



It shows up everywhere, on both offense and defense.

Scouts know when players have it, and when they don't. Coaches can sense it's off and watch as a player's improvement stalls. Hitting, pitching and fielding slumps are started or prolonged by it.

The art of seeing. It's not power, arm strength, or some official box that scouts check. But it's a piece of the performance pie that converts fundamental swingers into advanced hitters, and fringe prospects into starters.

Seeing the whole field. Anticipation. First-step quickness. Strike-zone awareness. They all come down to seeing. It's not 20-20 eyesight, something that can be gained by something as simple as contact lenses. It's more subtle but can be just as important.

Bill Geivett, a 25-year baseball veteran as a college coach and director of player development for several Major League Baseball teams, put it best.

"We test them in the eye doctors office and we grade them out now on video-vision games, but we have no way to assess their visual processing skills in real games," Geivett said.

We know what a great swing looks like, and we have metrics to quantify swing efficiency, but at some point swings need to be converted into offensive performance."

That conversion starts with the art of seeing. Again, it isn't about vision training or wishing you had absurdly good eyesight like Ted Williams or Tony Gwynn. Seeing is a hybrid of visual awareness, quietness of thought and mechanical set-up—where the head is the camera, the eyes are the lens, and the front leg functions as the tripod.

Baseball is currently being flooded by a hybrid solution of mental skills and vision training options. It's a good start for some players. But for others it misses the core issue of how and what players are focusing on prior to, during, and after the action at hand.

Not So Simple

The visual-search strategies of baseball's best players don't show up in biometric X-rays of swings or pitching deliveries. There is no demonstrable correlation to improved scores on two-dimensional vision-training games and in-game hitting.

Coaches hope that mere repetition—taking more reps, playing more games, building muscle memory and mental experience—will increase performance. Those all matter, of course. But how do we accelerate the performance improvement when teams and players don't have forever to figure it out?

College freshmen might have only that first half-season to impress the coach and earn a starting job. Newly-drafted minor leaguers don't want to wash out in Low-A ball. Players need to show improvement—and promise—fast.

How do we quantify and improve on a tool that is invisible? Simply put: *players must pay attention to how they pay attention.*

To be clear, seeing is not "looking" or "watching". It's more holistic. As Manny Ramirez told me years ago, "when I look at nothing, I see everything."

I also recall chatting with Edgar Martinez after I gave a talk to the Mariners in spring training, when Edgar explained to me that his high-speed tennis-ball training helped him "create and see more space in front of the ball." Can you imagine having 50 feet to react to a fastball instead of 40? No wonder Edgar's in the Hall of Fame.

Attention awareness can be the most powerful factor in all types of relaxation and visual processing success. "Focus" is a great concept, but it's not so simple, as noted by open focus and biofeedback pioneer Dr. Les Fehmi, PhD.

"This narrow and sometimes single-pointed way of attending is called narrow-objective focus—it is the focusing on one or a few important things as foreground and relegating everything else to the background of awareness, or even at times disregarding the background entirely," Dr. Fehmi said. "The fastest way to break the hold of narrow focus is to become aware of space—the space between objects."

Paying more attention to the entire visual field rather than to one object must be a priority. "Looking" takes place during the decision time to take the picture (swing or no swing). "Seeing" is paying attention without judgment or the need too early to make the primary object the only thing that's important.

The old saying "stay back, let the ball travel deep" is about staying visually neutral longer, and being more aware of seeing the space in which ball travels.

Are seeing and thinking mutually exclusive? Perhaps. When we commit to just seeing, thoughts don't disappear—they become less important. Seeing is the ultimate portal to playing in the present, as the brain is much more efficient in committing to one thing at a time.

Take Home Plate Away

"Take Home Plate Away" sounds bizarre, but I've found that it's a great teaching tool for a wide variety of players, from MLB prospects down to 5-year-olds.

When you get right down to it, home plate is there to record runs and to define the strike zone. Meanwhile, a hitter's home plate really sits in front of the "dish" where the yes-no decision to swing is made. Remember playing Wiffle-ball or stickball when you were young? Where was home plate? Probably the wall or the old chair a few feet behind you.

It's better to get rid of home plate in practice. The same-for-everyone "strike zone" becomes more of the hitter's personal "hitting zone." He is now forced to focus visually up the runway stretching from himself to the pitcher. The hitter begins to sense and then learn where his body needs to be to attack all parts of what will, of course, eventually be a called strike.

Ken Eriksen, head softball coach at USF and the USA women's national softball team, explains this.

"Take your hitters to the mound to look at the plate," Eriksen said. "It ain't that wide! Go back to the box, take the plate away, and learn to formulate your own personal runway to become a better anticipatory hitter with the knowledge that a pitcher works to throw into your successful collision zone."

To take this even further take home plate out of the equation during a pitcher's bullpen and their control issues can often improve. No-plate pitching takes the "result" piece out of the thought process and forces pitchers to acknowledge and see this virtual runway between them and the hitter as a "map" to help the brain.

Colorado Rockies reliever Scott Oberg shares his thoughts on the strategy.

"I try to use the runway space as a guide along which to draw lines in my head," Oberg said. "Especially for my fastball. There are times where I will follow my eyes along the ground and follow them up to my intended target. As if to draw a line with my eyes in that space that now my body can follow as an intended consequence.

"Once I come to my target it's becomes easier to pull more of the entirety of the catcher, batter, umpire scene into view. Which in turn, allows for a more relaxed viewing of the mitt. Now because my eyes are relaxed, I can relax my body and give myself the best opportunity to execute a pitch."

Adjusting your "seeing" game plan is no different than tweaking your delivery or adjusting your attack angles in hitting. Make attention awareness, open focus and space zones a priority, and watch "mindset" and "vision" magically improve.