

# Why You Should Hit the First Pitch!

by Charlie Lau, Jr.

For some reason, no one really knows why, generations of hitters followed one of the Golden Rules laid down by the great Ted Williams: *Take the First Pitch.*

You can probably still find some old-school coaches today who stand by and teach the Golden Rule, though the rule itself certainly makes little sense. Williams believed, we're assuming, that taking the first pitch offered a variety of advantages. Perhaps, being able to time the pitcher better, getting a "good look" at the pitcher's delivery, or simply making the pitcher work harder and throw more pitches.

But while for years there was no hard evidence to dispute the Ted Williams Way, computers and pitch-by-pitch studies have since shown exactly what

common sense would dictate. STATS, Inc., for example, conducted a five-year pitch-by-pitch study that revealed some hard-core evidence to blow up the Ted Williams approach. An analysis of 100 of the game's top

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hitters suggested that the game's stars hit about 70 points higher and slug 130 points higher when they put the first pitch into play than they do in all other plate appearances. In fact, more than 95 percent of big leaguers hit better and slug better on those 0-0 at bats than in their other bats.

As I preach in my book *Lau's Laws on Hitting* (Addax Publishing): "Some hitters and some hitting instructors adhere to the most befuddling philosophies in baseball: Take that first pitch. I've never understood that thinking. Why take a pitch when it's possible that the pitch might be the best darn pitch you'll see all week?" This is an absolutely silly mental approach that can, without a doubt, contribute to slumps.

It's all logical. Pitchers, after all, are all programmed from the first day they ever toe the rubber to get ahead in the count and throw strikes. That means throw a strike on the first pitch. In its five-year study, STATS, Inc. found only six major league players who didn't hit better by putting the first pitch into play.

Only six. A great individual example from the study was the legendary first-pitch hitter Kirby Puckett. Puckett batted .383 with a slugging percentage of .565 on 0-0 at-bats during the study.

So, why would anyone not swing at the first pitch? Perhaps out of blind loyalty to Ted Williams, who was one of the greatest hitters ever. Others have successfully hit by using the take-the-first-pitch approach, too. Wade Boggs, who retired after collecting 3,000 hits, is now in the Hall of Fame. But as I point out in my book: "Yes, Boggs delivered over 3,000 hits and enjoyed a very successful hitting career in the big leagues, but just think for a minute about how many great pitches Boggs let go by. How many more hits would he have produced had he been more aggressive?"

This approach is equivalent to reducing the number of strikes to two. How would hitters like it if suddenly the rules of the game were changed and hitters had to start each at-bat down one strike in the count? How many hitters do you think would favor the rule change? They would be furious. But that is essentially what you're doing if your mental approach consists of taking the first strike. Being behind in the count, in essence, forfeits some of your power to the pitcher. ♣

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