

# *Using the Change-Up*

## *Tactically & Strategically \**

A tactical weapon is a weapon used in the battle against the batter. A strategic weapon is one used to put yourself in a more advantageous position prior to actual engagement against the batter. For example, a gun or tank is a tactical weapon used in a battle, whereas a bomber or missile is used strategically to destroy the enemy's gun and tank factories so that the guns and tanks never reach the battlefield. Some weapons have both a tactical and strategic role to play. For example, an airplane can be used to bomb enemy factories prior to a battle, and it can be used to attack enemy forces during a battle.

In the "battle" between pitcher and batter the tactical use of a change-up is readily apparent. It is a great "weapon" for getting batters out. Indeed, the change-up is a very effective strikeout pitch and is often (sometimes too often) used with two strikes on the hitter. Also, the change-up is often used in a sequence of pitches to set up the hitter for a fastball. The change-up makes the fastball "look" faster.

Many pitchers and coaches do not realize, however, that the change-up also has a strategic role to play in winning the "war." Understanding this strategic role will affect how and when the change-up is used during a game, and it will help win games.

What is a good change-up? A good change-up is a pitch thrown at a speed which is from 70 to 80 percent of the pitcher's fast pitches, and it is thrown without revealing, or "telegraphing," this speed change to the batter. There are many techniques for throwing a change-up. Too often pitchers learn a mediocre change-up which either does not change speed enough, or which results in a slowing of arm speed at ball release that signals the batter that a change-up is coming. Every good pitcher can learn a good change-up, and every good pitcher should learn to throw and properly use this pitch.

To understand the strategic role of the change-up one must understand how the pitch affects batters. The timing of the batter's stride, hip rotation and arm swing is critical if the batter is to contact the ball in the vicinity of the plate. Batters miss a change-up because the bat is swung too early through the strike zone before the ball arrives. If the batter is to be successful, the slower speed of the change-up must be detected early and the batter's timing adjusted. If the pitcher does not telegraph the pitch, there is very little time to make this adjustment. Indeed, if the batter is a big person, if the batter takes a long stride or if the batter takes a big swing with arms fully extended, there may not be enough time to adjust.

Many batters, and particularly power hitters, change their hitting style when a change-up is likely. They realize that they cannot adjust their timing quickly enough if their normal swing is taken and they adopt a shorter, more controlled swing with less arm extension. Whether or not these changes work, one thing is certain, the batter's power is considerably reduced. In other words, many batters will sacrifice hitting power to avoid striking out! Recognizing this, the change-up can be used as a strategic weapon to reduce the hitting power of the opposing team.

To accomplish this strategic objective, a sufficient number of change-ups must be thrown to convince opposing hitters that the change-up might be thrown at any time. Only then will they adjust their hitting style in such a way that hitting power is reduced. The pitcher should demonstrate that the change-up will be thrown in any situation. Throwing two or even three change-ups in a row, or throwing a change-up with three balls in the count, makes a powerful statement. Remember, it is not necessary to throw a strike to make this statement! You are getting the job done when you hear opposing players or coaches warn hitters "watch out for the change-up".

To take advantage of the strategic benefits of the change-up, one approach is to use the pitch aggressively early in the game to convince opposing players that they will have to cope with the pitch. Even if the tactical situation does not call for a change-up, you may choose to throw one if it will deliver the message: "I will throw the change-up at any time." If the opposing hitters get the message and change their hitting style to deal with the pitch, you may be able to move the outfielders in a few steps. When this occurs, the pitcher should also be more cautious in using the change-up, since the batters have taken measures to hit it. For example, when you have an opportunity to throw a "waste" pitch, throw a change-up just to keep the other team thinking you are using the pitch frequently.

Some batters will not, or cannot, adjust their swings to deal successfully with the change-up. You may find entire teams that rely heavily on batting machines, or whose pitchers do not throw good change-ups in batting practice that cannot adjust. By continuing to aggressively use the pitch against such batters, you may find that they become frustrated, or the timing of their swing becomes fouled up even for fast pitches. It is surprising how often this happens to the best batters on the opposing team. I have seen many games where use of the change-up has turned good, aggressive hitters into indecisive, frustrated hitters who couldn't hit the ball off a stationary tee by the end of the game.

One word of caution: Some batters will respond to the aggressive use of the change-up by guessing when it will be thrown. When the pitcher senses this, the change-up should not be thrown to the batter, at least not for a strike. The batter will guess right on occasion, and when this happens the ball will probably be hit hard. Of course, you cannot always detect when a batter is simply waiting for a change-up to be thrown, and you should expect the pitch to be hit hard on occasion. You might consider adjusting your use of the pitch when this occurs, but don't give up the strategic objective.

Whether, and how aggressively, the change-up should be used to gain a strategic advantage is a matter of judgment. If the pitcher outclasses the opposing batters, forget the

strategic benefits. Use the change-up tactically to get batters out when the opportunity arises. If the opposing team is a good match for the pitcher, the strategic benefits should be exploited to gain an advantage against the heavier hitters. Be careful not to overuse the change-up against batters at the bottom of the order. On the other hand, if the pitcher is outmatched and cannot get opposing batters out with her best pitch, use the change-up very aggressively and hope its strategic benefits will throw the opposing hitters out of kilter and help win the game.

*\* Reprinted from "Fastpitch Softball / The Windmill Pitcher" by Barry Sammons.*

# If my Fastball is...

# My Change-up needs to be...

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