

The Psychology of the Count

By Paul Workman

The game of fastpitch, like most other sports, is one of athletic ability and psychological prowess. Although most would agree that the better physically conditioned players generally have the greater advantage, it's important not to underestimate the power of the head game.

The following discussion assumes that the pitcher is a quality pitcher with various pitches and the ability to place the ball in location, and the batter is a successful batter. With that in mind, here are common hitting and pitching scenarios and reactions to each.

Remember, the player with the greater psychological edge has the advantage.

0 Balls & - 0 Strikes - NO COUNT

0-0 FROM THE BATTER'S POINT OF VIEW:

On the first pitch, the pitcher generally wants to throw a strike. To get ahead of the batter in the count is what every pitcher strives for and likewise, to get ahead of the pitcher is what you as the batter wants. We all feel better when the first pitch is a ball; it gives us that sense of confidence and advantage that we think makes us hit better. However, more often than not the first pitch will be a strike.

Pitchers do not want to throw a meatball, but they so want it close enough to make you swing or have the umpire call a strike. Therefore, expect a strike. Watch the corners but also watch for the mistaken down-the-middle fat pitch. Be prepared to swing. Do not take the first pitch just so you can see the pitcher, especially after your first at bat. Chances are, if you do take the first pitch you will be behind in the count. Watch the zone carefully; expect a curve or a drop, but probably not a rise since they have a tendency to rise out of the strike zone. Do not expect a change-up on the first pitch.

0-0 FROM THE PITCHER'S POINT OF VIEW:

The first priority is to get ahead in the count. If you are a confident pitcher try to throw a pitch on a corner, hoping either for a good call from the umpire or the batter swinging and missing. Most of the time the batter takes the first pitch, so do not waste this pitch-it should be a strike. Depending on the game situation and the batter, I've been known to even call a hard straight fast ball right down the middle just to be sure and it needs to be heat!

0 balls & 1 strike count

0-1 BATTER:

You're behind in the count now, but not too far! Do not panic. Do not expect a strike. The good pitcher will now try to throw a ball that is clearly not a strike hoping to get you to chase a bad pitch. If you know the pitcher, expect her best pitch whether it is a curve, drop, rise, or even a change-up. Watch the zone carefully! But remember: Some pitchers may come back with the same pitch that got them the first strike, especially if you took a called first strike. A pitcher with heat may throw fast balls until someone hits her.

0-1 PITCHER:

If the batter took the first strike as a called strike and looks confused, you may want to come back with another pitch like the first. With a confident batter I will send a different pitch but it will not be a strike. You want the batter to chase that bad pitch so you can go up 0-2. Come with your best pitch on this count.

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0 balls & 2 strikes count

0-2 BATTER:

Even more than before you are behind in the count. You are now in a serious situation with the pitcher definitely having the advantage. You must be extremely careful about the next pitch. It probably will not be a strike unless you have watched two fast balls go by. A pitcher will be careful not to serve up a fat pitch under these circumstances. A change-up is possible, maybe even probable especially if the pitcher normally throws heat. Another possibility is that pitchers will use this count to try out new pitches. I suggest that you watch only for the straight fast ball down the middle, but expect every thing else.

0-2 PITCHER:

The pitcher is in the best position of all. You have three balls to get the batter to chase a bad one, so do not throw a strike. The batter will probably be expecting a change-up, so you may go with a rise or a drop and it may be significantly out of the zone. If they do get the bat on it, it should be a pop-up or grounder-probably high and outside.

1 ball & 1 strike count

1-1 BATTER:

Even count low-very hard to predict. There is probably a slight advantage to the pitcher. The pitcher will risk another ball trying to get you to chase a bad pitch and you should be willing to risk another strike to avoid going after that bad pitch. Watch the zone carefully but do not expect a great pitch. I would expect a pitch with some movement with this count.

1-1 PITCHER:

Even count low. This pitch may be any number of pitches depending on your ability. You should probably try to be close to a strike but on the comers; try to get the batter to chase it. You do have the advantage because you have more balls to give up than the batter has strikes. You can afford to waste a pitch if necessary to keep it out of the strike zone.

