ADVANCED HITTING DRILLS
By Bill and Cal Ripken, Jr.
January 31, 2005

With most of the country dealing with cold and icy weather, we thought it would be a good time to devote a good portion of this article to hitting drills. The off-season is the best time of year to work on fundamental drills that assist the development of a good swing. The great thing about many hitting drills is that you don’t need a field or a batting cage. Hitting drills can be done with any type of balls, and many of the drills don’t require too much space. If you have access to a gym, a warehouse, a basement or even a garage as well as some plastic balls you should be all set to hit until your hands bleed (that’s just a figure of speech; please don’t take it literally).

As most of you know, one of our teaching philosophies is to keep things simple. Because of this it seems as though we got a lot of letters asking for more advanced hitting drills and instructional lessons. While this is understandable, and we really enjoy passing on our knowledge of the game to all levels of players and coaches, please keep in mind that baseball is a simple game. Our dad used to break down baseball in its simplest form, calling it “a game played with a ball, a bat and people.” To elaborate a bit, even the most complex aspects of the game can be broken down into simple parts. A double play, for instance, is nothing more than a catch, a throw, a catch, a throw and a catch. Similarly, hitting is a series of simple fundamental movements working in combination to form a complete swing.

We appreciate that coaches are always looking for drills and teachings to make their players better. But we always stress that Derek Jeter catches a ground ball and throws it to first the same way that a 10-year-old should. Likewise, there are certain mechanical checkpoints that pitchers of all ages and levels must get to during their deliveries to throw strikes on a consistent basis, and no matter how crazy some big league stances are, most successful hitters at all levels are very similar mechanically once the ball is delivered and the actual swing has begun. If you are fortunate enough to stop by a big league batting cage before a game you are going to see guys getting in as many repetitions as possible – hitting off tees, doing soft toss and short toss and taking live batting practice. These are the same drills we have our campers do all summer. There really are no gimmicks, tricks or shortcuts. You become a better hitter by training your muscles over and over again to perform in a certain manner during drill work. Then, after enough repetitions, hopefully everything comes together during batting practice and game situations.

Remember, hitting probably is the most difficult skill to master in all of sports. It’s hard enough to hit when a hard ball is flying at you at a high speed and may dip or dart at any time. Don’t make hitting too complicated or technical, especially during games and batting practice. Observe your hitters in those situations and then figure out what drills they need to work on to correct any flaws. Save the teaching for practice and one-on-one situations.

With that said, we know coaches are continually searching for drills that are productive and exciting – drills that will help their players get better and at the same time maintain their interest. We would argue that the vast majority of players at all ages enjoy telling more than anything else. So, there really is no need to get to crazy with hitting drills. Hitting, by nature, is fun and exciting. If you feel like your players aren’t getting enough out of the basic tee and soft toss drills, turn those drills into contests. Develop point-scoring systems for executing the drills correctly. Kids of all ages enjoy competition and tend to focus a little better when they are competing. This type of creativity during drill work can develop an atmosphere where players are learning and getting a lot of reps, which is what hitters need to be successful.

Still, there are a couple of drills that we do with all of our campers that we consider to be more advanced. They are the one-arm drill and the lob toss drill. These drills are great because they are challenging and different. They can be done with younger kids to help them develop a better awareness of their bodies and how to control their bodies to hit effectively. For older players the drills can be used to correct problems and help develop the short, quick swing that we promote.

ONE-ARM DRILL
The guide or bottom hand is very important to developing a swing that is quick and takes the bat head directly to the baseball. Most of us hit with our stronger hand on top, so we naturally are going to generate bat speed and power through the strength of that hand and arm. If the bottom hand is neglected – if it is not developed and trained – the end result can be a very long, looping swing with a lot of holes that pitchers can exploit as they get
older and smarter. The one-arm drill removes the top hand from the bat and allows the hitter to figure out how to get the bat head to the baseball as quickly as possible. The goal is to create a direct path to the baseball using the lead arm.

We have used this drill with 7- and 8-year-olds at our camp with some pretty good success. Coaches often have younger players use a smaller bat than they are accustomed to for this drill to help them realize more success. We would encourage you to make your players use their game bats, however. This should feel a little bit awkward. The younger batters will have to really work to get the bat head to the ball and will start to get their muscles used to the movements necessary to do so. The only way to get the bat to the ball with the lack of strength created by the one-handed grip is to take a direct path toward it. When they put two hands on the bat, the swing naturally will be more compact.

To execute this drill the batter starts with his bottom hand on the knob, in its normal position. The top hand is removed. The tosser is stationed in front of the batter (on a stool or bucket or on one knee) behind a protective screen. Start the drill by tossing the ball softly to the batter, who should take five swings in the traditional manner with two hands on the bat. The top hand is removed for the next five swings before the batter finishes up with five more traditional swings. If the batter is struggling with the one-handed swing after a few tries it is okay to have him tuck the elbow into his side for increased stability. Choking up a little bit is permitted as well after a few tries with a normal grip. Again, the drill is designed to feel awkward and to force the batter to figure out how to get the bat head directly to the baseball. Keep with this five-five-five pattern even if the hitter swings and misses five times during the one-arm phase. As the player gets stronger the sets can be increased to 10 or even 15. This will help the batter continue to develop the strength necessary for a short, quick swing that utilizes the wrists, hands and forearms.

Some players will be able to hit the ball pretty well with one arm, while others will struggle. Either way the hitters should notice a shorter, more compact swing with two hands back on the bat.

Lob Toss

Many hitters have a tendency to shift their weight to the front foot too soon. There are many reasons for this. Sometimes, especially with young hitters, there is a fear that they will not be able to catch up with a good fastball if they don’t start their stride almost as the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand. Other times it seems that hitters who spend a lot of time hitting off of pitching machines fall into the trap of timing their strides as the ball is placed into the machine rather when seeing the ball first and then striding. Since a lot of players spend their winters at local batting cages, this seems to be more of a problem early in the spring when players start hitting outside off of live pitching for the first time. Hitters who try to time pitching machines often tend to get out in front too soon when facing live pitching, which means that most of their energy is spent by the time the ball crosses the plate. This leads to a swing where all of the bat speed is generated by the hands without any assistance from the trunk, hips or lower body.

To be successful, hitters need to develop the ability to keep their weight back as long as possible and trust that their hands will be quick enough to catch up with a fastball. This allows them to determine what type of pitch is coming and adjust accordingly so that the swing all comes together at the right time. The lob toss drill can help players be more patient at the plate, teaching them to let the ball get as deep as possible before exploding forward and driving it.

To execute this drill the hitter assumes a normal stance in the batter’s box. The tosser sets up with a bucket of balls (any type of balls is fine) about 15 feet in front of home plate, sitting on a chair or bucket behind a protective screen. Each toss should be thrown with an arc, much like slow-pitch softball.

The batter must wait as long as possible before striding forward and hitting the ball. This drill can be done until the batter is tired if desired. We would suggest letting each hitter take at least 10 swings to really get the feel for waiting as long as possible before exploding. Almost any player should be able to pull these pitches, so we recommend having the hitter let the ball travel or get deep before exploding forward and trying to hit a line drive up the middle or to the right side. Most hitters will be way out in front on the first several tosses, which will most likely cause them to roll over and pull ground balls. This provides the coach with an opportunity to point out to the batter how it feels to be out in front too early and what the end result is when the hitter does not wait long enough before shifting his weight forward.