

Calling Pitches, It Doesn't Have To Be Either /Or!

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I've watched with great interest the national debate over who should call pitches - catchers or coaches. Over the years I've seen this is not as much a tactical issue but as power struggle.

I don't seem to recall this issue from my days as a catcher. Granted, there was a reason. Many teams only had one coach. He was busy running the game. Also, if he wasn't a former pitcher or catcher himself, he generally had no idea what to call, so he chose to abstain from the politics of calling pitches. And basically- no one could blame him.

Today many things have changed. It seems to me this issue has become masked as an identity crisis for catchers. Catchers consider calling their own game a sign of athletic manhood, rivaled only by testosterone laden issues like hair on your face, sperm count, overcoming the need to call home, or how bad your hat smells. Oh I almost forgot, profanity; you're not a real man unless you use foul language. We need to raise this discussion to a higher, less paranoid level. We need not make independence, social psychology or trust the center of this debate. Just winning.

Baseball, after all, is a team game. Pitching and catching are arguably difficult positions to master. Throwing the ball and stopping the ball require unique skills and mental disciplines. Where, when, how, and why to throw a baseball to a batter is an information science. It seems to me that catchers who lobby to call their own pitches independently, better be able to back up their words with significant and specific cause and effect reasons. Coaches, on the other hand, need to realize the asset of using the instincts and observations of the person 2 feet away from the batter. Neither should forget the pitcher's level of confidence, capability and fatigue at that particular moment of the game.

Calling pitches is a partnership, supported with more than intuition, guesswork, or gut instinct. Much more than, "Well, we haven't thrown this one in a while", or "Hey, let's mix it up, out there!"

A pitcher is focused on a spot. Not the reaction to a spot. The catcher is focused on receiving the ball and runners on base. The pitching coach sees it from the side. He can intently study the batter -- his weight shift, eyes, timing, rhythm, swing mechanics, balance, and mental focus. A good catcher can generally "feel the" batter's mental focus, and certainly can pick up subtleties from his close proximity to the batter if he is trained to.

As a pitching coach I believe it is our responsibility to help get people out. My in-game scouting report includes a Tactical Game Chart. During the pre-game batting practice and

in the first few pitches to each batter, as Yogi said, “You can see a lot by observing”. I believe “he who has the most information wins”. Obviously we have to execute.

The complete game chart is set up with 9 individual boxes on an 8 1/2 x 14 legal size paper and conveniently fits on a legal clipboard. Because the paper is large, there is more room to write and quickly read what you wrote 30 minutes later. Instantly you can access your comments and evaluations about previous batting appearances because each box is in the same spot on each page. I like this format better than all the tiny boxes on one page. It is much more difficult to access that information quickly on the spur of the moment during the game.

With the information from previous games compiled on an overall scouting report and the present game chart, a pitching coach should be able to assess the current situation and predict possible outcomes. In our role as pitching coaches we have the time, the information, the focus and the experience. Remember, baseball is a game of histories, angles and percentages.

The Tactical Game Chart works immediately and yields both short term and long term benefits. The immediate in-game tactical information identifies where a batter is vulnerable or alerts you to a required adjustment. Those specifics and details should be discussed between pitching coach, pitcher and catcher between innings. With all three contributing their unique perspective a stronger plan for the next inning is likely.

But you must be committed to using this process every game. You must have a manageable system. There are long term benefits too, even in high school. Especially in high school. Most high schools play district opponents twice a year. So they see the good batters about 8 times a year. This means that by senior year tournament, someone has watched the majority of these players *32 times at the plate*. There is an invaluable history here. Consider the benefit of these 32 individual reviews - your team’s success and failures against this one player.

Taking the time for pre and post-game strategy meetings educates both the pitcher and catcher in what is likely to happen or what actually happened, and how to control or react to those circumstances. Preparation is a great strategy. It eliminates fear, creates expectations, builds self confidence, makes players feel needed and involves the staff in decision making. Also by sharing player’s knowledge and experience we build a mutually dependent team structure.

Yes, it takes time, organization, and commitment. Sorry, that’s the price of consistently producing a winning program year after year. However, together through publications like ***Collegiate Baseball***, we can help each other improve time management and organization skills. You though, have to bring the commitment to never stop learning.

Thank you for your time.

If you would like a free master of this chart, send a self addressed envelope to Pinkman Pitching, 22923 Quicksilver Drive #115 Sterling, VA 20166.