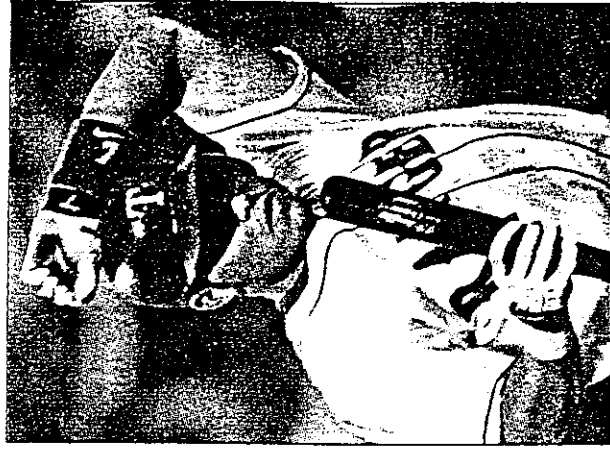


# Good hitters think best outside the box

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By Rich Kendra



McGwire by Keith Skopec, AP. Rodriguez by Bill Janscha, AP

The beauty — or difficulty — of baseball is that it's a team game played out one individual at a time. That individual is the hitter.

Good hitters have a routine that prepares them mentally before they get in the batter's box, says Ken Ravizza, a professor of psychology at Cal State Fullerton who also is a consultant for major league teams and Olympic athletes.

"There's a difference between superstition and routine," says Ravizza, who, with Tom Hanson, authored a book on baseball's mental aspects, *Heads-Up Baseball* (Master Press, \$17.95). "Superstition is a concept where you believe that something gives you the power. A routine is something you can do and control.

"Our goal is to see the ball and hit the ball. The difficulty in baseball is it's not that simple. There are so many distractions. So we need to develop a routine."

**Becoming the hitter.** So when should you begin filtering out the distractions? When does your at-bat actually begin?

Ravizza suggests picking a definite moment, such as when you put on a helmet, put on batting gloves, pick up a bat, or when you step out of the dugout. Whichever one you choose, from that moment on, you're thinking nothing but hitting.

"Now you're putting on the hitter," Ravizza says. "We're not carrying the last at-bat to the plate. Now you're zeroing in on the pitcher. What pitches does he throw? Does he throw his curve for a strike? Find his release point."

When you're "in the hole," waiting to go in the on-deck circle, this is the time to prepare your body. Warm up by stretching, swing a weighted bat and get loose. Keep watching the pitcher and take note of the game situation.

**On deck.** Now you move to the on-deck circle. Here is where you get into a rhythm and start timing the pitcher with your swing. Remember any pointers about your own swing, such as "keep your hands back."

"You can do a little visualization here," Ravizza says. "Watch Mark McGwire. He closes his eyes and pictures his at-bat."

This is where you develop your plan before you step in. Think about how many outs

**Good models:** Many major leaguers have a routine they follow before each at-bat to help ready themselves. Mark McGwire pauses, clears his mind and visualizes the pitch before stepping in. Ivan Rodriguez resets his helmet and his mind-set after being brushed back by a pitch.

"So many people think, 'Did I get a hit?'" Ravizza says. "That's an end result. What you really should be concerned about is, 'Do I have quality at-bats? Did I give myself the best chance to succeed?'"

## Dealing with setbacks

The reality of hitting a baseball is that things change with each pitch. You might swing and miss, disagree with a strike call, or a runner steals a base to change your mission. You have to regain focus.

Step out. Turn away from the plate for a second or two if you're frustrated after missing a pitch. Take a deep breath. Check your sign. Re-adjust your helmet as a way of putting your "hitting cap" back on. Now step back in with confidence.

a commitment to the sign. If it's a bunt, visualize it.

"After you get your sign, smooth the dirt in the batter's box to wipe the slate clean. Take a deep breath, exhale and step in. It's a new at-bat, and you've got a mission. In your mind, there's only the pitcher, the ball and you.

**Time for action.** Until now, all the thinking has been done before getting in the box. Once you step in, it's all reaction.

"Yogi Berra said, 'You can't think and hit at the same time,'" Ravizza says. "In the box, you're shutting down the thinking process. Think of energy going out. Pick up the release point and attack the ball. Execute your plan."

There's not any one way to prepare for an at-bat. What's important is to find out what works best for you, and do it every time.

there are. Where are the runners? Will you have to move them over? Picture yourself delivering.

**Heading to the plate.** Now it's your turn. Don't think: "I have to get a hit. I have to drive in runs." Don't get ahead of yourself. Walk up to the plate with confidence. Instead, talk yourself up: "I waited for this. I'm ready for this."

Ravizza says a coach once told his team, "An AB (at-bat) is a precious thing to give away." Some coaches can tell when a player is going to "give away" a turn at bat. If the player jumps in without getting a sign from the third base coach, he's getting ahead of himself. If he's tense or distracted, it shows through his body language. Good coaches know when their players are following a routine or breaking from it.

"Get your sign," Ravizza says. "Then make