



PLAY BIG! By Dr. Tom Hanson
Sample Reading

Part 1:

“Do You Make These Mistakes Hitting and Pitching?”

You're about to discover...

- How NOT to Hit (and pitch)
- The most important question in baseball
- Why you must fail to have fun
- The hidden cause of technical mistakes
- The REAL source of your results

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How Not to Hit

The streaking fastball was belt high, right down Main Street central.

My eyes lit up as my front foot stomped into the ground. "I'll rip this pitch," I said to myself as I yanked my hands forward.

And I *needed* to rip it.

The last couple of weeks were a nightmare for me at the plate: two for my last 23 and both those hits were lame. One hit was a swinging bunt that actually stopped *on* the foul line -- my only whiff of good luck in this whole streak. I'd already struck out and popped up today.

I'd moped around complaining about my slump to anyone who'd listen and I was wound up tight for this game.

But the team needed me to come through. This was the fourth inning of Game 2 of the best-of-three Red River Valley Summer League Championship.

We'd won Game 1 by a run (with no help from me) and we wanted this championship bad. After a slow start to the season our team had really come together and run the table the last few weeks, winning the first two rounds of the post-season tournament 9-1 and 8-2, and winning Game 1 of the championship series 3-2.

We had a special group of players who now shared a special bond, and although it was just a summer league, we wanted the laughs and life-long memory of dog piling at the end of the season.

But it wouldn't come easily.

The Rakeops, in their signature black tops and crazed dog logo black and white hats, had jumped out to a 3-1 lead in this second game, and our bats had gone silent.

Winning this game was huge because the Rakeops had their ace, Jay Kamin (Ka-MEAN), ready to pitch tomorrow's possible Game 3. Kamin was the Red River Valley League's own Cy Young. He was nasty and had dominated all summer. In fact, he was unbeaten. He shut us out the only time we faced him this summer and his ERA of 1.98 was only that high because he'd been shaky in the first inning several times.

"Get him early or forget it," was the book on Kamin, and as yet no one had gotten him. Fortunately for us he pitched the game to get the Rakeops into the championship series so he

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wasn't available for these first two games.

So while we were in the driver's seat having won Game 1, the pressure was on to put them away here before they could get to Kamin.

And I was our best chance. The way I was hitting it was a fat chance, but a chance nonetheless.

We had runners on second and third, but there were two outs and I was in the hole with two strikes. The way we were having trouble scoring runs, we knew this could be the ballgame even though it was only the fourth inning (each of the best-of-three series games were seven innings).

I had been pretty nervous all day, and got even more so before this at-bat. When I got to the on-deck circle my heart was pounding high in my chest, the butterflies were churning in my stomach, my hands felt clammy, and everything seemed to be going faster and faster. If you've been overly nervous about anything, you know the feeling.

I was so amped up, the start of our (bottom) half of the first inning was a blur.

Doug Kovash, the Rakeops' second-best pitcher, had been strong for three innings but walked the first batter in the fourth. Our two-hole hitter, Joe Knight, popped up. Jim George singled, putting runners on first and second, and both runners moved up one base when our clean-up guy and team slow poke, Lee Swenson, dribbled a nubber to first.

Suddenly the fate of the game, and perhaps the series, fell on my shoulders.

A baseball-sized lump in my throat choked my breath as I gingerly raked the dirt in the batter's box with my spikes.

I had decided to take the first pitch to see if Kovash was still in control and to run up his pitch count. Of course, it was a fastball down the middle for strike one.

Fortunately, Kovash followed with two pitches well out of the strike zone so they were easy takes. Perhaps his control *was* wavering.

"Time to shine," I thought to myself, *"he'll come with one now."*

The 2-1 offering was a fastball alright. I grunted my swing through the zone and fouled it back.

Two balls and two strikes.

"Big one left," I thought as I stepped out of the box, "rip it and be the hero...."

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“OR STRIKE OUT AND BE THE GOAT!” came another, more powerful voice in my head.

