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Slap hitting is on the move

More coaches in the county are adding the method, which requires hitters to swing as they start to run, to their teams' arsenals.

By DAWN REISS
Published April 16, 2006

Citrus senior Janea Thaler squats low, rotating the bat around. With her head bearing down she looks to the mound. The dog and pony show has started and she's in the center of it. Answering the high-pitched summons of her coach, Butch Miller, Thaler uncomfortably shifts around in the dust, waiting to demonstrate her ability to slap-hit.

Slap-hitting changed Thaler's life. She hit less than .100 as a junior. But Miller, an Ohio product in his first year as softball coach, changed her thinking. As a result, she has become a force on offense, hitting .354.

"I only wish I had her another year," Miller said. "She'd be really good."

A natural righty, Thaler had never hit from the left side, as all slappers do, until Miller asked her to give it a try. At first everything was a struggle.

"When I first started my hands were all messed up and I didn't know what I was doing," she said. "It took a week and a half to hit and three weeks for my feet to get used to it."

"Before it was just trying to make contact and get on base," said Thaler, who now hits solely from the left side. "and now I'm swinging it."

* * *

Not everybody can be a slap-hitter.

To properly slap, a hitter - usually at the top of the lineup - has to have speed and good hand-eye coordination. It's a swing on the run that drives the ball on the ground or on a line to the left side. The batter is in motion as she hits the ball, giving her a headstart toward first base.

It's a growing trend in Citrus County where three first-year coaches - Miller, Lecanto's Robert Dupler and Seven Rivers' Jackie Iwaniec - have implemented the slap into their programs. Though second-year Crystal River coach Justin Wentworth said he doesn't teach the slap, he's glad he has had a few players who know how to do it, notably 2005 alum and USF freshman first baseman Ashley Bullion.

Why the difference this year?

"I just don't think anyone was as aggressive (in Citrus County) as we are this year," Dupler said.

The movement is happening everywhere. Wentworth attributes the change to colleges, which are having a trickle-down effect on the travel ball and high school game.

Sam King's father, Bob, said it helped get his daughter, a Lecanto senior, a scholarship to play next year at Division II Queens University of Charlotte.

King said she learned from Bullion, a natural lefty, during summer travel ball several summers ago, never realizing until recently just how large a role it would play in her college tryouts.

"It's great because it showed off my speed," King said. "Knowing that I'm quick helped a lot with the coaches. College coaches like players who can switch hit because you're more valuable in certain situations."

Area coaches are taking notice too. They are incorporating the slap because it not only makes prospective college athletes more versatile but it gives players who aren't solid hitters a

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chance to produce.

Iwaniec has used the slap with several of her Warriors, including her seventh-grade daughter, Alex, who is the smallest varsity player at 4 feet 8 and 70 pounds.

"My daughter isn't a strong hitter," Iwaniec said. "It helps her get on base because it pulls a defense in. Sometimes players don't know how to use the bags and it helps with their hand-eye coordination because when you're just slapping the ball you can meet the ball better."

The slap can also lure defenses into a lull.

"It's so dangerous because once you perfect it, it's hard to defend," Miller said. "Depending on what rotation you use to cover it, there's always a hole."

Wentworth saw first-hand how difficult it is to defend against the slap when the Pirates faced Ocala Forest this season.

"We brought everyone in, and their No. 2 hitter, a slapper, just hit one to the fence on us," he said. "She tattooed that ball. It opened the gates from them and there was nothing we could do. She was an amazing player, but that's rare."

Wentworth said the key is playing the slap like you play a bunt. Crystal River, 10-2 and seeded second in the Class 4A, District 6 tournament, brings the outfielders and corner infielders in.

"The slap is to softball the way the drag bunt is to baseball," he said, "with someone like Juan Pierre or Rafael Furcal or any speedster from the left-hand batting box just dragging it out of the box and playing to their speed."

* * *

Back on the field, Thaler has taken two swings and is trying to decide her plan of action for the incoming pitch.

"Awww" get on top of the ball," Miller said. "You can't swing at that anyways because you can't slap a high pitch."

The clink of metal resonates as the ball bounces off the ground toward shortstop from a strong Thaler slap.

"That's the one you want to slap," Miller said. "right there."

She rattles off another. This time it's in the gap next to the shortstop.

"That's a good hit. Were you trying to do that?" Miller asks as Thaler shakes her head. "Go ahead and lie and tell me, 'yeah, coach I was trying to do that.' Work on placement."

Clink. Another one drops to the infield dirt and pops past the pitcher at a methodical pace.

"That was a base hit," Miller said. "That was a perfect slap."

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