

Mental Approach of the Starter

Bill Swift, who currently coaches amateur baseball in Arizona, says it best: “You have to have confidence going into a game. You have to think positive. You have to stay positive.” That to me implies one thing: pitchers need to have great self-esteem. A pitcher going into a game has to know what he can throw for strikes; he has to know what he can do well to accomplish the goal. A pitcher has to believe in what he can do well and capitalize on it.

Swift goes on to say, “You know the good hitters are going to get their 3 hits, but that you’re going to get 7 outs out of their 10 at-bats; you hope the good hitters don’t get them against you. I’ve always concerned myself with the hot hitters that pop into your head.” Swift continues, “You can’t be intimidated by any pressures. There are a lot of different pressures—fans,

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A great pitcher stays focused despite the many pressures of the game.

press, the crowd on top of you, and so on. You have to prepare to be focused and make yourself stay focused—you've got to go for it."

Jay Kemble believes that the mental approach of the starter going into a game at the high school and amateur level is key: "It's the most important thing. You have to build his confidence in any one-on-one opportunity you have with the pitcher."

Improving a pitcher's mental approach really starts with the preparation from the first day—the setting of goals and the focus on achieving those goals. Careful monitoring and one-on-one communication between the pitching coach, the coach, and the catcher are vital stepping-stones toward the establishment of the needed self-esteem and confidence. Every throw is an opportunity to work toward a positive mental approach.

Nothing is better than a game-day approach to preparing for the season. Gamelike experiences offer the best ground for building and establishing confidence in what a pitcher can do well. Live pitching to hitters with a specific purpose provides key opportunities for establishing confidence.

Using a game-day approach for each starter in a rotation scheme serves as ideal preparation for getting starters ready for a season, particularly as you build up the endurance of pitchers with each game-day outing. By setting goals for each game-day experience, coaches have a great opportunity to work with pitchers one-on-one and build their confidence.

D'Andrea sets individual goals with each pitcher. In working with a pitcher's mental approach, he says, "You have to battle yourself to stay positive and always think 'I'm good enough.'"

I've always tried to plan opportunities in practice and game situations for each starter to succeed doing what he does best. Nothing is more important than self-esteem. By providing opportunities to succeed, the coach makes it possible for the pitcher to reach agreed-upon goals for each outing. Each pitcher should be hungry for success.

The game-day approach is a great way to provide pitchers the opportunity to be on top of what they can always do well—being positive, staying focused, and charging ahead. The real key to it all is self-esteem. Providing your starters the chances to do what they do well in live hitting circumstances is the best vehicle for gaining that positive self-esteem.

Effective Preparation Methods

Most coaches and pitchers count on the work they do between starts as key preparation for game pitching experience. Bill Swift says, "It's getting ready for the job you've got to do in the game; at each level of competition you're in, the level of work increases." Mike D'Andrea claims that as a professional, "I never felt the workouts at the park were near enough to get me ready. I had to do things on my own to be sure I would be ready for my start."

Both Swift and D'Andrea emphasize that conditioning was the biggest concern, especially running. Both also acknowledge having to be careful about eating. For Swift, it was important to get enough rest before each start and to pay attention to proper nutrition—a healthy diet, the use of vitamins, and so forth. Rest and diet are especially important for professionals because of the traveling and night games involved.

We've always stressed running as a vital part of conditioning. Many approaches have been developed recently to accomplish desired conditioning. The proper mix of endurance running and interval running spaced between starts needs to be planned. We've made the day following a start a conditioning day, one that calls for both hard running and a throwing routine that's comfortable and appropriate for each pitcher. Many pitching coaches recommend long toss for this conditioning day.

We've always favored what we've called a short-throwing day two days before a scheduled start. This workout allows for working on mechanics, direction and location, changing speeds, and fine tuning the best pitch and the out pitch. It is a stretch-out day in our six-step warm-up routine, centered on perfecting pitching mechanics while stretching out through the six-step routine. This workout provides an excellent opportunity for one-on-one monitoring and coaching. The greatest gains in fine tuning often happen in these workouts, which are a key part of the preparation ritual.

The game-day six-step warm-up ritual is a key period of the pregame preparation. The warm-up should begin with some running and stretching exercises with a light weight. (We use a tennis can with sand.) A long-toss routine before the six steps is often part of this ritual. Ideally, the pitching coach will monitor this routine. Jay Kemble suggests, "If you don't have a coach, give the kids something to coach themselves. In the six-step warm-ups, they get to know the guidelines for getting ready."

Swift advises pitchers in the pregame warm-up to "work to develop a rhythm; get a flow to get yourself going; try to work towards getting everything in sync." As suggested earlier, the pitcher should be sure to come out of the pen with at least two pitches ready to go.

Getting the Book on the Opponent

At the professional level, the book on opposing hitters is highly sophisticated. What's more, the professional pitcher has the talent, the tools, and the command of pitches to execute a strategic plan. At the college level a fairly high degree of sophistication is involved in accumulating the same kind of information. Some college pitchers are also capable of executing a carefully planned strategic approach to handling opposing hitters. At all other amateur levels the book on opposing hitters is less comprehensive, and the ability to execute a desired plan is more modest.

Swift and D'Andrea acknowledge that as professional pitchers, a big part of getting ready was meeting to go over all the accumulated information. Swift reports, "What was most important to me was knowing who was hot with the bat, who was getting the hits, who was driving in the runs, who I do not give into, who I pitch around." Swift goes on to say, "It was important to me that my catcher and I agreed on each guy's strengths and how we were going to handle the lineup." D'Andrea counted on a notebook he kept and game charts he charted the day before a start for knowing where the holes for each hitter were, what each hitter was hitting well, and in what count he hit well. Then, like Swift, he would meet with his catcher about handling the batting order.

Information gathered by whatever means can provide valuable insight for forming a strategic plan. Pitching and hitting charts are especially valuable if the pitchers facing the hitters have some similarity to the pitcher who will start.

Observing batting practice, keeping charts, and watching games is useful for discovering

- who the hot hitters are,
- where and how hard the good hitters are hitting the ball,
- what pitchers are being hit hard, and
- on what count the hitters are hitting the ball hard.

Kemble cautions, "At my level, I really can't count on the book; I'm more concerned with my pitchers' strengths. We have to use what they do best. Of course, it helps if the pitcher who will start has the tools."

Getting the book on opposing hitters is helpful in achieving the goal of handling the opposing lineup. Of course, the book needs to be applied according to the talent, ability, and success probabilities of the pitcher involved.

Pitch Count and Number of Pitches

I learned the importance of pitch count and the number of pitches from my college coach at Duke University, Jack Coombs. Jack was a great major-league pitcher with the Philadelphia Athletics. He won 31 games in a season and won five World Series games without a loss. He was the master college coach on pitching during his time, and much of my pitching background comes from what I learned from him during my college career. Coombs kept the scorebook himself, noting every pitch—a practice I have always used in my coaching career. The pitcher designated to be the next starter now commonly handles this job. This view of the pitch count on each hitter and the running total of the number of pitches thrown is valuable information for pitching decisions that the coach must make during the game.

First, with prior knowledge of the likely total number of pitches the starter can handle, the signs of when to remove the pitcher begin to develop. For most in-season starts, 100 pitches is a key point of consideration.

