

COACHES' CORNER

FIRST EDITION!

Speaking to the coaches, parents, and players of the SPFBL about how best to develop skills while enjoying the game.



Having coached high school baseball for fourteen years, and also having gotten to know youth level players during this time, I wanted to share some insights with the coaches, parents, and players of SPFBL. I have had quite a bit of experience in watching the baseball habits of youngsters, and in witnessing their progression through the ranks. I want to

emphasize that coaching baseball at any level is a delicate balance between encouraging good habits that we want our players to practice while fostering the traits, abilities, and learning styles of the individual. In short, there is not *one* way to do things, but there are techniques that we have found to work best. I hope you will enjoy our work.

JOE HIGGINS HEAD COACH--SPFHS

THIS ISSUE



INTRODUCTION: Why I started the newsletter.

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Alumni Spotlight: Zach Lipshitz, Jeffrey Hammonds, and our first alumni day.

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ALSO



Key tips about using the legs in baseball, as well as a good bat grip.



The planning for our first Alumni Day has begun.

Pictured: Joe D'Annunzio '10

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Winter Training In Full Swing

Our staff has been enjoying an 8-week winter clinic with Coach Todaro's 8U team and Coach Aumenta's 9U team at the Ball Park in Springfield. Joining me have been JR Luccarelli (assistant varsity), Tom Baylock (former two-time county champion head coach at SPFHS), and John Giunta (former JV and assistant varsity coach). Players have gotten lots of

reps in hitting and fielding, and have recently transitioned into some pitching mechanics work. Also, Anthony Bruno (freshman coach) and I have had a nice group in our Middle School hitting clinic on Monday nights. We hope these players are enjoying the sessions and wish them success in the Spring.

Alumni Spotlight: Zach Lipshitz '15

Zach Lipshitz had one of the best offensive seasons in school history for the Raiders in 2015. He batted .505 with 53 hits and scored 40 runs in 29 games. He has since moved on to play at Drew University. I spoke to him recently about his work ethic, his love for baseball, and what works for him as a hitter.

Zach was excited about answering these questions. The first thing he mentioned was his study of video. He used video of his own hitting and compared it to his expectations, or his own idea of what he should look like when he hit. He also would compare his video to that of major leaguers, such as Mike Trout. While comparing one's

swing to that of the best player in the world can be a humbling exercise, it is exciting for Zach. It speaks to his expectations for himself, as well as his desire to fulfill them.

Zach's work ethic is a special case. He has swung a baseball bat more than almost anyone I know, including guys who played into their 30s. That is no exaggeration. Players who have high expectations and a strong work ethic can easily run into problems in that they develop bad habits by overworking. I always say it is better to put the bat down and not hit at all than to practice angry and reinforce

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Zach will be honored on 2/21 by the Union County Baseball Association as its HS player of the year

Bat In The Fingers!



A grip with the bat in the fingers, not the palms, is more conducive to quicker bat speed, and less tension.

When listening to longtime Rutgers hitting coach Glen Gardner talk about hitting, you'd expect to hear something technical, something advanced. But Coach Gardner always begins (whether with college players or youth players at a camp) by emphasizing a grip that keeps the bat in the fingers.

It may seem like a minor point, but we often spend so much time and energy working on the mechanics of our swing, that we ignore the things that get the bat to where it needs to go—the hands. But Gardner emphasizes that it is not actually the “hands” that hold the bat. It's the fingers.

A grip in the fingers gives us a looser, more relaxed

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Jacob DeGrom gets the most out of his legs with a long, athletic stride.

Using The Legs It's Hard If You Don't Use Them

It's an obviously odd title but I hope it got your attention.

When I watch young players hit, throw, and field, the first thing I always notice is how the feet and legs are working. We all know how important the legs are, but I feel that young players (including high school players) do not pay enough attention to it.

One of the most persistent criticisms I have of players from youth league to high school is that they often play with their feet too close together. And in many cases, the players who are guilty of this as hitters will be the same who are guilty of it when throwing. What I meant by the title was that given our knowledge of the importance of the legs in baseball, it must be emphasized that they cannot get the most out of them if they do not spread their feet and bend their knees. Think of a weight lifter

who is getting ready to squat, a basketball defender, an offensive lineman. What trait do they share? They all have a wide, athletic base. It applies especially to throwing and hitting in baseball.

