

Enhanced Tracking

Vision Skills Can Be Enhanced With Proper Concentration Training

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tracking pitches in the bullpen in the batter's box, they would learn the proper mechanics of tracking pitches visually. Hitters would not routinely move their head forward or up and down. Developing mechanics that minimize this movement is crucial.

"Batters now routinely coil with the hands and doing it at the same time with the weight on the back side. That keeps the eyes in position to see properly."

Dr. Harrison said another key element in vision performance is making sure the eyes are in the right position before ball release by the pitcher.

"That involves having the eyes facing the pitcher without much head turn. That gives better depth perception. We found that seeing the ball wasn't so much seeing it clearly but was actually being able to measure the velocity of pitches. To measure the velocity of the pitch, you had to see the pitch with two eyes.

"Even though we suspected you couldn't see the bat actually hit the ball, there was emphasis on keeping the eye focused until the point of contact. When batters took pitches, they would track the ball all the way to the catcher's glove. They would try to accomplish this with little head movement."

Natural Reflex

Dr. Harrison said he found that it was a natural reflex with the eyes to look away as soon as they received enough visual information.

"If you go out a doorway, you will look at the doorknob just as you get there. Then you will look away as you grab the doorknob. It's the same thing as looking at a pencil or a glass of water. You look at the glass or pencil. Just before grabbing it, usually the eyes look away. So we suggested you compensate for this natural tendency by having the eyes locked on the contact point. Good drills for this are batting tees in practice or soft toss. This develops the habit of staying with the ball longer."

Dr. Harrison said the concept of fine centering also was explored.

"Fine centering is tuning into something very small. Our thinking was when players were throwing the ball accurately, sliding effectively and picking up a jump off a pitcher holding them on or hitting at their best, they were at a fine center. Their focus was limited to a very fine area. But we found most of the time people were in a soft center.

"We found a hitter didn't really look at a pitcher's motion. They weren't hitting motion but the ball. You want the maximum focus to occur not before the ball is released but right after ball release from the pitcher's hand.

"Not every hitter can do it, but those we have worked with could see the ball come out of the hand and a few could see the pitcher's hand position and also see the way the fingers hold the ball as the whole process slowed down.

"The best quality of vision was found to be right after switching one's vision to a specific area. So we had batters look at a spot on the pitcher when he started into his motion. Then the batter's eyes switched to the release point. This

How To Reach Dr. Bill Harrison

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif. — Dr. Bill Harrison sells several products which can enhance vision in baseball players.

For information on these products, call Dr. Harrison at (949) 215-2447.

You can also e-mail him at wdharrison@home.com

The web site for his business is: www.performancefundamentals.com

You can also write him at: Dr. Bill Harrison, 540 S. Coast Highway, Ste. 202, Laguna Beach, CA 92656.

really works for those wishing to pick up the ball a little better."

Body Motion

Another important concept he advocated was for the player to have a little rhythm or motion in the body in the preparation stage of hitting.

"We saw so many players who would physically freeze. When we saw that, we could tell they didn't have very good recognition of the pitch and tracking. So we encouraged the hitter be in action and then become set once the pitcher came close to releasing the ball. The reason for that was because a relaxed body and a relaxed mind allowed the eyes to function and see better."

Dr. Harrison said many training techniques are different now in terms of vision performance.

"Every year since 1972, I have been working with anywhere from 2-5 major league clubs," said Dr. Harrison.

"The majority of players don't need to get involved in any extensive eye training program within an office that has eye training equipment. But there are a few simple things they can do to improve their visual concentration. So I have been working on products that the masses can use so they don't have to go into a formal office to get the training.

"All of the products we have are used with major league baseball players. One is designed to train and develop concentration to the highest possible level. We have found most people have good visual concentration as long as everything is static and slow. But when the game picks up speed, they have a heck of a lot of difficulty keeping their concentration.

"This product allows players to keep up with rapid movement and time pressures. It also allows players to cope with distractions and fatigue and things of that nature. It allows the player to switch vision from a soft center to a fine center."

Lack Of Sleep

It was brought up to Dr. Harrison that a recent study from the National Sleep Foundation showed that Americans suffer from a serious sleep deficit. Nearly two-thirds of American adults do not get the nightly eight hours of sleep recommended for good health and optimum performance. He was asked if major league players are receiving enough sleep and what impact sleep deprivation has on eye performance during games.

"We have found that the best vision occurs when you don't

think. What happens when you don't think too much is that you see better. If you do think, everything becomes a visual picture as opposed to a worded picture. Sometimes when players are fatigued, they perform this process very well. It is one of the reasons why a player may perform extremely well in a game despite recovering from the flu. This type of player literally can't talk to himself and can't think too much. He is focused on the here and now which becomes visual. If you do this, you see and react better.

"On the other hand, if the athlete did not get adequate rest on a regular basis, there would be a point of no return. The body obviously must have sleep as well as the eyes. In the long haul, sickness and exhaustion will not be an advantage. But it's not as always disruptive as we might think it is."

Dr. Harrison said his concentration drills should be done after workouts.

"We would prefer to have the athlete physically exhausted, whether it be weight training work, running or a hard practice. Then they spend about five minutes on these demanding concentration activities that are fun. They are all done with a stopwatch. Players are always competing against the clock. Most seem to benefit from these drills. Our *Eye Speed Concentration Trainer* is well designed for all ages at almost any level of interest."

