

TEACHING THE TOOLS OF
HITTING

ENDORSEMENTS

From Baseball Professionals:

“Les does a great job keeping the game in perspective: Kids and fun first. But if you want to teach kids how to hit, this book is like having an MLB hitting instructor on call.”

— **STEVE RUSHIN**

Writer, *Sports Illustrated* & *SI.com*

Author, *The Caddie Was a Reindeer*, *The 34-Ton Bat*, *Road Swing*, et al.

“Les Norman is a man of high character and a student of the game. As a Royals teammate, his hard-nosed, blue-collar work ethic helped him defy the odds and bring a small-town kid to the big-league stage.”

— **MIKE SWEENEY**

Five-time MLB All-Star

Kansas City Royals Hall of Fame First Baseman

“I’ve known Les for almost thirty years. He’s passionate, a great communicator, and extremely knowledgeable about the swing and how to be a great hitter. I highly recommend his book.”

— **KEVIN SEITZER**

Hitting Coach, Atlanta Braves

“Les is one of the best hitting instructors in the region. His knowledge of hitting and his philosophy are simple and to the point for all baseball players.”

— **“BIG” JOHN MAYBERRY**

Kansas City Royals Hall of Fame First Baseman

“Les has developed a way to teach hitting that is easy to understand and repeat during practices and, more importantly, in games!”

— **BRIAN MCRAE**

MLB Outfielder 1990-1999

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From Baseball Parents:

“My son was cut from his fifth-grade baseball team. The coach said he would never be a baseball player. We signed up with Les to help him develop his skills. In the last four years, he’s grown to be one of the best players on his team, and in 2015, 53 players tried out for his high school team. He was one of the 22 who made it! One of the first calls I made was to Les to say thank you for believing in my son when others didn’t.”

— **GREG GRAGG**

Kansas City, MO

“Three years ago, my son didn’t know how to hold a bat properly. It was painful to watch him struggle every time he went up to the plate, and his self-confidence dropped every weekend. I called Les, and he helped my now 10-year-old hit his balls to the fence! I so look forward to watching my son play with joy and confidence.”

— **ROLAND HESS**

Kansas City, MO

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TEACHING THE TOOLS OF

HITTING

HELPING HITTERS CREATE THEIR OWN SWING

FORMER MLB PLAYER

LES NORMAN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've had a passion for hitting since I was a young boy watching the Cubs play on WGN in the suburbs of Chicago. I lay awake at night imagining how to hit nasty curves, 100-mph fastballs, and game-winning home runs. Deep down, a stick and a rock would have been enough to keep me happy for an entire day.

Without hesitation, my sincere thanks and praise to God for gifting me with the ability to play the greatest game on the planet. He used it to help me escape a rough childhood, then developed a passion inside me so I could use the platform to invest in the lives of others. Without Him, I am nothing.

Next, I wish to thank my incredible and beautiful bride, Kristin. Her patience, encouragement, compassion, and strong faith have kept me together for more than twenty years. She's accepted me for who I am and loves me anyway. She gladly gave up her dreams to help me pursue mine, and logged thousands of miles in airplanes and cars to watch countless games, at all hours and in all kinds of weather. Her dedication to our boys is so evident, cheering them on at their games regardless of batting average, wins, or losses. She is my glue, and a gift that goes far beyond words. A man should be so blessed!

My two sons, Mack (13) and Tayt (10) weren't alive when I played in the big leagues, and they don't get caught up in the fame stuff. They simply love me because I'm their dad. It's an honor to coach and encourage them, and I want to thank them for already understanding that the game is about giving glory to God, having fun, and sharing with others. They are going to be strong, godly men—and good hitters too! I love them with every fiber a father can have, and I am so very proud of them.

My mom, Virginia Stevens, was a single mom fighting to provide for her family and keep them safe. She endured so many hardships, but she never quit. She kept fighting so we could have what we needed. I always had a uniform to wear, a team to play on, and the equipment to succeed. Her sacrifices and love helped shape me into the man I am today.

