

# Finding the Sweet Spot in a Hall of Fame Swing

By [TYLER KEPNER](#)

**2006**

## Lateral Head Movement

By moving the head forward during the stride, many elements of the swing become compromised.

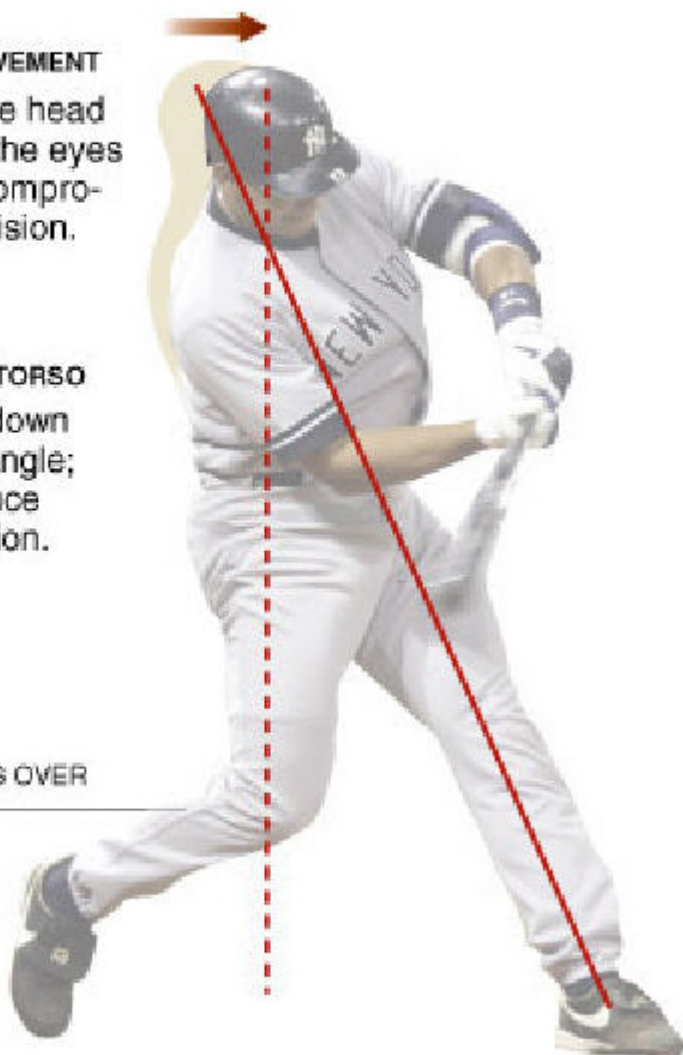
### HEAD MOVEMENT

When the head moves, the eyes move, compromising vision.

### UPRIGHT TORSO

Breaks down launch angle; can reduce hip rotation.

HEAD WAS OVER KNEE



Rodriguez singling against the Twins last season.

**2007**

**Stationary Head Position**

Swing elements fall more naturally into place and create a more efficient and powerful swing.

**NO HEAD MOVEMENT**

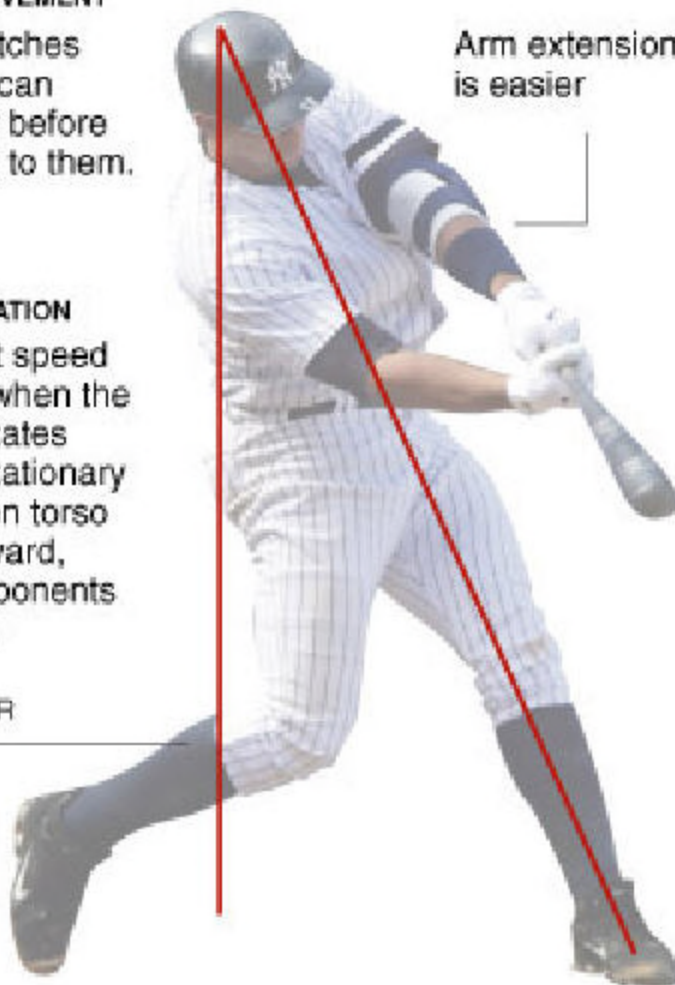
Can see pitches better and can wait longer before committing to them.