I squeezed the bat tightly and locked down my jaw as I stepped into the box. “Don’t strike out,” the voice said, fearing the worst and praying Kovash would throw that first fastball again.

“THERE IT IS!” said my inner alarms the instant the ball left the Kovash’s right hand, “JUST LIKE THE FIRST PITCH!”

This fastball was in my happy zone... This fastball was crushable... This fastball was....

... a curveball.

The instant I actually saw the ball, the dang thing was tumbling like clothes in a dryer, and it was obvious the pitch would be way outside.

But it was too late.

As a psychology major I’d always been fascinated with things like that moment in time when you’ve committed to some action, be it slamming the car door or swinging at a pitch, and you realize you’ve made a mistake.

It seems like you should have plenty of time to stop, but the horse has left the barn. You just can’t stop.

This time, *fascinating* isn’t the word I would use to describe the experience.

My butt shot out behind me like I was begging to be spanked and I hideously lurched forward in hopes of fouling it off. But I already told you how my luck was running. My streak remained alive and well.

I got my spanking alright: strike three.

Embarrassingly, the only thing that did hit the ball was the dirt in the lefty batter’s box. In disgust I continued my futile flail at the ball by spinning my body around like a top, looking up to the sky in submission.

I’d twirled myself right onto home plate when the catcher tagged me out. Add “not-running-to-first-base-on-strike-three-in-the-dirt” to my distinguished list of accomplishments for the at-bat.

I took my helmet off with my right hand and smacked it into the palm of my left hand as the Rakeops hustled off the field to the cheering of their 60 or so fans. I could feel the deflation in my teammates as they tried their best to jog out of our first base dugout to take the field for

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the fifth inning.

"Here we go again," I said to myself. *"I stink!"*

I'd let the team down again. Tough to win tournaments when your number-five hitter can't put the ball in play, much less drive in a run.

As I walked toward my defensive position at first base, Johnny Waddle, our catcher, gave me my hat and glove. He gave me a quick word of encouragement, but I didn't catch what it was.

I was lost in my own world of loser-dom.

I continued my self-lynching as I got to first and began angrily chucking ground balls to the infielders.

"DANG IT!" I blurted out through my gritted teeth.

Then, *"Atta boy, Tom,"* I said to myself sarcastically as I flung a ball to third. *"Way to come through for the team."*

Although this was just the top of the fifth and we still had nine outs left (we always play 7 inning games in this league), I felt like it was all over. Not just the game and not just the series, but my whole baseball career. *Why play if I can't hit?*

While I knew I stunk as a player, what I didn't know was that this dark night of my soul was actually the dawning of the most important, most shocking, and most wonderful experience of my life so far.

In fact, I was just a few outs from the start of an adventure that may, before this is all over, change the way baseball is played forever.

Baseball Doesn't Care

After we got the Rakeops out damage-free in the top of the fifth (during which I continued verbally abusing myself), I trotted in to the dugout. Having made the last out of the fourth (shocker) I had some time on my hands.

I was too intent on beating myself up to appreciate how nice a day it was.

August in northwest Minnesota, the tail end of "Road Construction Season" as we refer to summer up here, can really be beautiful. Today was just that: 76 degrees and sunny with those

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fluffy, Chamber of Commerce “come visit our 10,000 lakes” clouds overhead.

No chance of rain. But even in the radiance of this fine day, somehow Old Man Winter was sending advance notice we shouldn't get too comfortable, he'd be back soon.

I, like all Minnesota males, considered myself above average. Tall with limited speed and mobility (that's what I was told, although in my mind I was cat-like quick), I was confined to playing first base. Three right arm operations stemming from a childhood accident made my throwing a team joke.

But there was nothing wrong with my glove hand – I could pick it with anybody.

Until recently I was also a good hitter. From youth league through junior high I was consistently a dominating hitter (it helped to be a head taller than most), but it seemed other guys caught up to me in my early teens.