My dad, Ralph Stevens, who took on a rebellious, angry teen and accepted him without prejudice. The baggage wasn't his, but he carried it anyway. Real men do that.

To all of my youth baseball coaches, a huge thank you for seeing

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something in a short kid void of talent yet full of desire. The MLB guys get all the fame and recognition, but those who give freely of their time and effort to invest in the lives of kids are the true heroes of the diamond.

My baseball coach at Reed-Custer High School, Jerry Cougil, demanded the best from us, but he did so with compassion, gentleness, and humor. I learned so much about how to play the game from him, but maybe the most important thing I learned was to respect myself and the game. He was my first true example of playing for the name on the front of my jersey instead of the back. He has continued to keep a small-town program in the forefront of Illinois high school baseball, and has done so with hard work, dedication, and perseverance, along with an incredible ability to fundraise!

It's rare in life when you get the honor of playing for a coach who touches millions of lives, but I was afforded that very thing. Former University of St. Francis head baseball coach, the late Gordie Gillespie, gave me what I needed the most: the ability to be confident and trust in myself. GG helped me find the maturity and work ethic necessary to take my game to the next level. He challenged me when I needed it, backed off when I didn't, and gave me the father figure I so desperately missed in my youth. I truly loved this man.

As a baseball fan, I've read many authors' works in many forms. One of my all-time favorites is *Sports Illustrated* and *SI.com* writer and author Steve Rushin. A huge Thank You! to Steve for being such a gracious guest on my radio show and a big encouragement in this my early writing career. Your incredible talent, along with your passion and appreciation for the greatest game ever invented, are nothing short of inspirational. As one of the world's best in your field your schedule is beyond busy, yet you took the time to help me. You are truly amazing. Now get back to work!

A boy with a big-league dream is just that—at least until a big-league team helps the dream become reality. I owe my entire professional career to the Kansas City Royals, who took a chance on a 25th-round pick from the middle of nowhere. Their expert staff and willingness to develop players, regardless of age, helped me achieve that dream for parts of thirteen seasons as a player, and many more years as a member of the Kansas City Royals alumni. My deepest thank you for your faith and trust.

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INTRODUCTION

You can't reinvent the wheel. It's round, and it has one purpose: to allow things that rest on it to move. It's the same with hitting. The sport of baseball was created to use a round, club-like object to strike a round, smaller object in order to make it land as far as possible from where the defenders are standing within the boundaries of play as stated by the rules of the game. The problem with teaching hitting is that many coaches and instructors try to reinvent the swing to make it more like their own (or like a particular professional player's), based solely on the fact that that person has had success using that style; therefore, all players should hit in that manner.

I find a major issue with this line of thinking and coaching. To pattern a young player's baseball swing on only one or two professional hitters is based on the assumption that every kid who plays baseball has the same abilities as that particular professional. But, as we all know, every child is born with different gifts, sizes, talents, muscle structure, hand-eye coordination, raw abilities, etc. Some of these skills are born in a player while others must be learned. One kid may have fast hands and weigh a lot for their age, while another may be small, weak, and slow-moving. Forcing a young player to emulate someone who has had success sets a child up for failure if they are unable to duplicate the success of the professional.

Former MLB All-Star and current (at time of publication) Atlanta Braves hitting coach Kevin Seitzer once said, "Don't be the coach who makes a kid quit the game." The type of teaching that pushes young players toward strict imitation of professionals is usually the first step in creating this sad ending to a kid's baseball career. Each kid has their own swing, and that fact should *always* be taken into consideration. Some instructors hide behind kids who find a style that works, and they attempt to create clones of the other kids. This theory is void of one simple fact: The kid who uses that style is already gifted, and would probably be able to emulate a number of different styles anyway.

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There are basic fundamentals every hitter should use, but they are the same as with football players, wrestlers, basketball players, etc. Even your recreational game of basement ping pong uses these fundamentals, and I don't know many professional ping pong instructors, although I am sure they're out there. What every kid needs to become a successful athlete (note that *successful* is a subjective term) is proper balance, good hand-eye coordination, and good timing, along with a bit of confidence, which can be built through proper mechanical instruction, patience, and encouragement over time. By "success," I mean the player's idea of success and having fun, not a coach's idea of winning at all costs. Winning is great, but being able to learn from mistakes, gaining the ability to self-teach, and learning to deal with adversity are all tools we can teach on the field and, more importantly, in life.