2 balls & 1 strike count

2-1 BATTER:

This, by some measure, is also an even count in that both the pitcher and the batter have one pitch to sacrifice before being in real trouble. However, the advantage goes to the batter. I don't think the pitcher will want to go 3-1 so I believe in most cases you will see a strike (or very close to a strike). Pitchers will throw perhaps their best pitch. Be prepared to go after that good pitch in your location.

2-1 PITCHER:

You are a little behind now and you must get a pitch across that is seen as a strike to both the batter and the umpire. You may risk going 3-1 but only if the game situation warrants it. To be safe, you should throw a strike or a good pitch with movement to get the batter to chase it and go 2-2.

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2 balls & 2 strikes count

2-2 BATTER:

Even count high-hard to predict. I think the pitcher has the advantage in this situation. The pitcher is willing to accept another ball trying to get you to swing at a bad pitch. Chances are the pitch will not be a strike, certainly not a straight fast ball down the middle. The pitcher will be shooting for the comers. Watch the zone carefully and be prepared for anything, even a change-up.

2-2 PITCHER:

Even count high. The pitcher has the advantage because you have a ball to give up whereas the batter cannot afford to watch anymore strikes go by. The pitch should be close to a strike but should probably be outside the zone. Under some circumstances you may want to throw a change-up here or perhaps a good rise ball.

1 ball & 2 strikes count

1-2 BATTER:

The pitcher is in the best position of all. Unlike when the count is 0-2 and the likelihood of a strike is low, with this count the pitcher may even come with a straight fast ball hoping to catch you off guard. I think most pitchers want to close the book on this count, so look for a strike on their best pitch. This count is the hardest to predict and requires the greatest concentration on the zone.

1-2 PITCHER:

This is my favorite count for a pitcher. You have the most flexibility and the batter does not have any idea what's coming. This ball will not be a strike but should look like it. Rise, drop, or curve is the best pitch here. Throw a fast ball if the batter watched the first two go by, or even a change-up if your fast ball is working well.

1 ball & 0 strikes count

1-0 BATTER:

A good confident pitcher will not panic with this count. Do not, therefore, necessarily expect a fast pitch. The pitcher may even be willing to accept another ball in the hopes of getting you to chase a bad pitch. This would be a good time for a curve drop or straight drop depending on the pitcher's pitching ability. Concentrate on getting that mistaken fat pitch. A less confident pitcher may indeed serve that fat pitch to try to even the count. Know the pitcher!

1-0 PITCHER:

Although you are behind in the count, do not give up a fat pitch. Go with your best pitch here and try to catch the comer. It would be better to be down 2-0 than to serve the meatball for a homer. Nothing fancy though, just a good pitch with movement.

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2 balls & 0 strikes count

2-0 BATTER:

This is the batter's best situation. The pitcher does not want to go 3&0 so she is likely to throw a strike, coming with her best pitch. She will definitely tighten the location close enough to a strike to avoid uncertainty in the umpire's mind. Expect a pitch that is a strike or very nearly a strike. Normally, you would not see a change-up or other exotic pitch in this situation because the pitcher wants to be back in control of the situation. Look for this to be a good pitch and one that is hittable. Be aggressive on this count.

2-0 PITCHER:

You now must throw a strike. You definitely do not want to go 3-0, so you must have the batter and the umpire seeing strike. Probably a hard straight fast ball would be the best pitch to throw, or maybe a slight rise ball, but only one that is well placed.

3 balls & 0 strikes count

3-0 BATTER:

The pitcher is in trouble. The next pitch will be to get out of trouble, and will most likely be a straight fast ball down the middle to obtain that first strike. The pitcher will be expecting you to take the pitch; she does not want to chance a bad call from the umpire and walk you, especially if you are the leadoff batter. Do not necessarily take this pitch. If she serves up a fat pitch and you like the location, go for it. Decide ahead of time where your best pitch is and determine that it is the only location at which you will swing at the ball. Take the rest. Don't ground out, fly out, or worse, foul out on a strike that is not in your specific location. This takes discipline and control. Expect this pitch to be your pitch and be prepared to go after it, but again don't go after it if it is not in your location. You are better off taking the strike and hoping for a better pitch on.