I wrongfully sat the bench during my junior year: *How could you not find a place for a guy who was ripping the ball like I was?*

But riding the bench actually worked out pretty well in the long run because it motivated me to practice hard the winter of my senior year. I swung a weighted bat in the basement (still sorry about the chunk I took out of the pool table, Dad) and read Charlie Lau's book on hitting for hours. I even flipped through the corner pages, setting in motion George Brett's swing, until the pages were so frayed that the images wouldn't come to life anymore. But, man, I wanted to hit like Brett. Who didn't!

Everything came together the summer of my senior year of American Legion ball. I even set some records that had stood for awhile.

But unfortunately for me baseball doesn't care what you've done in the past. It doesn't care what you're capable of. It just gives you what you've got coming on this next pitch.

Like the Greek character Sisyphus rolling his rock up the hill only to have it roll back down again, each time up to the plate you start over from scratch.

And right now, for today's game, I felt I should be scratched from the lineup.

As I entered the newly painted light blue first-base dugout, my metal cleats click-clacked on the cement steps. I grabbed a paper cup, filled it with water from the yellow cooler, and gulped it down while my teammates milled around.

“Let's get this guy,” said one of my teammates trying to overcome the unspoken sense that we might not pull this one out and our joyous one game lead could turn into a crushing series

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defeat if we had to beat Kamin (we'd yet to ever score off him).

I grunted some faux support and stepped just outside the dugout to the outfield side to blow off some steam.

Matson Field had improved dramatically in just the past year. The old four-foot fence was replaced with a 7-foot high chain link fence that began on the outfield end of our first-base dugout and encircled the entire outfield, both foul and fair territory.

A new grounds guy had the field in nice shape and they'd dramatically improved the lights. A light green windscreen ran the whole length of the fence, which gave the field that cool, Big League enclosed feeling.

Nowhere is that more important than in Moorhead, Minnesota, God's pool table.

This area is astonishingly flat. If you ever wonder how far you can see on a flat surface, come to Moorhead.

And it's crazy windy. Today was pretty calm, but generally it felt like the wind raced down the east side of the Rocky Mountains, accelerated as it crossed Montana and North Dakota, and slammed into every human face in Moorhead. Not a pleasant feeling, even in the summer. (You don't want to know about the winters).

So adding the windscreen was a major upgrade for the ballpark.

The windscreen had the unintended effect of making it hard for the players to see the fans through the screen.

With your face near the wind screen, you could see through the windscreen well enough, but put even a few inches between you and the fence and everything behind it blurred out fast. Fans milling about behind the fence were shadowy ghosts whose form you could make out, but you couldn't see the finer details that make a person recognizable.

All of that was fine with me at the moment. I didn't want to see anyone pointing at me as the loser who blew this for our team.

"Hey 21," a man's voice barked out my number through the screen. I didn't recognize the voice and was in no mood to chat or put up with him asking for a ball or something, so I ignored it.

"Hey 21, got a minute?" the voice persisted.

I turned to look at him. I couldn't tell much through the screen except that he was an adult (meaning older than me, so at least in his late 20s) a few inches over six feet tall. He was not

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fat, not skinny. I couldn't make out any facial features, but while he seemed familiar in some way, I was confident I didn't know the guy.

Turned out he knew me even better than I knew myself.

You're Asking for It

"How's it goin'?" he asked in a pretty non-descript accent. It wasn't the strong local "Minnesooda" accent, his vowel sounds weren't round enough. But it wasn't a strong Northeastern or Southern accent either, so perhaps a transplanted Minnesotan from Florida or something.

My icy stare back at the shadow in the fence made any verbal response to his question unnecessary.

"I see," he said before adding with some sarcasm, **"And how's that working for you?"**

"How's what working for me?" I snapped back.

"It doesn't take supernatural powers to see you're pretty down on yourself," the man said, almost implying he had such powers. "This is a big game. I'd think you'd want to play big."

I took offense: "With all due respect, sir, I want more than anything to help this team. Did you see my last AB?" [AB = at bat, a hitter's turn at the plate]

"Yes," he said, "and?"

