs scored. High-Scoring Baseball is now available in bookstores everywhere, as well as online at www.HumanKinetics.com. It is also available as an enhanced e-book edition with video, compatible with the iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch, NOOK Color, and NOOK Tablet. Look for more from Todd Guilliams in Baseball The Magazine throughout 2013.