

The Mysteries of Batting

What I Have Learned of a Difficult Subject from Many Years' Experience as Player and Manager

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Manager Hugh Jennings

BATTING is, and always will be, the great problem in baseball. You can take a hulking young farmer and if he has any sense you can, by proper training, make a pitcher out of him. You can teach a youngster with average knack how to field in a creditable way. But batters are born, and though batting talent can be developed, like all other talent, there is nothing in the wide world you can use as a substitute. A player is either a good batter or he is not, and all the drilling in the world will not make him so.

Batting is surely the thing in which players are most interested, and I believe it is also the most interesting thing to the spectator. Perhaps this well-nigh universal concern in the subject will excuse such scattered comments as I may contribute to the big problem.

I once listened to Nap Lajoie when he was expressing himself on the subject of hitting. It was a subject that the big Frenchman knew something about, if any one ever did. I believe he came about as near to being a perfect hitter as any one who ever lived. Well, Lajoie said that he seldom or never tried to outguess the pitcher, and I believed him. But I wouldn't believe that statement coming from the average batter or even the unusually good batter. For I think that is just what the wise hitter almost universally tries to do.

I know when I was a player myself and making a very fair record with the stick, I always used to try to figure out what the pitcher was going to give me. True, I was wrong a big percentage of the time. Any batter is bound to be. But the occasions when I guessed right were the occasions when I usually came through with a hit. I am firmly convinced that, had I not tried to figure in advance what the pitcher was going to give me, I would have hit scarce two hundred. I know I used to lay for Amos Rusie's curve ball. He had a beautiful curve, fast breaking as a rifle bullet. He would quite frequently get two strikes on me, but I would wait for that curve ball. I don't know that I would even have made an effort to hit at a fast ball had he given it to me.

And yet there were batters in my day who didn't practice this, or at least wouldn't admit that they did. I know I once asked Jack Doyle, "Don't you ever try to guess what they are going to give you?" "Oh, no," said he, "I go up there and take what comes."

One curious angle to this batting problem is the fact that not a few really great batters make a slow start. In the spring, when pitching is ragged, and even a dub may hit .300, while .400 averages are not uncommon, you will frequently see a champion staggering along with a .250 mark to his credit. The layman would naturally ask, "When a weak sticker is hitting .350 why shouldn't the star be batting for .500?" And the question is perfectly logical.

I once heard this slow start on the part of some batters explained on the ground that they were warm weather batters. Now it is well known in baseball that there are warm weather pitchers who are practically useless on cold days. The assumption that the weather might affect the batter is therefore a perfectly natural one. But personally I have no faith in such a theory. I doubt if the weather has any particular effect on hitting. I believe the explanation of a slow start can be made on entirely different grounds.

I play handball a great deal. Now I have played with people who weren't very good at the game, people that I knew I could defeat without extending myself greatly. Nevertheless sometimes these opponents would get a long lead on me at the start of the game, and I would have to buckle down to business later on and overcome that lead. I believe the main reason they were able to get that lead was because of the confidence I felt that I should be able to beat them easily. The result was that they played at top speed, knowing that they would have to be at their very best, while, on the other hand, I was inclined to take things easy, knowing that I could beat them.

I think that this condition of affairs exists to quite a degree in baseball. Take Ty Cobb, for instance. Ty knows that he is a champion. He knows that the youngsters

who lead him in the early days are not his equals. He knows that he can defeat them, and in the spring, when he may not be feeling in exactly the frame of mind to go out and burn up the league, he perhaps doesn't do himself full justice. On the other hand not a few inferior batters, finding the pitching ragged, begin with a couple of hits in the first game, see themselves with a fat averages at the close of the first week, and strain every nerve to maintain that average. As the season advances the pitching tightens up and the machine play of the opposing clubs begins to cut down their easy hits, and their fine averages wither while such batters as Cobb round into their stride and begin to display the ability which they undoubtedly possess.

It is much the same proposition as in a Marathon race. At the beginning of such a race you will seldom find the winner in front. He is usually back there about number forty-seven in the list, plodding along easily, while a bunch of enthusiastic amateurs are pegging away, out there in front, using up all their strength and energy. Finally, as the pace gets hot and the way long, the leaders begin to lag and one by one drop out of the race exhausted, while the veterans gradually crowd to the fore and finally leave the rest away behind. A baseball season, is a Marathon of 150 games, where exactly the same principle applies. Very often in a Marathon race you will find a runner hit up a hot pace for a time at various stages of the race. If he could only travel at that pace throughout he would smash all records. In similar style I have heard batters complain about their slow start. "If

BATTING MAXIMS OF HUGH JENNINGS

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The second place man to be able to work to advantage must do three things.