"And *that's* how it's going," I said with a tone and body language that made it clear I was done talking with him.

"Is that what you want to have happen?" he asked. "Is that how you want your game to go?"

"Yeah, sure, I love being the goat!" I said angrily. "Of course not! What do you think?" I then started heading back toward the dugout. I'd had enough of this harassment already.

"But you're playing small and asking for more of it," he said, "so I thought..."

"Look, I don't need some stranger coming over here and tell me I'm playing small, whatever that means. And I don't hear me asking for more crappy hitting, do you?"

"Actually, that's *exactly* what I'm hearing," laughed the man. "I can help you change that if you

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let me. ***After all, you're actually only forgetting one thing.***

"No thanks," I said only half turning back toward him as I kept walking. "I'm fine."

I stepped inside the dugout and stopped at the bench to grab some sunflower seeds from an open bag. I poured a handful, popped them all into my mouth, and headed for the home plate side of our dugout.

My mind was so busy being mad at myself and the stupid man that I didn't notice I was chewing the seeds whole. It didn't matter. It's not as if I had the patience to split each seed anyway.

"I'm asking for it?" I mumbled to myself, *"I'm playing small? And I'm forgetting 'only' one thing. Who does he think he is?"*

PING!

I was snapped out of my own head by the familiar sound of a baseball hitting a metal bat very hard. Kevin Dotseth, our center fielder, had just connected with a 2-1 pitch from Kovash. "Go ball! Go ball!" came the cries from our dugout as we all raced over the top step of the dugout.

"Yeaahhhh!" we all cheered as Dotseth's ball barely cleared the right-field fence. "Dots" didn't have much opposite field power normally, but with Kovash's fastball providing the juice, he had just enough power to help us cut the lead to one run.

Is This Guy Serious?

While we were pumped up, Dotseth's home run didn't exactly rattle Kovash. He proceeded to mow down our next batters, and we were quickly back on the field.

Although I tried not to let the man see me look over, I glanced over at the man behind the screen several times from my position at first base.

Who is that guy? What does he want? Is he pulling for the Rakeops and trying to get in my head to mess me up?

That doesn't make much sense, I'm already messed up. He should ride someone on our team who might actually do something useful.

"This is a big game and I thought you'd want to play big."

What kind of crap is that?

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How could he think I'm asking for more bad hitting?

I'm only forgetting one thing? What could that be? What am I forgetting?

All these questions made me want to punch him in the face. But I also wanted to find out the answers. He was in my head. I wish I knew who he was. He seemed so familiar, but not like anyone I'd met. He'd said he wanted to help, but so far he'd just helped me get more frustrated.

A strike out and two fly outs made short order of the Rakeops' half of the fifth inning and I trotted in, head down.

I decided to forget the man and stay in the dugout where I belong.

The Most Important Baseball Question

"Same seats, same seats!" Chad Swanson, our shortstop, told everyone as we got into the dugout. He was the funny guy on the team (every team seems to have one), and he always seemed to be fired up about something.

He was invoking one of our rituals we'd created over the summer. The good teams I'd been on always made up their own goofy rally cries or superstitions (although they usually were both).

This one, "same seats," means we all go back to where we were during the previous inning. Since we'd scored while in those places, we all got back into them to start the bottom of the sixth.

"Wow," I thought to myself as it hit me: *I was outside talking to the man when the last inning started.* I couldn't believe I had to go back out there. It seemed a very strange coincidence that my decision to go out there a second time was made for me.

"Hey, 21," said the voice behind the screen in a welcoming tone as I took my position outside the dugout, "looks like the energy's changed and you guys have some momentum."

I grunted a reply.

"I didn't mean to get under your skin," the man said. "You just didn't look very happy and I **know you didn't know what you didn't know about playing this game.**"

For some reason, the way he said that melted just enough of the ice in my veins to crack me open.

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“Okay,” I said, “I’ll bite. What one thing am I forgetting?”

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