



Hitting Secrets

from Stan Musial, Carl Yastrzemski and Tony Oliva

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How did Stan Musial hit .331 over his 24-year career?

How did Carl Yastrzemski win 3 batting titles?

**How did Tony Oliva win AL batting titles his first two seasons?
I asked them back in 1990.**

A central focus to what I teach baseball players is the importance of their approach. What are you committed to doing out there on this pitch?

In my interviews Musial, Yastrzemski, and Oliva discussed their approach at the plate and all three had an interesting theme: They grew up hitting the ball primarily to the opposite field.

Not until they were 3-5 years in the Big Leagues did they start to pull the ball more often.

Why? Let's let them tell you...

Stan Musial

At-The-Plate Thinking orientation.

Musial's philosophy of hitting was, "Get the fat part of the bat on the ball, hitting the ball where it was pitched." This is not as easy as it sounds:

Musial: Of course, you know it takes a few years to be able to do that. I'm talking about once you get to the big leagues. I wasn't a pull hitter at the beginning, I was a spray hitter.

Basically I hit the ball to left field, to left center. I used to hit a lot of doubles and triples in that direction because I could wait a little longer on the pitch and go with the pitch, and I was just

meeting the ball. Then after 4, 5 years in the majors why, after you get your confidence and you felt like you could, then I started pulling the ball, and doing the things at the plate that I wanted to do, not hitting the pitcher's pitch. I was getting to a point where after 4 or 5 years I was able to pull the ball, go to left field, go for distance, all that. Of course these things take 4, 5 years and I guess when I was 27, 28 I got in my prime, you know, I think an athlete's best time is between 28, 30, and 32, in a career, so I was able to do that. Just meet the ball, hit it hard, go with the pitch.

Most importantly, once in a while you've got to give in to the pitcher. You just can't, you know he's out there thinking just like you are, and he has some idea about what he might want to do of course, and so a lot of times you've got to go with the pitch [hit it to the opposite field]. Which most hitters can't do.

I was very fortunate when I was young, before I played high school ball, and all of this happened sort of accidentally, was we had a ball field that had a short right field, and we had one ball. And if you hit the ball over the short right field you had to wait for the outfielder to chase it down, it took time. Whereas in left field we had a hillside in left field and if you hit the ball against the hillside the ball was in play. So being a left-handed hitter and the hill in left field I learned how to go the opposite way.

That's a very important factor in hitting, being able to go to the opposite way. So I learned that when I was young.

And I could always hit to the opposite field. Any time I wanted to I could hit to the opposite field. As I came along professionally, I was still hitting the ball to left field, but then I got more confidence, and stronger, and playing more, getting experience that was able to pull the ball whenever I wanted to, the pitch inside. So it's very important to be able to hit to the opposite field.

Hanson: That's interesting because that's a similar story to what Oliva said. He said his orientation was to hit it to the opposite field almost all the time, but once he became a professional, he got stronger and he worked at it more until he learned to pull the ball.

Musial: Well, pulling is the hardest thing to do. Pulling the ball in baseball is the hardest thing to do, because the bat has got to get out further to the ball [demonstrates arm position] you've got

to be out in front of it. Whereas hitting the ball to the opposite field you're waiting a little longer, your eyes and head are closer to the ball. Whereas when you are [pulling the ball] your hands and bat and head and eyes are further from the ball than they are when you are hitting the opposite way.

Carl Yastrzemski

At-the-plate Thinking (Orientation)

Hanson: What would you say was your orientation at the plate, or is that what you were saying that it would vary a great deal? Oliva talked a lot about his base orientation was going to the opposite field and Musial talked about hitting the ball where it is pitched.

Yaz: Well, I had two different things, careers if you want to call it. My first six years I was more of a straight-away hitter. I really didn't look to zones and spots I just waited on the ball and hit the ball wherever it was pitched. That's a much easier way to hit. From '67 on I became a dead pull hitter and with my size it was more difficult to hit because I couldn't take an outside pitch and pull it. I'd have to give up the outside part of the plate when I was a pull hitter, whereas when I was a straight-away hitter I didn't have to give up the outside part of the plate. If I would have hit for average, I could have hit .300 average easy if I had stayed a straight-away hitter. It's much easier to hit the ball that way. You wait on the ball longer and use the opposite field. But I decided that in '67 I was going to become a pull hitter and with my size it became more difficult to pull the ball and hit for high average also.

Hanson: Looking back does that seem like it was a good decision?

Yaz: Well I made the decision according to the ballclub. I just thought that we needed someone to hit for power and drive in runs.

Hanson: That's a similar situation that both Oliva and Musial talked about, they both talked about being go-the-other-way-type of guys early on and then learned to pull and that was in large part what made them become a more complete hitter.

Yaz: Ya, right. Same as I. The same thing I did. At the end of my career I tried to go back as a straight-away hitter, figuring that with a little bit of age it would help me to wait a little bit longer and I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it anymore. I was just so accustomed, so many years of looking for zones and a pitch on the inside part of the plate at a certain height, giving up the outside part of the plate, I couldn't adjust to a change in my thinking. Yastrzemski noted in his book that in his early years, "I was not a dead-pull hitter... Even though I hit .650 one season in high school, I was more like a Wade Boggs- type than a power hitter. I could spray the ball to all fields" (Yastrzemski & Eskinzi, 1990: p. 2). Also, speaking of his ideas on hitting as a rookie, Yastrzemski said "My theory of hitting was simple. Look for the ball, get a pitch in the strike zone, and hit it" (Yastrzemski & Eskinzi, 1990: p. 57).

Hanson: So from '67 on your orientation was to look for something from the middle of the plate on in and try to pull it out of the park?

Yaz: Hit it hard, pulled. You'd never think of hitting a home run. Very few times did I ever think of hitting a home run and actually do it. Usually it would come on an accident. My whole theory was try to knock an infielder down with a line drive (Y, 246-257).

Conclusions

I'll let you draw your own conclusions from their words.

I will say another major theme from my interviews with great hitters is that they kept it simple. You need to find what's best for you, but I can tell you that hitting to the opposite field is an easier task than pulling. Think about it.

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