

Ichiro operates on a higher plane

Brad Lefton / The Sporting News
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A respected batter once stopped by Ichiro Suzuki's locker with some pregame advice. The player noted that if Ichiro simply learned to be more patient and not chase so many bad pitches, he would have a legitimate shot at hitting .400.

Ichiro listened to his teammate's reasoning, thanked him for his thoughts — then continued with the same approach he has used since his days in Japan: swing at anything he considers hittable.

"I've heard that (advice) in Japan, and I've heard it here, too," Ichiro says, "but frankly, I find it very naive. True, if you look at one at-bat in isolation, there are instances where you could say if I had just laid off a particular pitch, I could have walked. But if I actually tried to apply that thinking to my batting for an entire season, it would be detrimental. If you could have all of your hits and then selectively apply patience to some of the other at-bats, that would be great. But it doesn't work that way."

This is a player who knows what works. In 2004, Ichiro broke an 84-year-old record with 262 hits. Now in his fifth major league season, he had the best April of his career. Ichiro, who has 963 hits in 663 career games, is on pace to reach 1,000 hits in fewer than 700 games. The only player to do that since 1900 is Hall of Famer Chuck Klein, who reached 1,000 in 1933 in his 683rd game.

Ichiro's success can be attributed to numerous things, including hand-eye coordination that a veteran scout says is the best he has ever seen. Ichiro also has an unparalleled focus on his craft. Ever the perfectionist, he always is thinking about hitting. In an interview with Sporting News that was conducted in Japanese, Ichiro discusses his approach and philosophy to the art of hitting a 90-mph pitch with a 31.5-ounce bat.

Not as good as a hit

Of the 77 players who had at least 500 plate appearances in the American League last season, Ichiro tied for 48th with 49 walks — and his were in 704 at-bats. Subtract his league-leading 19 intentional walks, and Ichiro worked pitchers for 30 free passes. That's one unintentional walk for every 23.5 at-bats; the major league average is roughly one every 10 at-bats.

The man who just wants to hit hints that even 30 walks might be 30 too many. "I don't know of many fans who go to the ballpark hoping to see a hitter draw a walk," Ichiro says. "So, if the debate is about walks, then rather than thinking of ways to increase them, I think it would be far more productive to figure out ways to lower them by turning those at-bats into hits. If you put your energy toward productive thinking like that, you'd be increasing your potential as a hitter. I'd rather be known as the kind of player who thinks and works like that."

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"I don't know of many fans who go to the ballpark hoping to see a hitter draw a walk," Ichiro says. (Nick Laham / Getty Images)

There was a pinch of sarcasm in that proclamation. Ichiro is not seriously looking to further expand his strike zone. But he is motivated to reduce what he calls his mistakes and turn outs into hits.

Ichiro particularly was consumed with such thoughts early last season, even as he was collecting 50 hits and batting .400 in May. Something wasn't right to him.

"The nature of batting is such that even if a pitcher gives you 10 tosses right down the middle, you're still not going to bat 1,000," he says. "That's just the way it is, and I accept that. Now, since pitchers don't just lob it in there like that, there are also times they're just going to outright beat you. I accept that, too. But now you've got the rest of your at-bats. Pitches I believe I should have been able to connect on for a hit but didn't for some reason are my mistakes. That's what I want to reduce.

"At that time, despite what the numbers might say, I felt like I was making an inordinate amount of mistakes. For a long time, I thought it was my mental state, but the longer it persisted, I started thinking maybe there's a physical problem in the way I move toward the ball."

On goes the light

The elusive clue finally came to Ichiro. The Mariners were finishing a homestand with an afternoon game against the Rangers on July 1. As Ichiro stood in his customary spot on the first-base side of the cage during batting practice, a thought popped into his mind: What if he made a subtle change to his stance?

As he often does while waiting in that grassy patch, Ichiro made a few exaggerated golf-like swings. Liking the way they felt, he used the slightly altered stance in the cage. A bit more intrigued, he used the stance in that day's game. He had a single and two doubles in his first three at-bats. He got two more hits the next night at St. Louis, and beginning July 4 he went on a 21-game hitting streak. Ichiro wound up with 51 hits and a .432 average for the month.

