For speedy center fielder Ben Skinner, slowing down is key.

by JACOB SWEET

Although much of the project’s data analysis and publication of results lie ahead, Gardner underscored the importance for any school’s leaders of knowing and enunciating its mission—and then investing accordingly. Public perceptions of luxe student centers and climbing walls to the contrary, the research suggests strongly that such investments should focus much more on teachers, informed advisers, and skilled support personnel than on facilities or the latest technology.

Gardner and his colleagues are sharing their findings at https://howardgardner.com/category/life-long-learning-a-blog-in-education.

The thought of stealing makes Ben Skinner ’19 smile. On the baseball diamond, speed is his biggest asset. But to steal second base, he needs to get to first, the only one that can’t be stolen. To reach it, he can draw a walk or get hit by a pitch, but mostly he hits a ball into play and beats any throw to the bag.

Skinner is often looking to drive the ball up the middle, out of reach of the shortstop and second-baseman. If he’s ahead in the count—the pitcher has thrown more balls than strikes—he may swing for more power, slightly increasing the upward angle of his swing. If he’s behind, he’ll shorten his motion and just try to swipe the ball into play.

Skinner is known as a contact hitter, but making contact isn’t easy. A baseball is less than 3 inches in diameter, and most Ivy League pitchers throw into the high-80s-miles-per-hour range, minimum. Almost every pitch reaches the plate in less than half a second.

Hitting was simpler in high school. Most pitchers, even around Moraga, California—

After missing the first few games of the 2019 season with a concussion, Skinner has been among the Ivy League leaders in on-base percentage.
Skinner’s baseball-happy hometown—stuck to fastballs. Four-seam fastballs, the most common breed, depend on velocity and don’t have much lateral movement in the air. Curveballs, sliders, and sinkers—off-speed or “breaking” pitches—curve, slide, and sink in mid-air, often leaving a batter off-balance and confused. Breaking pitches are notoriously hard to control, however. In high school, he could “sit on” a fastball, anticipating the ubiquitous pitch and swinging at just the correct moment.

Not anymore. Nearly every Ivy League pitcher has command of at least two, usually three pitches, and can throw them on any count. A first-pitch curveball, a high-school rarity, must weigh on Skinner’s mind. If he expects a fastball and gets a curveball, his swing may be done before the ball reaches the plate. College pitchers are sharper, nestling the balls into the corners of the strike zone, where hitters are lucky just to make contact.

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ninth to first in the batting order, and .416 had the highest on-base percentage among Harvard starters. One of two players to play all 42 games, he led the team with 55 hits, 13 doubles, and 17 stolen bases, recording a .325 batting average—to go with a .990 fielding percentage. After the season, in which Harvard went 22-20, he was one of three Crimson players voted First-Team All-Ivy.

“I think junior year was when everything started to slow down,” Skinner said. “I don’t think there were any major physical adjustments I made per se, but all of a sudden I was just seeing the ball a lot better.”

In the first couple hundred milliseconds after a pitcher throws a ball, Skinner might notice a dot-like pattern in the spinning seams, alerting him that the pitch is a slider. If he’s preparing to steal second and notices a pitcher getting locked into a routine, he can take off at the moment the pitcher lifts his left foot. And though he is the team’s only engineering concentrator, he said his approach to baseball and engineering are separate. Engineering is about analysis; baseball is about instincts.

Sometimes it’s no secret that Skinner will steal second. The pitcher knows, the catcher knows, everyone in the stadium knows. It is at times like these where everything slows down and his intuition kick in. Then, it’s just a footrace.

“That’s the most fun,” he said, smiling.

One Shoe, No Problem

By the time Kieran Tuntivate ’20 gets on the line for a race, he’s already run it countless times in his head. During warm-ups, throughout practice, at night before the meet, he’s imagining how much it’s going to hurt: his form stiffening, his legs over-loaded with lactic acid that won’t go away. He thinks about how fast the pace might be and which runner will challenge for the lead and when.

About two laps into the Ivy League Indoor Track and Field Championships 3,000-meter final, at Harvard’s Gordon track, on February 23, Tuntivate’s left shoe popped off. In the scenarios he had rehearsed, this one had not come up.

It wasn’t a shoe-tying problem. Some 300 meters into the race, a runner from Columbia stepped on the back heel of his left shoe, pulling it under his foot like a slipper. For 100 meters his options—one ideal—raced through his head. His first thought was to slip the shoe on while running, but the maneuver wasn’t possible. He thought about moving to an outside lane and adjusting, but he had tightly tied his spikes beforehand and didn’t know if he could slip it on without falling hopelessly behind. He then allowed himself a moment of annoyance at his unluckiness, subtly pointed out his shoe situation to Alex Gibby, associate head coach, and let the shoe fall away without breaking stride.

“And when the shoe came off, my fourth thought was just, ‘Alright, whatever, relax,’” Tuntivate recalled. “I could almost feel some of the nervousness from some of my teammates and from Coach Gibby. It’s weird, but their nervousness almost helped me relax.”

Tuntivate makes relaxing seem easy, but it’s not. Lost shoe aside, this was his biggest weekend of the indoor track season. He came into the race as the favorite, but there were 15 other competitors, and he had a target on his back. He was also hoping to race, and win, the 5,000-meter championship less than 24 hours later. The focus during the 3,000 was not just on winning, but doing so without any undue strain.

Injuries while running barefoot were also a concern. Harvard’s indoor track, renovated right before this season, has a “tuned” layer of butyl rubber with embedded granules, giving runners more bounce and traction. “It’s not sandpaper, but it’s damn close,” said Gibby. Indoor tracks generally stretch half the length of an outdoor track, so there are more frequent and tighter turns, placing an increased centripetal-force burden on his now-shoe-less left foot. Continuing the race meant both coach and athlete accepted that the foot was going to be carved up by race’s end.

Even more serious, every athlete was wearing track spikes: ultra-light, tightly-fitting running shoes equipped with metal spikes for increased traction. In a race of this caliber, no one would wear a bulkier, more supportive, spike-less running shoe. In a sea of spikes, one does not want to be barefoot. But Tuntivate continued. “Generally, I’m not going to drop out unless my coach literally pulls me off the track,” he said. “It would’ve been nice, but it was never a really a serious option.”

As the shoe slipped off, Gibby considered pulling his athlete out of the race, watching for any signs that he was losing control. “Kieran, in general, is somewhat of a stoic,” the coach said. “You’re looking for mechanical changes. You’re looking for tension, frustration—things of that matter boiling up. And none of that was present.” He was also thinking about the long-term consequences of the race. If the injuries were serious, Tuntivate could be hindered for weeks or months, jeopardizing his competitiveness in major outdoor meets. A dual-citizen of Thailand and the United States, Tuntivate has national-class ambitions. After dominat-