The endurance of starters differs, but even for a properly conditioned and experienced pitcher, 100 pitches thrown in a contest is a key juncture in deciding when to remove the pitcher. If a lesser number of pitches has been established as the limit before the game, that limit becomes a guiding point. The pitch count is especially important when pitching injuries or arm difficulties are a factor.

At the amateur level, it is particularly important to avoid overuse. Too many pitchers face the consequence of severe arm problems because of overuse. Going too far with the number of pitches thrown in an outing will hurt the pitcher.

The inning-by-inning pitch count gives managers and coaches a good picture of the pitching trends in a game. The manager or coach knows the number of first-pitch strikes, the number of high pitch counts (2-2, 3-1, 3-2), what pitches are being thrown for strikes and what pitches are not, and what pitches are being hit hard. The combined indications can help in making a pitching decision.

The key to being a successful manager or coach is making pitching decisions at the right juncture in games. Many major-league managers have lost their jobs because of their inability to make the right pitching decisions. The ability to make the correct decisions is an instinct, a feel that one acquires through experience. The most helpful guide for making such decisions is the number of pitches in a game and the picture of that pitch count to opposing hitters game by game.

Finally, pitch count should serve as the guideline for the amount of rest a pitcher should have between outings. If the pitch count accumulates to 60 or more pitches at the amateur level, one might suggest a minimum of at least three days of rest between starts. For outings that total between 30 and 60 pitches, at least two days of rest is recommended between outings. For outings of 15 to 30 pitches, at least one day of rest is needed. Remember, exceeding such guidelines too often can bring about arm difficulties that lead to serious consequences.

Analyzing the Pitcher's Stuff As the Game Proceeds

Knowing what's going well—what the pitcher can throw for strikes, what the best pitch is at each juncture of the game, what the out pitch is for each such situation—is a key factor in the success of any outing. A cooperative relationship between the pitcher, catcher, and pitching coach is invaluable in determining this as a game goes forward.

Before the game, a pitching plan for handling the batter order should be developed based on information previously gathered and studied. At the college and high school levels, observation of batting practice serves as an ideal point for analyzing such factors as

- batting stance,
- position of the hands,
- concentration of the head,
- stride,
- quickness of the hands (bat speed),
- opening of the hips and front shoulder, and
- telltale signs that suggest use of certain pitches.

Any game plan devised for handling the batting order in the pregame meeting must be based on each hitter's strengths and weaknesses and the strengths and weaknesses of the starting pitcher.

The pregame warm-up serves as a first juncture for analyzing what's going well, what can be thrown for strikes, and so on. The pitching coach should help with this analysis and be alert for the telltale signs. The game catcher observing his part of the warm-up concentrates on what's going to be ready for use at the start of the game.

I always wanted to know, either by personal observation or from the pitching coach, what is working well for the pitcher, what he is throwing for strikes, and the availability of the pitcher's strengths. This breakdown sometimes calls for adjustments to the agreed upon strategy.

An important period for analyzing the pitcher's stuff is between innings. To make adjustments to game strategy, the coaches can go over the charts kept, the observations of hitters reacting to the pitcher's strengths and weaknesses, and the inning-by-inning analysis of what is or isn't working well.

On some days a pitcher will not have success with his customary strengths. In these cases, it is smart to stay with what has made that pitcher a starter. The coach or manager should remember that opposing hitters have good and bad spells. Analyzing the pitcher-batter matchups as the game moves along can dictate the strategy for handling each at-bat.

I cannot stress enough the importance of having the right catcher handling the pitching staff. The catcher must have the instinct, flare, and ability to use each pitcher's strengths, to know what's going well for the pitcher, and to know what in the pitcher's arsenal can fit the pitch count. The catcher has always been a key for any championship team. Great catchers get the most out of a pitcher by analyzing the pitcher's stuff and the hitters he will face as the game proceeds.

A coach should work to establish an ongoing examination of this kind with each opportunity for communication, whether it's between innings or on that important trip to the mound. The discussion on the trip to the mound

should usually center on the adjustments needed to handle what is or isn't going well. Most pitching coaches are responsible for this.

Sometimes a trip to the mound involves a specific pitching situation—that of challenging a hitter, pitching tough to a hitter, or pitching around a hitter. In my experience as a head coach, I usually used a trip to the mound either for that type of pitching situation or to make a pitching change.

The ongoing analysis of a pitcher's stuff and what the opposing hitters are hitting hard determine how one plans to challenge a hitter—to pitch tough to a hitter or pitch around him. One wins or loses on this critical choice at a particular situational pitching juncture.

It comes down to these choices:

- Do you take a chance on letting the hot hitter beat you by challenging him?
- If you don't, do you want to take the chance that you can either pitch tough to him by pitching him away from the middle of the plate, mixing the fastball with a change-up or breaking-ball out pitch?
- Or do you want to pitch around him with pitches designed to prevent him from putting the fat of the bat on the ball?

If you determine that your starter is still capable of beating the hot hitter with his strengths, you challenge the hitter by going after him with your two best pitches or perhaps only your best. Keeping abreast of the pitcher's ongoing strengths obviously goes a long way toward making this choice. Good catchers—ones who have a good feel for this—are often the key persons in making this choice.

Communication With the Catcher

No player in the game is more important than the catcher. The catcher's position has always been the first one I determine in my lineup. You need someone capable of getting the most out of your pitchers. Championship teams have catchers who capitalize on each pitcher's strengths. I've always felt that the coach is responsible for training and developing catchers to handle pitchers and get the most out of them.

Many coaches have recently taken this a step further and assumed the responsibility for calling all pitches—the pitch to be used, its grip, and its location—especially at the high school and college level. At the professional level it's more common for the bench to focus on controlling the runner or runners on base by calling for throws to a base and pickoff plays. To call pitches to the catcher, the coach must have a finely tuned communication system. The system must be quick, easy to understand, and indecipherable by the opponent. The system must use a clear indicator to relay the pitch to

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A good catcher knows how to get the most out of his pitcher.

be used, including its location. Similarly, with a runner on second, signs between the pitcher and catcher must use an indicator that keys the needed call.

Coaches use varying philosophies about calling the game. Legendary coaches like LSU's Skip Bertman and Southern California's Mike Gillespie, each of whom has won national championships, completely controlled calling this part of the game. University of Miami coach Jim Morris, with two recent national championships, has his pitching coach handle it.

Mike D'Andrea, at the high school and legion level, has used a mix of systems. He calls everything for a new catcher until he feels that the catcher is ready. Then he turns it over to the catcher and calls pitches only when the catcher looks to him for help.

Mike puts it this way: "You need to feel comfortable that the pitcher is throwing the ball you want for that count. Pitchers don't have time to think—they just have to learn to pitch." Mike feels that his catchers eventually learn what he wants pitchers to throw in all situations. Mike can then feel comfortable about having the catcher call the game.

Many others, including me, are uncomfortable calling the game from the dugout. I never felt that I had the same feel that the catcher had for what was happening—the bite on the curveball, the movement on the fastball, the spin on each pitch. Thus training the catcher to handle calling the game for the pitcher has been a priority for me. I reserve my participation for the occasional situational call, key pitch call, or for making the decision to change pitchers.

Unquestionably, communication between the pitcher and catcher is required if the catcher is to call the game. Again, the pregame meeting largely determines how the game will be handled and how each hitter will be pitched to. The coach involved should ensure that a clear strategy has been planned and agreed upon.