This book will not pick apart other people's swings. I will not make the claim that my style of hitting is the only way because, a) it isn't, and b) it's not a style at all. It's simply the art of taking your players' various types of swings and helping them improve on their own styles to put them in a better position to succeed. If you're offended, that certainly wasn't my intent, but I encourage you to read on. Even if you take only one or two points from the entire book, your hitter will benefit, and after all, isn't that worth it?

Some years ago, I was coaching my oldest son's baseball team in a local tournament. Our kids were playing at the coach-pitch level, but they were a little advanced for their age. After a meeting with the families, we decided to enter a recreational machine-pitch tournament (a level up from what they were used to playing) in an effort to have some weekend fun and gain some valuable experience. There was no pressure to win or to play well; the objective was simply to use the experience to have fun and play a new level of baseball. Our highest priority for this tournament was to make sure each player—and their siblings—had a snack after each game!

On a blistering-hot, sunny morning just before the opening game, the umpires called the coaches together at home plate for the usual pre-game meeting. As a coaching rookie, I decided to break the ice and humbly introduce myself to the other team's coach, as well as defer the call of the coin toss. I don't remember the exact conversation verbatim, but it went *something* like this.

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“Hi! My name is Les Norman, and this is our first-ever tourney. We’ve never played at this level before, so I’m looking forward to learning from you and the other coaches, so if you have any pointers, I’m all ears.”

“That’s great, because this is our home field for league play, and we are undefeated, so be *prepared* to get an education!”

The coach then turned around and walked away, without shaking my hand or receiving the ground rules from the umpires, all in an effort to inform me that I had just invaded rival territory. Fast forward to the third inning. My Royals were ahead 12-0 with the bases loaded and nobody out. I informed my players to advance only one base at a time, no matter where the ball was hit, so as to not show up the kids on the opposing team, who were obviously shell-shocked and playing without an ounce of fun. One of our players connected with a solid single to left field, and the tiny left fielder, already tired from chasing balls all over the outfield, nervously held the ball, unsure of where to throw it. His teammates and coaches began *screaming* at him to throw it in, somewhere, anywhere, and finally, out of absolute paralyzing fear, the poor boy threw it somewhere in the vicinity of North America. Thank goodness the laws of gravity were still in effect.

“Time!” yelled their head coach, while storming past me by the third base coaching box. On the way out to left field, the coach slammed a clipboard down into the dirt and pointed a finger in the child’s crying face, yelling, “Don’t you *ever* hold the ball like that again! If you ever do that again, you will come out, and I will kick you off this team!” The infuriated coach huffed back off the field like a stubborn five-year-old ready to hold his breath until he turned blue.

As the coach passed by me again on the way back to the dugout, I whispered, “Are you serious? I hope you’re proud of yourself treating that young boy like that! That was *not* necessary!” The response I received shocked me to my core.

“I can do whatever the hell I want! He’s *my* son!”

That was about eight years ago now. I wonder if that boy still plays, and not just baseball. *Anything*. I also wonder if that coach still coaches kids. To be honest, I hope the boy still plays and has fun, but I also hope that the coach is either out of the game, or has learned some valuable lessons on coaching and parenting. If not, then youth base-

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ball is better off without that type of...leadership. And by the way, that head coach was a mom! It's not just the dads out there who lose control.

The bottom line is this: If you are looking for information on how to make your team win more games, please put this book down and go seek anger management classes, and please take that angry mom with you, or at *least* rethink why you coach. If you are simply searching for an effective tool that can help your hitters have more fun, build more confidence, and maybe get a few more hits next season, then you're in the right place. Make it about the kids. If you aren't in it for the kids, then do us all a favor, and I'll quote one of the greatest men I've ever known, my former college coach, the late Gordie Gillespie: "If you're not in it for the kids, then get out of the game." The game will be better—and so will the kids—with you watching. Silently.

