

# Collegiate Baseball

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## Tony Abbatine Utilizes Breakthrough System

# Is Visual Psychology Answer To Performing?

Understanding how one feels by how one sees. Visual psychology!

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Is Visual Psychology the Answer To Performing?

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**CHESTER, N.Y.** — When the performance levels of baseball players go south, coaches often look at mechanics, vision and the mental state of the player. Tony Abbatine, a consultant who has worked with the New York Yankees, Los Angeles Dodgers, Boston Red Sox, Colorado Rockies and New York Mets, feels that defining and integrating visual psychology in the sports performance world is important to explore.

"What comes first in an athlete's slow decline into a slump?" asked Abbatine.

"Is it negative self-talk, self-induced pressure or perhaps a change in his visual habits and focus targets?"

"Put another way, does your loss of confidence and loss of emotional control stem from a temporary change in your visual search strategies?"

Abbatine teaches sports psychology at St. Thomas Aquinas University and believes that we must first understand and acknowledge that the human eyes are the only external part of the brain.

The debate about whether the athlete's problem is visual or mental is pointless.

"In 20-plus years of working with college and professional athletes that live and perform in the visual world, I believe the long term fix and underlying source of performance problems should first be addressed in the visual world.

"Let's further example how the eyes are truly the windows to the soul and gatekeeper to the brain. Why do we feel so relaxed and calm sitting on a beach or walking through the woods?"

"One of the teaching cues I use now is making references to sunsets, mountains and oceans. Every human being has the visually 'feel good' image.

"When I work with athletes, I will give them these three choices. All the players on the west coast typically think about oceans or gorgeous sunsets. Where I live in New York, we have stunning mountains which players feel relaxed walking through.

"So the athletes have this image in their mind that relaxes them.

"It is a reminder for the eyes to be in a sweeping and scanning mode or what is called Open Focus. That is a term that is now just getting into baseball. When I learned about Open Focus, it was a life changing moment for me even though those two words have been around for centuries.

"Open Focus is non-judgmental seeing. Here is the quote that came out of Manny Ramirez' mouth in 2005 when he was talking to me about hitting, and I'm trying to explain to him what is happening in clinical terms.

"He turns to me and says, 'Tony, when I look at nothing, I see everything.' When he first said that, I thought Manny was being Manny.

"But when I reflected on what he said, it dawned on me that his comment coincides with all the research that is out there on Open Focus. When you are in Open Focus, you have much more awareness of space and time. You see all the little movements that typically aren't observed.



TONY ABBATINE

"It basically shattered the old soft focus, fine focus methodology that the baseball industry has embraced for so many years." Abbatine then talked to a number of other Major League baseball players.

"They felt the sunset, mountains and oceans mind set makes sense. When they started to describe Open Focus, it wasn't this hard, fixated fine to soft focus like many people have taught in baseball, including me.

"Major League hitters would talk about how they utilized vision with a sweeping and scanning posture because that is where the eyes are at their most natural state.

"Think about sitting on a beach with perfect weather. You aren't fixated on the seagull. You aren't staring at the breaking of a wave. Your eyes are in constant horizontal viewing of the landscape. After these elite hitters started talking about this, I'm thinking to myself, wait a minute. Open Focus might be the way to go for hitters."

### Studying Marksmen

Abbatine, who has worked with Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez and a number of other great hitters over the years, said that the Open Focus philosophy began gaining more traction in his mind when he started studying people who shoot rifles.

"In a target sport where they have to acquire a degree of efficiency and accuracy, they stay in this Open Focus mode the whole time. The brain knows what to do and what is really important.

"If you are standing in the batter's box and are in Open Focus, here is what transpires. As the pitcher is going through his delivery, what is important? The eyes and the brain work together. What is important is that the hitter's eyes are watching the pitcher and the delivery. He is looking for any pre-pitch visual cues.

"Then the question was, 'Well Tony, that's great. But how do you know when to start looking at the ball? Don't underestimate how smart the brain is. What's important when the pitcher's arm comes up, and he is ready to throw? It is front side tracking of the ball.



TONY ABBATINE

"Open Focus centers on what is important right now at this particular time to focus on compared to the fixated, hard look which is exemplified by the 'deer in the headlights' situation that happens to hitters. The bugging out of eyes or over fixation of eyes during the delivery is a big problem.