With the unfolding of the game, I've always favored having the catcher call the game, though with ongoing communication between the pitcher and catcher. The experienced pitcher should take advantage of his feel about his strengths. He should not hesitate to communicate his opinion by occasionally shaking off a call, expressing himself in a timeout in a crucial moment, or talking with the coach and catcher between innings. A good battery learns to communicate through game experience and appropriate encouragement and monitoring from coaches.

The coach must feel comfortable with the system he uses to call the game. He must make sure that each person involved understands his role in the communication process. The coach should establish definite guidelines for

- who makes the call,
- how it's communicated,
- the pitcher's prerogatives for changing the call, and
- what determines the ultimate call.

Coaches who favor controlling all calls must ensure that the communication of the battery follows specific guidelines regarding the call. Coaches who favor having the catcher call the game must ensure that the players clearly understand how the calling of the game is to be controlled and adjusted. An effective relationship must exist between pitcher and catcher.

A coach must be comfortable with the system and believe that it gets the best out of his pitching staff. I favor having the catcher call the game. I felt that it was my responsibility to help the catcher develop the feel and instinct for calling the game, but at key junctures I made situational calls.

Developing a Rhythm

Of all the pitchers I coached over the years, Bill Swift best epitomized the pitcher who always pitched with a rhythm. Swift himself points out that as a coach he now works “to get my pitcher on a good roll. You’ve got to get him in a rhythm—everything has to feel in sync.”

Mike D’Andrea likes to get this flow going by having his pitchers “pitching fastballs down the middle, then to halves, then the thirds of the plate.” D’Andrea reasons, “Not many high school pitchers have control, so I use this system not only to get them going but also to get them throwing to location. When they get to hitting the thirds of the plate it becomes a reward.”

Jay Kemble counts on the six-step warm-up system we used for so long, which helps to develop the rhythm for the game for his pitchers. Finding a rhythm is a point of emphasis in the process and “especially for establishing and meeting the goal of coming out of the bullpen into the game with two pitches going for you.”

Having a rhythm in a delivery reflects confidence, appropriate concentration on the target, and smooth execution of pitching mechanics and pitching flow for each pitch. The pitcher can’t work a game the way it’s been planned or throw a pitch where he wants to throw it without developing pitching flow or rhythm.

The ultimate test of the success of any rhythm is related to the degree to which a hitter can disrupt it. A pitcher with self-esteem, mound poise, and maturity counters the hitter’s attempts to unsettle him with the appropriate handling of such tactics from the balance point in the delivery. We tell our pitchers to “get to the balance point, lift, and throw!” Experience in such situations helps the pitcher keep his poise and flow.

Mental Approach of Relievers

Like starters, relievers must have a positive mental approach. Relievers need to go into the game thinking positively and being unaffected by the pressure of the situation or a hot hitter. The key is to stay positive.

If the relief pitcher starts the inning, Swift suggests, “You come into the inning to get three outs—it’s like the first inning.” He adds, “The worst pressure is coming in with one or more men on. You have to be prepared. Above all, know your role when you come.”

Again, the key for the pitcher is coming in ready to go with his real strengths—what will go well for him—throwing strikes. Swift reports that the key difference between getting ready as a starter and a reliever is “getting loose fast—starting to throw harder earlier, perhaps earlier than five minutes.” He further emphasizes, “You’ve got to get your strengths ready fast and go out there with your best pitch.”

How does one know when a pitcher is ready to come in? Even the bullpen coach or pitching coach has difficulty with that call. Swift says he observed many relievers saying they’re ready before they really are. They need to learn to develop a rhythm faster, to get everything to feel in sync faster. Experience will help a pitcher learn how to do that. I’ve always asked that a pitcher indicate his readiness when he can at least come in with his best pitch.

Certainly at the amateur level, the reliever can be effective coming in from the bullpen with only his best pitch. The ideal is having the time to come in with his two best pitches in readiness.

Pitching strategy in working a game, particularly at the amateur level, depends on many factors: what the pitcher does best, the consistency with which he can do it, and the talent he has for getting it done. These considerations will determine the strategy involved.

The greater the tools, talent, and self-esteem for getting it done consistently, the more weapons and strategy can be involved. Most of us have to work with the strengths at hand and the confidence involved and then get the most we can to accomplish each victory.

We have lived with this philosophy for each game situation: “Have your pitchers, whether starters or relievers, as prepared as possible. Don’t mess around with things that are not going well. Go with what’s going well and with what will be good for you!”

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Handling Pitchers

Steve Hertz

I would first like to say what an honor it is to be asked to contribute to this book and share some of my experiences and methods. I remember attending my first national baseball convention 25 years ago as if it were yesterday. I had the overwhelming feeling that I didn't know anything or anybody. I was intimidated, and I remember asking myself after every terrific presentation, "Why aren't we doing that?" Oh, what a feeling of inadequacy I had.

But as the years and conventions rolled by, I began to realize how this amazing body of knowledge worked. Baseball people share, they teach, they borrow, they learn, they give, and they care about the game, their teams, and the future of the game. What a wonderful environment! What I've learned and shared during those early conventions are a huge part of our program. The convention is the vehicle that each of us has relied on for support and growth.

Well, now my hair is gray, and the colleagues that I am proud to call my friends are too numerous to count. What I have learned from those battle-tested generals is who I am. So, in that realization I have settled my anxiety and insecurities, and, with their help, I feel centered enough to share on this grand stage.

Monitoring Pitchers' Arms

I've heard about, seen, and read about pitching systems, programs, structured workouts, and plans. This one. That one. Throw in a game, then do this on day one, this on day two, throw this many pitches on day three. Or,

throw, throw, throw, more, more, more. But I've never seen a rigid system that's right for every pitcher.

All arms are different. All pitchers are different. All bodies are different. What works for one won't necessarily work, or work as well, for another. It seems to me that the health and recovery of an arm and body are extremely important, along with the strategic plan used to get hitters out. Success in these areas is driven by an individual's mental approach. A pitcher must be mentally tough enough to handle the adversity inherent in the position.

Coaches should teach their pitchers to learn their bodies and their arms. Among the many questions that should be answered are these:

- What is my best way to recover?
- How many days of rest do I need?
- Should I ice my arm?
- How much should I run?
- What kind of conditioning should I do?

Every pitcher and pitching coach should search for, learn, study, refine, and settle on a total-body workout involving prestretching, circulation through conditioning, a strength program that not only builds strength and muscle tone but also maintains it through a long season, and a poststretching routine.

I want our pitchers to be in complete control of their arms. I want them to make the decisions about their arms. I want our pitchers to rate their arms daily because they are the only ones that truly know how their arms feel. To create that self-knowledge, we have set up a rating system. I am so tired of asking pitchers, "How do you feel?" and hearing them reply, "I am fine." That kind of communication between a pitcher and a pitching coach is not precise. I want to know exactly how his arm feels. Moreover, I want him to know and learn how to evaluate and measure where his arm is on a day-to-day basis. Only then will he begin to make quality decisions for the health of his arm, and only then will the coach be sufficiently informed to manage each pitcher's ability.

