

Strike Zone Management

By Mike Roberts

Strike Zone Management Part I

Being able to pitch the ball with good velocity is certainly important, and being able to throw breaking pitches can also help take a pitcher to the next level, but to compete at the highest level, a pitcher, her catcher and the pitching coach must understand the importance of managing the strike zone during a game.

First, my unscientific research leads me to believe all batters have a built-in radar system that allows a batter to track the path of a pitched ball, the speed of the pitch and the time between pitches. If a pitcher throws a pitch to the same location at the same speed twice in a row, most batters will have zeroed in on the pitch. Therefore, trying to come back to that exact pitch a third straight time will usually benefit the batter.

We must also understand three strike zones actually exist in any game. The pitcher would like to pitch on the corners, get strikes out of the zone. This is the pitcher's strike zone. The batter would like pitches down the middle or in a favorite sweet spot where she can drive the ball. This is the batter's strike zone. The umpire acts as an arbiter who forces the pitcher to give a bit more to the batter and the batter to offer at more borderline pitches. This is the umpire's strike zone.

Add to this the fact that every pitcher is a bit different, as is every batter's preference for pitch location. But many coaches don't understand that each umpire's zone is a bit different as well. Obviously there is a rule book strike zone, but no umpire actually sees the zone this way. First of all, most umpires will force the pitcher to come down a bit lower than the letters for the high strike, but will compensate by giving a wider zone on the comers.

Beyond this, the umpire's positioning behind the catcher will greatly affect his or her impression of what is a strike. A small catcher allows the ump to stay low and call the low strike. A catcher who allows the ump a piece of the slot will get a call on the inside corner. The umpire who positions tighter to the slot and catcher will call more outside corners. Positioning of the umpire is many times determined by the catcher, and a shift of an inch or two also shifts the strike zone. And the catcher who shades her glove pocket toward the zone as she receives the ball will buy more corner calls than a catcher who allows the ball to move her glove aimlessly.

Understanding this, what does the pitcher do to try to manage the zone, and how can the batter take advantage of certain situations? I try to always enter a game as a coach with a pitching plan. If we have played a team before, or at least scouted the team, we will have a book on each hitter. This will tell us the batter's power location as well as weaknesses. It will tell us where to position our defenses. I will try to identify a preferred pitching pattern for each batter.

I will also want to identify the batter or batters who I won't let beat me. This means when the opposition has a runner in scoring position, who do I not want to pitch to? If the good hitter becomes to bat with a big run sitting at third with two out, I will pitch around her, either by intentionally walking her or pitching to her weaknesses while not worrying about a walk. This is what we call going to the pitcher's zone. A weaker hitter may indeed beat us, but our chances are much better against a weaker hitter.

Statistics bear out that more hits come on 2-0 counts than any other. The second highest number comes on 3-1 counts. Too many coaches give the take sign on these great hitting counts. They are hitter's counts

Strike Zone Management

By Mike Roberts

simply because the pitcher will normally want to get in the zone on the next pitch. This would be called going to the batter's zone. If hitters understand this, they can learn to "box" pitches; i.e., look for their favorite pitch in their perfect location. In these situations, the batter will only go after a pitch hurled at an expected speed within this small box. The best box counts are 0-0, 2-0, and 3-1.

Conversely, pitchers will normally pitch to the pitcher's zone on 0-2, 1-2, 2-2, and 0-1 counts. This means the batter must become more defensive, protecting the zone. To do this means most batters will choke up a bit and get tighter to the plate, looking for the outside corner and reacting in. The batter is in the "hack" mode, looking to get a pitcher's "mistake" in the zone, but prepared to hack at anything close, fouling off the borderline pitches. Obviously this takes away from the batter's power, allowing the defense to shift a step or two to compensate.

There are certain batters you may not want protecting. These are your power hitters, who don't have great speed. Unless they drive the ball, they aren't going to get on base because they are too slow to beat out anything in the infield. Pitchers need to identify these batters and adjust the pitch selection accordingly.