"I was with a group of hitters recently at St. Thomas Aquinas University. When they see me, they always think sunsets, mountains and oceans. When that ball comes out of the pitcher's hand, a hitter must be looking at that ball as if he was sitting on the beach or sitting in the mountains looking at beautiful landscapes."

### Relaxed Hitters Perform

Abbatine was asked if this is why some athletes don't tap into their potential during the spring but excel during summer games.

"What comes first. . .the bugging of the eyes or the tension and confidence issues that take place when your coach is putting the pressure on you to perform? Therefore, the player feels he must do more and often comes up short when perceived pressure is at the center of his universe.

"With visual psychology, let's fix the problem from the outside in and get back to sunsets, mountains and oceans and get this Open Focus back so that becomes the solution to some of the confidence and self-esteem issues that a hitter is going through." Abbatine learned a great deal from fighter pilots and speed readers over the years in the quest to help hitters.

He said that when the eyes are in an unnatural hard focus during hitting, pitching or fielding, a domino effect takes place.

"The way humans are wired, if the first move with muscles are tight and is hard, such as bulging eyes, it sends a message through the brain to the rest of the muscles to react similarly.

"Hitting coaches talk about batters having arm bars or hitters jumping out of their swings. If the eyes bugged during the swing and you have tension level off the charts, that message gets sent to every other major muscle group in the body through the brain. Why wouldn't they tighten up? That is the source of the problem!"

Abbatine said Latin players are a great example of Open Focus. They are relaxed when they get to the plate and hit. "The eyes are their most natural and tensionless state when they are gazing and scanning. Fixating on the ball leads to a diminished clarity of vision. It's that simple. Hitters must learn to trust their eyes by getting off the pitcher to maximize their visual acuity.

"Can you teach relaxation to a Major League hitter? The first line of defense is your eyes. Why not teach the eyes how to relax which also teaches the body to stay in Open Focus. This reduces all of the back brain stuff that becomes more of the traditional psychology issues."

Abbatine said it is important to differentiate between hitting and pitching when it comes to Open Focus.

"Hitting is a reaction. Pitching is an action. The visual search strategies of a pitcher doesn't have to be as exact. Pitching is a feeling. You must feel and repeat your release point so you have command of pitches. You will have pitchers who bug eye or over fixate on the catcher's glove and can get Major League hitters out and also have tremendous control.

"I have also worked with pitchers and seen that not work. Open Focus for pitchers can get a segment into throwing with better command."

Abbatine said to think about pitchers who have a cold or the flu and pitch through it. They are often much more relaxed than normal because they are tired and under the weather.

"How often have you seen pitchers in these exact situations pitch extremely well? They are totally relaxed.

"Pitchers are often told to stay in the moment. Let's get them in the zone and be present by having their eyes stay in their most natural state. The eyes do not want to bug, over fixate tracking a moving object."

### Training Of Open Focus

Abbatine explained how the concept of Open Focus can be trained.

"Why can one outfielder get a much better jump on balls than others? When you look at two comparable shortstops, why does one see the ball going to the hole better than the other which allows him to get a better jump? Speed and agility drills help to a degree. But one particular fielder is able to see the ball off the bat better than another.

"Visual search strategies are a key element in this. Open Focus brings fielders closer to that edge."

Abbatine said that with great hitters, their field of vision is always slightly in front of the oncoming ball.

"Every Spring Training, I get kids in a van and drive down the highway. If look at the dotted lines on a highway in front of the hood. The lines come at you very quickly. Then I ask them to blink their eyes as a way of resetting the brain.

"Now look at about 30 feet out from the hood of the car. As soon as you put your eyes out in front, what happens to the perceived speed of those lines? They slowly come toward you instead of looking like a blur.

"You have just entered the world of changing your visual search strategy by wanting to know where the car is going and less of where it's been. This is what great hitters do. They have these great anticipation skills.

"And more importantly from the visual world, they spend more time tracking where the ball is going and not where it's been which segues back to Open Focus. Manny Ramirez talked about this all the time. If he over fixated on the hand of the pitcher or watched for the release point as the ball came out and was 1/100th of a second late in tracking the ball, he said he would never be able to follow the ball properly. He knew he was in big trouble.

