

THE EYES HAVE IT

July 31, 2009 by admin

Filed under Fresno Grizzlies, Top Stories

The Grizzlies are using a new technique to sharpen their eyes at the plate.

By David Taub

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“The hardest thing to do in sport is to hit a baseball.”

-paraphrase of a famous Ted Williams quote

It's a simple concept, really. A successful hitter hits the ball. Really successful hitters reach safely three of ten times at bat.

Teaching a batter how to hit has been a philosophical quagmire since the game itself.

The methods are as varied as they are long: live toss, pitching machines, tape study, altering swings. Teams are willing to try anything to get the edge on how to be more successful.

One of the latest methods is to train batters with their eyes. It is called iTrac, used by at least four Major League teams, including the Giants.

On a Saturday, two hours before the Giants Triple-A affiliate, the Fresno Grizzlies prepare to battle, Juan Ciriaco, Jake Wald, Kevin Frandsen and Buster Posey gather around the indoor batting cage.

Enclosed by a mesh net, a device whirls specially marked tennis balls upward of 120 miles per hour from the regulation distance of 60' 6". It looks like a pitching machine with a bazooka attachment. It sounds like a vacuum cleaner as each pitch is delivered.



Kevin Frandsen is ne of the many Grizzlies who uses iTRAC. (Photo courtesy: Dave Nelson)

Developed by a company out of Wheeling, Illinois, iTrac rockets tennis balls stamped with red and black numbers. The hitter tries to guess what he just saw as the ball whizzes on by.

“Naked chicks on them would even be better,” joked one of the Grizzlies around the cage.

The operator of the equipment on this particular day is a former player, whose baseball dreams never reached beyond small college ball.

Joe Niemie's career didn't last long because of injuries. But, his arm problems led to coaching, and eventually to his current job as MLB iTrac trainer for the Giants.

Niemie coordinates the iTrac batting sessions for all Giants home games. When the team is on the road, Niemie and his machine hit the road as well, taking his wares to the Giants' two California minor league teams: the Grizzlies and the San Jose Giants.

Currently, the Giants, Cleveland, Tampa Bay and New York Mets contract out iTrac in hopes of getting the edge. Niemie hopes his company's secret to improving hitting will be discovered by all 30 teams.

"Every time it gets easier," Wald says after a session. "I kind of pretend I do (see the numbers on the ball). I kind of pick up shapes."

Wald is unsure if this will actually help him, but he is willing to do whatever it takes to help his game. The balls start fast, in the 80-90 MPH range, then can get up to 120. On this day, players barely get a piece of the ball, more often than make solid contact.

Then, the hitter will just hold the bat, in a bunt formation, with one hand. This, Niemie describes, is to help their eye follow the ball all the way through the plate.

One philosophy iTrac believes that is somewhat a break with tradition hitter's education is to turn the head to focus on the ball, instead of just the eyes.

"You see everything better when you have both eyes [on the ball]," Niemie says. "It will really enhance what's called your binocular vision, which will enhance your depth perception, allowing better contact."

This is especially valuable for pitchers with late and trick movements, i.e. Mariano Rivera's cutter or most Greg Maddux pitches.

The goal to moving the head with a ball at such high velocities is to keep the vision of the ball between the eyes.

By having the batter keep his focus on the printed number on the ball at high speeds, the hope is to identify spin of the hard ball. This in turn allows the hitter identify the pitch and increase chances for success.

"Anything that helps," quips Grizzlies hitting instructor Hensley Meulens. "We are very glad the Giants are investing into this."

The numbers will tell that the Giants are better offensively at home than they are on the road. Although this could be related to a number of factors, Niemie is willing to credit iTrac as one of them.

"No one works on the seeing. That's where we come in," Niemie says, touting his system.

Urban legend has it that one baseball superstar mandated in his contract that the iTrac system follows him to a new team. The technique has its believers, but ultimately, the numbers will tell the story.

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