Our rating system works this way. Every day after the pitching staff plays catch to their tolerance at the beginning of practice, my pitching coach, Chris Sheehan, will ask each of them to rate his arm on a scale of 1 to 10. (*Tolerance* refers to a personal feel for feeling loose and warmed up along with a sense of any degree of pain, discomfort, or fatigue.) On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 means he's lying on the ground unconscious and we're calling 911, and 10 means his arm feels perfect—no pain, maximum strength, and in midseason condition. If a pitcher is feeling OK, he'll usually give a 7 to 8 1/2 rating. In that case Coach Sheehan says nothing. If the rating is communicated as a 6 1/2 or lower, Coach will ask why and adjustments may be made. We list these

ratings every day on a sheet with every pitcher's name on it so that we can learn and monitor how our activity taxes their arms.

With this data over an extended period, we get a great feel for who can do what. We can then make quality, healthful decisions about our pitchers' arms. This really helps us when we come to deciding our staff's different roles. Each pitcher must follow two rules with this rating system. The first is to be honest. The second is to be consistent. One pitcher's 8 may be different from another pitcher's 8, but the key for us is to learn each pitcher's arm and to manage it wisely. A daily rating determines what degree of throwing each pitcher will do on that particular day.

Overcoming the Velocity Complex

We try to sell our pitchers on embracing the craft of pitching—getting hitters out. Too often young pitchers equate velocity, strikeouts, and stuff with pitching. And all too often we run into young pitchers who have developed a velocity complex, which compels them to throw harder and harder in situations when adding effort to pitches only makes things worse. We try to have each pitcher find his tempo—a tempo that through evaluation and practice we have determined to be his proper physical effort. That tempo aids his mechanics and facilitates his repeating of those mechanics, thus promoting a pitching mentality rather than a throwing mentality.

A pitcher must be in touch with his tempo at three times—during practice and bullpens, during fatigue in a game, and under pressure in a game. If a pitcher has the ability to find his tempo at those three times and not add effort to his pitches, then he creates poise and proper thinking on the mound. Coaches and players should often discuss this pitching-versus-velocity approach to develop understanding, and pitchers should practice it daily for feel.

Determining Rotation

The following topics are considerations for choosing your starters and making quality rotation decisions.

Starter's Arsenal

Before the coach can see the complexion of his staff, he must allow enough time for the entire pitching staff to get in proper shape and then throw enough innings in enough outings. A coach has to be able to decide who his starters are. An important criterion in this decision is the pitcher's ability to get different types of hitters out. You have contact hitters, pure hitters, big

power hitters, slap hitters, poor hitters, outstanding hitters, and you have to remember that the pitcher will see hitters from both sides of the plate. To sustain success as a starting pitcher throughout a diverse lineup, a pitcher must have command and must throw strikes. He must have three pitches:

1. a fastball that he can locate with accuracy,
2. a breaking ball that he can throw over the plate, and
3. a change-up so that he can change speeds.

Without those three pieces of the puzzle, a starting pitcher will have difficulty getting different kinds of hitters out during a five- to seven-inning outing. Other attributes that a starting pitcher must have include the right psychological makeup, the ability to pitch tough in tough situations, the ability to keep pitching, and the ability to be competitive.

Lead With Your Ace

If your pitching staff is fortunate enough to have a pitcher with at least three pitches, command of those pitches, and great competitiveness and mental makeup, then you have the luxury of having a true ace. I have always believed that you lead with your ace in the first game of every series. This does many things to help your ballclub. First, when your best pitcher is on the mound, your entire ballclub plays with more confidence. If you play with confidence in the initial game of the series, you'll have a better chance of establishing some momentum going through the series. Also, if you win the first game of the series, you have a better chance to win the series, which could lead to a championship. If you do not lead with your ace, you run the risk of sending an awkward, possibly negative message to your pitching staff and your entire team. To manage in a positive and successful way, coaches need to send solid, positive messages to their ballclubs.

Show Contrast with Your Starting Rotation

When determining a starting rotation, I feel it is important to keep in mind the differences between your pitchers. If you have a hard thrower, a soft lefty, and a guy who throws a split-finger fastball at midlevel velocity, you have the advantage of being able to show contrast to your opponent. For example, in the first game you lead with your ace, who has the best stuff, possibly a hard fastball. The second game you come back with a pitcher whose abilities contrast with the hard-throwing ace by going with your soft-throwing, crafty lefty. Then, in the third game, you show contrast again by throwing your hard-velocity right-hander. This sequence will tend to disrupt the timing of your opponent's hitters and quite possibly give you advantage.



Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Baseball

Leading with your ace in the first game will help establish momentum going into the series.

Establish Roles

As a pitcher, I always wanted to know when I was going to pitch. Not knowing is difficult. So, having experienced that myself, I have made it a rule to let every pitcher on my staff know what his job was going to be for each game, but I always let them know that it could change if the situation changed. To know what their roles were going to be each day was helpful

mentally to my pitchers. Over the years, pitchers have told me that they have appreciated knowing. We don't have anything to hide from them on that subject. I think that having this communication with your pitching staff is important.

Establishing roles is an extremely important part of the development of your pitching staff. A pitcher needs to know what his role is—starter, long reliever, middle reliever, setup guy, or closer. All those roles require different skills and different skill levels; establishing roles allows a pitching staff to create an identity, have a regimen, and develop a consistent work ethic to help each pitcher fill his particular role. Each of those roles has a different workload with respect to the daily routine. Your staff must embrace those roles mentally. A pitcher must not be disappointed if he is not a starter. He should perform the role he has to the best of his ability with an intellectual understanding that every championship ballclub has outstanding starting pitchers, outstanding long relievers, outstanding middle relievers, outstanding setup men, and an outstanding closer. The realization of that by your staff and their acceptance of their individual roles are vital to the success of your team and your pitching staff.

Advice on the Lineup

The following is a concise discussion regarding a coach's considerations in making out a starting lineup. You must consider this information in concert with your decision on the starting rotation and consequent moves in the bullpen.

Use What You Know

I like a set lineup so that my players begin to learn about themselves and the subtleties, the little characteristics, and the tiny ways in which the game changes. I like my players to know those things about one another. I think that shaking up a lineup is tough on a ballclub. I also believe that you pick your lineup based on the personnel you have. If you happen to have a team with a lot of power rather than a team with speed and contact hitters, you work with that situation to choose your starters and pick what type of offense you create. Out of that decision you make out your lineup.

The phrase I like to use is "You know what you know." You know if a particular hitter is a good contact hitter. You know if he has speed or not. You know if he is your best hitter. You know if he has power. You know if he is not a good contact hitter or if he strikes out a lot. You can't be duped into hoping that a player will do what you know he can't do or has not been able to do. Go with what you know he can do. Use what you know.

A good rule to follow in deciding who plays and when they play is to start your best all-around players and then make defensive replacements when ahead in the game and offensive replacements when behind. In developing a starting lineup, you can choose from among the following three philosophies:

1. Pitching-staff driven. If you have an outstanding pitching staff you may be well served by starting the best defensive lineup. If your pitching staff has shown a tendency to give up a lot of runs, you may be tempted to start a lineup that produces more runs.
2. Defense- or offense-oriented. In this case you always have an offense-oriented lineup and a defense-oriented lineup. It's your choice.
3. Best combo players, "baseball players." You choose the best all-around players, guys with the best combination of speed, hitting, and defense.

Put your players in situations where they can be successful. Ask them to do only what they are skilled enough to do. Let the complexion of your players' skills determine your offensive style and make your decisions in concert with those skills. Again, ask your players to do what they are good at.

