

HITTER'S COUNT: WHEN ACTION LOOMS

Scott Delaney

An at-bat's intimacy is like very few things in sport. It has similarities to a penalty kick in soccer or a penalty shot in hockey; a one-on-one tackle by the safety in football or fullback in rugby; a breakaway in basketball with one man to beat. It's one v. one, mano a mano. At the highest level, it is a contest between savages who will do anything to win. And for all sports, these moments are the most vulnerable because they are front and center for all to see, with no teammate to share the blame. Someone is declared the winner; the other, the loser. In major league baseball, the average hitter is exposed 550 times a year.

At their essence, at-bats are about balls and strikes. The at-bat's pitch count shows how many balls and strikes have been thrown, with balls listed first. Four balls earn the batter a free walk to first base; three strikes and you're out.

In an at-bat, batters sometimes attack first-strike swinging, while others work the count. Pitchers throw pitches in the zone - or balls that look like strikes - to get a batter out. Some do it with guile, others do it with power. Whatever the vehicle, the motivation is the same: for one to dominate the other. The pitch count lets everyone know who's winning.

Every batter seeks a hitter's count, which is when the batter has the advantage. A hitter's count is either the first pitch of an AB, or when there are more balls than strikes with less than two strikes: 0-0, 1-0, 2-0, 3-0, 2-1, or 3-1. These play to the hitter in part because the hitter can't strike out on the next pitch, meaning the batter can be more aggressive. In addition, because the pitcher usually must be assured of throwing a strike on the next pitch, his option of getting a batter to swing at a ball outside the strike zone is limited, if not eliminated. The difference between a count in favor of the pitcher and a hitter's count could be more than 200 percentage points. For example, an 0-2 count produces a .150 average, whereas a 3-1 count powers up the average batter to .369.

Being able to reliably throw a pitch for a strike is important, especially as the at-bat progresses. Fastballs are traditionally thrown in a hitter's count because they are the easiest pitch to throw over the plate. The issue, however, is most major leaguers can hit the heat, especially when they know it's coming. The value of a quality fastball therefore multiplies exponentially with the number of balls and strikes.

But in 2019, instead of fastballs, pitchers are throwing soft stuff in hitter's counts - breaking balls and off-speed pitches. It has generally paid off for the hurlers by fooling batters, either tipping the at-bat in the favor of the pitcher or eliciting weak contact resulting in an out.

When the Red Sox hosted the Colorado Rockies at Fenway Park, the Sox were up 5-2 in the top of the 7th, but the Rockies had the bases loaded and no one out. Matt Barnes, the stellar Sox reliever, had been called upon to settle things. Unfortunately, the hot-hitting shortstop Trevor Story was planted at the plate.

Story took ball one and then ball two, keeping the count in his favor (2-0). With the bases juiced, Barnes needed a strike, and Story was looking for something over the plate. The two-ball, no-strike pitch count gave the average hitter a 36.5% chance of getting a hit. Two more balls and the batter would earn a walk, pushing a run over and putting the tying run at second, go-ahead run at first. Wisdom whispered to the batter, "Look for a fastball".

But Barnes has two plus pitches: his fastball and his curveball. At the time, he led all Red Sox relievers in strikeouts and was fourth overall on the pitching staff (starters and relievers) in Ks.

On the next pitch, Barnes tossed a nasty curveball that looked like a fastball coming out of the hand. As it approached home plate, the ball bent at a sickening angle. Barnes hoped this would result in a swinging strike, beginning to shift the at-bat to his advantage. But Story had other ideas. He was sitting soft and drilled the pitch to left for a loud Fenway single, scoring two runs and moving the tying run to third with no one out. The Rockies' odds of scoring at least one more run - the tying run - improved to 84.4%. Barnes got behind 3-1 on the next two batters and never made it out of the inning.

Batters and pitchers do everything in their power to gain the advantage in each at-bat. The pitch count can be the difference between the batter hitting like The Babe or looking like a bum, the pitcher throwing like Cy Young or getting pulled. The count - on display for everyone to see - reflects who's winning each at-bat. And when you see a hitter's count, you know the chance of action looms.