

The Business Of Baseball Training

Where Have All the Catchers Gone?

John Pinkman

For quite some time now I've been soul searching for the reason(s) that so few catchers participate in our off-season pitching workout. The pitching program is very successful involving well over 100 pitchers from over 25 area high schools, so you would naturally believe that catcher participation would follow. Nope.

There seem to be only two types of catchers. One who defaults to that position because of his slow, lethargic body and attitude..those who constantly say, "Do I have to?" "You mean, now?"

The other is bright, intense, savvy and wants to learn everything about how to get a batter out. He's the first on and last off the field. He also carries more equipment inventory than Sports Authority. Now, in your opinion, what's the ratio? 1 in 5, 1 in 15, or 1 in 30?

Catcher attendance in off season workouts is so poor it makes me angry. I'm angry at the lost opportunity for them. When they do come, it's half way through the winter season, in February, because they feel it's politically correct to be seen by pitchers and coaches. Then they are often late arriving – usually just after the group has completed their exercises. If anything in their schedule conflicts (let's say – a TV show) they are absent. Nevertheless, I've searched my soul from many angles.

- Do we do a poor job at marketing?
- Are catchers just inherently lazy?
- Do we need to offer different programming and better instruction?
- Is the fee appropriate?
- Is there an historical problem in teaching catchers?
- Attitude – Ours? Theirs?

In reality it may be a little of each. But I really don't know. I have opinions but no facts.

It may help you to have a brief history of our school. For many years we only taught pitching. A few years ago coaches asked us to offer catching instruction. They had fewer players wanting to catch and the overall catching performances of those who did play the position declined. It seemed natural and needed. We also saw too many bases being given up and pitchers losing strikes due to poor catching skills. By far the bases were not stolen –they were simply taken from the inability of the catcher to block and even catch *basic* pitches.

The need for catcher training is to me as vital as pitcher training. Many years ago I made the commitment to only train pitchers because no one else was, and I felt I could dramatically affect the game by providing more players who could basically throw more strikes. But today with the apparent shortage of catchers I'm more likely to advise a young pitcher/catcher player to choose catching.

Recently at spring training I discussed this subject with Eric Wedge (Wedgy), the catching instructor and AAA Manager for Cleveland. Wedgy tried to relieve my anxiety by telling me in his opinion quality catchers and their lack of pursuit of training is epidemic throughout the country. Wedgy shares many other coaches' opinions that players would rather sit behind a Nintendo than home plate. Granted, the image of today's high school recruit for catching hasn't changed much from the ol' days of "Wearing the tools of ignorance." There may be one difference: a worse attitude. Coaches tell me their catchers feel they are doing them a big favor by just showing up and wearing the equipment.

I see red when watching a game and see a coach virtually plead with a catcher to go the bullpen and warm up a pitcher. Then yell at him to squat down and catch the ball instead of standing up and playing catch. It's a problem when you see a strike lost, time and time again, due to a weak, out of shape player with poor skills. It's a problem when you can't call a breaking ball to get a needed situational strike out with a man on third base because your catcher can't move his body to block the ball.

But getting angry and being disappointed is not the point. Why is this a problem and what can be done about it, is the challenge.

Honestly, I do not know the solution. But on the plane home from spring training, I considered the possibility that we as coaches may have in a way created this problem or at least contributed to the scarcity of catchers and their work ethic.

Having said that I'm only going to raise a few questions. Think about these possibilities. If you have answers I'll see that they get published.

- Have we as coaches historically degraded the position?
- Do we default players to catch rather than motivating good athletes to the position?
- Have we failed to empower catchers with our knowledge of their vital role and value to the game?
- Do we recruit them by detailing the true excitement of the position?
- Have we taken catchers for granted? Have we ignored them in bullpen training, expecting them just to receive the ball as we only focus on pitchers?
- Do we spend the needed one-on-one personal training time?
- Do we train catchers in making tactical decisions?
- Have we let this poor state of catching exist?
- Do we have any control over this situation and can we change it?

To respond to this column please contact John Pinkman at throw@pinkmanpitching.com