



The Master of Two-Strike Hitting

We often hear a batter being described as a good “two-strike hitter,” but what exactly does that mean? Dating back to the 1988 season, STATS Inc. has kept a record of batting performance on the two-strike counts. They discovered that the average non-pitcher sees his batting average decline by about 28% when down to his last strike, which means that most players hit under .200 when batting with two strikes. In 2011, only two of the 30 teams managed to hit in the .200s with two strikes on the batter (Texas at .210 and Boston at .206). Overall, the complete set of major leaguers in 2011 hit just .180 on two-strike counts.

Even the very best hitters rarely have a season in which they hit .300 with two strikes. In 2011, there weren’t any .300 hitters when down to the last strike (minimum of 100 plate appearances with 2 strikes). Victor Martinez of the Tigers led the majors at .299, and that was clearly an aberration from his career pattern. It was a new career-high for Victor by 60 points, and overall in his career he has hit .231 when down to his last strike.

Almost always a season like Victor’s is a fluke, likely caused by the small sample, and rarely does the player ever repeat such a year. For example, in the 2000 season Derek Jeter hit .312 with two strikes, but he’s never done better than .264 in any other season, and his career average when down to his last strike is only .228 — which is a fairly normal 27% below his overall average.



Victor Martinez of Detroit



“The Toddfather”

Among active players, the highest career average with two-strikes belongs to Colorado’s Todd Helton, who has twice hit over .300 when down to his last strike (2000 and 2003), and overall in his career is a .265 hitter when down to his last strike.

Active Career Leaders	BA with Two Strikes
Todd Helton	.265
Ichiro Suzuki	.264
Albert Pujols	.262

In the twenty-four seasons of data, there is only one player who has been a .300 hitter for all of his 2-strike at-bats in the data. The data isn’t available for his whole career, but it covers 14 seasons and nearly 70% of his career plate appearances. In over 2000 plate appearances when down to his last strike, this player hit .302. The next closest among the other retired players is Hall of Famer Wade Boggs, who hit .262 with two-strikes on him.

The clear master of two-strike hitting is none other than Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn, and being able to hit .300 when down to his last strike made it little easier for him to win his eight batting titles.

Gwynn's most amazing accomplishment came in the 5-year period from 1993 to 1997. In that period Gwynn hit a remarkable **.337** when he was down to his last strike. That covers 783 two-strike plate appearances, and that .337 two-strike average was only 8% less than his overall batting mark of .368.

.337 as a two-strike hitter — it boggles the mind. Consider this. Among all the other hitters in those five seasons, how many hit that high in their *overall* at-bats?

The answer is ... none. Mike Piazza came the closest, hitting .3367 in his overall ABs, just a smidgen behind Gwynn's two-strike average of .3374!



1993-97	Highest Overall BA	With 2 Strikes
Tony Gwynn	.368	.3374
Mike Piazza	.3367	.243
Frank Thomas	.334	.251

Research Notes

Two-Strike hitting data is, of course, unofficial and there are small differences between the data sets held by various companies. STATS Inc. has tracked two-strike hitting the longest and has the most complete data from the earliest years of tracking performance by ball-strike count.

Tony Gwynn with 2 Strikes (STATS Inc data)

Year	Avg	AB	H	2B	3B	HR	BB	HBP	SO	PA	OBP	SLG
1988	.229	188	43	3	0	3	14	0	40	202	.282	.293
1989	.308	201	62	3	3	0	13	0	30	215	.349	.353
1990	.282	181	51	7	4	1	10	1	23	192	.323	.381
1991	.282	174	49	13	2	1	9	0	19	184	.315	.397
1992	.291	158	46	4	1	2	9	0	16	168	.327	.367
1993	.322	146	47	10	0	1	9	1	19	156	.365	.411
1994	.397	131	52	5	0	5	6	0	19	137	.423	.550
1995	.313	147	46	7	1	0	4	0	15	151	.331	.374
1996	.296	135	40	8	0	0	12	1	17	149	.356	.356
1997	.358	176	63	17	1	6	10	1	28	191	.387	.568
1998	.299	134	40	9	0	5	8	1	18	144	.340	.478
1999	.296	115	34	2	0	1	8	1	14	125	.344	.339
2000	.238	42	10	1	0	0	0	0	4	43	.233	.262
2001	.282	39	11	3	1	0	6	0	9	45	.378	.410
ALL	.302	1967	594	92	13	25	96	6	271	2102	.333	.400



The odds are fairly decent that if we *did* have the data from the first six seasons of Gwynn's career, that we would be able to say Tony was a career .300 hitter when down to his last strike. His two-strike average for 1988-2001 was .888 of his overall average in those years. Apply that .888 of his batting average from his seasons before 1988 and you get .297. Use that .297 for his extrapolated number of 2-strike at-bats in that period, and the reasonable estimate for his career average as a 2-strike hitter is .300 and a fraction (.3003).

When I first uncovered the note that for a five-year period Tony Gwynn had hit higher with two strikes on him than any other player had done in all of his at-bats, it really wowed Tim Kurkjian of ESPN. He wrote: "That is absolutely the most terrific piece of research I've ever seen, not just on Gwynn, but on anyone."

Congratulations to Todd Helton, who just passed Ichiro Suzuki in 2011 to become the new career leader among active players in 2-strike hitting. The biggest hit of Todd's career was a 2-out come-from-behind walk-off homer against the Dodgers in September of 2007 to tie up the wild card race. I mention it here because Helton hit that amazing home run off a pitch on a 1-2 count.