

Wayne Graham is now a National Champion. What's new? Wherever he has gone, he produced a winning tradition. Pitching has always been at the heart of his program. If you believe that, you'll understand his record. In 10 years at San Jacinto Community College his Gators won 5 conference and in separate years and additional 5 national championships.

Training hundreds of pitchers including Roger Clemens and Andy Petit, Coach Graham has developed his pitching program into a consistent winner. His ability to recruit and train is worth some study. During his 12 years at Rice he never had a losing season, has won 6 WAC championships, and appeared in Omaha four times with a recent national crown. His combined win total exceeds 1100.

I spoke with Coach Graham during the CWS. We talked about the 6 important components of pitching – Mechanics, Tactics, Mental/Emotional Pressure, Athleticism, Nutrition and Athletic Values.

JP: Pitching Mechanics Form the Foundation of Durability and Success. What are your thoughts?

WG: Your pitcher has to have good arm action. If a guy's arm action is not good you have a problem to begin with. Occasionally you can change that.

I've always favored balance at the top, proper stride length, proper relationship between front and back shoulder. I believe that the balance on top is critical.

We had a pitcher by the name of McCurry. He pitched some for the Astros. He was a tilt back and over the top guy. In order to go over the top, he had to tilt his spine to the side. We straightened his spine out and then he dropped his arm to a better position and he began to throw 97mph with strikes.

I believe that the front side (hip) opens up and release your hips. The back side responds. I don't believe in an active glove. If the glove is too active, timing becomes an issue. Particularly if the glove turns back into the chest too early it kills your timing.

JP – I know the biggest single reason pitchers can't throw strikes is a wild glove side leading to instability in the spine and disrupting their timing.

WG – That's right. It's all about timing. Pitching and hitting are all about timing. If that glove moves too much it will kill speed too. Not increase it like many believe. But each pitcher is different and you have to approach each one as an individual. There are certain guidelines.

Like stride length. I believe in Tom House's theory as it relates to height (85%). I had a player at San Jacinto JC who when he left was throwing 94 mph. They (his next school) shortened his stride by a foot! They made him a good college pitcher with a lot of

movement on the ball. They also made him a “non-prospect” because he could only top out in the mid 80’s as a result.

Coaching pitchers is an art. It’s an art because there are too many variables and you need years of experience to see them all. You have to understand the nuances in the differences of pitchers. I don’t have all the answers but I never do anything to lower the upper limits of his fastball.

This is big. I think if you have more than one (arm) slot you have immediately lowered the ceiling (mph) on the fastball. When a pitcher has 3 pitches (fastball, curve, change) from the same slot it is very hard to hit.

JP: Let’s move on to tactics. How does Rice get ‘m out?

WG: You can’t let hitters, especially in Omaha, sit on speed. If you do you’re gonna get hurt. You have to have confidence to throw your off-speed pitches over when you’re behind in the count. But it’s very important, of course, to stay ahead in the count.

JP: What about change ups?

WG: “I” love change ups. But the biggest problem is the “pitcher” has to want a good change up. It’s all about want to! – or have to. A few years back we sent a kid to Wareham in the Cape Cod League. He hurt his arm and couldn’t throw a curve. He **had** to learn the change or go home for the summer. He did and it was the best change I’ve ever seen. He went on to lead the Cape in strikeouts that year. He threw a 88 mph fastball and wore ‘m out on that change. He threw it right down the middle. His arm speed was exactly the same for fastball and change up.

The guy with a great change up, even when a batter is looking for it, fools you. You expect it, then your eyes change your mind and say “no, it’s not a change – it’s a fastball”. But the pitcher has to want it and has to work on it.

JP: Mental Preparation - What is your program to teach players how to deal with pressure?

WG: With me, I’ve been in baseball all my life and it’s instinctive. I know when to inject humor on our club. It also tells the kids you’ve got to play this game with humor. You’ve got to see the humor in the human condition to succeed in baseball. I tell them, “remember you are doing something that you love to do. It’s supposed to be enjoyable. You’ve got to enjoy the process”.

JP: In the past Auggie brought Ken Ravizza into his program with great results. Would you bring in a professional to help your team deal with stress and pressure?

WG: No. I would never let a sports psychologist touch my team. That would be a denial of my ability to lead.

JP: Athleticism is a critical component of a successful college program. Can you share your ideas on that subject?

WG: Most strength and conditioning coaches have come from football and are dedicated to purely building power. If you get too big, the muscles can bind. You have to wean them (coaches) away from the football mentality. I don't give them a whole lot of license with my team until they show me that they have read some new stuff and do it right. I think plyometrics is outstanding.

Plyometrics can increase speed and quickness. But I'm careful not to spend too much time away from the practice field. Baseball requires a lot of skill you can only get from the practice field. But there is so much mis-information out there now. I believe that the mis-information far transcends the good information right now.

There is so much out there that is totally wrong, like driving your glove down and into your chest will increase speed. It won't. So we stay very basic in most everything we do.

JP: When you recruit do you look for a specific size athlete?

WG: No. I'm completely non-prejudiced on that. I'll take a Billy Wagner at 5'10" any day. There was a time in major league baseball when they started to only sign 6'2" and over catchers, completely ignoring the history of the game. It took 10 years for sanity to rear its head. The big catchers couldn't move and block. Here again, mis-information is rampant.

JP: Do you have a formal nutrition program?

WG: No, we don't have a nutritionist. But you do have to sell them (players) on good eating habits. The information is out there. It has to be a lifestyle. You can't follow them around and make choices for them.

Consistency is everything. The reason Roger (Clemens) is so successful today is not because he found the perfect conditioning program. It's because he's consistent doing it.

JP: Would you describe your specific management style? I know it's based on experience and you don't like to control everything.

WG: If I controlled all aspects of my players and the program I would limit them. You have to allow coaches and players to contribute.

Communication is key. We have a very hands on style, the doors are open all the time. Remember, this is all we do. Why shouldn't I be available? We yell at each other but we all care about each other.

Here at Rice when I think I've gone over the line with criticism and apologize to the player, they respond: "Well, coach, I know you're doing it in my best interest...I know you're trying to make me better." You can't fool kids today. They know if you care or not. Any coach that makes himself out to be infallible is making a huge mistake.

JP: Rice leads the NCAA in graduating athletes. The value system at Rice must be a priority. What is your goal?

WG: I want them to have a sense of responsibility for their actions and a positive impact on society. I don't want them constantly making excuses.

I hope we are creating leaders. With the combination of their education they receive at Rice and their baseball experience, I expect them when they leave to be movers and shakers. Why would anyone go through life without the need to have an impact on society? We are trying to teach them to do that.

JP: And apparently succeeding. Thanks for your time Coach.