

Jerry Crasnick on plate discipline

Like the definition of a good stimulus package or the guidelines for tipping your neighborhood Hooters waitress, plate discipline means different things to different people.

To the average fan, it's embodied by Angels outfielder Bobby Abreu, a hitter who's comfortable taking Strike 1 down the pipe and eyeballing pitch after pitch on the black. Your garden variety Abreu at-bat runs almost as long as "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button."

For some Hall of Fame voters, Andre Dawson's meager walk totals are a rationale against induction to Cooperstown. Baseball writers love the Hawk's 400 homers, 300 stolen bases and eight Gold Gloves, but many refuse to cut him slack for that .323 career on-base percentage.

To Daniel Murphy, the Mets' young left fielder, plate discipline means having the willpower to say no regardless of how much his eyes say yes.

"Plate discipline for me is swinging at something that I'm looking for and I can hit," Murphy says. "For the most part, I like the pitch down, so I try not to swing at anything up until two strikes, because if I swing at that, then I'm out."

For Atlanta outfielder Jeff Francoeur, the search for a more disciplined approach is elusive and the source of occasional torment. Francoeur began this season with loose goals of 80 strikeouts and 50 to 60 walks. But he's always been an aggressive player, and he's wary of becoming too passive in the quest for a higher OBP.

"If on-base percentage is so important, then why don't they put it up on the scoreboard?" Francoeur says.

Hey, if they can post Ian Kinsler's OPS on ESPN's "Sunday Night Baseball" with no further embellishment, that day might not be far off.

As managers obsess over pitchers' workloads and teams routinely carry staffs with 12 or even 13 arms, the 30 major league clubs continue to look for ways to drive up pitch counts and apply the pressure. One ultra-selective Albert Pujols or Kevin Youkilis in the middle of the order sets the tone, and the mindset becomes contagious.

That's nothing new. The long-term goal, as teams focus on grinding out at-bats to chase starters and expose weak bullpens, is finding the next wave of hitters who can get with the program. In baseball terms, it's the equivalent of automobile manufacturers' racing to build the best hybrid vehicle.

"There are a lot of player development people who continue to scratch their heads trying to come up with ideas about how their hitters can be more selective," says Keith Lieppman, the farm director for the Oakland A's. "It's continually evolving to this day."

Do scouting directors just look for players with proven pedigrees in the draft, or can teams feel free to select players with power, speed and other tools in anticipation that plate discipline can be taught to anyone with hand-eye coordination and the willingness to learn?

It's the old nature versus nurture debate. Is plate discipline a God-given skill, a learned behavior, or a combination of the two? And in the case of Francoeur, if you tinker forever, do you have a chance?

Alderson influence

Contrary to the popular perception, life as we know it didn't begin with "Moneyball." The A's began preaching the value of on-base percentage way back in the 1980s, when general manager Sandy Alderson embraced the writings of Eric Walker, a former aerospace engineer who argued that offenses should be more concerned with avoiding outs than amassing base hits.

For me, plate discipline is being able to know what pitch you want to put in play before you step in the box and not swinging at anything else but that.

” -- *Braves third baseman Chipper Jones*

The A's instituted a teaching model that's been subject to constant trial and error over time. It permeates each level of their minor league system.

"I've been in this job 18 years, and I've gotten phone calls from people in other organizations who say, 'How do you guys teach that selectivity thing?'" Lieppman says. "I tell them, 'Have you got a couple of years?'"

Boston, Cleveland and San Diego are among the other organizations that stress plate discipline in the minors. If a young Red Sox hitter doesn't have a clue in Salem, Portland or Pawtucket, Fenway Park certainly isn't the place to learn. That's truer than ever now that technological advances in scouting allow teams to readily identify and exploit hitters' weaknesses.

"It's an incredibly difficult thing to teach at the major league level," says Red Sox assistant GM Ben Cherington. "There's pressure on players in terms of winning, keeping a job and earning money. It's hard to do at any level, but it's really hard at the major league level."

Boston's approach is centered on two building blocks. First, hitters are encouraged to approach an 0-0 count with the same mindset they have at 2-0 or 3-1. If they see a fastball in their zone, they're poised to climb all over it and drive it. If they don't see that pitch, they lay off, and it's either a ball or a strike they probably couldn't have done much with, anyway.

OBP SINCE OPENING DAY 2005

BEST	WORST
Albert Pujols .438	Miguel Olivo .269
Chipper Jones .429	Corey Patterson .280
Todd Helton .421	Juan Uribe .284
Manny Ramirez .415	Adam Everett .288
Alex Rodriguez .408	Khalil Greene .293

Minimum of 1,500 plate appearances

WALKS SINCE OPENING DAY 2005

MOST	FEWEST
Adam Dunn 474	Miguel Olivo 39
Pat Burrell 427	Kenji Johjima 55
David Ortiz 418	Yuniesky Betancourt 61
Albert Pujols 411	Delmon Young 65
Bobby Abreu 409	Ivan Rodriguez 74

Minimum of 1,500 plate appearances

Boston's minor league instructors also stress the importance of a consistent two-strike approach. Generally, hitters like to widen out at the plate, choke up, let the ball travel deep in the zone and try to foul it off. Some hitters expand the zone from black to black. Others might look away, since that's where most pitchers try to finish off hitters, then adjust to anything inside.

