

Preparing to Compete

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See if this sounds familiar...

Your starting pitcher walks the first batter. Walks the second one too. He then throws one to the backstop. Trying to find the plate, he takes a lot off his next pitch, which is hit for a double. Several batters later, before you know it, you're down 4-0.

Your pitcher takes the mound in the second inning and "settles down". He then throws a 3 hit shutout the rest of the game. What happened? Was he warmed up? Was he nervous? Does it matter? The simple fact was he was not prepared to compete on the first pitch.

“There is a world of difference between warming up and preparing to compete.”

For years now we have used a combination of teachings from Ravizza/Hanson and Don Rowe (long time director of Minor League Operations for Milwaukee, now retired). The point of their work is simple: there is a world of difference between warming up and preparing to compete.

We have integrated the work detailed in “Heads Up Baseball” by Ravizza/Hanson and clinical training by Rowe in the following plan. It works.

Consistency begins with pre-game preparation that starts with the first step on the field. There are other considerations such as nutrition, scouting information, mental management and of course, between appearance training. But for this article I'll limit the commentary to the component of pre-game field activity.

First and foremost, the number of complaints from recreation and high school pitchers (and for me the hardest to understand and easiest to correct) is that they are not told 24-28 hours prior to the game that they are going to pitch. This is not as big a problem in college. But coaches need to know it is very upsetting to the pitcher to have it sprung on him that he will be pitching in 45 minutes. You can almost certainly expect this to have a negative effect on his performance.

Please do not respond with “he's better off not knowing”. That is an old excuse that indicates a lack of preparation. Further, it is a coach's job to teach him how to **handle** pressure – not **avoid** it.

A pitching coach should do whatever is necessary for a pitcher to be successful on game day. Standing next to him in a bullpen and asking how he feels is not nearly enough. If warming up is the only criteria for pre-game activity, let his girlfriend rub his arm and back – that will do it! But he will still not be prepared to compete.

There are several critical components to this plan with the overall goal of **CONSISTENCY**:

- Time management
- Pre-game mound visit
- Stretch and jog activities
- Bullpen throwing

Time components are managed by pitching coaches. From beginning to end write down specific time segments. One of the written assignments we give to our pitchers is to write their warm up routine in sufficient detail to present to their coach. It was optional whether they actually turned it in to the coach. Why? Many of them were scared of his reaction. (At least one other article here)

Start backwards from placing the pitcher on the bench 10 minutes prior to game time. From high school to college we all preach to our students the benefit and importance of personal time management. Here is another way baseball can help teach off-the-field lessons. I have seen too many pitchers frantically run to and from the pen and then directly to the mound without sufficient rest. That is the equivalent of pitching 3 or 4 innings without rest. Not to mention what it does to them mentally.

Pre-game mound visit. When does a pitcher usually take the mound? Most never see or feel the mound until the 1st inning or relief appearance. If there is a surprise, they have 7 pitches to adjust physically and mentally. That is not enough time.

The first thing you and the pitcher should do upon arriving at the field - home or away - is to visit the mound. We use these two analogies to explain why this is a benefit. For older boys – It is easier to kiss your girl the second time. I don't need to elaborate on this...use your own experience. For younger boys – use the comparison between the 1st and 2nd day of school. It is similar to a pro golfer who walks the course prior to the match.

Hopefully the point is obvious. If there is a field problem you may have time to fix it. If it cannot be fixed you have sufficient time to mentally adjust and perhaps if necessary make changes in bullpen.

The following are the ideas on the pre-game visit to the mound by the pitcher, catcher, and pitching coach.

- Stand and see where you are going to compete that day. Visualize what it will look like at game time.

- View of home plate. Ballparks are designed solely for batters' vision, not pitchers'. Are there any surprises, concession stands, lights, bleachers, background, etc?
- Inspect the mound dirt, condition of rubber, stride foot landing area, dirt/grass rim condition, slope of all sides
- Condition and construction of backstop - distance from home plate, type of fence or wall
- Distance of dugout to foul line, is it at ground level or below, does it have a protection rail or fence, or is it open?
- Roll a ball down first base line to determine slope or hold
- Inspect the dirt in front of home plate. Is it hard or soft? Does it have a high grass lip?

“You warm up to throw, not throw to warm up”

Jog and Stretch

Next allow appropriate time for jogging, stretching – and supervise the players. I have never seen any group of ball players, little league to pro, do this consistently as well as when they are directly supervised.

Just remember this – the medical community is unanimous on this quote: “You warm up to throw, not throw to warm up”. They also indicate that the vast majority of sore arms occur from insufficient or improper warm up procedures.

There are many differing opinions to this component. Coaches as well as pitchers have different thoughts as to running, stretching, catching and long toss for pitchers prior to the game. The best idea I've heard on this matter comes from Bobby Moranda of Georgia Tech at his ABCA seminar- No talking during pre-game catch. It is not the social hour. Whatever your program, make it consistent and by all means – **WRITE IT DOWN!**

We use Tom House's Functional Fitness Program, stretch cords and a flat agility ladder. It takes 30 minutes and is well worth the time to avoid injury. Too much time, you say? How much time does your pitching staff lose to sore arms?

Bullpen Routine

Bullpens should be attended by the coach and starting catcher. It is more important for the catcher to see the flight of the ball that day from the starting pitcher than for him to flip balls to a coach in infield practice.

The following workout is easy to remember. It comes in segments of 4 pitches. It is designed to warm up the arm and the brain. Each pitch has a specific location just as in the game. There are no “do-overs”; just as in the game you need to move on. That pitch is over and you can't change it. Let it go and prepare for the next pitch.

The final 12 pitches with a batter standing at home plate simulate the 1st inning. If a batter bothers a pitcher in the bullpen how will that change in the game? Plus it gives 3 hitters a chance to warm up their vision.

The bullpen throwing routine can begin with short toss. Limit those to less than 15. Next all throws from the mound should begin at 70% and work up to 85% of maximum velocity with the catcher down. Some catchers have a habit of standing way too long into the pen. Again let me emphasize the importance of the starting catcher being in the pen.

The last 12 pitches simulating the 1st inning are at 100%. This should take no longer than 25 minutes with the 5-minute break. Then back to the dugout 10 minutes prior to game time. Of course the total number of pitches can be adjusted. But understand this: The American Sports Medicine Institute reports that a pitcher's arm needs a minimum of 25 fastball pitches to be safe (to his arm) and accurate. If you ever ask a pitcher to enter a game with less, whether starter or reliever, do not expect results. Plan ahead and manage the game properly or your pitcher will warm up in the game with men on base. Either way it's 25 pitches.

The pre-game pen uses 4 terms and assumes right hand batters:

Boxes - up and in, low and in, low and away, up and away (total of 4 throws)

Tilts – up and in, low and away; up and away, and low and in

Opposites (Oppo's) – inside, outside; low, high

Sequences – create 4 pitches, using all types of pitches to be thrown that day. Locate them appropriate to the opponent's weakness and your game plan

70% of velocity

2 – Boxes (8 pitches)

1 – Tilt (4)

85% of velocity

1 – Oppo (4)

Pitch outs / intentional walks (4)

Rest 5 minutes

Change ups (4)

Curve or other off speed pitch (4)

3 - Sequences (12)

Total of 44 pitches

Remember--- Prepare To Compete!