■ The Road to Wrigley ■ The Spotlight: Rich Harden ■ iTrac: Visual Training

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We'll take 'em

Reed Johnson and Jim Edmonds went from castoffs to catalysts

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VINE LINE

Seeing is believing

Cubs hitters train all their muscles—even their eyes

By Jim McArdle
Free-Lance Writer

Back on June 10 of this season, with the Cubs clinging to a two-run lead against Atlanta at Wrigley Field, catcher Geovany Soto stepped to the plate with two runners on base in the bottom of the eighth inning.

Braves reliever Manny Acosta was trying to set up Soto to strike out on a slider down and away. But the rookie catcher recognized the spin and pulled the 3-2 breaking pitch into the leftfield bleachers for a game-clinching three-run homer. Credit some extra work in the hitting cage that afternoon for the blast.

"I was trying to just look at breaking balls on the machine," Soto said. "Maybe it helped me; I don't know. But I worked at it; I saw it."

Soto is one of several Cubs hitters using a new system that trains their eyes to better track and recognize pitches. Called iTrac, it works off the concept of speeding pitches up as high as 150 mph and then slowing them down to game speed. It shortens the "blind zone," about eight feet in front of home plate, where batters lose sight of the ball.

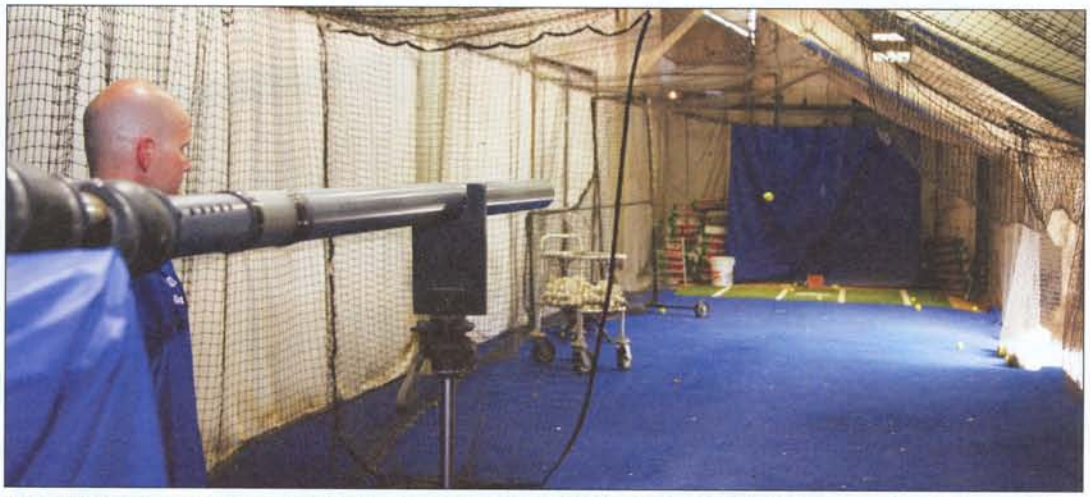
Eric Maleski, a Chicago-area native who is always on call for Cubs players to work with iTrac in the batting cage under Wrigley Field's rightfield bleachers, said the eyes can be trained just like any muscle.

"If you talk to any good hitting coach, they'll say, 'See the ball; hit the ball.' How many people are working on the first part?" Maleski said. "The eyes can move over 300 mph."

Cubs players initially might have been skeptical, but it's a system that's been used as far back as 1998, by the Milwaukee Brewers.

"At first, you get in there, and it's like, 'I can't hit it.' But then you start getting the hang of it," said infielder Mike Fontenot. "The deeper you see the ball, the more you can wait. When you're hitting, that's tremendous."

Players often get exposed to the system along the way and bring it with them when they change teams. Ivan Rodriguez brought it to Detroit. Juan Gonzalez brought it first to Cleveland, then to Kansas City, where Carlos Beltran tried it. When Beltran signed his $119 million deal, a clause in his contract obligated the Mets to use the training system.



Under the rightfield bleachers, Cubs players use the iTrac system to sharpen and train their eyes for pitch recognition.

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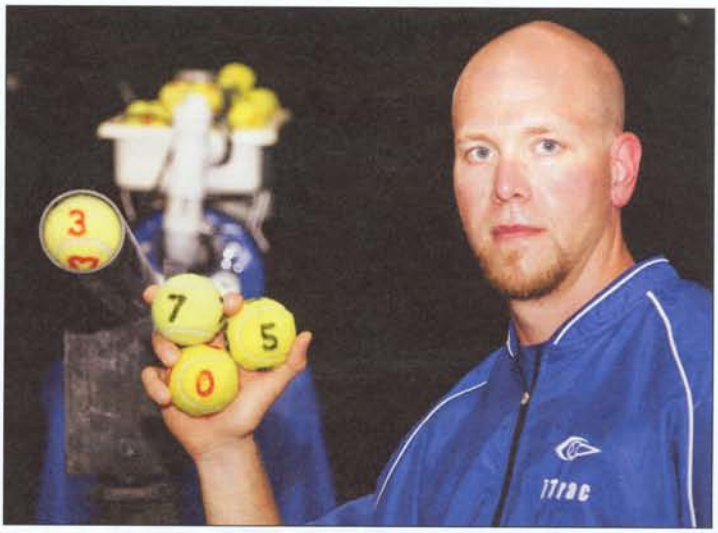
>
> —*Mike Fontenot*

Seattle's Edgar Martinez was one of iTrac's biggest proponents. The Mariners were already using it when Gerald Perry became their hitting coach in 2000.

"They didn't have to sell me on it, because I'd seen it in Seattle," Perry said. "There are some benefits to it, that's for sure."

Maleski pitched the Cubs on it during 2007 spring training. All iTrac wanted was to tout the Cubs as a client and have players do clinics at their Wheeling, Ill.-based parent company, Drive Performance.

The machine spits out tennis balls stamped with a number, 1 through 9, in either black or red ink. Hitters initially just watch. Maleski dials the speed way up before bringing it down into the 90s. Batters try to pick up the color, and as that gets easier, they'll call out the number. Then it's time to hit.



Maleski displays the numbered balls players must try to recognize at 130 mph.

Outfielder Reed Johnson knew Martinez used the system, as well as Manny Ramirez and hitters in the Cleveland organization. But he'd never tried it until joining the Cubs.

"Being able to see the colors and numbers on balls has started to become a little easier," Johnson said. "The concept makes sense. It's just something else in this game you're using, always trying to get a competitive edge."

Hitters use the red seams on a baseball for pitch recognition. A knuckleball will appear whiter because it's not spinning. A fastball will be more red and look to be spinning upward. A good tight slider will appear as a red dot.

The iTrac machine can be adjusted to train hitters to recognize these various rotations.

"The ball is telling you all the information you need. The idea is once you see that information, you can use it to your advantage," Maleski said. "What we're able to do is get their eyes to tell their brain and actually see a ball going that fast. It's just conditioning."