One popular misconception is that teams such as Oakland and Boston bombard their young hitters with a directive to walk more and strike out less. Instead, those clubs preach the value of a sound approach, and believe the numbers will take care of themselves as a byproduct.

"We don't want guys to strike out, but I don't think a guy strikes out less by telling him to strike out less," Cherington says.

Says Lieppman: "We have a cycle that we pound into hitters' heads. It consists of the approach, the result, and then the response to what just happened. It's not about going up there trying to walk. It's about getting a good pitch to hit."

For several years, the A's tinkered with incentives to drum home the need for a disciplined approach at the plate. An Oakland prospect couldn't advance a rung in the minors or win an organizational award unless he walked in 10 percent of his plate appearances or posted an OBP of .350. But the Oakland development people eventually concluded that those markers were too rigid, and they dispensed with the standards.

Still, the A's continue to school their young hitters in the importance of focus and tuning out distractions. In rookie ball or Class A ball, hitters might be required to take a pitch or two in each at-bat. They participate in drills that teach them how to foul off tough pitches with two strikes. And if a hitter swings at a bad pitch in batting practice, he might receive a subtle reminder.

"There's a learning curve for hitters, and there are going to be some down cycles," Lieppman says. "As you teach people how to be selective, in many cases performance will go down and you'll see an increase in passivity for hitters. It's hard to be aggressive and patient and selective at the same time."

Cherington divides young hitters into three categories. The first consists of players who are "wired" to be selective and have the developmental background to be successful. Youkilis and Mark Teixeira embraced the concept of plate discipline in college, while Yonder Alonso, Cincinnati's first-round draft pick in 2008, was a polished hitter coming out of the University of Miami.

The second group consists of players who also might be wired for selectivity, but haven't been exposed to the philosophy enough to put it into practice. Orlando Hudson and Jose Reyes both made huge strides once they arrived in the majors. Cherington mentions Pittsburgh second baseman Freddy Sanchez, who's never been a big walker, but became more particular about swinging at strikes as a minor leaguer in the Boston chain.

The final grouping is made up of players who don't have the inclination to be selective. They're just not built that way. Corey Patterson, Brandon Phillips, Yuniesky Betancourt and (to this point) Francoeur are members of this fraternity.

There are no secrets these days. Inside Edge and other statistical services keep detailed information on which hitters are finicky and which swing freely, and who makes contact or swings at air. The FanGraphs Web site can tell you that only 9.3 percent of the pitches Toronto shortstop Marco Scutaro swings at are outside the strike zone, while Giants catcher Bengie Molina offers at a whopping 54 percent. Francoeur resides in the middle of the pack at 27.8 percent.

Born hacker

In many ways, Francoeur is racing to make up for lost time. As a terrific high school athlete in Atlanta, he had the gifts of a first-round draft pick with none of the refinement. He would stand on the plate, take a big metal-bat hack, and watch the ball fly.

Since his arrival in the majors in 2005, Francoeur has struggled to find an identity. He hit 29 homers in his first full season, but posted a .293 on-base percentage. Then he improved his OBP at the expense of his power. Last year he bulked up with an NFL-style conditioning program in an effort to hit more home runs, and everything unraveled.

One scout called him "the most confused hitter in the game" -- a label that Francoeur doesn't dispute. He's sensitive to the criticism of his free-swinging approach, and at times he's put excessive pressure on himself to remake himself as a hitter.

"People forget that I just turned 25," Francoeur says. "I've been up since I was 21, and a lot of people come up when they're 24 or 25. I have 3½ years in the big leagues, but I'm still learning how to hit."

Francoeur spent a lot of time with teammate Chipper Jones in the cage over the winter and traveled to Texas to work with Rangers coach Rudy Jaramillo. Among other things, they stressed the impact that good or bad mechanics can have on plate discipline. In 2008, Francoeur's mechanics were such a mess that he had to cheat and start the bat early to have a prayer of hitting a fastball. That robbed him of precious milliseconds to better gauge what was coming.

Jones runs through the list of transgressions: Francoeur's head was moving, his bat was "wrapping," and he was long getting to the ball. In one-on-one sessions with Jaramillo, Francoeur picked up a couple of keys to remedy the problem. He now makes sure to get his hands back and his foot down once the pitcher raises his arm and is ready to deliver the ball. That way, he can better see the ball, and doesn't have to rush to get his hands in position.

