

## **Teaching Pitchers Effective Focus**

### **By Aaron Weintraub**

Pitchers have an inherent advantage in the game of baseball: they hold the ball. Unfortunately, many pitchers forfeit this advantage because they have not learned to have the courage and mental toughness to focus effectively. Harvey Dorfman defines mental toughness with the following three steps:

- 1) Want it.
- 2) Know what to do, and
- 3) Do what you know.

Assuming the desire for success exists, pitchers need to know what to do. They need a game plan to dominate the hitter. The first step is to learn to play the game one pitch at a time. Teaching pitchers how to focus effectively on a single pitch is one of the coach's greatest challenges. Although the focus itself is simple, executing this simple focus is a complex process because people are complex. Causes for a lack of focus are usually established behavioral patterns that must first be recognized, then fixed. Common poor patterns that lead to a lack of focus include pitchers who:

- want to bow up and throw the ball by the hitter

- worry about extraneous things while delivering the pitch such as:

- the score

- who the hitter is

- how they look

- the quality of the umpiring

- the quality of the defensive play behind them

- simply do not know where their focus *should* be.

Proper focus during the delivery (after what type of pitch and where have already been decided) must be small and specific, usually a lace or other point inside the catcher's mitt. Effective focus *is* simple: throw aggressively through the target. Unfortunately, since pitchers are people and people are not simple, this is much easier to say than to do.

During a team meeting before the first practice of the fall, we ask the pitchers to come up with a list, in order, of the variables that get outs. They always decide that accuracy is most important, followed by (often in this order) changing speeds, movement, velocity, and deception. The point is clear: when the going gets rough, continue to focus on accuracy and do not allow your ego to take over and change that focus to velocity.

### **The Hit/Miss Chart**

The goal is to throw one aggressive, accurate, great pitch (called a hit).  
Then do it again. A pitcher's success rate for this can be kept.

The next step in teaching what to do (focus on throwing the ball aggressively through the mitt) is a bit more involved. We chart it. Accuracy can be charted in many ways, such as a ball/strike percentage, but we think our measurement is the most accurate simple method (simple meaning, in this case, not enhanced by technology). We call it a hit/miss chart (see Figure A). A hit is a "great, fantastic, wonderful" pitch in which the pitcher has succeeded in his goal of "throwing the ball aggressively through the mitt." He hit the target with good stuff. The amount of error we allow for a hit is equal to the size of a catcher's mitt. The catcher may move his mitt a tad to catch the ball in the pocket, but if the ball wouldn't have hit the glove had it stayed still, the pitch is charted as a miss.

Many young players do not appreciate the difficulty of hitting such a small target, so the first time we throw, we discuss what a hit is and what a miss is. Invariably, a freshman will call a throw where the receiver had to move his glove eight inches to the side a hit. So we ask him what would happen if he missed by the same amount on a 1-2 inside fastball. Then he begins to understand that close is not good enough to be a "hit".

There are several steps to keeping this chart during games; it is a group effort to keep it accurately. First, an extra pitcher charts what pitch is thrown and its intended location, based on where the catcher sets up (see Figure A). He also notes the result of the last pitch of each at-bat. This is done solely to serve as a reminder for which pitch number each at-bat ended on; the result should not influence whether that pitch

was a hit or a miss. After the inning, the pitcher gets a drink, then finishes this chart by placing a mark in either the hit or miss column for each pitch. He knows that to be a hit, the pitch must not only have been accurate, but must also have been thrown aggressively, with 100% commitment to that pitch. With practice, pitchers can usually recall most or all of their pitches in a good inning. Keeping focus in a poor inning is tougher. To fill in any gaps, we also have the person on the regular pitching chart judging hits and misses. Like normal, the charter puts the number of each pitch in either a ball or strike row. If the pitch is a strike, we assume it is a hit unless marked. If it is a ball, we assume a miss unless marked. If a strike is a miss, a star is placed in the ball row of the chart for that pitch. If a ball is a hit, a star is placed in the strike row. This way, the entire hit/miss chart can be checked by looking at the pitching chart after the game. This type of reflection helps the pitcher increase his awareness of mistakes, thus increasing the chances for an adjustment.

After the hit/miss chart is completed, we (coaches) tally the results on a summary chart (see Figure B) for the pitchers. The summary allows each pitcher to track his progress and set effective goals. Goal setting is a critical step; its usefulness should not be underestimated. We hold a formal goal setting meeting with each player after the fall season is completed. The pitchers themselves never fail to list increasing their command as a goal. As with all goals, we ask if this is a SMART and controllable goal (SMART is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Attractive, Realistic, and Time constrained). Good command is controllable, but it is not specific. A measurement is needed. With thought, the pitcher realizes that our hit/miss chart is the best way to measure command. By looking at past results and discussing strategies for improving, we are able to set appropriately high and realistic goals for each pitch the pitcher throws.

The goal setting meeting is not complete until the player lists the methods or regular work he is going to employ to achieve his goals. It is gratifying to hear these young men say things such as:

“I will try to pick out a small target on 98% or more of my throws at practice every day”

“I will practice my pre-pitch routine every time I throw a pitch, be it flat-ground bullpen, mound work, or in a game”

“I will work on dry mechanics in front of a mirror for at least 15 minutes a day, five days a week.”

We were often surprised at how tough of controllable work goals our players set for themselves, but we learned that their motivation is high and once they clearly see what they need to do to meet their own goals, they are willing to work extremely hard. The final (and perhaps most important) step to goal setting is to monitor and adjust the goals. We encourage players to do this regularly, but we do it with them at least once per month during the spring.

It should be noted that all the charting we do is not initially popular with the players. However, we believe the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. We also believe that pitchers clearly DO have the time and ability to do this extra work. So we do not ask them do the charts, we require it. With time, many appreciate the benefits and become staunch proponents of the charts.

The process of learning to focus effectively one pitch at a time is not completed, but it is well on its way once these steps are taken. Other steps include countless reminders to pick out a small target and aggressively throw the ball through it on every throw. Other mental skills such as developing a proper perspective and controlling arousal are also necessary for perfect focus and of course all this mental work is not a substitute for developing effective pitching mechanics. By incorporating all these aspects of teaching pitching, players can learn to “bridge the gap between potential and performance” (Rick Peterson). All this is, of course, easy to say and hard to do, but now that you know what to do, take the defining step of mental toughness and do what you know.