I hope you find the information in this book fun and helpful. I teach it to my sons and their baseball teams, as well as to the extensive list of athletes I've had the honor of teaching and coaching over the last twenty years. You'll find helpful tips from the smallest of details to the broadest range of ideas. Like the many great hitting coaches I had from age 6 up to 30, you may not agree with or like everything you read, but if you can take a little from here and a little from there and make them your own, then I have accomplished what I've set out to do, which is to make *you* a better coach based on *your* abilities, not on mine. So please, have fun and enjoy this time with your kids. It all goes by way too fast! Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to run... My thirteen-year-old wants to borrow a pair of my size-11 shoes.

Before you read on, there's just one more thing....

As you read about specific aspects of hitting, you may wonder what drills you could implement to help your hitters. If and when that happens, simply flip to the back of the book. There's a whole appendix on drills where you'll find explanations of each drill, as well as some detailed information I hope you will find useful. Use what I have, or make up your own. Use your imagination and get creative; you know your kids best and how they respond.

CHAPTER 1: Breaking Mental Barriers

One of the best ways I've found to get my hitters to respond is to make most drills a friendly and fun competition. I've made up some drills on the spot at practice, designed simply from an idea that pops into my head based on the flow and mood of the practice. I may have used them to liven up a slow practice, or simply wanted to structure something based on a glaring weakness. Most kids know they are struggling in some area. Pointing it out to everyone repeatedly may not be the most effective route to get the best out of them. Help them enjoy practice. Organized drill work is a great way to build a hitter and, more importantly, improve your relationship with them!

OVERCOMING FEAR BY TEACHING PROPER MECHANICS

Over my many years of coaching youth baseball, I've heard so many kids tell me they love baseball—especially the hitting part. I grew up liking the outfield but *loving* the time when I could hit, whether in practice or a game. It didn't matter if I was good at it; I just wanted to hit-hit-hit. Even with that love of hitting, though, I had a silent enemy lurking in the bushes. I was afraid to get hit *by* the ball. I wasn't excited by the idea of pain, and most hitters, no matter how young or old, would probably agree. Each time I speak to a large group of hitters at a baseball clinic, I ask this question: "Who's afraid to get hit by a pitch?" An overwhelming number of younger kids immediately raise their hand, and almost all of the recreational-level players do the same. The older kids are a little proud, less willing to share their fear with the group openly. They have reputations to protect, after all.

At this point, I often share the story of when I was the leadoff hitter for the Buffalo Bison, the AAA affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, in the 1997 American Association World Series in Des Moines, Iowa, at historic Sec Taylor Stadium. The opposing pitcher that evening was a young, fire-balling prospect named Kerry Wood, a Texas high school

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phenom who owned a fastball reaching 100+ mph, along with a curveball that seemed to drop out of the sky.

As a notorious first-pitch fastball hitter, I'd made the decision prior to the game that I would stride out early in an effort to get ahead of Wood and crush that first-pitch strike—but only if I could catch up to it. There was one big problem: Although that first pitch was the fastball I expected, it wasn't exactly in the anticipated location. Unable to stay balanced due to my long stride, the ensuing 98-mph guided missile sank itself deep into my left elbow, sending an arc of blood into the freshly manicured dirt, along with a shockwave of pain throughout my arm that reduced me to a pile of goo in the right-handed side of the batter's box. I eventually recovered, took my base, and admired the massive swelling on my new, oversized elbow.

About two innings later, I made the longest walk to home plate I'd ever taken since my first at-bat as a little guy waddling up in my first Little League game. I had to face Wood yet again. I was a professional, I was thirty years old...and I was *afraid*.

After I share that story, I like to ask everyone the same question again. "Now, who's afraid to get hit by a pitch?" More hands go up this time around, albeit with more humility. The moral of the story is, we're all afraid on some level, and it only takes hitters one time getting hit by a pitch to cause them to stumble back into the pit of fear. Yelling at players or telling them to stop being afraid *never* works.

