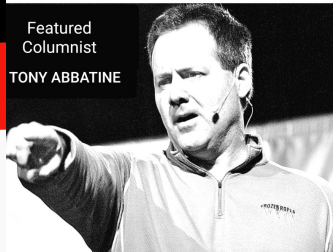


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Columnist

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By Tony Abbatine on October 10, 2018

So much of the hitting dialogue and teaching at the amateur and professional levels involves how hitters are changing their "launch angles" to create better backspin in an effort to join the "elevate to celebrate" mania.

Get on plane. It's great advice and the swing path of the rich and famous, but it still begs the question as to how hitters see and get on the plane.

Newsflash: Most fail. Why? First, when it comes to launch trajectory, only a few millimeters separate a line drive to shortstop and a towering home run. Second, to hit middle-bottom off the ball — to generate backspin — the hitter is still relying on his fundamental, and irreplaceable, ability to gauge (see) pitch trajectory and time to collision (speed estimate).

We hear it all the time:

Wait for a good pitch to hit.

See the pitch longer.

Stay back.

Don't chase.

Turning these words to skills at the elite level requires three visual-physical tasks:

Delay the neuro-muscular impulse to fire the swing. The great hitters have impulse control and balance patience with aggressiveness. They are either wired that way or work really hard to delay the eyes sending the command to swing.

Recalibrate the timer in the eyes that tells the body to "Go." Put another way, great hitters snapchat (take the picture) later in the runway.

Own the runway — the distance between the mound and home plate.

There are two key pieces to getting these strategies and boosting your on-base plus slugging percentage (OPS), as well as your strikeout-to-walk ratio.



Intent and Space.

Intent

A hitter must stay as visually neutral—meaning their eyes cannot tell the body "swing" for as long as possible, while still leaving time to deliver the barrel. Hitters must reprogram their "click," which is the time when they take a picture of the ball in flight and send it to the eyes and brain for processing.

This should happen at or near the "Go Zone"—which, depending on pitch speed is approximately 15-20 feet from home plate. The longer the eyes can wait, the more accurate their estimation of where—and when—the ball will arrive in the hitting zone. Better spin/trajectory prediction comes from this delayed timer, which can be adjusted within the eyes

Learning and marking this "Go Zone" during live hitting and drills is the beginning of recalibrating the eyes.

Space

It gets back to "Open Focus"—the ability to incorporate narrow and broad attention levels simultaneously.

Think of this as seeing the big and small picture at the same time. Seeing and processing the space that exists in front of the ball and a sense of space that existed from the source of the pitch (the pitcher's hand) is crucial to estimate speed. Open Focus, seeing ball flight in both diffuse and narrow focus, allows for greater depth and space processing.

The soft, judgment-free and scanning mode that one uses to sweep beautiful sunsets and recognize changeups are the end game with Open Focus. Open Focus is also the ultimate space ride, as objects in view are seen as a function of when and where they are in the surrounding space. The great eyes never track or see in a vacuum, which is sufficient for batting practice but not for in-game ball-flight success.

Finally, words of wisdom for today's young hitters—don't launch before you see the plane on the runway.