

# Soft Toss: Timing is of the Essence

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A mid-season demotion for a promising young hitter is as synonymous with summer as a trip to the beach or a glob of sunscreen. These players leave the show toting unsightly numbers and, almost always, poor strikeout and walk totals. The commentary surrounding these roster moves features the usual chatter: *Needs to control the zone better. Needs to learn how to take a walk. Needs to lay off the high fastball. Needs to stop swinging at the curve in the dirt.*

Young players, even top prospects with near-peak athleticism, find themselves at a disadvantage against their more experienced peers. Good strike zone judgement is essential, and it's a skill that all successful big leaguers learn, to some extent anyway, along their development path. Failure to control the zone can stem from a number of flaws, most of which are treatable. Helping a player develop plate discipline is tricky though. As [Billy Beane](#) eloquently said in [Moneyball](#), "it can be done, but we'd have to take guys in diapers to do it." Hitting coaches trying to help their players improve at the plate have their work cut out for them.

The first step is identifying the right problem. Plate discipline and pitch recognition are related problems: hitters with an otherwise competent understanding of the strike zone might still post poor walk and strikeout numbers simply by being lured into chasing pitches that appear to be strikes before bending out of the zone. Consequently the "fix" for an underlying issue varies greatly between players. Some simply have trouble tracking the ball in general. That can be a death knell or, in [Eric Hosmer](#)'s case, a sign of an [underlying vision problem](#). Other problems can be improved with repetition, and by drills that help players reinforce the strike zone and identify pitches out of the hand better.

For Bryan Dinkelman, the hitting coach for Minnesota's Single-A affiliate in Cedar Rapids, improving a hitter's timing is critical: "The main thing with pitch recognition is learning to get yourself into a good hitting position on time and smoothly. When players are able to develop good timing, they will be able to recognize pitches earlier and determine what they are."

Hitters with poor timing mechanisms often find themselves between pitches, or falling into a pattern where they guess too often, and are left exposed when they anticipate poorly. Good timing allows a player to sit on a particular pitch (usually a fastball) and then, with their weight and bat head in the right spot, adjust to an offspeed pitch if necessary. It also puts a hitter in a better position to look for the seams as the ball leaves a pitcher's hand. Naturally, hitters with poor timing or pitch recognition skills don't improve overnight. Dinkelman notes that "players develop at different rates and being able to be comfortable recognizing pitches is something that takes some players longer than others."

To help, Dinkelman uses a couple of drills. He uses a pitching machine that can be programmed to throw different pitches to teach hitters to recognize spin, and to practice their timing. He'll also do a form of modified soft toss with his players, changing speeds to help his hitters focus on

staying back. Video is also a valuable tool. Dinkelman has his hitters watch their at-bats to reinforce their knowledge of the strike zone and to go over particularly problematic pitches.

[Darryl Robinson](#), the hitting coach for Houston's High-A club in Lancaster, is also a strong proponent of video analysis. He likes to use it by having his players act as the coach for their own at-bats. "I show them the video, and I ask, what do you see? Just to get a feel for how they're thinking. A lot of times, they're right on." For Robinson, the approach is useful for a couple of reasons. One, simply looking at the video is helpful for players working on an adjustment, and tracking progress throughout the season. More importantly, having the players dissect their swings and approaches helps reinforce the need for an adjustment. As Robinson says, "It's their idea, not mine. It's something THEY saw."

Robinson also echoes the importance of timing. Every hitter has a timing mechanism that they try to synchronize with a pitcher's windup before beginning their load. A couple, like [Gary Sheffield](#)'s violent bat wag, are noisy, but most hitters use something quieter: they might drift back and forth, or build rhythm by gently moving their hands.

Robinson identifies the changeup as the pitch that gives his hitters the most trouble. Perhaps more than with any other offering, timing is critical to recognizing and laying off of the cambio: "the goal is to not load so quickly that you can't recognize it. You have to load slow and easy so you can recognize the pitch and make a good decision."

Robinson also designed his own drill to get his hitters thinking about pitch recognition. Using a couple of balls, he paints the seams with different colors—"red for fastball, blue for curve, black for change"—and then he has his hitters guess what pitch is coming in by shouting out the color of the ball. "I'm not trying to get them to get it right," Robinson says. "I'm trying to get them to focus. It starts with them getting it wrong a lot. Then they start to pick it up earlier, start looking for it out of the hand." It's very similar to a drill that [Carlos Beltran](#) and others have used to enhance their [focus and visual perception](#). While color isn't an exact replica of spin, he's found that the skills needed to identify color correctly in the limited time hitters have to decide whether they will swing or not translates well to identifying pitch type. The second big advantage is that it teaches hitters how to look for a pitch type when it's still in the pitcher's hand, training them to look for any identifiable feature. It can be a big edge, and as Robinson says, "if you don't look (early), you're not going to see anything."

There are a few other things Robinson uses, including a traditional drill where players stand in the box and identify whether incoming pitches are balls or strikes, and taken together, he sees results in his players. The Astros keep a detailed record of their players' progress throughout the season, and Robinson says that his team sees about a six percent drop in swings out of the zone from the start of the season to the end.

He also notices tangible improvement on an individual level. He cites utility man [Marc Wik](#), a player who has long been plagued with lofty strikeout totals, as an example. "Last year, he was a guy who had a problem laying off the pitch up in the zone. He used to get mad at me all the time in BP: he'd swing at a pitch up in the zone and I'd be yelling Nooo! Just to try to trigger him."

Over time, Robinson noted incremental improvement and he was blown away when Wik went on to lead the Australian League in walks last winter.

In the sport's infancy, baseball was very much a see-ball, hit-ball game. Even into the latter half of the 20th century, hitters survived by sitting dead red and waiting until they got their pitch. But as the league's strikeout rate rises, as pitchers throw harder and harder, as bullpen specialization increases, and as we see previously unimaginable phenomena like [Noah Syndergaard](#)'s 95 mph slider, the importance of pitch recognition and plate discipline grows alongside. The ability to discern a ball from a strike and an offspeed pitch from a fastball—and relatedly, the ability and desire to work to improve those skills—already separates all-stars from [flameouts](#), and will continue to do so moving forward. In this landscape, the teams that can find coaches, drills, and settings where players can improve on these core skills will develop a meaningful competitive advantage.