Arm extension is easier

**AXIS OF ROTATION**

Greater bat speed is created when the swing is rotates around a stationary spine. When torso moves forward, swing components slow down.

HEAD IS OVER CALF



Rodriguez's winning home run against the Indians last week.

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BOSTON, April 22 — Alex Rodriguez has hit 476 home runs over 14 seasons in the major leagues. Kevin Long, the hitting coach who helped fix the flaws in his swing, hit 17 over eight seasons in the

minors. Now Rodriguez, the [Yankees'](#) third baseman, is off to perhaps the hottest start in baseball history.

In the weeks after the Yankees' swift elimination from the playoffs last October, the first significant change the team made was to promote Long from the minors to be the hitting coach. Rodriguez was not the only problem, but he was one of them.

[Don Mattingly](#), a former most valuable player, was shifted from hitting coach to bench coach. The duty of instructing the Yankees' hitters fell to Long, 40, who had coached since 1997 but never in the majors.

Rodriguez was one of the first people to call and congratulate Long. Rodriguez had just gone 1 for 14 in the playoffs and was dropped to eighth in the batting order in the final loss, extending a long streak of postseason futility. Boos greeted him regularly at Yankee Stadium.

The season had embarrassed Rodriguez, but he was proud to have withstood it and eager for another chance. He met with Long in Arizona, where Long lives, and set up another meeting for five days in December at Rodriguez's home in Miami.

It was there that Rodriguez started to deconstruct his swing. The lessons imparted, together with a better frame of mind and a sleeker physique, have helped Rodriguez to his potentially historic start. Rodriguez has 12 home runs and has hit safely in all 17 games. By himself, he has more home runs than seven teams, including [Barry Bonds'](#) [San Francisco Giants](#).

Rodriguez has 31 runs batted in, four shy of the April record set by Juan González for Texas in 1998. With seven games remaining this month, he is two home runs shy of Pujols's April record set last season.

Last season, it took Rodriguez more than twice as many games to reach his 2007 totals in home runs, runs batted in, extra-base hits and total bases. Interestingly, though, he walked more often then than now.

That seems counterintuitive. Pitchers would seem more inclined to pitch carefully to a hot hitter, and selectivity at the plate — seeing a lot of pitches, forcing a pitcher into a bad count — is usually seen as a virtue.

### A Swing Adjustment

When Long met with Rodriguez, they talked hitting philosophy. Rodriguez said he liked to take a pitch to measure the pitcher's stuff. But he usually bats behind Bobby Abreu, who sees more pitches on average than any hitter in the majors.

"What are you doing on deck?" Long said he told Rodriguez. "You're the fourth hitter of the game, shouldn't you have an understanding? I'm just asking. What do you think?"

The message was to stay aggressive, to look for fastballs on every pitch, even when it seems obvious a pitcher will throw a breaking ball. That is a rule for many hitters, but now, Rodriguez is applying it.

"You get on a run like he's on, and as soon as the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, you know if it's a strike or a ball," said Mattingly, who once homered in eight consecutive games. "That's a great feeling up there, because you're just like, 'Whatever you want to do, it doesn't matter.'"

Mattingly said he left all instruction to Long, who studied tapes of every Yankees hitter last winter. Long believed Rodriguez could be more consistent with a lower leg kick and a faster rotation of his hips.

The result would be a more compact swing. Rodriguez made this easier on himself by losing 12 pounds. A leaner hitter is more flexible. "That's a huge factor," Long said.

