

STRUGGLE HITTING IN TOURNAMENTS?

I frequently listen to this old saw at my hitting club, especially after a recent tournament... “I just don’t understand! How come I hit the ball so well in batting practice, and then stink the place up during an actual game? Many of my teammates compliment me on my hitting during practice. I’m totally relaxed and consistently crush the ball in bp. My swing is grooved, I have both good rhythm and tempo and some power. However, up at the plate during the game, I’m seen to turn into a cluster of ragged nerves”.

“When I step into the batter’s box my muscles become rigid and constricted, my mind becomes foggy. I’m so worried about making an out that I make really dumb swing mechanics mistakes that I don’t do in bp. I fail to wait on the pitch, my pitch selection is terrible, I let the good ones go by and then swing at the bad ones, I go out on short pitches from being over anxious, resulting in easy outs”.

Well, let’s agree right away that rare is the bird that hits better in the game than in bp, but we can improve our tournament game hitting with proper preparation. I do believe that the game swing may never completely compare to your bp swing, but you can get it closer. From my experience, hitting well in tournaments requires lots of quality bp and playing a good number of actual games between tourneys.

Let’s explore this not hitting well in the game phenomenon. Are your game hitting woes a problem with pure swing mechanics, or just plain old nerves or game jitters? Well, it’s most likely a combination of both of those things and they are entwined. Understand, that excessive nerves will affect sound swing mechanics. If you have allowed your game performance to become obsessively important to you, you might be suffering from a disorder commonly called, “performance anxiety”.

Don’t focus so much on the outcome and more on the process to ensure success. Remember, it’s senior softball, not major league baseball, and they are throwing the ball underhand and slow. We should just relax and have fun, right?

How should seniors address this “game vs. bp” dilemma? I suggest to my bp hitting club members to employ a simple counting scheme during bp. Let’s assume you get (10) swings in each bp round. Keep track of what most likely would be a hit in the game and what would be a sure out. This method is not an exact science, but serves as a good approximation of hits and obvious failures and addresses your swing mechanics. If you do this, you might be amazed at the number of outs you’re actually making in bp as most hitters have a propensity for not remembering their mishits.

Here's how this hitting scheme works: if the first bp swing is considered to be a base hit, you're then **1-1**. If your second swing is not a hit, then you're 1-2 and ad infinitum... 1-3, **2-4**, **3-5**, 3-6, **4-7**, 4-8, **5-9** finishing 5-10. So, your BA is .500 during that round making outs on pitches, 2, 3, 6, 8 and 10. Instead of just aimlessly swinging away in bp as most of us do, you should concentrate on making good contact on every pitch and raising you bp BA.

Tips for hitting better in tournaments:

- Always be aggressive during each at bat; get your money's worth on every swing.
- Don't psych yourself out by over estimating the significance of each at-bat, have fun!
- Having some nervousness is okay, and can actually lead to better performance in some cases.
- Muscle memory is the key and not over thinking during the at-bat.
- Remember what Yogi Berra said in his book of aphorisms: "You can't hit and think at the same time"!
- Just taking bp only between tourneys will not totally prepare you for a tournament; you'll need some live game action to practice things you can't in a typical bp session, like working the pitch count.
- If all you play is a once every month tournament, you'll not feel as relaxed as you otherwise would be by spending time in the game situation where teams are wearing uniforms, someone is officiating, and the score is being kept.
- One way to feel more at ease in tournament action is to play local league games once or twice a week.
- Understand that things you've been working on in bp, might be difficult to move to the live game and will take time to incorporate into your game swing.
- Get an eye exam if necessary!

You develop swing mechanics from taking a lot of bp, but you can only overcome nerves and other distractions by playing lots of live games. It's not unlike one's fear of public speaking. If you suffer from public speaking anxiety, one way to overcome it is to give lots of speeches until the nerves eventually disappear, and you begin to speak unconstrained. The same argument can be made for improving your tournament game hitting by playing more softball between SSUSA events.

Happy hitting,

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