

Strategy Of The On-Deck Circle

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Just about now, many coaches (the good ones) begin to think about how they will prepare their players to be effective hitters. We spent time with our players in weight training, having them swing weighted bats and taking hours of batting practice in the batting cage. We impressed upon them the importance of proper balance, weight shift, mental preparation, and concentration. Yet with all this concern, many coaches fail to include use of the on-deck circle as a place to make those final preparations for one of the most difficult activities in all sports, hitting. The purpose of this article is to review a set of activities one could use to improve the chances of success at the plate and taking advantage of the on deck circle is one of them.

It is not accidental that the on-deck circle is physically separated from the dugout or team area by at least 25 feet. The separation is important for both safety and as a signal that this is a place where something special takes place.

One of the most obvious uses of the on-deck circle is to make "PHYSICAL PREPARATIONS" to bat. Players may swing two regulation bats or a special on deck bat to stretch and tone the muscles which are needed for the act of hitting. This should be the first action taken by players in the on-deck circle.

While the physical preparations are taking place, the up-coming hitter should mentally review the "GAME SITUATION". She should know the inning, the number of outs, the location and base running speed of each of the base runners, if the pitcher has had trouble finding the plate or has consistently found the strike zone, and what has transpired during the inning.

The likely offensive strategy should have been reviewed prior to the game and the on-deck hitter should understand her role in that strategy. When the coach calls for the play dictated by the game situation, it will not come as a surprise and the hitter should be able to react to the call more positively than if she were surprised by it.

One of the most important preparatory actions for hitters is to WATCH THE PITCHER. The Good Lord must have been a bitter because she made most pitchers very predictable. As a hitter, your advantage increases if you can correctly predict the pitch and its location. The on-deck hitter should review the performance of the pitcher to this point in the game. What seems to be the best pitch? Can she throw the riser - or drop - for strikes? Does she seem to have confidence in these pitches? What does she throw when she is ahead in the count? When she is behind? Does she have an off-speed pitch? When does she throw it? Does she only throw it with an 0-2 or 1-2 count? Will she throw it with runners on? What I am going to do with it should she throw it to me? What does she throw when she really needs a strike or an out?

If this is not the first time at bat, the on-deck hitter should mentally "REVIEW WHAT HAPPENED IN PREVIOUS AT BATS". Was I successful? What kind of pitch did I hit? Where was it located (high/low, inside/outside)? What was the situation then? Is it the same now? If unsuccessful, what can I do to correct any action which may have led to making an out?

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In addition to watching the pitcher to review her tendencies in various situations, the on-deck hitter needs to focus her attention on the pitcher in order to "REGAIN TIMING CUES". Hitting is a reaction activity. In fastpitch softball, the hitter does not have the luxury of waiting to see the ball before she begins her hitting sequence. At 60 MPH, it takes less than 0.4 seconds for the ball to travel from the pitcher's hand to the home plate. Thus, the effective hitter watches the pitcher's delivery to find the precise moment for her to begin the set of activities ending in an effective swing and a well-hit ball. As practice swings are taken, the on-deck hitter should time the pitcher's delivery just as she would in the batter's box. Once she finds the right moment to begin her hitting sequence, the pitcher's position at that moment must be remembered and used to start the set of hitting activities once in the batter's box.

All too often, batters go to the plate with no intention in mind. This is foolish and usually results in a wasted bat or failure to accomplish the task called for by the situation. Those who fail to plan are easy to spot. They flail away at anything close to the plate and usually wind up hitting the pitch the pitcher wants them to hit rather than the one they should hit.

The effective hitter sets a GOAL FOR EACH AT BAT. Setting and understanding the aim of each and every at bat makes success more likely. If the situation calls for a sacrifice fly, the well-prepared batter looks for a pitch she can drive and produce a long hit to drive in the run. She does not chase the low pitch, even if it is a strike. When she gets that good pitch high in the strike zone, she hits it. If the situation calls for moving a runner from second to third base, then she should look for a pitch which can be bunted or hit to the light side so the runner can move over. Hitting the ball to the left side of the infield or a short fly to the outfield is not what her team needs in that situation.

When all the above have been completed, the on-deck hitter should end her preparation by taking a few moments to relax and VISUALIZE SUCCESS at the plate. Developing a mental picture of what she will try to do in few moments makes it easier for the mind and body to react to this now familiar situation. All the energies the on deck hitter can find should be focused on the impending task. Many hitters call this moving into the "COCOON OF CONCENTRATION" . They try to bring all the preparation into a single focused effort to be successful at the plate. Once one understands what is to be accomplished, the solid preparation and intense concentration will maximize the chances of success at the plate.

No discussion of the on-deck circle would be complete without mentioning the responsibility of the on deck hitter for plays at the plate. In those situations when a play at the plate may occur, the on-deck hitter must be alert to play a role of assisting her team and teammates. The on-deck hitter is the person closest to the plate when a play may be made there. She needs to tell the runner what is happening and whether she should slide or not. This information should come sufficiently early so the runner can make the appropriate adjustments. Failing to assist in this way may cause injury to someone (sliding when it is unnecessary) or may cost the team a run should a runner fail to slide when she should have.