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Sometimes What You See -- Is Not What You Get

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Accuracy is everything in pitching. So many of us spend long hours working with pitchers on their location. Every now and then (which seems to come more often sometimes) you become frustrated working with a pitcher who has great mechanics but just can't seem to throw the ball where he wants.

First I video and analyze, shooting at about 1/2000 of a second. That will freeze the ball and allow me to focus down to the fingers. I also carefully watch the throwing motion, isolating my vision on a single aspect of the motion. After years of looking at pitchers I swear my eyes operate at 1/2000 as well; I just can't freeze and reproduce the motion.

During those sessions I study basic mechanical actions that may be the cause of the problem. Static and dynamic balance, core stabilization, stride leg angle and landing, and head, eyes level to the horizon, are primary body factors that cause control difficulties.

Occasionally I, as I'm sure you do, sneak up behind a pitcher in a set position to see how he is holding the ball in his glove (picture 1). Taking a quick look or asking him to suddenly show me the ball, has uncovered basic ball grip flaws. I've learned never to assume a pitcher truly understands how to hold any pitch. Assured that he is holding the ball correctly, I retreat to the back of the bullpen mound.

One day my son Patrick and I were reviewing a tape of a pitcher who was having velocity and location problems. We were viewing a segment of tape that was shot from a camera directly over the pitcher's head. To our surprise, and quite by accident, we discovered the exact cause of both problems. As the pitcher pulled the ball out of his glove, his fingers moved on the ball. At the cocking position his thumb was completely off the ball! In order to do that the ball has to be held tightly against the knuckles (picture 2). Imagine throwing a change up without your thumb on the ball. The pitcher, who was sitting next to us, had no idea that this was happening.

The very next week we worked with another boy with worse location problems. I mean you weren't safe standing behind him wearing a mask and holding a twin mattress! He was doing the same thing. The grip in the glove was good, but like the other pitcher, again we found the thumb flying off the ball during the cocking phase.

This shot is now a routine when we videotape our pitchers. We look at all throwers' fingers during the cocking phase, especially very small and extra large handed pitchers. The smaller boys seem to roll the ball into the palm. Bigger fingers sometimes fly off the ball in several different ways (picture 3 illustrates one of many possibilities). We have also found the fingers repositioning themselves on the seams, thereby altering the basic aerodynamics of the ball's flight, producing unwanted movement on 4 seamers and slow or no movement on other pitches that are meant to move.

Funny thing about this diagnosis...if you know to look for this problem you can often see it with plain eyesight. You can't totally identify exactly what is happening, but you are alerted that there is a peculiar movement. Common video moves at 30 frames per second. Sometimes that's too slow to capture these subtle motions in a fast moving arm. If you shoot a large number of throwing motions, there is a greater chance of catching that instant on tape.

There is always a specific reason or a series of small, related factors that cause throwing problems. It is my experience that if you spend more time determining the exact cause, the solution will become apparent.

Time is always the issue, isn't it? Whether you are a teaching pro, on the clock, or a field coach in the middle of practice, you manage time as well as people. However, experimenting with and implementing possible solutions to undefined problems is not a wise or productive use of our time when training pitchers.

Take the necessary time to find the problem. We use several video capture methods. They all pay off. We never, and I mean never, begin to work with a new student without a thorough video assessment. To me it's like going to a doctor to fix a possible broken leg. The doctor would never try to save time and quickly set the leg without taking an x-ray, because there is a waiting room full of patients. For years I have suggested video analysis to coaches only to receive comments like: it takes too much time, its disruptive to practice routine, we are not a high tech ball team, we can't afford a video camera, we don't have enough on field practice time as it is... Pitchers rarely, if ever, work themselves out of a mechanical flaw. They almost always work themselves deeper into the problem or the into the doctors office.

I love this quote, it think it came from Xerox Inc. " Some people never have enough time to do it right, but they always find the time to do it over."