"Front side tracking of pitches is crucial for hitters. If you think about it, this is what catchers do. And this also is what home plate umpires do. If hitters simply utilize front-side tracking and Open Focus, they will have better contact success with bats."

### Overusing Eyes Daily

Abbatine said the eyes weren't meant to be slammed and crammed all day on a computer or overused with smart phone use six inches in front of them constantly.

"When they do have a chance to go outside and practice Open Focus, the brain is saying thank goodness, I'm free. You would never, ever see a surgeon perform surgery for six hours with bugged out eyes. Can you imagine the eye strain?"

Abbatine said that his training begins after the athlete has gone to an ophthalmologist and is cleared to play baseball. If he needs any corrective lenses, he purchases them prior to training.

"There are plenty of players in the game who have 20/20 vision but can't hit.

"Most of the hitters I have worked with have never heard about Open Focus before. The experiences I have had is that hitters improve quickly when they take this approach to seeing pitches.

"All you have to do is remind them about ways and conditions that their eyes have had before.

"Then you introduce the concept of relaxed eyes by thinking of sunsets, mountains or oceans. Then front side tracking is introduced. It is the same as playing catch with a teammate as you track the front path of the ball.

"It is common sense and where the eyes want to be. I have seen hitters have that 'ah ha moment' almost immediately.

"They are amazed they don't have to soft focus from point A and hard focus once the pitcher is at point B.

"How simple of an adjustment is that? This makes the process much easier for hitters to perform at a higher level."

### Information Overload

Abbatine explained what launch angles have done to the efficiency of hitting.

"The amount of information out there with hitting at different launch angles and exit speeds and the like is absolutely overwhelming. We are so much in the heads of these young hitters that it's criminal. The problem is that when younger players start talking about launch angles and exit speeds, they are talking about grown men on the professional level doing this.

"The amateur game at the college level involves players swinging aluminum bats.

"The need to hit a ball 450 feet is not necessary. If more college programs spent the time reducing team strikeouts and increasing walks, which is a byproduct of what I teach, they would win more games.

"With the aluminum bat, you don't have to be launch angle perfect. When you start talking about visual psychology, let's spend more time on where the ball is, what type of pitch it is and where it will arrive. Those are really the three components of what Major League hitters do when tracking baseballs.

"When hitters see the ball sooner, longer and clearer, it becomes the most important tool of hitting and the barrel finds the ball. If you look at the Major League level, there are numerous hitters who don't have kinetically correct swings. You initially watch them, and you wonder how they got drafted.

"But many can really hit. Hitters at that level are professional estimators of time to collision. You don't hit what you see. You hit what you think you see. They are playing advanced calculus in the span of a half a second after the ball is released by a Major League pitcher.

"The mechanics of hitting are worthless once the game starts. But their ability to be on time and be able to recognize speed and location is what makes them elite hitters.

"There is a reason why there are no blind guys batting cleanup at the Major League level. It always get back to that. Yet the industry always seems to flush over that."

"Why is the first complaint you hear hitters share when they are slumping or mentally lost is that the ball looks smaller and faster?

"Why does first step quickness on defense have nothing to do with agility but is more a function of how quickly the brain processes information received from the eyes?

"Traditional sports psychology starts with the back of the head. Visual psychology starts with the part of the brain that all athletes live and die with — their visual skills."

### Thinking Outside Box

Abbatine said that the next time a coach tries to help athletes find clarity, build routines and control the process, he should think outside the box and address the visual world first.

"An adjustment visually may go a long way to cleaning up the junk found in the back of the brain."

Here are some observations Abbatine has heard from elite athletes related to their visual habits:

- When I look at nothing, I see everything.
- The key to being on time at the plate is to be on time and in front of the ball's path out of the pitcher's release.
- When I take the time to relax my eyes, it sets me up for a smooth, effortless swing.
- When I'm going good, I can create hitting lanes to steer the ball into.
- I want to see the pitch and hit in my mind's eye first, not see it and hit it.
- I can see the whole field so easily when my gaze and scan paths are consistent.

*More can be found on Tony Abbatine at [www.TonyAbbatine.com](http://www.TonyAbbatine.com)*

*And founding National Baseball and Softball Training Center: [www.FrozenRopes.com](http://www.FrozenRopes.com)*