Characteristics of One Through Nine Hitters

Your leadoff hitter is your offensive catalyst—not necessarily your fastest guy, but the guy who gets on base the most. Finding this guy and allowing him to do what he does best will be huge for your ballclub. He is the guy you hate to see come to bat against you. Give him your most at-bats and hit him leadoff.

To me, the number two guy is my second leadoff hitter. He should have many of the same characteristics because if your leadoff guy doesn't get on, you have a second chance to get things started. I want this guy up a lot and on base often.

Your number three hitter is your best offensive player. He is your pure hitter, the guy you want up when the game is on the line. He is your toughest out. He is the guy who is going to throw everybody on his back and carry you when it gets tough. He is Mr. Clutch.

Number four is your scariest guy. I like this guy to be big, strong, and imposing. I want the pitcher and catcher to see this guy come to the plate and say, "Oh, no. Be careful," because when a pitcher and a catcher think that way, I can't see how good things come of it. This guy should be your second best all-around offensive player and an aggressive swinger.

The number five hitter is a big swinger too, with imposing size. He should have excellent power so that the opponent pitches to the four hitter. It will help if this guy can run. Usually your four hitter doesn't possess much speed,

and you don't want to bunch up a lot of guys who can't run. So if you have an imposing guy with good speed, hit him fifth.

At six and seven, I like to hit guys who can really run. I like to save one of my better hitters for the seven spot because this spot, for some reason, seems to come up in clutch situations often.

A good fastball hitter should be in the number eight hole because pitchers want to get that hitter out, especially with two outs so that the nine hitter leads off the next inning. So the eight hitter faces a lot of challenge situations. And I think pitchers and catchers tend to challenge with a fastball. I think the guy in the eight hole can be productive as a good fastball hitter.

The nine spot is where I put my best speed—a drag bunter, a base stealer, and also a fastball hitter who can take a pitch and walk. Some of the best innings I can recall had the nine hitter leading off the inning with a base on balls. Then here comes the top of your order.

Several other considerations are worthy in deciding whether players should start or where they should hit in the order:

- Good contact hitter
- Good speed
- Hitter who can make two-strike adjustments
- Power
- Mentally tough competitor
- Guy who is better with people on base
- Good bunters (drag or sacrifice)

When you platoon, you don't have a clear winner at a position, but you may have a left-handed hitter who hits right-handed pitchers pretty well, a right handed-hitter who hits left-handed pitchers pretty well, and both struggle in the opposite situation. The combination of these two can create one good starter.

Scouting Your Opponent and Implementing Data

To give your team an edge in a game, you should gather scouting data about the opponent and execute it effectively.

Anticipate Plays and Relay Information

I believe in scouting reports and knowing our opponent. We want to respect our opponent, do our homework, and know what task is in front of

us. We spend an enormous amount of time gathering data on our opponents—their tendencies, their speed, their power, what plays they like to run, how they run the bases, and whether they bunt. All this data helps us anticipate what they are going to try to do. The hitters' tendencies, what they might do against particular pitchers, how we are going to play them, and how we are going to pitch them is all included in a scouting report that we hand to each player in a meeting before every series. We then try to execute that plan. As the series progresses, we may modify the plan from game to game or even from at-bat to at-bat. But the information gathered over a few games tends to repeat itself because players, pitchers, teams, and coaches tend to follow patterns. They may put the ball in the same place, struggle against the same pitch, be successful against the same pitch, and call the same plays in the same situations. Knowing this information going into a game is vital. I believe that anticipation is one step quicker than reaction. This whole process is anticipation, an educated anticipation.

Figures 11.1 and 11.2 are examples of how we acquire data that goes into our scouting report for an opponent. These and other reports are carefully kept and closely monitored so that we gain valuable information regarding that particular opponent. The compilation of this information in like situations prepares our players and, better yet, allows them to anticipate what the opponent will do. Incorporating this data into our alignments and decision making has won many games for us over the years.

Figure 11.1 is a chart kept by one of our pitchers who is probably not slated to pitch that day. He has a notebook with sheets titled "Opponent's Offensive Plays." He must carefully watch and accurately record all offensive plays put on by the opponent and fill in all the categories listed. Coaches tend to do the same things in the same situations with the same people. Coaches like to steal in certain situations and in certain counts. This data gives us a good feel for each coach's tendencies so that we can employ the proper defense against it.

Figure 11.2 is a composite that we have for each hitter we will face on a given day. As you can see, we have watched Mr. Miller for at least 16 at-bats and many pitches. In watching him and recording anything we see that is listed on the sheet, he has given us a lot of data with which to combat him.

The information gathered won't be useful unless we have a system to relay it. The following is an example of what we do with our center fielder, shortstop, second baseman, and catcher in communicating our information on each batter. Each of the four players has a piece of tape on his glove with our scouting information on it, one through nine. As each hitter comes to the plate, our catcher can refer to the scouting report on his glove about how to pitch the hitter. The second baseman and shortstop relay the appropriate information (tendency and speed) to their respective corners. The center fielder does likewise to his flanks in left and right field. The following is a system we have used to communicate this information:

**Gonzaga University Baseball
Opponent's Offensive Plays**

Opponent Ferris State
Date 1-17-02

Hit-and-run	Hitter	Runner(s)	Count	Outs	Score	Inning	Hit where
	Jones	Smith 1B	0-0	0	1-0	2	Right side
	Bishop	Harper 1B Jones 3B	2-1	1	2-0	4	Left side
Steal	Runners	Base(s)	Count	Outs	Score	Inning	Steal type
	Smith	1B	1-0	2	2-0	3	Straight
	Rollins	1B	2-2	2	3-2	6	Delay
Bunt	Hitter	Runner	Count	Outs	Score	Inning	Where
	Harper	Bishop 1B	0-0	0	4-2	5	Sac, right side
	Bishop	None	1-0	0	4-3	7	Drop left side
	Edwards	None	2-1	1	5-3	8	Drop left side
1 st and 3 rd	Jones	Rollins 2B	2-0	0	5-3	8	Push right side
	Runner 1B steal?	Runner 3B steal?	Count	Outs	Score	Inning	What happened
	Smith-delay	Jones in throw	2-2	2	3-2	6	Scored but throw
	Bishop-3/4	Jones in O's throw	1-2	2	6-3	8	Out at plate SS-D

FIGURE 11.1 Chart used to record the opponent's offensive plays. This data goes into a scouting report for an opponent.

