

Bannister. "There are no breaks. You have to work so hard to get every out.

"You sometimes get the feeling with good lineups that early in games they're not even trying to score runs. It's like they're just trying to wear you down so they can get you later."

If that's baseball strategy in 2010, then the questions are simple: How do you learn to work the count in your favor? How do you get proficient at drawing walks? How do you find that balance between patience and aggressiveness?

The answers, though, aren't simple.

**F**or more years than anyone cares to count, baseball scouts graded players on the five basic tools—hitting, power, speed, defense and arm strength. But today there's an important sixth tool: plate discipline. The trouble is, nobody seems entirely sure where to look for it.

"It's about pitch recognition," says Allard Baird, special assistant to Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein.

"You have to have confidence hitting with two strikes," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire says.

"You have to believe what your eyes tell you," Cardinals hitting coach Mark McGwire says.

"You do whatever you can to survive," Tigers outfielder Johnny Damon says.

Anyone can watch Ichiro Suzuki throw or Chase Figgins run and see that they're gifted. As for plate discipline, well, there isn't even agreement that it is a gift. Many believe plate discipline is something that can be taught, like the wheel play.

The evidence that taking a walk is a learned skill is pretty sketchy. Year after year at spring training you will hear how hackers like Jeff Francoeur or Yanesky Betancourt plan to take more pitches. But they can't. Taking pitches is just not in their DNA. "Hitters normally improve their plate discipline somewhat over the course of their careers," says Red Sox senior adviser Bill James. "At the same time I wouldn't be wildly optimistic about hitters learning to draw more walks. Walks—unlike anything else in the hitter's record—are a simple measurement of a complex phenomenon."

The phenomenon, as seen just from the sampling of quotes above, involves numerous elements. Consider just one pitch: a slider that at the last instant dives out of the strike zone. To take that one pitch, a hitter has to almost instantaneously:

1) Recognize that it's a slider

- Determine that it's not hittable
- Determine that it will be called a ball
- Have enough faith in his calculations to not swing
- Have confidence he'll get a better pitch to hit

There are other judgments in addition to these, but the truth is, it's hard enough just to get through the first point. "Wily Mo Peña never saw a slider in his major league career," James says. "He thought they were all fastballs."

## SWING THEORY

Last season Dejiar Span had the highest OBP of his pro career (.392), in large part because he became one of the most selective hitters in the majors. Overall he swung at only 16.3% of pitches out of the strike zone. (Compare that to the Giants' Benji Molina, the majors' worst hacker at 43.7%.) Below is a breakdown of how many pitches Span saw in various and out of the zone and how often he went after them.

111	71	239
26.1%	23.9%	11.3%

92	99	123
62.0%	63.6%	47.2%

77	185	208	336	138
37.7%	66.5%	65.9%	52.1%	18.8%

62	96	154
61.3%	65.6%	46.8%

224	90	319
21.9%	27.8%	21.0%

Swing data from STATS LLC

**S**pan played football in high school. He thinks this is a big part of his approach. Last year Span had a .392 on-base percentage, third among AL leadoff hitters with at least 300 at bats, behind the Yankees' Derek Jeter and Figgins, then with the Angels and now with the Mariners. It was the highest OBP of Span's career, including his five full years in the minors. How did it happen? Teammates joke that Span "plays angry." He goes into each plate appearance looking to battle on every pitch.

considers when he's in other scoring positions more aggressive batters than he slugged .500 first pitch times during the season. But he averages are il-