In spring training, Long and Reggie Jackson, the Hall of Famer who is a special instructor for the Yankees, told Rodriguez, who bats right-handed, to treat his first at-bats as an experiment.

"For your first 25 at-bats, just think right-center," Jackson said they told Rodriguez, "because you've got as much power to right-center field as any left-handed hitter around."

Coaches implore batters to concentrate on hitting to the opposite field for a simple reason: That is where the pitches are. About 80 percent of pitches cross the plate from the middle to the outer half, Long estimated. When a hitter waits just a bit longer for an outside pitch, he said, he can react more easily to a slower-moving breaking ball.

A hitter who drifts forward in his swing, Long said, has a tendency to hit lazy fly balls. But a hitter who stays back hits more line drives, and with Rodriguez's strength, line drives often become home runs.

In batting practice Friday, Rodriguez sprayed liners to all directions, with none clearing the fence, Long said. Yet in the game that night, he hit two home runs off the [Red Sox' Curt Schilling](#).

Schilling later wrote on his Web site: "I think there's a major difference between a hot hitter, and a hall of fame-hot hitter. Hot hitters still have holes, the latter don't."

Schilling also noted that any time a pitcher missed his location, Rodriguez was crushing it. The Yankees' [Jason Giambi](#) sees the same thing.

"Anytime you're hitting, the big difference is when you get that mistake, you can't miss it, because you might not get too many," Giambi said.

Asked about his work with Long, Rodriguez nodded as a reporter mentioned several factors. Asked which had made the most difference, Rodriguez said, "I'm not sure," and then compared Long to a hitting coach he had with the [Texas Rangers](#).

Then Rodriguez walked away, a quick brush-off that has become routine in his interaction with the news media. As soon as reporters enter the clubhouse before games, Rodriguez inserts earphones and starts blasting his iPod. (On Friday, his selection was John Mellencamp's "Small Town," audible halfway across the locker room.)

### An Attitude Adjustment

In a March interview, the Hall of Fame third baseman Mike Schmidt, the only other player to homer 12 times in the season's first 16 games, suggested Rodriguez could make life easier by analyzing himself less in public. Rodriguez, who now gives mostly perfunctory answers in group settings after games, seems to have taken the advice.

"He's guarded, and he should be," said Larry Bowa, the Yankees' infield coach. "Everything he says will be scrutinized. The less you say, the less you have to account for."

Jackson said some of baseball's best hitters — he named Bonds, [Derek Jeter](#) and himself — had had a mean streak, or, in Jeter's case, the ability to “do it with style, to not let anyone get inside his mental space.”

Rodriguez, though, has often been portrayed as a mental wreck. Torre has often traced Rodriguez's struggles to trying to do too much or please too many people.

At the start of spring training, Rodriguez cleared one item off his mind by admitting that his relationship with Jeter had cooled from close friends to, essentially, business associates. His comments received lots of attention for a few days, but now the topic has mostly disappeared.

Rodriguez also seems to be using his critics as motivation, rather than trying to win them over, said Jackson, who said he speaks regularly with Rodriguez by telephone.

“No matter what he does, his detractors — and even people just trying to keep it in perspective — are going to say, ‘We need to see it in October,’ ” Jackson said. “So the detractors will always be there to bring down what he's doing, and that needs to drive him.”

When Torre batted Rodriguez eighth in the playoffs, Jackson spoke to Rodriguez in the clubhouse before the game. The humiliation of batting so low has not motivated Rodriguez, according to Jackson, but it has left an impression.

“Those little, small things cut, they hurt, they scar, and you don't forget them,” Jackson said. “That scar's on your body, and you look at it and remember what it was. You can forgive, as a God-fearing person, but you never forget.”

Rodriguez has the option of becoming a free agent after this season and forgoing the final three years and \$81 million of his 10-year, \$252 million contract. He very well could do it, because he would have many suitors willing to give him a contract much longer than three years.

But there is no evidence to suggest that Rodriguez is performing for a new deal. His best seasons have come in the middle of his contracts, not at the end.

Rodriguez will always be rich, but there is only so much time to place his name among baseball immortals. One day he could challenge Bonds and Hank Aaron at the top of the homer list. Plenty of other records could fall.

“He can draw a line up on the wall that a lot of people can't get to for a long time — maybe ever,” Jackson said. “That's the chase for Alex Rodriguez. That's the fulfillment for him, to say that I got all I could get out of it.”