He must be able to hit the right ball.

He must be able to keep the ball on the ground.

He must figure correctly the opposing player who is going to cover the bag and play him accordingly.

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I could only hit in May the same as I do in August, I could bat .400," they say. No doubt this is true, but it isn't human nature to be able to sprint for very long at a time. If a batter were a machine he might do it, but, being human, he can't.

Every batter has his little peculiarities and mannerisms. And every batter has characteristics which make it simpler and easier for him to do certain things than some other batter. Ty Cobb is a shining example of batting talent raised to its highest form. I wouldn't pretend to try to teach Cobb anything about the art of hitting. And yet I have noticed certain things from long observation of his work. For one, I dislike to see Ty hit at the first ball pitched. He sometimes does this and I recognize the fact that there are frequently reasons for so doing. An opposing pitcher will often try to sneak across a strike on the batter, feeling confident that he will not hit at the first one. The batter's natural retaliation is to break up this method of attack by hitting at the first ball. But I believe that Ty gets set better, and is in a better position to hit successfully, if he lets two or three balls go past him; in other words, looks them over. Then he is much more apt to hit the ball true and hard.

Another thing, Ty hits to left fully as frequently, if not more so, than he does to right field. But I like to see him hit to right. The ball always seems to travel faster and harder when he hits them to right. He seems to get more force behind the blow and to meet the ball better when driving it toward that field.

The position which a player occupies in the batting list affects his hitting to a considerable extent. If he is picked as lead-off man he is practically ordered to pop off at least thirty points from his batting average. The lead-off man is almost invariably instructed to wait the pitcher out. In consequence he usually has to pass up one or two good balls that he feels confident he could hit and may find himself in a hole and under the necessity

of hitting at a bad ball. However, by following out the waiting system he is working for the best interests of his club, which is the main thing, really the only thing to be considered.

There are managers who consider the lead-off man the most important position in the batting order. Certainly he is the individual who is counted upon to drive the first wedge into the enemy's trenches. But it is equally clear that any initial advantage the lead-off man may win for his club would be of slight importance were it not backed up by a vigorous offensive on the part of his team mates.

For this reason I believe the men with the heavy bats, the clean-up hitters, are given perhaps more prominence than is their due by the average spectator. True, their work is very important and no club would get very far were it not for the presence on the line-up of some one or more men who could slug in the pinches. But it has always seemed to me that the most difficult of all positions on the line-up for the manager to fill acceptably, was second place.

No doubt this may sound odd, and yet how many good second place hitters do you find in baseball? Not many, I can tell you. And the reason is clear enough. The second place man, to really work to advantage, must be able to do three things dependably and well. He must be able to hit the right ball. This is very important and demands the knack of waiting them out combined with an unusually good eye. It takes judgment to decide whether or not to hit at a ball that looks pretty good but isn't exactly right, or whether to wait for something better. Few batters have the ability to do this, when they are called upon to advance the man ahead.

In the second place he must be able to keep the ball on the ground. How many times does the crowd groan when they see a batter pop up a meagre fly ball? But that is just what the pitcher is praying and sweating in the effort to make him do. In the third place he must figure cor-

rectly the opposing player who is going to cover the bag, and play him accordingly. Obviously the plan of the opposition is to make a double play if possible on the batter, assuming that number one has already got his base. Obviously the sole object of number two is to advance the man on the bases and break up this defensive plan. But for this purpose I myself do not so much rely upon the sacrifice. The sacrifice is a good play for a conservative game, where the players are slow-footed. But the most dashing, aggressive and effective offense is always the hit and run, provided you have players with the right ability to execute the play.

On the old Orioles, one of the grandest teams that ever existed, we used to work the hit and run offense to perfection. McGraw was lead-off man, an ideal player for the position. He was brainy, tricky, a good batter, a good waiter, a hard man to pitch to. Generally he would get his base by one means or another. Then came Willie Keeler, the best second place hitter I ever saw or ever expect to see. He was just as much superior to all other second place hitters as Ty Cobb is superior to other players in all-round offensive work. Keeler could do the three things I have indicated, as essential to the second place hitter, to perfection. He could almost certainly be counted upon to advance McGraw to second, even though he were himself thrown out at first. But very, very often he would come through with a short, snappy single, McGraw would race around to third, and with Keeler on first, no one out, and our heavy stickers up, McGraw was dead sure to score. In fact the enemy was very, very lucky if they held us down to one run, and often through Keeler's brilliant playing at his important position, we would score several runs in the very first inning—lead enough to insure us the game.

