I’ve watched a lot of young baseball players try to hit live pitching, and I’ve observed two mistakes that I call “foundational” mistakes. These are the basic, fundamental mistakes which – if they aren’t cured by the coach or parent – can eliminate the effectiveness of on-field coaching while reducing the player’s potential batting average by more than half. For instance, it’s of no use for a coach to tell a batter to hit the ball behind the runner, when the batter can’t consistently hit the ball onto the field of play at all.

Young batters typically make two foundational mistakes. They swing under the ball and behind it. The first foundational mistake, swinging low, is usually caused by a poor stance and swing. The second foundational mistake, swinging late, is usually caused by slow reactions, which are caused in turn by the fear and excitement of being at bat in a real game. Both mistakes can be cured.

Swinging Low

Most young players begin from a stance that is too high and narrow; and, while the ball is en route to the plate, they step forward to a stance that is too low and wide. This causes three problems:

1. The batter’s head is in motion during the swing, confusing the batter’s visual concentration.

2. The batter’s eye-plane drops significantly during the swing, causing the batter to swing below the ball by the same amount.

3. The rotation of the batter’s body is restricted, resulting in a weaker swing. The power of the batter’s swing is the result of two factors, the weight of the bat and the speed of the swing. Bat speed doesn’t come from “stepping into the ball”, which has a negligible effect on bat speed. Bat speed comes from a full swing of the batter’s body. This swing includes every part of the body from the arms and shoulders to the toes - everything except the head, which should stay steady throughout the swing. By the way, if you’re thinking this sounds like a golf lesson, you’re right. The concepts are very similar; and, by the way, how many
golf pros teach their students to increase club speed by stepping into the ball? Zero. Think the golf guys might be missing something? Try it yourself.

The cure for the stance problem is for batters to start from a natural power position, and to take no step at all. By “power position” I mean a solid stance from which batters can get their best view of the ball and their best full-body rotation.

1. Batters should place their feet about shoulder-width apart - a little more is okay, and then move the back foot an additional inch or so toward the catcher.

2. The batters’ weight should be on the balls of their feet with their heels off the ground.

3. Their knees should be bent a little with their torsos bent slightly in towards the plate.

4. Their elbows should be high - around arm-pit level, and away from the body.

5. The bat should be held high and at the same position from which the batters’ swing begins, meaning that batters should not have to move the bat at all to start their swings.

6. Batters should keep their heads steady, maintaining the same position of the eye-plane throughout the swing. Lifting the head or body will cause a grounder or a missed ball, dipping the head or body will cause a pop-up or a missed ball.

The benefit of switching to this power position stance with a full-body swing is significant, but it won’t be apparent until the second problem is also cured.

**Swinging Late**

I mentioned above that the problem of swinging late, usually called “swinging behind the ball”, is caused by the fear and excitement of being at bat. We’re all aware of the distractions that can affect a kid’s performance at the plate. Rather than list them all, I’m just going to describe the common effect that all of these factors have on the batter’s performance. Each of them slows down the batter’s ability to mentally process the motion of the ball, which makes the batter swing further and further behind the ball until the batter can’t make contact with it at all.

I’ve developed a workable cure; but before I talk about what works, I need to mention a standard coaching error. The only coach on the field who should be giving batting advice to the player at the plate is the coach who can actually watch the batter’s entire swing, meaning the first base coach for right-handed hitters and
the third base coach for lefties. When a coach can actually see the whole swing, his advice will tend to be specific, helpful, and directed toward what the batter is really doing, physically and mentally, at that moment. The coach will say something like, “Jesse, you’re swinging behind the ball and under it; lock up your stance, and think ahead of the ball.” If the coach can’t see the whole swing, his batting advice will tend to be general, repetitive, and it won’t improve the batter’s performance at the plate at all.

To eliminate the problem of swinging late, what works is a consistent training program pointed toward getting the batter to react to the pitch earlier and quicker. For this, I use the batting cages at the “sportsplex” in our hometown, but I don’t use the cages the way you’d expect. Remember that batting cages have none of the fear and confusion of an actual game to slow down the batter’s mental processing. So, if you train batters to hit down the middle of the cage, they’ll probably miss the ball completely – swinging behind it – when the “heat is on” in a real game.

What works in the cage is to train the batter to pull the ball hard. For instance, in the cages I train my son Greg, a right-haner, to think ahead of the ball and to hit it hard to left. And I don’t mean a little bit to left. What I’m looking for are consistent, well-hit, line drives smashed into the net on the left side of the cage.

Why? Because I know from experience that being at bat in a real game - with all its noise, excitement, fear, and confusion - slows down Greg’s mental processing the equivalent of a full field of play. And yes, I mean it, a full field of play. If I train him to hit the ball down the middle of the cage, in a real game he’ll be swinging so far behind the ball that he won’t even be able to hit a weak foul to right. So, by training him in the cages to hit the ball out of play to the left, in a real game he’ll actually hit it somewhere on the true field of play.

We’ve all seen this before - or we’ve been burned by it, but we may not have known why. When a boy who’s never hit anything before comes to bat in the bottom of the ninth and finally makes contact with the ball, where does he hit it? If he’s right-handed, he strokes it into the right field hole, scoring two and ruining your day. Why? Has this kid suddenly become the best placement hitter in the league? No way. He finally made contact with the ball, and he finally made contact with the field, at the first spot that matched his gummed-up mental processing, the hole in right. A more simple example is the location of cars hit by foul balls in the parking lot. The overwhelming majority of cars hit by fouls are parked on the first base side, matching the percentage of right-handed hitters.
Working in the cages has another benefit, this time a natural one. It reinforces the need for the batter to begin his swing early with every pitch.

How frequently do we visit the cages? We go two or three times per week and hit 30 pitches per visit. I train Greg to think of the cage as a real at-bat: being mentally prepared for it, doing his static and dynamic stretching exercises before he goes in, and being ready to hit the first pitch hard. I stand behind him on his right side, looking for any motion of his head, and making relevant positive comments.

What if Greg’s having a bad day and not hitting as well as usual? Buying more time or pitches will just build frustration. So, we wrap up that session, talk about what went well and what didn’t, and look forward to his next session.


**Conclusion**

So, there it is. In my experience, you can help your batters cure the two foundational hitting mistakes by teaching them to take a solid stance with no step, to make a full-body swing, and by training their minds to think ahead of the ball. That doesn’t mean they won’t occasionally forget everything you’ve taught them—remember, they’re still kids; but these ideas will help you get them back in the groove soon.

Good luck, and if I can help at all, write to me at mark@markwarns.com.