Strike Zone Management Part II

Once we have an understanding of the three strike zones and the importance of changing pitches, we need to prepare a game plan. This is much easier if you have played a team before, but what about those teams or hitters you haven't faced.

I believe coaches have two basic approaches to making a batting order, either the traditional 1-8 method, or the less used 1-4 repeat approach.

In the 1-8 approach;

The leadoff hitter ideally is one with a good strike zone awareness that allows her to take the borderline pitches. She has good speed, probably bunts very well and gets on base a lot. Pure hitting ability is not essential, but certainly would mold this player into a perfect lead-off hitter.

The number two hitter may be a lefty, protecting the runner on first on the steal. She will be a great bunter and have decent speed as well; ideally, she will also be a line-drive hitter, a good hit and run, opposite field hitter.

The number three hitter should be the best hitter on the team. She comes through in the clutch and hits for average. She will display some power, but is more concerned with consistency.

The clean-up hitter is an RBI powerhouse who can still hit for average, but tends to drive the ball a bit more.

The number five hitter is also a power person, but does not have an average as four.

The number six hitter is similar to the two hitter, maybe not quite as fast or quite as good a bunter, but a solid hitter who likes line drives, but does not necessarily hit to the opposite field.

Strike Zone Management

By Mike Roberts

The number seven spot is occupied by a decent average hitter, but not as good as three. She will have average speed and power.

The number eight hitter should be able to bunt and hit for some power, but will probably be inconsistent. She should be willing to take a pitch and work hard to get nine to bat to clear the order.

The number nine hitter is your next best number one. You want speed here as well as a good bunter. She will not be as proficient as one, but will be sort of a one in training.

The 1-4 repeat method

Uses the similar one and two qualities as well as three and four, but at five, we start over. The nine in the I-8 would be a five in the 1-4. Six is similar, but we look for more opposite field hitting ability, maybe a lefty. Seven is the same, but eight is more a power spot in this order, your nine will be a weak but quick hitter, a slapper in training perhaps.

Obviously, the coach without great hitters but good speed may want to use the 1-4 method. Most line-ups I see are variations of on these two. We recognize each line-up makes adjustments for the available talent, but this might give us some idea of how to approach a team we don't have much information on.

Another approach I used in high school was the football classification approach. Normally, most places have more football classification than softball, but even if yours doesn't this approach will work. I broke-down the schools into four classifications according to pupil size. The smallest size usually had 1-2 good hitters, the next highest 2-3, then 3-4, then 4-5. If a team was having a banner year, you can add another good hitter. If the coach is making a typical lineup getting the better hitters to bat as often as possible by placing them near the top of the order, and if we can identify the coach's preference for making a line-up, we may be able to quickly identify the hitters we won't allow to beat us.

Of course, we can also look at traditional ways to identify weaknesses. A hand dropper gets rises; tight to the plate, pop inside; away from the plate, breaking pitches; power hitters, change-ups, etc. The most difficult batter is the one who takes a neutral position in the box - one even with the plate with good inside-out coverage usually possess a compact stroke.

Finally, even if your pitcher doesn't possess a wide array of pitches, you can still devise a game plan. Learn to work up or down, or in and out. Change speeds. If you don't have a good change, alter the time between pitches. Making a batter wait an extra few seconds usually will cause her to tighten her grip, particularly in critical situations, and reduce her efficiency. You can also position players to try to force batters to go to their weaknesses. For example, a third baseman plays on top of the batter while the pitcher throws a drop curve down and away to the-right. The batter may try to pull the pitch, a difficult thing to do on a drop curve. Play slow hitters deeper at the corners. Invite the power hitters to bunt by playing back. They usually don't have as much practice at it. Even if they are sometimes successful, you've kept them to one base and they now have a slow runner on first.

By assessing your strengths and weaknesses, you can always find some approach to devising a game plan. Many times it simply comes down to asking the players if they know any of the hitters from summer ball, but whatever you do, put together a plan. Strike zone management is really the key to this game. If you master it, from the offense to the pitching and the defense, you will be extremely successful!