

John Pinkman
2/14/02
Word count: 986

Part 1 – “Grasping” at 2-Seam Fastballs

Each year we survey high school coaches in our area to obtain their input regarding the development of their pitchers' skills. The coaching feedback we received this winter led us to focus on 2-seam fastball movement in addition to providing our standard instruction on 4-seam, cutter, straight change, and tomahawk curve. In the past we have placed a high degree of attention in off-season and pre-season instruction on 4-seam fastballs that produce a greater degree of accuracy.

Prior to the 2-seam instruction we interviewed 120 high school pitchers at our facility in Virginia. We chose only high school pitchers who participate in our weekly winter workout program, most of whom have a minimum of 5 years pitching experience. We asked them to demonstrate their 2-seam fastball grip and describe what it did on its way to the plate.

The results were surprising to say the least. Two simple questions evoked stutter, stammer, and the proverbial “deer in the headlights” stares. What we assumed to be obvious (that everyone knows how to achieve 2-seam fastball movement) was anything but.

Approximately 20% of the pitchers interviewed had accurate knowledge of the grip that produced an anticipated flight of the ball.

The remaining 80% made comments like:

- The Silent All Boy Answer; shoulder shrugs with palms up in the air (this doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't know, he's just too lazy at that time to seek the answer, or figures to quickly cut his losses and that a prolonged attempt at a wrong answer would prove to be more embarrassing)
- It zigs and zags
- It goes up
- It sinks when I throw it slow
- It moves...I think
- It goes up and away from a lefty batter and the opposite to righty batters
- It does something different every pitch
- I have no idea what it does but coach says to keep throwing it
- And after some really agile verbal footwork.... Ya know, I really don't know

We followed up with these questions:

PP: When do you throw the 2-seamer?

A: Most said “all the time”

PP: Why?

A: Coach says my fastball must have movement

PP: OK, then if you throw it all the time and you said you don't know where it goes, what do you throw on 3-0?

A: Silence

Notwithstanding their recent comments, pitchers as a group are very bright people. As a pitching school we design instruction to meet their intellectual needs and abilities. We know from our experience if a pitcher truly understands how and why a ball moves through the air, he will be more likely to practice, control, and maintain its usefulness through the season. He can become his best coach.

We believe that learning ball movement begins with aerodynamic knowledge – not ball grip. To do otherwise is like teaching someone to shoot by just pulling the trigger and hoping for the best. Just as important, the pitcher must have a solid consistent core stabilization and eyes level to the horizon with a consistent release point in front of his face.

When a pitcher says, “I lost my curveball” he really didn't understand the process - he merely observed the product. In any case, we teach our students to understand why the ball moves in a specific direction and the effects of the constant physical laws of gravity and distance (drag), combined with the impact of the variables of axis of rotation and thrust (velocity).

Editing note—suggested pull out- not necessarily here

“However, I get in trouble as a teacher when I assume that the players know something that is apparently very basic. And in this case, I was in trouble plenty!”

However, I get in trouble as a teacher when I assume that the players know something that is, to me, very basic. And in this case I was in trouble plenty! Yes, occasionally we have to take it on the chin with self-protecting comments like “this is too boring”, “hey coach, we already know that”. But do they really? Or is it a smoke screen that we ourselves evoked?

Why are athletes afraid to admit they don't know? Perhaps you may agree that players perceive us with a basic fear. If they fear us they do not expose their pain, lack of knowledge or basic needs. This is in no one's best interest. It prevents us from being the best coach we can be and can certainly damage the player's career and team success.

We constantly walk a fine line between management by fear or leadership by respect for our knowledge. You probably know a coach or two who legislates by fear due to his own lack of knowledge. (Please, it is a must read, Duke Coach, Mike **Krzyzewski's** book, *Leading With The Heart.*)

Players also confuse our intensity and purpose as intimidation. I am confident that when players feel intimidated in our program it is in those instances when we ask a question, and patiently wait for an answer from him, not dad. We feel that is a part of learning. Our education program is designed to have the student confront his own knowledge initially and on an ongoing basis. By confronting themselves they reinforce what they know or admit that they don't know and are receptive to learning. The most important word at our school is "why".

We believe in and respect the intelligence of our young men. We also realize our responsibility as teachers.

I know in my heart there isn't a coach in the game who doesn't live for that moment when the light bulb goes on, a smile beams from ear to ear, and the boy in front of you says, "OH! NOW, I get it.... thanks coach!"

Part 2 in the next issue of Collegiate Baseball will detail specifics of 2-seam ball movement.