Dr. Harrison said his company also has a product that develops depth perception that can help in many areas of baseball.

"This helps develop the muscles of the eyes which are involved in tracking. The one we call the *3-D Depth Perception and Tracking Trainer* is for a more motivated player who is looking for a higher level of skill. We have found players who train with it find that everything slows down. Pitches look slower. The other thing we noticed is that hitters can track breaking pitches better and typically have better timing as a result. It helps timing and tracking skills. It is not for everyone, but I would bet that many young athletes would benefit from it."

Relaxation Of Eyes

It was brought up to Dr. Harrison that many hitters in baseball seem to have a "deer in the headlights stare" as they track balls from a pitcher who throws extremely hard. He was asked if relaxed eyes work better to track fast pitches.

"You can never argue with success by major league hitters. Frankly, one of the things which happens to major league players physically and visually is that they are so gifted that they can do things others simply can't. They have unusual capabilities. I'm not sure if mirroring what they do is the best way to become better. They can get by with some sloppy habits and perform pretty darn well.

"When the eyes are wide open, as you described, there tends to be more tension in the muscles of the eyes. That makes it more difficult to track as effectively. That doesn't mean they won't have success. In general, most of the visual and mental skills work a lot better with relaxation."

Dr. Harrison said he worked



VISION TESTING — Dr. Bill Harrison (right) examines a member of the Cincinnati Reds organization for vision skills.

with five major league teams during spring training and noticed some amazing things.

"It astounds me how successful major league hitters are when you consider most of their pre-game swings are soft toss or underhand short toss. They work on defense in the field, and there is a little bit of batting practice prior to games. But they don't get many swings off live, game pitching. Yet, they are thrown in a game and judged on their capabilities. I think there is a missing link there. It is very important for batters to develop early recognition and identification of pitches and also develop the ability to track pitches effectively."

Dr. Harrison said a great training drill for hitters to track balls on any level of baseball is to have hitters stand with a bat in the batter's box in the bullpen while pitchers are throwing pitches to catchers.

"The batter holds a bat and doesn't worry at all about hitting these pitches. He can even stand back a little bit from the plate so he has a little space. What he is doing is working on picking up the ball early, reading the pitch, tracking the pitch and seeing the ball go into the catcher's glove. Every batter should track 15-50 pitches a day. Hitters would see tremendous benefits from this practice alone.

"Mike Hargrove, manager of the Baltimore Orioles, told me one important technique he performed when he played and was out of sync with his hitting stroke. The solution was to run down to the bullpen before the next game and watch 20 pitches. It was almost like the gears on a 10-speed bike would lock right in. Tracking pitches in this fashion is a golden opportunity for hitters. A lot of times batters don't want to hit off game-quality pitching. But they sure need to see it."

Bunting Helps Tracking

It was brought up to Dr. Harrison that during the 1999 season, the University of Miami (Fla.) had a sensational year that culminated in a national championship. The Hurricanes that year did something unusual as Miami held bunting practice in two stations for approximately one hour every Thursday prior to each 3-game series. Head Coach Jim Morris felt the bunting practice helped allow the team to be extremely skilled hitters.

"That is an excellent technique," said Dr. Harrison.

"It allows players to learn tracking skills. Many batters in the major leagues will take the first pitch. If the batter instead hits the first pitch thrown and hits it

poorly, he has not given himself a chance to get a feel for the pitcher. He now comes up for his second at bat with little knowledge about what this pitcher is throwing and never really feels confident. The batter is better off visually if he can see four pitches and four or five the next at bat. Then he has a big advantage. That batter may face the same pitcher in the seventh inning and has a great feel for how to hit him.

"I firmly believe that prior to game time, batters should see game quality pitches. A lot of coaches have done this with good success. The problem you get is that coaches have 1,000 things to do before games and this normally isn't a high priority on their list. But it will definitely benefit hitters."

Strobe Lights

Dr. Harrison was asked if batters can warm up their eyes any other way such as using strobe lights in a dark room so game speed pitches during games are easier to hit.

"Professional hitters did that at one time. It's a fascinating thing. Pinch hitters or late inning replacements hit in cages beneath the stadiums. They would hit off a machine with regular baseballs in a dark room with a strobe light going off and on. So the ball was really hard to see. Invariably when they went into a game, the pitches looked slow.

"The player who probably did this the most was Mike Diaz. He was a very talented pinch hitter for the Pittsburgh Pirates in late 1980s. He swore by this technique because he felt that pitched balls during games looked like beach balls. There are other ways of doing it. There is one company out there which uses high speed tennis balls. Batters stand with a bat in the batter's box in a batting cage under the stadium and track tennis balls coming in the strike zone at 120-130 mph. After that, everything else looks like it is coming at them in slow motion.

"It's possible to train the eyes to slow everything down. On the flip side, if you have batters react to slow pitching prior to games, everything is extremely fast for them during games. There is a lot of reverse training which goes on in baseball which unknowingly puts batters at a disadvantage for first few trips to the plate in games.

"Again, I feel it is wiser to have batters track balls which are going at a much higher speed prior to games which will make their first at bats easier on them. Prior to a game, tracking 15-20 pitches in the bullpen off pitchers is important."