Opponent Scouting Report – Hitter

Team UC Irvine Date 1-28-02
 Number 14 Player Miller

Bats: R (L) S Runs: A- / A (A+) A++ Steals: (Yes) No
 Tendency: FM-5 Power: Ass Contact: Good
 Sac: (Yes) No Push: Yes (No) Drag: (Yes) No Hit-and-run: (Yes) No

Hitter Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Pitch strength: <u>FB</u>	Pitch weakness: <u>LH-breaking ball and change</u>
Location strength: <u>Middle-in</u>	Location weakness: <u>Away, up</u>
First-pitch hitter: <u>(Yes)</u> No <u>5/16</u>	Pitches swung through: <u>LH-BB, RH-change</u>
Two-strike adjustments: <u>(Yes)</u> No	Pitches chased: <u>FB, LH-BB, RH-CH</u>
Hit-by-pitch: <u>(Yes)</u> No	Locations chased: <u>Up, down and away</u>
Box location: <u>Up and on deck</u>	

Vs RHP At-bat:	1. <u>1B</u>	Count: <u>0-0</u>	<u>FB in</u>
	2. <u>2B</u>	<u>1-0</u>	<u>FB mid</u>
	3. <u>K</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>FB up</u>
	4. <u>F-8</u>	<u>1-2</u>	<u>BB mid</u>
	5. <u>SH</u>	<u>0-0</u>	<u>CH mid</u>
	6. <u>HR</u>	<u>0-0</u>	<u>FB mid</u>
	7. <u>4-3</u>	<u>2-0</u>	<u>CH away</u>
	8. <u>1B</u>	<u>0-0</u>	<u>FB in</u>
	9. <u>1B</u>	<u>3-1</u>	<u>FB mid</u>
	10. <u>F-5</u>	<u>1-0</u>	<u>CH away</u>
	11. <u>HBP</u>	<u>1-1</u>	<u>FB in</u>
	12. <u>F-8</u>	<u>0-0</u>	<u>CH mid</u>
Vs LHP	13. <u>5-3 drag</u>	<u>0-0</u>	<u>CH away</u>
	14. <u>4-3</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>BB away</u>
	15. <u>K</u>	<u>1-2</u>	<u>BB away</u>
	16. <u>BB</u>	<u>2-2</u>	<u>FB up</u>

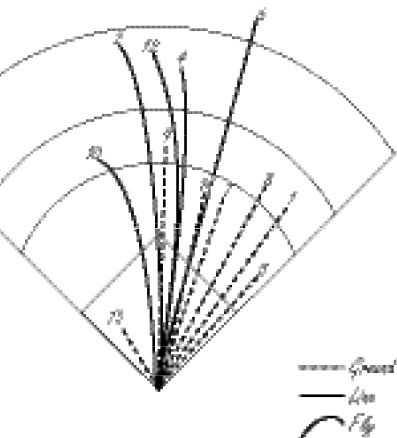


FIGURE 11.2 Sample scouting report on opposing hitter.

	Right-handed hitters	Left-handed hitters
P = pull	1. below-average power	4. below-average power
M = middle	2. average power	5. average power
O = opposite	3. good power	6. good power

If a guy is a P-3, he pulls everything with good power. If a guy is a PM-2, he is pull on the ground and middle in the air with average power.

We also want to communicate each hitter's speed, which is a significant variable in solid infield play. We communicate the information by the following:

A++	Great speed
A+	Good speed
A	Average speed
A-	Poor speed

The last factor we need to communicate on each hitter is how we are going to pitch him and where his location weakness is.

Reg.	Pitch this hitter "regular" (get ahead and go with pitcher's strength)
Chal.	Pitching challenge (go right at him with mostly fastballs)
Back	Pitch him backward (fastballs when ahead, other pitches when behind)
Jam	Location weakness is inside
Away	Location weakness is outside
Up	Location weakness is up in the zone

Putting all this information together, here is an example of what the tape on our fielders' gloves looks like for the opponent's first hitter indicated by uniform number:

MO-5 A++ Reg. A

This means that the hitter hits middle on the ground and opposite in the air, is left-handed with average power, and has great speed. We will pitch him regular, and his location weakness is away.

Calling pitches when you're sitting with the scouting report in front of you tells you that a hitter likes a certain pitch, has a weakness in a specific location, a strength in another location, chases a particular pitch, and hits another pitch well. Having all that data is a powerful advantage, but it can also be dangerous.

The pitcher can make two kinds of mistakes. A physical mistake is simply missing the intended location. A decision mistake is throwing the wrong pitch in the wrong area. We as coaches tend to want the responsibility of calling the type of pitch and its location to reduce the frequency of decision mistakes. When we call the pitches, however, we eliminate one of the most natural exchanges and workings in the game, the pitcher-catcher relationship. We take away the catcher's feeling and understanding for how to get a particular hitter out by recalling what he did the last two times at bat and remembering the general scouting report on the hitter's weaknesses and strengths.

But we often have catchers who do not have the experience to couple the pitcher's strengths with the feel for getting the hitter out in a given situation. In those circumstances we call key pitches or even every pitch.

All of us have had a veteran catcher who has a great feel for getting hitters out. In that case we like to spoon-feed the pitcher and catcher before the ballgame and between innings with our scouting reports. Then we let them go with it and make the calls.

Be Careful Not to Tip Pitches

Programs and coaches are becoming increasingly adept at picking up pitches or signs from the coach as he relays them to the catcher, from the catcher as he relays them to the pitcher, or from the pitcher who makes some change in mechanics as or before he delivers the pitch. My teams have lost games because the coach, catcher, or pitcher has tipped our pitches or the location. That occurrence has led to a breakdown in our pitching effectiveness or our ability to get hitters out consistently.

How do you know when your opponent has your pitches or location? One way is to listen to the talk that comes from first-base coach, third-base coach, or on-deck hitter, or some consistent name, number, first name, last name, or phrase from the dugout. Usually the catcher is most able to pick up that kind of oral sign. This occurrence would cause you to look closely at where you are tipping and change your signs and signals.

Another way to figure out if the opponent is intercepting signs is to watch how their hitters swing at certain pitches. Do they seem to be taking great swings on every fastball? You can tell this is happening when hitters make a total physical commitment to the swing. Are they letting all the off-speed and breaking balls go? Do they seem to have great balance and take those pitches as though they know what's coming? What do their swings look like? If you add these things up, you will have an indication of whether a team has your pitches or signs.

Therefore, when deciding whether to call pitches or to call just a few key pitches, you should test your ability to give signs without interception. Have someone try to pick up your signs before you initiate a system and call

pitches in games. Imagine how devastating it could be when you think you are doing something to promote getting hitters out but instead you are allowing the hitters to know exactly what's coming. Again, more programs are making sign stealing a large part of their offensive approach and are good at picking up opponents' pitches and locations.

To help your pitchers learn not to tip pitches, have a number of your players not in the game try to pick pitches from each of your pitchers. A teammate may spot something that the pitcher should correct to prevent tipping his pitches from the mound.

Opponents also try to pick pitches from your catcher. Be sure that your catcher is clean from both sides when giving pitches. Be sure his arm does not move when giving signals to the pitcher. Also, have two or three pitch routines that you can use with runners at second base. To make sure that your catcher is clean from tipping, use your intrasquad scrimmages to try to pick up signs from your catcher.

When calling pitches from the dugout, we like to use at least two people giving signs at the same time, thereby causing twice the work if someone wants to try to pick up our pitches. We will also do that even if the catcher is calling his own game to cause a little confusion on the other side of the field.

Some teams will act as though they have your pitches even if they don't in an effort to confuse you and cause your pitcher, catcher, and coaches to get away from their natural thinking process, disrupt your pitcher's tempo, and create a little paranoia. This ploy can be effective in disrupting what the pitcher, catcher, and coach are trying to do to get a hitter out.

Control Misses

In every ballgame a pitcher throws pitches that he did not intend to throw. He misses the location or the strike zone. A pitcher must recognize that he will often miss during a ballgame. We strongly believe that pitchers should work to refine their pitching to the point where they control their misses. Their failure to do this may be a major factor in winning or losing ballgames. Missing out of the zone at the right time and missing toward the middle of the plate at the right time can be the key to winning.