The sacrifice has grown in favor with the passing years and most managers inclined to use it quite freely. Every manager of course employs this play, but if

you have a good hitter in second place, such as Keeler was, it seems almost criminal to throw away his chance of hitting, by a sacrifice.

One of the things that is called to my attention more and more the longer I stay in the game, is the superstition of the players. Far be it from me to criticise them, however, for no one was any worse than I used to be in this respect. I remember my peculiar hobby, which no doubt was a clear indication of an unbalanced intellect, was this: I used to jump over the base paths when I went out on the field to take my position at short in every inning. I know my landlady went to the game one day. We lost the game as it happened, and when I saw her afterward and asked how she had enjoyed the game she said, "I knew you were going to lose. You forgot to jump across the base paths in the second inning."

The most dangerous thing that could happen to a club in those days was to ride in a bus, or any other conveyance, with a cross-eyed person. Such a catastrophe could be counted upon as almost sure to destroy a batting eye, for a time at least.

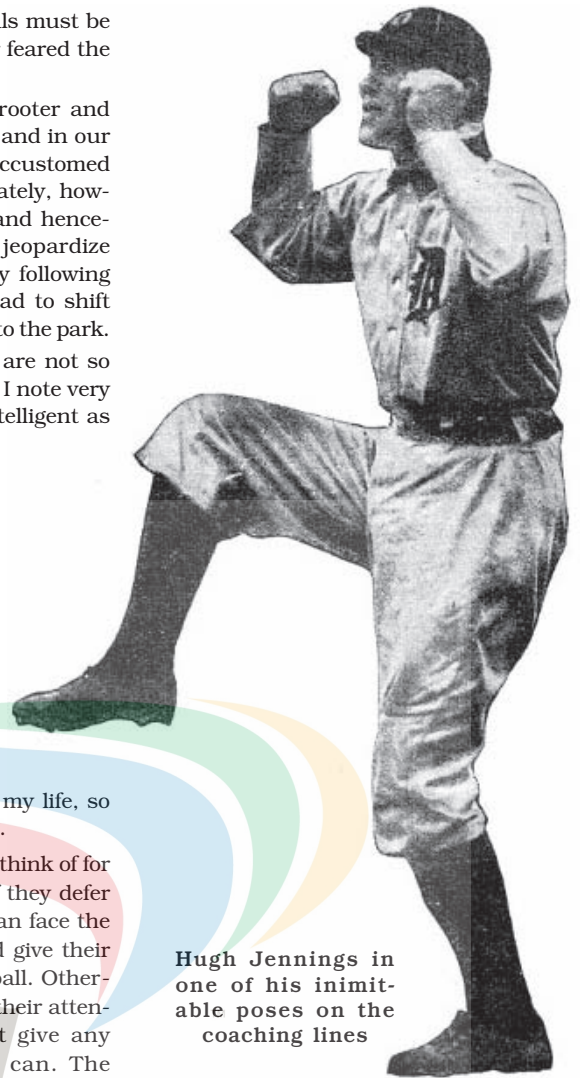
Another prolific source of trouble was funerals. True, we did not meet with a procession very often, but when we did disaster was plainly in the offing. We finished this hoodoo, however. One day we passed a funeral, but for some reason, either because the opposing pitcher was easy or something of the kind, we amassed a lot of runs; so many that the opposition could do nothing. After the game some profound logician on the club recalled the fact that we had met a funeral, had won

the game, and therefore funerals must be lucky. Henceforth we no longer feared the dire influence of funerals.

There used to be a great rooter and friend of the team in St. Louis, and in our bus rides to the park we were accustomed to drive by his place. Unfortunately, however, we lost a game one day and henceforth of course we could not jeopardize our chances at the pennant by following that particular route. So we had to shift and drive through other streets to the park.

Perhaps players nowadays are not so superstitious as they were, but I note very little difference. Even Cobb, intelligent as he is, is superstitious. Let him make two hits in a game, with an old pair of stockings on, and he will wear those stockings until he strikes a hitless game. Yesterday he came in late to the game. And he made two hits. Today I know that he is outside, in the club house, but he will come on to the field late. He wants to make two hits today. Yes, we are all a little bit unbalanced. But I have lived in a glass house all my life, so I have no right to throw stones.

Really the only excuse I can think of for batters' superstitions is this. If they defer to their pet superstition they can face the pitcher with an easy mind and give their entire attention to hitting the ball. Otherwise a lurking doubt distracts their attention. The psychologists must give any further explanation, if they can. The problem is beyond me.



Hugh Jennings in one of his inimitable poses on the coaching lines

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