

## Memorandum

To: All WBBA Board Members, Coaches and Interested Parents

From: Rick Caldecott, Traveling Director

Date: February 26, 2011

Re: Hitting Clinic Presentation by Mr. Tony Cicallo

### I. Overview

All of us who have played, watched, and/or coached baseball over the last 30 or 40 years have observed the evolution of hitting instruction. How many of us fondly recall our coaches telling us about squishing the bug, smoothing the dirt, or even the promotion of a long high front leg stride into the ball to promote weight transfer and power into the ball. Even extending the arms out from the body to create a long smooth, powerful swing arc was routinely taught. Today all of the above is frowned upon by professional hitting instructors. All is not lost, however. Today's hitting instructors still like a loaded hands position off the back shoulder, the alignment of the second line of knuckles of both hands on the bat, a balanced starting stance with the knees slightly bent, the feet slightly more than shoulder width apart and the feet lined up with the batter's box inside chalk line.

In the remainder of this memo I will attempt to restate for the reader the salient points of Mr. Cicallo's presentation last weekend. To provide clarity I will break down what was taught concerning stance focusing on areas of the batter's body and positioning. A discussion of hitting drills will follow. I will conclude with some thoughts on the use of pitching machines and breaking hitting down into shorter duration repetitions.

### II. Hitting Stance

A. Foot placement and weight distribution. There is continuity between generations in that they agree that the hitter should take a stance with their feet shoulder width or a little wider apart. The toes of both feet should be pointed at the inside chalk line of the batter's box and in line with each other. As with past generations, the pre-swing weight distribution should be such that approximately 60% of the player's weight should be on the back foot and 40% on the front foot.

B. Central Torso. The central torso stance taught a generation ago is still prominent today. That is, knees slightly bent, thighs and butt slightly set off in a sit-back position with emphasis on relaxed, balanced and athletic positioning.

C. Shoulders, Arms, Hands and Head. Shoulders need to be squared up, level, and in line with the feet and inner chalk line of the batter's box. Again, the shoulders should be relaxed and athletic. The arm position has evolved. Today we want to teach having the hands closer to the body than was traditionally the case to help prevent casting of the hands and an extended swing arc. Think about how a figure skater can whirl much more quickly with her hands against her body as opposed to extended.

The hands should grip the bat in the fingers with the second row of knuckles on both hands aligned. This hand position allows for a strong grip on the bat and a more fluid swing motion. To test this concept rest the fingers of either hand in first the palm and then the fingers of your other hand and grip the fingers tightly. Then pull your fingers free of the other hand's grip. Note how easily you can pull your finger free from a palm-centered grip. Now note how much more difficult it is to free your opposite hand's fingers from a finger-centered grip. Don't choke the bat to death.

The head position needs to turn toward the pitcher, relaxed and with the eyes focused on the pitcher. Obviously, the ball to be pitched is the center of the eyes focus. The head position should be aligned with the rest of the body to help promote good overall body balance.

### **III. The Swing Setup and Mechanics**

The baseball swing taught today by the best teachers emphasizes swing control by shortening the swing arc, seeing the ball better by reducing head and body movement during the swing and simplicity by promoting a few core principles that are easy to repeat. Without the advantage of diagrams or of live hands-on teaching it is challenging to precisely describe the desired swing.

A. Hands and Bat. Let's begin with bat and hand position. The bat should be just in front (off) the back shoulder in a weighted (loaded) position. Coach Cicallelo provided a check for this position. While holding a bat, have your batter grab a piece of his jersey with the end of his fingers on the front of their back shoulder. Bat position at the start of the swing has evolved greatly over time. Many of you may remember a coach telling you to candle the bat (get it perpendicular to the turf) or lay it back to promote a flat swing arc through the ball. Today the preferred bat position is with the knob of the bat pointing into the opposite batter's box. Perhaps a 45 degree angle to the body provides the best description. Both arms should come together on the bat to form an up side down power "V" The historical practice of putting the back arm out flat behind the body discouraged.

B. Modern Swing. The well-taught modern swing begins at its essence with a forward punching motion led by the knob of the bat with the hands tight to the body followed by a short downward and through swing path through the hitting zone. Think of going down and through the ball in a manner designed to keep the barrel of the bat in the hitting zone as long as possible. The stroke also seeks to go down and through the ball in a manner that imparts backspin to the ball. Backspin in turn promotes a penetrating ball flight. The short length of this swing allows for a faster turn through the ball which replaces power lost as a result of the reduced body movement

in the lower half of the body discussed below.