Fear is a strong emotion that causes people—especially young people—to think and act differently. It causes humans to cease all normal activity, and in some cases, it can cause erratic breathing as well as an increase in blood pressure. The act of willing someone to stop being afraid just isn't possible. Encouraging your players with patience and teaching them how to get out of the way of a rogue pitch or how to get hit properly, however, will work.

Kids *will* get hit by a ball at some point, if they play long enough. If you prepare them for the inevitable, the pain won't go away, but they will be able to prepare for it in advance, which will allow their minds to deal with the adversity more easily. You will not only be helping them deal with fear in game situations, but you will also be teaching them that fear is *normal*—not unmanly. Victory doesn't come when they are no longer scared; rather, vic-

BREAKING MENTAL BARRIERS

tory comes when they recognize the potential for fear and learn to battle through fear when it arises.

When teaching younger kids (or any hitter who has in-the-batter's-box fear issues), begin by using balls that aren't as hard as baseballs. Rag balls, Wiffle balls, tennis balls—anything that won't hurt too much at the point of contact will do. When most hitters load (a term we'll discuss in chapter 3), they do so laterally, meaning they rock back toward the backstop but have no *internal rotation*. They tend to pull their hips and shoulders open when they see the pitch coming, exposing themselves to getting hit in one of many painful areas: face, throat, chest, stomach, private parts, etc. Kids who are very fearful won't even stay in the box to swing the bat, let alone have a chance to make contact.

Here are some key ways to help hitters battle their fear and build the confidence they need so that, when a pitch inevitably does come at them, they can either avoid it smoothly, or get hit on the back of the body as opposed to the front. There will probably still be some pain, but at least you'll save some money on your dental deductible!

STEP 1: BALANCE

Every single athlete must have proper balance no matter the sport. Gymnastics. Football. Wrestling. The list goes on and on. If I had to pick one aspect, one key, for helping any athlete be successful, it would be the basics of having good balance. Most hitters push with their back leg too much (also discussed in a later chapter), just like I did in that pro game, and are therefore unable to move out of the way. Had I used better balance, the pitch would have sailed painlessly (yet quickly!) by for ball 1. Teach your hitters to have good balance throughout their entire swing, especially when taking practice swings. Some have more natural balance than others, but consistent work on balance can aid in the muscle memory that hitters need to succeed.

STEP 2: INTERNAL ROTATION

As I stated earlier, most young hitters load by pushing their body toward the backstop instead of using a slight internal rotation

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(more on that later). Pushing their weight back too much causes them to push too far forward, leaving them in that vulnerable position of getting hit without the ability to move out of the way. I teach my kids to start everything with their hands by moving them slightly toward their back shoulder instead of toward the catcher. This load will do a couple of things.

First, it will cause the weight shift to go back naturally instead of pushing it too far by using the legs.

Second, it will cause the front shoulder to turn inward, helping the hitter avoid getting hit in one of the sacred places mentioned earlier.

Third, the hitter's head will remain still a little longer, allowing the hitter to pick up the ball sooner and more clearly, which will result in better timing, more confidence, and a better chance to move out of the way after seeing the pitch.

Fourth, hitters will stay on the ball more often when they do make contact.

For now, however, we're focusing simply on avoiding being hit.

STEP 3: STRIDE FOOT

Many kids are taught that the longer the stride, the more power they generate. If this method is being taught without incorporating balance and timing, the hitters are being done a disservice. Sadly, most of my students come from teams where the coaches *thought* they were doing it correctly, or had adopted a fad that everyone was trying, but in the long run they wind up causing frustration to the hitters and to their hitters' parents. A longer stride in and of itself can actually result in poor timing and less power, all the while putting a hitter in a position where they can't avoid getting hit by an errant pitch.

Each hitter has their own level of power, but make no mistake: They *all* have it. Even the little ones. A hitter's power comes from natural strength, good timing, quick and strong hands, and the power of the core, all thrown together with the ability to relax the body throughout the swing and remain balanced. Most kids who stride far don't fare well against harder-throwing pitchers, so they swing harder, which results in slower bat speed and lack of power, among other issues.