To increase concentration on good misses and controlled misses, we have a touch system that the catcher uses before each pitch or each set of pitches. This system is determined by each situation and more specifically by the count. For instance, on the first pitch to a hitter the catcher will touch the front of his mask. This tells the pitcher to miss toward the center of the plate if he misses the glove. He still may go for the outer half or inner half of the plate and throw to the glove, but should he miss the glove he'll miss toward the center of the plate for a strike. He will then be ahead in the count. He wants to avoid throwing an 0-0 pitch on the outer half and miss away to make the count 1-0.

The miss toward the center of the plate will remain the goal until the count becomes either 0-2 or 1-2. At that point the catcher will change the focus to miss outside the location or glove. The touch by the catcher will be on the side of the mask to tell the pitcher to miss outside if he misses the glove. The goal is to expand the plate and induce the hitter who is down in the count to swing at a pitcher's pitch. We work on this technique during bullpens and then apply it in ballgames. This system is a way of showing command with both strikes and misses. The pitcher who controls his misses limits the potential damage when he misses the target.

Three Plans for Getting a Hitter Out

The pitcher must have a plan to get the hitter out as he steps to the plate. We ask our pitcher to focus on three such plans:

1. Get ahead and expand the plate.
2. Get behind and pitch backward.
3. Challenge him, go right after him, and invite contact.

As I mentioned earlier, the situation may dictate which of these plans a pitcher will use. But going after a hitter without a plan is dangerous. Too often a pitcher's plan will be to get ahead of the hitter with a first-pitch strike, stay ahead, and then get the hitter out. When that plan blows up and the pitcher finds himself behind, he must realize that an equally powerful and productive way to get the hitter out is to pitch backward, which is simply to throw pitches other than fastballs in fastball counts.

Getting ahead of a hitter is powerful because the pitcher is able to throw pitches out of the zone and induce the hitter to chase them while maintaining control of the count. Challenging hitters, going right after them, can be as powerful as the other two because just getting base hits is difficult. Any pitcher who can throw strikes will induce his opponents to put the ball in play, which will produce many outs. In the right situation, under the right score, challenging hitters is an outstanding plan.

Three Things Every Pitcher Should Know

The last time the ABCA convention was in Atlanta I had the chance to listen to Kevin Brown give a wonderful clinic on some of the things that he uses. I must give credit to him. He said that every pitcher should know three things before going up against an opponent:

1. Know who in a ballclub is hot and is swinging the bat well so that he can pitch them a little bit differently than he does the other hitters.

2. Know who runs, has good speed, and will steal bases. This knowledge is key to setting his break time when he is in his stretch and holding certain runners close. He should know who to hold close and who is less of a concern.
3. Know who the first-pitch swingers are. The pitcher can be hurt by a hitter who makes his living by swinging at first pitches in the strike zone. If the hitter picks the right pitch and the pitcher is simply trying to get ahead, the result can be disastrous. So every pitcher should know who the first-pitch swingers are.

Maximizing the Stuff Available

Each of our pitchers has accepted and employed the following components to maximize his stuff as part of his plan for getting a hitter out. I believe that every great pitcher possesses these elements.

Two-Against-One Mentality

In every team sport in which a double team may occur, such as in basketball when two players guard a player with the ball, one side has an obvious physical and mental advantage. In football when two players decide to double team a lineman or double cover a receiver, they have the same obvious physical and mental advantage. We like to turn that two-against-one mentality over to our pitcher and catcher to get the hitter out. In a sense we have that same mental and physical advantage. We want our pitchers to use that mental advantage by hooking up with the catcher to get a hitter out.

The catcher and pitcher decide what pitch they will use. They also decide where the pitcher will throw the pitch. They have the advantage of deciding to deceive through different speeds, pitch selection, and approach. What a decided advantage that is. And when the catcher makes his pitcher's success his own, you truly have a two-against-one advantage on every hitter. Your pitcher and catcher must understand this advantage. When you have this, you can have that specially pitched game. Without question, we are remiss as coaches if we fail to sell our pitching staff and catchers on this obvious advantage.

Chart BP for Confidence

Every year coaches have pitchers who lack confidence. Lack of self-assurance will be a constant enemy. If a pitcher pitches with confidence, he will pitch better. He will execute better. As in hitting, confidence might be the most vital factor for success. In that regard, pitchers need to remember and

recognize how difficult it is to get base hits and what a great advantage they have by having eight players behind them making plays.

Pitchers have a great advantage even if they don't have their great stuff. If a pitcher invites contact he has a great chance to get many hitters out. To make sure that our pitchers realize how difficult it is to get hits, we have them chart batting practice. We give the pitcher a clipboard, and they list the at-bats, the number of balls put in play, and how many hits and outs occur. What they find is that even with a batting-practice pitcher throwing all fastballs right down the can at 70 to 75 miles per hour, with no pressure on the batter, the pitcher is seeing 50 to 60 percent outs. When the pitcher adds breaking balls and off-speed pitches and knows the hitter's weaknesses, that percentage increases dramatically. When pitchers see that, they can regain the confidence they may have lost. When we have someone struggling, my pitching coach might go to the mound and simply remind the pitcher how difficult it is to get base hits even in batting practice.

Power of the Count

The count is a powerful entity in getting the hitter out. The count itself can destroy the hitter's confidence. The hitter thinks much differently at 2-0 than he does at 0-2. Studies of how the count affects hitting show overwhelmingly how low batting averages are at 0-1, 0-2, 1-2, and even 2-2 as opposed to 1-0, 2-0, 2-1, and 3-1. The pitcher need not rely on just surviving the hitter or waiting for the hitter to make an out. A pitcher's mental ability to use the power of the count can be a powerful, even devastating, tool in his success.

First-Pitch Strike

I have often heard knowledgeable pitching coaches ask the question, "What is the best pitch in baseball?" And they answer, "The strike." We would like to go one step further and say that the best pitch in getting the hitter out is the first-pitch strike. By getting the first-pitch strike, the pitcher has many ways to go about getting the hitter out. The pitcher becomes the boss in getting the count further in his favor and putting the hitter at a decisive disadvantage.

We feel that when everything in pitching boils down, the most important factor in winning a baseball game is the pitcher's ability to throw first-pitch strikes and get first-pitch outs. But the pitcher cannot acquire this skill simply by the coach's suggesting it or demanding it. The coach must emphasize it and have the pitcher work on it in his daily routine. We have built charting of first-pitch strikes into our flat-ground work, our pitcher catch, and our bullpens. Throwing first-pitch strikes is as much a mental skill as a physical skill. We work on it daily. We even have a catcher signal

that the catcher gives to the pitcher before the pitch signal to get the pitcher's mind focused on the first-pitch strike.

When working at this skill, pitchers often become tight. They want to execute it so badly that they go backward for a time. I believe we must accept this phase. Eventually the pitcher will learn the skill and improve upon it. I believe that the first-pitch strike percentage is directly correlated with ERA and winning percentage.

Maintain Mental Focus in Three Key Situations

Years ago I had the pleasure of listening to Coach Skip Bertman at LSU talk about catching. In that presentation he talked about patterns that his catcher would give their pitchers, and I thought his plan was outstanding. We employed it in our program with some modifications. We want our catcher to communicate three patterns to our pitchers with a simple touch.