3-0 PITCHER:

You are in trouble now. Whether the umpire is not calling the comers, or you can't hit the zone, doesn't matter. You must now throw a good pitch. Even though you know the batter is looking for a strike, in most cases they will take the pitch and give you a free strike. Throw a hard fast ball down the middle.

3 balls & 1 strike count

3-1 BATTER:

A confident pitcher knows she must throw a good enough pitch to make you go after it but it may not necessarily be a strike, especially if you are not the lead-off batter, there are no runners on, two outs, and the pitcher's team is ahead in the game. I would expect a close pitch and I would look for my location and risk the count going full rather than go after a ball.

3-1 PITCHER:

Still somewhat in trouble, you must continue to throw strikes. Certainly they need to look like strikes. If one of your pitches is working well and the game situation warrants it, you may want to throw a pitch with movement.

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3 balls & 2 strikes count

3-2 BATTER:

This, like the even count high, is hard to predict. However, the batter has the advantage. Certainly, the pitcher wants you to go after whatever pitch she throws but does not want to serve up the fat pitch. It will almost have to be a strike. This again is tempered by the game situation and your own at-bat situation. For example, if your first two strikes were on high fast balls, expect that you may see a rise. If you have a tendency to go after high balls, be especially careful. Also, you must avoid compensation. The pitcher may throw a drop thinking you will over compensate and go after a low pitch.

3-2 PITCHER:

This count is the ultimate test of wills. You must throw what appears to be a strike and the batter must swing or risk going down looking. This must be your best pitch and the placement must be good.

The psychology of the count is a complex study in people, situations, strategy, and confidence, both in you as the batter, and the pitcher. Every at-bat is different and the rules above do not apply in all cases. The important thing is that, as a batter, you study the situation and the pitcher and make decisions based on that study. Decide before you step into the box what the pitcher will throw and watch for that pitch. You must know how good the pitcher is, what her best pitch is, what the situation is, how the umpire is calling game strikes, who is on base, how many outs there are, and what the score is. Do not step into the box wondering what the pitcher will pitch! At least understand the situation and determine to your best ability what to expect.

Notice that throughout this discussion I have stated that you must watch the zone. The ability to determine in that split second whether a pitch is in or out of the zone is very hard to obtain. Do not be discouraged if it takes a while for you to get it or if you have periods of slump. Even pro baseball players who practice four to six hours a day and play 160 games a season still have trouble determining the zone. Sometimes you will be right, sometimes you will be wrong. The secret is to be right most of the time.

Try this exercise; While sitting alone, visualize the ball being released by the pitcher and coming toward you. Visualize balls in the zone as well as balls outside of the zone. Try to add drops, curves, rises, change-ups, and fast balls. Focus on release and rotation. Then, when hitting in practice, try to put the exercise into your mind as you hit.

If you do not already know what your best pitch location is, determine it! Begin to discipline yourself to look for that pitch. Make your own notes about which pitches you get the best hits on, because these are the ones you see the best. You have very little time to make a hitting decision while in the box. From the release to the plate is about one half second. You must, therefore, know ahead of time what pitch you like and have your mind and body trained to look for that pitch.

Remember, as pitcher your main goal is to fool the batter to give her nothing decent at which to swing, all the while getting strikes called. Short of that you want her to hit pop-ups or grounders. To do this you must be sure that the batter is off guard as much as possible. Try to get ahead in the count so that you can keep her guessing about what's coming next.

Study the opponents between innings. Know and understand who the good hitters are and throw your pitches accordingly. If you throw a high and inside to someone and they kill it, then the next time you will want to avoid that location.

The head game is the best game fastpitch has to offer. Learn it and have more fun.