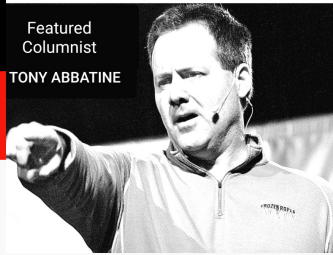


By Tony Abbatine on September 26, 2018



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So many of the industry's pitching experts talk about the pitchers tunnel, this special place during the first phase of ball flight (for discussion purposes, let's say the first 10-12 feet from release), where the elite (Clayton Kershaw for example) begin ball flight on all their pitches.

It's no great revelation that late movement wins the prize in the battle. It's no secret at the elite level that the best of the best release their pitches in the approximate same arm slot and hand slot. So what is a hitter to do?

No magic bullet or secret sauce exists in the pitcher-hitter battle that has been waged for decades and where statistical failure is over 70 percent for most. However, a 1/100th of a second improvement in ball flight prediction will give a hitter approximately a five to seven foot earlier read on ball direction and trajectory. I know Ted Williams swore he read spin on balls but for most elite hitters their recollection and clues are more about movement and speed/space differentials.

Hitting coaches and hitters themselves will describe hitting streaks and quality at bats as a function of good rhythm and timing. However, rhythm and timing are a function of how effective the hitter visually connected with the pitchers delivery and properly predicted ball flight (which is where timing come in). Most slumps start or could be shortened by checking back in with a hitters visual search strategies and "seeing" where they deviated and eventually disrupted their rhythm and timing. Do poor visual skills during a stretch in a season cause the mental slump to follow? If the eyes are part of the brain, why not fix the first part of the problem that might reduce or eliminate the stinkin' thinking that the great Ken Rivizza coined decades ago?



Back to blowing up the tunnel. Here are two visual check points coaches and hitters can share:

First, get a peek before the tunnel starts. This goes back to open focus and the great line former Red Sox hitter Manny Ramirez shared with me in 2005 when describing how he "scanned and painted" the pitcher's movements looking for clues. When asked about what he was looking at Manny said: "When I look at nothing, I see everything." Is this Manny being Manny or a glimpse into the visual skills of the rich and famous?

The harder and more narrow you look, the less you will see. Hitters prolong slumps by fine focusing on some magical "window" that opens and closes quickly. Elite hitters will talk about seeing so much more when they look at less, the premise behind the open focus/attention level switch model. Detecting small differences in tempo, posture, glove side and hand/wrist/flesh/fingers of the pitcher are what elite hitters do. The challenge is that this happens many times at the subconscious level so they don't know or articulate what they saw to others.

Second, lead the ball out of the tunnel and "vunnel" it into your go zones.

Improved ball flight skills occur when the hitters field of vision stays slightly in front of the ball. Ask a skilled shooter or fighter pilot about their visual search strategies and they will tell you they stay slightly in front of the target so they can see more of where the ball is going and use the space in ball flight to help better predict speed and movement. Hitters struggle when they attempt to pick up the ball "hard" out of the tunnel and use a narrow attention level that eliminates all other pieces of ball flight, namely space and speed variations. It's tough to sit on a pitch or have a specific approach against a certain pitcher if you can't steer/vunnel the pitch into your preferred zone because you misread ball flight by getting stuck in the tunnel and trying hard to see the ball into the tunnel. Vunneling is the visual discipline elite hitters possess to properly predict and "steer" pitches into their offensive zones. It is truly a combination of visual discipline and having the "vision" to see the pitch you want in your minds eye. Stop telling hitters to get a good pitch to hit or swing a strikes unless you give them the visual tools to accomplish it.

Hitting is hard. Once the game starts and at the highest level, stay in the visual world.

In game visual awareness and making visual adjustments are a hitter and hitters coaches best tool in blowing up the tunnel.