In addition to getting us to use the large quadriceps and hamstring muscles at the tops of our legs, a wide athletic base also gives us dynamic balance. By this, I mean being controlled while moving quickly and explosively.

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bad habits.

I've seen Zach hit a lot, and noticed that as he matured, he did not run into this problem. The best part about Zach's work ethic is that he is able to work hard and clear-headed simultaneously. I can recall that I, as a player, often had trouble with reconciling my rigorous work ethic with a difficulty bouncing back from failure, even in practice. During his senior year, with each swing, Zach's body language showed a new determination, a new confidence, and a new excitement, regardless of the previous outcome. He is the poster boy for the saying: "The most important pitch in baseball is the next one."

Zach is emphatic when asked about his work ethic.

"I've hit every day for years," he said. "You can't just expect to pick up a bat a couple of times here and there and be your best. If you want it, you have to prove it. My senior year was the best season I've had in my life, and I know that my hard work was the reason."

Zach is living proof that hard work is rewarded.

SPREADING OUT



Todd Frazier

Put a bat in his hands, and it looks like he's loading up to hit. Notice his wide, athletic base as he prepares to throw to first.



The bent back-knee drive that Frazier shows here is possible because of his athletic base. It would not be possible if his feet were too close together.

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feel. It also gives us the ability to “snap” the bat through the zone with less tension. Tension is the enemy of a hitter.

An analogy I often make with our high school players compares hitting to pitching. Pitchers throw their fastball with the ball out in the fingers, with separation between the ball and the hand. A changeup is usually thrown with the ball tighter into the hand. This, not slower arm speed, is what makes the ball go slower. So I ask: would you rather swing a fastball or a changeup?

A popular way to grip the bat to keep it in the fingers is with the middle “knocking” knuckles aligned. As long as it is done while keeping the bat in the fingers, it works.



Congratulations to Jeffrey Hammonds ('89) for induction into NJSIAA HOF. Great to meet Jeff and Reggie ('80) today.

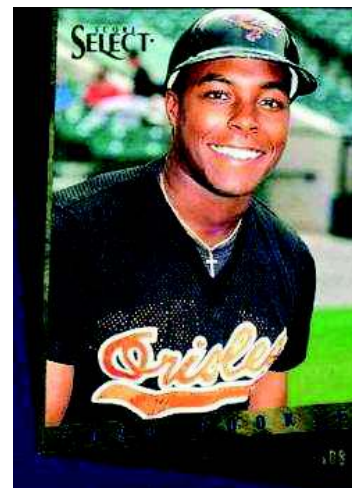


Hammonds Inducted

In December, Jeffrey Hammonds (class of 1989) was inducted into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame. He was a two-time sectional champ for the '88 and '89 Raiders, as well as a long-time major leaguer.

Hammonds played a remarkable thirteen seasons in the big leagues. After graduating from Stanford, he was a first-round pick of the Orioles, where he made a quick jump to the bigs. His most successful individual season came in 2000 when he hit .335 for the Rockies with 106 RBI. Hammonds also played multiple seasons for the Brewers, Reds, and Giants.

I was lucky to attend the ceremony and to meet Jeff and his brother Reggie, a draft pick of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Other alumni in attendance included Bill Flagg and Nyus Battle. Hammonds lives in Huntsville, Alabama. He is in New York regularly for his job as assistant to the President of the Major League Baseball Players' Association.



First Raider Baseball Alumni Day Planned

We are planning an alumni day on May 14.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the 1976 county title team. The following year, the Raiders won the only state title in school history. We are planning a special recognition of these two teams, as well as alumni from all years before our 11AM home game against Madison on Saturday May 14.

The planning is in its early stages, but we are expecting a nice crowd. Please spread the

word to any alumni players you may know, and if you know any baseball alumni who played in 1976 and/or 1977, please have them e-mail me at jhiggins@spfk12.org.



Captain Eddie Zazzali celebrates with the 2004 county baseball trophy, along with teammates Danny Birnbaum, Kevin Urban, Mike Baumwoll, and Mike Rusin.