The hips in the modern swing still turn hard through the swing and end up with the ‘belly button’ facing the pitcher as the swing is finished. The hitter should avoid letting his hips fly open except as part of a controlled turn. Hitting through not to the ball with a high bat finish is preferred. Perhaps the biggest swing difference between today’s modern swing and the swing we learned as boys, aside from the shorter linear punch forward with the hands instead of casting through the ball, is in the footwork.

Historically a slide step forward through the ball was favored. Best practices now dictate that the hitter do nothing more with his front foot than slightly pick his foot up and then put it back down in essentially the same spot as a trigger to start his swing. Having this minimal foot movement allows the hitter to keep his head and eyes very still so he can see the ball better. The swing’s simplicity also promotes easy development of a repeating swing.

The back foot that used to squish the bug still turns slight to open the hips for a turn. Today, however, best practice focuses more on the back knee firing forward with the back foot still firmly on the ground to help create weight transfer (thrust).

It is universally agreed that seeing and maintaining focus on the ball as it travels to the plate is critical. Make sure you teach your boys not to pull their eyes off the ball as they swing. Importantly the short, repeating “quieted down swing” discussed in this memo will help assure the boys are focusing their eyes on a pitched ball.

Remember when teaching the boys this swing that it will become progressively more critical to their hitting success as they rise through the competitive levels of baseball. As the pitchers get bigger, stronger and older they learn to throw harder, change speed, and mix in pitches like sliders, curves and fork balls that “break.” Recall how we all know boys that could hit at 12, 13, and 14 who were hopelessly over-matched in a high school varsity batter’s box. Learning the modern baseball swing is not an optional task for any of your players who desire a varsity baseball career as anything other than a pitcher who has a designated hitter bat for him.

#### **IV. Drills that help teach a modern baseball swing**

Mr. Cicallelo and others have provided coaches with a wealth of drills to teach all aspects of baseball including the swing. Mr. Cicallelo emphasized that he takes new ideas for drills from every available source. Look upon the hitting drills described below as a starting point for teaching hitting.

A. Numbered Ball Drill. Take 5 tennis balls or baseballs and number them with a marker 1-4 leaving the 5<sup>th</sup> ball unmarked. Soft-toss the balls to the boys and have them call out the number they see on the ball as they hit it. The un-numbered ball is a bomb and the hitter “blows up” if he swings and hits the blank ball. Make this drill, and all drills, fun! This drill promotes focusing

on the baseball.

B. Swing next to a wall (or fence). Put the hitter slightly more than a bat length from a wall (34"). Have them take their first swing without the end of the bat hitting (touching) the wall. If they then start to open up and cast their hands through the swing they will hit the wall (fence). With practice, the boys will learn that their tighter swing is way faster to the ball, increases contact percentages and accordingly reduces strikeouts. Remind the boys to finish in a bat-high position with both hands on the bat.

C. Top hand only on the bat. To promote a controlled down and through swing have the hitter take soft-toss throws with only his top hand on the bat in a severely choked-up hand position. Hit the ball with one hand on the bat envisioning and patterning a down and through motion with the one hand on the bat in tight-to-the-body position.

D. Similar drills to C. Isolating the hitter's mechanics by freezing the lower body having the hitter stand on one foot while hitting and varying the place the tosses come from in soft toss is also useful in teaching good swing mechanics.

## **V. Pitching Machines and the "Batting Cage Warrior"**

Our hitting presenter and Varsity Coach Jeff Wagner both commented to our coaches during the clinic about the current WBBA reliance on pitching machines and kids taking dozens of swings in the cage during training. It was strongly recommended to coaches that they hand pitch to the boys rather than use a pitching machine. It was also recommended that we do a lot of soft-toss, underhand flip pitching from short distances, and have the boys hit off a tee regularly. While doing all these drills we were urged to work slowly so the boys stayed focused on their swings and limit repetition to seven or less swings at a time before having a different boy step into the cage, up to the tee, or in front of the soft-toss bucket. These shorter sequences force the boys to focus on swing development rather than just bang balls mindlessly without working on proper swing mechanics.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Many thanks to Mr. Cicallo and Varsity Coach Jeff Wagner for putting on one of the best hitting clinics I've attended. Hopefully the WBBA will take a big step forward when it comes to teaching hitting. Any one who has questions concerning hitting and in particular needs a referral to people such as Mr. Cicallo, Varsity Coach Jeff Wagner, Tom Imdieke at Line Drive Sports or other resources for teaching hitting should feel free to contact me through the WBBA website or at 651-429-5500. Lets play ball.