

in the circle

with Michele Smith

Sacrifice Bunting

Each year I get excited when May rolls around as I know the end of the College Softball season is nearing and I will have the honor to help call games for ESPN. Three years ago while working as the color analyst for ESPN at the Women's College World Series I was amazed to see such poor bunting skills from the top college softball programs. With the WCWS right around the corner and the summer season shifting into high gear, I thought it would be a good time to recap bunting and its importance. Sacrifice Bunting

is a very important skill in Fast pitch softball. Teams that move runners into scoring position efficiently are often more successful than teams that do not execute the sacrifice bunt. In order to score a runner from first base it takes at least two, maybe three base hits. When a runner is in scoring position, it takes just a base hit, or most two at the most, to get her across the plate. There are many ways to move runners, and the sacrifice bunt is just one of those. In order to bunt the runner into scoring position, the bunt must be executed properly. Many teams are not taught to bunt properly and therefore fail to move runners. I have bunted using the following form for many years. I can promise you it makes sacrifice bunting an easier task to accomplish.



Stance [see picture # 1]: Almost 100% of the time we take the sign for the Sacrifice Bunt while outside the batter's box.



Therefore when we enter into the batter's box, we want to enter as if we are going to take a normal swing at the ball. In other words, we don't want to give away too early that we are going to Sacrifice bunt. Giving away the bunt too early would give the pitcher and catcher time to adjust the pitch they are throwing and for the defensive corners to charge in early. We will step around into bunting position early, but only after the pitcher has set and is at the start of her wind up.

"Back Leg Step Around" into Proper Bunting Position [see picture # 2]

Many times bunting failures are due to bad form. I have developed a simple "back leg step around" that is easy to learn and allows the batter to get into the proper bunting position. I use this method myself, and it helps me get the majority of my bunts down while advancing runners.

•The first movement is with the back leg. For lefties it is your left leg, for righties it is your right leg. While pivoting on your front foot, take

a full and long step forward with your back leg. This will put your back foot, once it is down and planted, in front of your forward foot, with both feet in front of home plate. See picture # 2. My left leg and foot are now in front of my right leg and foot. This puts me in front of home plate which is very important. [Many young athletes incorrectly step on home plate while bunting. This is an automatic out when seen by the umpire.]

•This "step around" method also puts my weight forward which is very important. This will help me get more bunts down and in fair territory. Many bunt failures are due to bunting the ball foul. Weight forward bunting gives you more of a chance to bunt the ball fair, and gets you out of the batter's box quicker and down the line toward first base. This form will also give more advanced players the ability to slap, bust and push bunt as well. This makes it harder for the defense to defend this play or get the lead runner at second base.

•While I am stepping around with my back leg, my top hand is sliding up the bat for control. My fingers remain behind the bat so they don't get pinched between the bat and ball at contact. My bottom hand remains at the bottom of the bat, and the angle of my bat is slightly upward so I will bunt the ball down. We do not want to pop up bunts. Popping up bunts can be an easy double play for the defense.

•My arms remain at the top of the strike zone. I only want to bunt balls from my arms down. Do not try to bunt pitches above your arms or the bat. This will cause pop ups.

-My arms remain relaxed and are not straight. They have a slight bend at the elbow. This keeps the arms acting like shock absorbers, and puts down a soft bunt. Tight or straight arms will result in too hard of a bunted ball. This will create a bunt that is easier for the defense to play.

•My head and eyes are looking over the bat, as if the bat is a site. Keep your head down and looking over the bat.

•Final Correct bunting form. [See Picture # 3]





Picture # 4

Making Contact with the Ball [see picture # 4]

- Keeping correct form as the ball approaches the contact zone is very important.
- Bunt ONLY strikes in a sacrifice bunt situation.
- While the ball approaches track the ball with both eyes, and think about "catching" the ball with the bat. Remember to keep the bat angled slightly upward. Do not let your hands drop. If the pitch is low, go down and get it with your knees. Your legs should lower you; do not lower only your arms. This will move your eyes away from the bat making the ball harder to see, and harder to bunt the ball down. Use your legs and knees to go down after low pitches, and stay off of pitches high in the zone or above your arms and bat. Again, bunt only strikes.
- See the ball make contact with the bat. See the ball down. We want bunted balls to stop inside a 3-5 foot arch in front of home plate. Too close to home plate and the catcher can easily field the ball, to far out in front of home plate and the defensive corners will easily make the play or get the lead runner at second base.

- Sprint to first base as soon as you get the bunt down. Many double plays are turned because the bunter is too busy watching the play instead of getting down the line as fast as possible.



Picture # 5

Assessment of Incorrect Form Pictures Incorrect Form Picture # 5

- Observing this incorrect form you can see the head is not looking over the bat, and the arms are too far from the body. This will result in missing the ball all together or popping up the bunt.

Incorrect Form Picture # 6

- Looking at this incorrect form it is easy to see that the inside foot is stepping on home plate and will be called an automatic out.



Picture # 6

Incorrect Form Picture # 7

- Looking at this incorrect form picture it is obvious that the footwork is wrong and the body weight is back.

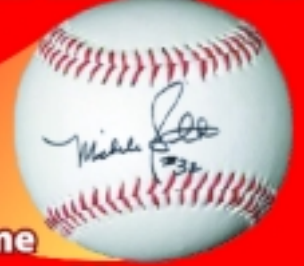
This will result in missed bunts and bunts going foul. Many young athletes who are afraid of the ball tend to look like this while attempting to bunt. It is important to teach the bunters the "back leg step around" form to get the entire body into correct position. This one simple step gets the legs and feet where they need to be, and the body weight at the right angle in order to making bunting a less complicated task.



Picture # 7

Good Luck with your bunting and moving runners! The game will open up and become more alive when you and your team efficiently move runners into scoring position. This execution can take your team from one that struggles to score runs to one that has many more opportunities to get runners across the plate!!

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