"Pitches that I had previously been trying to foul off but was inadvertently popping up or grounding out I was now able to foul off with greater accuracy and stay alive. What I gained with the change was simply a feeling, so it's difficult to describe, but what I can say with confidence is because of the change, I've been able to increase my ability to get hits off of pitches that I previously thought I should be hitting but wasn't. And that's the goal, to be able to hit with authority the pitches you feel you should be able to hit."

Ichiro followed up his July with 56 hits and a .463 average in

August, becoming the first player since Joe Medwick in 1936 to have back-to-back 50-hit months. It was during that stretch that George Sisler's hits record came into international focus.

"The 50 hits I got in May and the 50 hits I got in July and August are completely different," Ichiro says. "You have an expression here when someone's going good that he's 'in the zone.' Basically, I don't believe in that because it means you attribute your success to some indefinable phenomena, but if that ever applied to me, last May might be a decent example. I wasn't entirely sure why I was getting all those hits because I actually felt like I wasn't consistently hitting pitches I expected to. I was still searching for a way to reduce the mistakes that were apparent to me.

"But that wasn't the case in July and August. Through trial and error, I had discovered something meaningful that allowed me to get those hits. In virtually every case, I could clearly explain to you why I was able to hit each pitch. The number may have been the same each month — 50 — but the reason for the results was entirely different."

The feeling Ichiro grasped that July afternoon remains with him. To the casual eye, there are three main differences in his appearance in the batter's box: His front foot is farther off the plate, his stance is narrower, and the bat is in a more reclined position as opposed to pointing skyward. The changes are more complex than simple cosmetics. To Ichiro, batting largely is about capturing a unique but essential feeling.

"The change I made before the game on July 1 gave me a completely fresh feeling at the plate," he says. "I describe myself as the kind of batter who tracks the ball on a line, so how quickly I can enter that plane is crucial. As the ball is released from the pitcher's hand and comes toward me, first my eyes and then my entire body enters the line formed by this motion. My bat is the last part that enters this line.

"Until that day, my movements didn't follow the image I had of this action in my mind with high precision. But by tweaking my approach, I was able to grasp the feeling of getting my bat into the line quicker and with greater accuracy. The concept of identifying the line and getting everything in sync with it may be difficult to understand, but the end result is I feel like I'm able to see the ball longer and better."

A pitcher's perspective

In nearly two decades of facing major-league hitters, Twins left-handed reliever Terry Mulholland never has seen a style quite like Ichiro's.

"Most hitters I've talked to are looking for release point and spin," Mulholland says. "They're trying to see the ball out of the pitcher's hand early so they can pick up spin in order to determine what kind of swing they're going to put on the ball.

"But to hear him say that he's not only looking for that line but he's trying to put his eyes, body and bat into that line really makes sense in terms of his hitting style. The effort he puts into his swing is not a great amount of physical effort. It is the positioning of the bat in that zone and just following through with it."



Ichiro can hit pitches high, low and everywhere in between. (/ Getty Images)

Mulholland spent spring training with the Mariners in 2004 and was traded to the Twins in mid-April. He took advantage of his time with Seattle to contemplate what Ichiro was trying to do as a hitter, observing him from behind the batting cage.

"I was amazed by the rotation of his body and how he basically positions his body to get that bat plane in an area where the ball's pitched," Mulholland says. "I've never seen a hitter contort his body in such a way, particularly his feet. He actually rolls over his feet when he hits the ball. He looks like he's running out of the batter's box, but really his lower half is basically squaring up to allow his upper half to stay back longer and to see the ball longer. That means he can swing at it, foul it off or whatever he needs to do to put himself in a more advantageous situation in that at-bat."

Mulholland may understand Ichiro better than most, but he hasn't been able to use that knowledge to get out Ichiro, who is 6-for-13 in his career against Mulholland.

Mulholland says, "That answer I didn't find while I was watching from behind the cage."

Brad Lefton is a St. Louis-based journalist who has documented Ichiro's seasons in major league baseball for Japanese TV. He has spent his career covering baseball in Japan and America.

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