"I think Frenchy will admit that he cannot continue along the same path he was headed down and be successful," Jones says. "When you're that much of a free swinger, it can only lead to bad things. How many times did you see him swing at a pitch in the dirt the first couple years of his career?"

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” -- *A's farm director Keith Lieppman*

Francoeur's results so far this season are a mixed bag. He has only four walks and a .307 on-base percentage in his first 95 at-bats. But he's struck out a mere eight times, and he's hitting .440 with runners in scoring position. He thinks he's on his way to finding the proper balance between selective and aggressive.

"You don't go up there, as a hitter saying, 'I'm going to take some pitches,'" Francoeur says. "The moment you do, they're going to throw you two fastballs down the middle. If you're facing Tim Lincecum and you go up there trying to work into a hitter's count, you better not miss that fastball he throws -- because if you get behind 0-2, you're done."

Francoeur is fortunate to have access to a hitting oracle in Jones, whose .310 career batting average and six All-Star appearances give him the self-assurance to stick with a plan and rarely stray from it.

"For me, plate discipline is being able to know what pitch you want to put in play before you step in the box and not swinging at anything else but that," Jones says. "A lot of young hitters go up there and look for the first strike. They could be sitting on the fastball, but they still swing at the curveball.

"That's where young hitters make outs, whereas older hitters might sit on the fastball, then spit on the curveball, spit on the changeup and spit on the slider until they get that one fastball in the count. If you go up there with a game plan of knowing what pitch you want to put in play, it automatically makes you a much more selective hitter."

Mixed messages?

The Brewers have a young, relatively free-swinging lineup that's reliant on the long ball to score runs. So some players were perplexed last year when then-manager Ned Yost held a meeting in New York and told them they weren't drawing enough walks. Shortstop J.J. Hardy said the directive bred a sense of confusion and tentativeness.

"We didn't walk enough, so we had a meeting about needing to walk," Hardy says. "Guys were like, 'Really?' You look at it from our perspective. Guys would be up there trying to work a walk. Then they'd take a pitch down the middle and think, 'That could have been a home run.'"

Walk and strikeout totals can be deceiving barometers. Although Abreu has averaged 123 strikeouts per season, that's an inevitable byproduct of working deep counts. At the opposite end of the scale, lots of young players are so afraid of striking out that they swing at a pitcher's pitch early in the count simply to put the ball in play.

When Hardy was 18 years old and playing rookie ball, he struck out only 14 times in 166 plate appearances. In hindsight, he realizes it was because he was swinging from the moment he stepped in the box.

This year, Milwaukee outfielder Ryan Braun, a renowned free swinger, has already drawn 14 walks -- a third of his total for all of 2008. Is Braun more selective? Perhaps. But pitchers have also learned to tread lightly around Braun because of his career .584 slugging percentage. He's not going to see many strikes because his reputation precedes him.

It takes a rare player to learn the value of plate discipline under a microscope, but Reyes certainly applies. In 2005, Reyes drew 27 walks and struck out 78 times. Two years later, he drew 77 walks and struck out 78 times. In the course of his makeover, Reyes upgraded a .300 OBP to the .350 to .360 range annually.

The transformation is better achieved, of course, in the developmental chain. Nick Swisher, hailed in "Moneyball" as a polished offensive player coming out of Ohio State, took a big step forward with Oakland's Triple-A farm club in Sacramento in 2004, when he drew 103 walks and posted a .407 OBP. Swisher benefited from hours of work with coach Joe Sparks, who devised a drill in which he'd throw pitches and Swisher had to shout out "yes" or "no" before the ball reached the plate.

The general rule of thumb in baseball is that players need a foundation of 1,500 minor league at-bats before they graduate to the majors. But the A's use a different measuring stick. They track the total number of pitches seen, rather than simply count at-bats. It stands to reason that a hitter who averages 4.2 pitches for 1,500 plate appearances will be more advanced than someone who sees only 2.5.

"The more pitches hitters see, the more confident and mature they are," Lieppman said. "They're not panicked by a 2-2 sinker or a slider that's barely off the plate. They come to understand it's not a pitch to hit, or they foul it off. That's the level you're trying to get to."

In baseball's new age, even cultural stereotypes are taking a beating. Lieppman recently traveled to the Dominican Republic to visit Oakland's Latin-American academy, and he saw several youngsters making progress in the quest to exercise restraint at the plate.

The A's have no desire to suck the joy out of the game for their young Latin players, and they're not going to be finicky if they stumble upon the next Vladimir Guerrero. But they know there are only so many Vlads out there.

"Baseball people used to say, 'You can't walk your way off the island,'" Lieppman said. "We've changed that model to, 'You've got to be selective to get off the island.'"

These days, aspiring big leaguers from all backgrounds and locations would be advised to learn the same language. Brain-dead hackers need not apply.

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