

The Lost Art of Bunting

"Everybody in baseball says that bunting is a "lost art". They say this because coaches either view bunting as something, so basic, that it requires little skill, or because the aluminum bat has changed the game because of elevating players' abilities to hit the ball farther. After all, isn't the three-run homer more exciting? Most people think so. So, the art of bunting has been rendered useless, that is, unless you are undersized, lefty slap hitters with above-average speed.

Whatever the reason or the stereotype, too few players know how to bunt and, interestingly enough, for those teams that work on it, the bunting game has proven to be the difference maker in many close games at many different levels – including pro ball. If you have good bat control and have average to above-average running speed, you can make bunting into a solid part of your game and your team can turn it into a weapon that your opponent will have a very difficult time defending.

A well-schooled bunting team bunts at least once a game, and when they do, they put a tremendous amount of pressure on the opposing team. Once a team attempts to bunt the ball, the opponent has to respect that they might do it again for the remainder of the game. That's one more thing they have to worry about, leaving them vulnerable to other offensive threats such as stealing or swinging away.

Unfortunately, most coaches today have a "fast food approach" to scoring runs and providing skilled instruction. If it doesn't score runs in a hurry, or if it can't be taught and executed immediately for game use, then they aren't interested. Bunting is indeed a skill that players must learn and practice, over and over - even at the professional level. Today's best major league bunters work at their bunting day after day and will sometimes even spend entire batting practices working on their execution.

For most bunters, whether bunting to sacrifice or bunting for a hit, the best approach is to visualize your execution, focus on bunting a pitch you can handle, and use proper technique that's been "burned" into muscle memory from hundreds of attempts in practice. Give your team an edge this season and make bunting one of your strengths. You never know when it could be the difference!

Sacrifice Bunts

I often view the sacrifice bunt as the ultimate sign of selflessness in a team-oriented sport. When you get the sign from the coach to put down a sacrifice bunt, you know that you are giving up your turn at-bat for the good of the whole. I used to watch many players non-verbally communicate their disappointment when receiving this sign – a deep sigh or a half-hearted bunt attempt - and the end result usually let the team down. So I always tell players that if you work at perfecting your execution and placement of a sacrifice bunt, not only will you get the job done for the team's benefit, but you'll likely wind up safe at first (or second if the opponent throws the ball away). When you see the sacrifice sign, start focusing on the task at hand by visualizing the exact spot where you want to bunt the ball.

Keep these points in mind when sacrifice bunting:

1. Sacrificing your time at bat means just that. Make certain you square around in plenty of time to get the bunt down. There's no deception involved here. Oddly enough, many players wait too long to square around to a bunting position. Remember - it's a sacrifice!
2. Once you do square around, you should be in perfect bunting position at the top of the batter's box
3. Arms and elbows relaxed prepared to gently extend forward to contact (lead with the barrel when bunting toward third, lead with the knob when bunting toward first)

4. Barrel slightly above parallel to the ground (the barrel should never drop below parallel)
5. Lead knee bent at 90 degrees with upper body leaning over top of the knee (nose over top of the big toe)
6. Back knee inches above the ground with back foot ready to "push off" AFTER contact is assured
7. Hands in a position in line with your line of vision. Remember, you should bunt only at strikes. And since this bunting posture will place your line of vision at the top of the strike zone, a pitch that is thrown above your line of vision is a ball and should not be attempted at.

Bunting for a Hit

At the high school level, where players often log under 100 plate appearances in a season, successfully bunting for a hit can add 100 points to your final batting average. The key to a successful bunt for a hit is to be selective in the pitch you attempt to bunt, get your hands in proper position, and to initiate contact as far in front of the plate as allowed.

Here are three common flaws that many young players make when attempting to bunt which usually results in one of three unintended outcomes: they miss the pitch, foul it off, or bunt it someplace where the defense can make a play.

1. They decide before the pitch is thrown that they will attempt to bunt "no matter what". Often times, they attempt to bunt balls that are either out of the zone or are in locations that make it very difficult to achieve a desirable outcome. Bottom line, when bunting for a hit, the batter should use the exact same approach used to swing away in an "up-count" situation.
2. They start running out of the box before they make contact. Just like in hitting, more physical movement as the pitch approaches usually makes the process of precise contact more difficult.
3. Another mistake is showing the bunt too early, which allows the corner infielders to detect what's coming. Developing the proper timing to hide your intentions until the last second creates the element of surprise and will make your bunt more effective. If you become good enough and quick enough with your hands to drop the bat into bunting position at the last moment, then you have an advantage.

To correct these common flaws, keep these points in mind when bunting for a hit (righties "dump" to third):

1. Keep your arms extended and straight, and keep your hands firm. Soft hands will deaden the ball on the bat and will "kill it" in front of the plate allowing the catcher to have a play.
2. Keep your arms away from your body. If you hold them too close, you'll find yourself poking at the pitch.
3. Keep your elbows relaxed and make sure the barrel stays ahead of your entire body and above the point of contact. If you start to dip the bat, you'll foul off the pitch or pop it up.
4. You don't have to bunt the first pitch you see. The third baseman is always ready on the first pitch. Try putting down a bunt when the count is 2-0 or 2-1. That's when you'll find the third baseman napping.
5. The best kind of pitch to bunt is a fastball middle-in or a breaking pitch. The hardest ones to bunt are fastballs, low and away. Remember, if you don't like the pitch, you don't have to bunt it.
6. The best bunts are usually down the third-base line, but you can also push a bunt toward the second baseman. It's a tough play for the second sacker to rush in, scoop up the ball, and fire back across his body to first (for later discussion).