The first pattern is to signify to our pitcher that the leadoff hitter is the most important hitter of the inning. All mental effort must go into retiring this hitter. We feel that the ability to get leadoff hitters out is a key factor in limiting the opponent's runs. An offense will have difficulty scoring with one out and no one on. We believe that focusing on the leadoff hitter is a mental skill attained through emphasis and practice daily. So we try to eliminate the laziness or passiveness of pitchers who start an inning without complete, dialed-in focus.

We use a second pattern when runners are on base or things are not going well. We feel that how the pitcher pitches in this situation is one of the keys to success. When bad things are happening, I want my pitchers to pitch at their best. The pitcher may have to deal with a bad call or two, an error, or the disappointment of having given up hits and runs, but at this time he must have great focus, concentration, and resolve. Otherwise, the game can unwind quickly and fall apart. But should he pitch at his best when times are tough, you have a pitcher who can prevail in difficult situations.

We call the third pattern two-out dial-in. In this pattern we recognize that after we attain the second out, we become this incredible, huge force. We envision this bigger-than-life entity shoving the door closed. If the pitcher can achieve this kind of mental focus, he has a powerful tool. After they get that second out, pitchers all too often become lazy, lose their focus, and allow an inning to get started. Instead, they should imagine a huge, powerful entity slamming the door on the inning.

Work 75 Percent From the Stretch

When working in the bullpen we have our pitchers work 75 percent from the stretch. We do this because the most important pitches of the game of-



Photo courtesy of Gonzaga University Baseball

The ability to get leadoff hitters out is a key factor in limiting the opponent's runs.

ten occur from the stretch position. Many pitchers work more from the windup than they do from the stretch because they start an inning from the windup. But a pitcher could throw one pitch from the windup to start an inning, have the hitter get on base, and then throw the rest of the inning from the stretch. So we use our 75 percent rule not only in practice and bullpens but also between innings. The pitcher is then confident of his preparation for those tough situations with runners on base.

Never Compromise Your Stuff

One of the most common negative situations for a pitcher is temporary loss of control or command. We believe in allowing the body to do what it knows how to do, so the right response for the pitcher in those situations is to step off the mound, allow his mind to get right, and then not compromise his stuff to throw a strike. When control problems arise, the pitcher's first reaction is often to aim or guide the ball. He thus becomes tentative with the arm, loses command altogether, and loses his stuff. Instead, we want the pitcher to get out of the way and allow his body to do what it knows how to do by staying free, easy, and loose. He should get right mentally, dial up, lock on to his target, and let it rip.

Three-Ball Level

Have you ever noticed how many strikes a pitcher throws after he gets behind 2-0, 3-0, 3-1, or 3-2? On any three-ball count an enormous number of strikes occur. What's happening here, I believe, is a lack of focus at the beginning of an at-bat. Then, when the pitcher gets behind, he shifts into a have-to mode, which is a powerful mental approach. But when a pitcher gets behind 3-1 or 3-2 and then starts pouring on strikes that get fouled off, he has no room for error and is simply surviving, just throwing strikes, and the hitter is at a great advantage. In addition, ball four on a close pitch often ensues.

Pitchers who throw strikes have this mentality flipped around the opposite way. They shift into a have-to mode at 0-0. They are at their best at the front end of an at-bat and find themselves ahead of almost every hitter. I once had a player who showed me after a couple outings that he had lazy focus early. He would get behind and then throw an enormous number of strikes when he got to three balls. It was uncanny. So I just sat down with him and said, "You know, if you can flip that around and use that survival technique that you've already developed at three balls and get three-ball level focus at the beginning of every hitter, you could turn your pitching completely around." Well, eight consecutive complete games followed, and this young pitcher had obviously turned his fortunes around. Since then we've had marked success with proposing that three-ball level mentality to some pitchers. They understand it and are able to use it to great advantage.

Using the Bullpen

Few successful baseball teams, especially at the college level and above, do not possess a varied and productive bullpen. I have often felt that having a solid middle guy, a good setup man, and a dominant closer are three pieces

of the championship puzzle. One might argue that those three roles have more effect on the outcome of games than the three starters. Regardless, everything revolves around your pitching, and a huge part of that has to do with your bullpen organization and how efficiently your relievers pitch when they enter the game.

What You Emphasize Is What You Will Be Good At

I feel that the reliever's approach as he enters the game will dictate his initial effectiveness. We key on the first hitter. If your reliever, whether middle man, setup man, or closer, retires the first batter, you're in business. So we practice that.

I believe that you will be good at whatever you emphasize, teach, and practice routinely. The points in a game when you make pitching changes are critical. So being outstanding at getting that first hitter out is huge. We must have an extremely organized bullpen routine—no nonsense, with tremendous mental preparation and energy. At first it is just a great act, but with success it quickly turns to a genuine big-time approach. I tell our relievers that they are the cavalry coming to save the day, William Wallace from *Braveheart* storming across the Highlands, or Maximus from *Gladiator* upholding his family's pride. I think they like that image, and it helps them embrace their roles. We all know that most pitchers want to be starters. Somehow, we need to create an environment in which they relish their roles. Let's face it; they will go out there and pitch whenever and wherever we tell them to, and they will salute. But I believe that saluting will get you second place. When they embrace pitching with their hearts, you will get first place.

It's a Serious Place

We always have a pitching coach in the bullpen directing the plan, the routine, and the approach. Probably the most important ingredient in the bullpen process is the catcher. In our program we create a great bullpen catcher. He must have tremendous character, great energy, be a powerful motivator, and genuinely care for each pitcher and how he gets ready for his first hitter. If we have a bullpen catcher of that quality, we are bound to pitch well all year.

Know Your Pitchers and Manage

As a head coach, I will put in my two cents on a pitching change, but I leave the ultimate decisions to my pitching coach because he knows the pitchers best. He works with them daily and is in touch with their strengths and

weaknesses, both physically and mentally. He is the boss, and I want all the pitchers to know that. Only then will he have the power to influence them as he needs to.

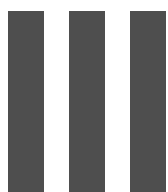
Focus 12 and Scripted 2

I am adamant about that first hitter, or in a starter's case, that first inning, which is often an ugly monster to our starters. I want them to get ready, take a two-minute break, and then come back and throw what we call our focus 12. In a sense, we want them to throw that first inning in the pen. We have a hitter stand in for each of the first three hitters on the appropriate side of the plate (for example, left, right, right). Our starter throws all four of his pitches to each hitter, locations and all. Staying with our 75 percent rule, the pitcher throws to the first hitter from the windup and the next two from the stretch. He finishes by going back to the first hitter from the windup to throw his scripted 2, the first two pitches and locations that he is going to throw to that first and most important hitter.

Pitching is a craft, and in handling pitchers we must be craftsmen. Search, research, learn, adjust, modify, and be willing to change and improve. Work hard to learn each of your pitchers, remembering that each of them is different. How you handle your pitchers, how you manage them, can be the most important factor to their improvement and success.

One last piece of advice: don't miss the richness and pride of striving to get there. The bullpens, the daily work, the anticipation of getting better are the true joys of the craft. Working hard with young pitchers, whether the dreams come true or not, is beautiful and just might be the real enjoyment of the game. Don't miss that process. Value and execute the process, and let the outcome take care of itself. Let *them* pitch.

PART



Defense

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