

## BULLPEN CHATTER



There are truths about pitching that sound contradictory. Here are a few...

- You add power to your pitching motion by slowing it down rather than speeding it up
- You pitch as much with your legs as with your arm
- Throwing hard requires a firm grip and a relaxed wrist
- Velocity is the least important aspect of a fastball, and the most important aspect of a change-up
- The less you throw a breaking ball, the more effective it is
- The less you try to make a breaking ball move, the more it will move
- One of the game's most effective pitches is a slow fastball thrown over the plate (change-up)
- The more you try, the more you fail; relaxing and enjoying the game will help you be more successful
- One of the best ways to take care of your arm is to throw

## PETE RICHERT'S WISDOM

I had the pleasure of talking at length a few times with Pete Richert, former Major League pitcher for the Orioles and, later, pitching coach for Oakland. Pete's a great guy, and knows pitching. I asked him for any tips he had for assisting younger-aged pitchers in developing the change-up. Pete had one of the better change-

ups in MLB when he pitched out of the bullpen in Baltimore.

"I tell our young prospects to throw the change-up even *harder* than the fastball. We long-toss change-ups, too, just to build the habit of throwing it harder than the fastball."

He waited for me to look puzzled, then continued with his explanation.

"You know what happens with young pitchers when they try to throw too hard? Their fastball loses velocity. Why does it lose velocity? Because they clench up and pitch with a stiff wrist. So I tell them to throw the change-up with that kind of macho. They learn to put more into it, and the pitch travels slower. They also learn the difference between throwing with a relaxed wrist and a stiff one."

Pete was a southpaw, and he talked about how southpaws tend to develop into smarter pitchers because, typically, they don't throw as hard as righties. He mentioned Whitey Ford and Warren Spahn – two Hall of Famers that Pete got to know in his playing days – and he mentioned Tom Glavine, Francisco Liriano and Jamie Moyer, too, the ageless Phillies' lefty.

"Moyer's fastball clocks in the low 80's and I've seen him throw a change-up as slow as 68 mph." Richert chuckles and shakes his head. "Here's a guy throwing 68 mph pitches in the Major Leagues, and having success! You have to learn something from that. It's not about velocity; it's about managing the speed gap between your fastball and change-up. Moyer does that better than anybody in the Major Leagues except Maddux."

## TOM HOUSE'S WISDOM

Another southpaw that I have done clinics with is Tom House. Tom finished his career with Atlanta, and was out in the bullpen the night when Henry Aaron broke Babe Ruth's homerun record, off Al Downing. Tom *caught the ball*. If you ever see the video highlight of Hank's 715<sup>th</sup> homer, watch as he reaches home plate. You'll see this crazy southpaw with glasses running up to him to give him the baseball. That's Tom House.

Tom's another guy who survived in the Major Leagues on savvy and wits. His fastball, like Moyer's, topped out around 84 mph. How does a pitcher survive with such limited pop on his pitches? Location and movement and changes of speed. It's not only lefties, of course, who

have this ability. Guys like Greg Maddux, Catfish Hunter and Orel Hersheiser, in their day, were great at locating pitches, putting movement on the two-seam fastball, and changing speeds to keep hitters off balance. It's a vanishing art.

Another thing that happens when your top velocity is less than stellar is that you tend to have a lower pitch-count. You make batters hit the ball, instead of missing the ball. You see, strike-outs take more pitches than ground outs.

"Once I pitched a perfect five innings in relief and threw only 39 pitches," House said to me. "How good is that!" He laughed. He said he always likes to ask young pitchers how many pitches make for a perfect inning.

"You'd be surprised how many of them say nine," he told me. "They're thinking three strikeouts. Of course, the right answer is three pitches. Three ground balls or pop-ups. Economy! Throwing strikes! Forcing hitters to swing the bat! It's part of being effective."

#### **LOEWEN AND FRANCIS**

You remember a few years ago when Baltimore took Whalley's Adam Loewen in the first round of the draft, ahead of North Delta's and UBC's Jeff Francis? I just shook my head at that pick.

They're both lefties, and it was the first time ever that two Canadian boys were taken in the top ten picks in the first round. Loewen was a fireballer, and temperamental, too, and he's now converted to a position player. Francis demonstrated, for Terry McKaig's UBC squad, that he knew how to pitch. Jeff was already a mature pitcher with a good fastball, but more importantly he knew how to locate and change speeds and get hitters out. Even with a disappointing 2008, Jeff's got the best winning percentage of any pitcher, ever, in the high thin air at Coors Field in Denver.

I've run into Jeff a few times now at baseball dinners. Ryan Dempster, too. These guys are competitors, and they know the subtleties of the pitching game. At his best, Jeff varies his fastball, locates it well. He is very aware that velocity has more to do with varying speed than throwing at top speed all the time.

"I've had a lot of success," he said, "taking something off my fastball."

He was talking about exertion levels on the two-seam, throwing it hard one pitch, then easy on the next, allowing it to sink and tail more.

Just enough of a variation in speed to throw off a hitter's timing, make him hit the ball but not dead-center. It's amazing how effective movement and speed changes can be in fooling a hitter.

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