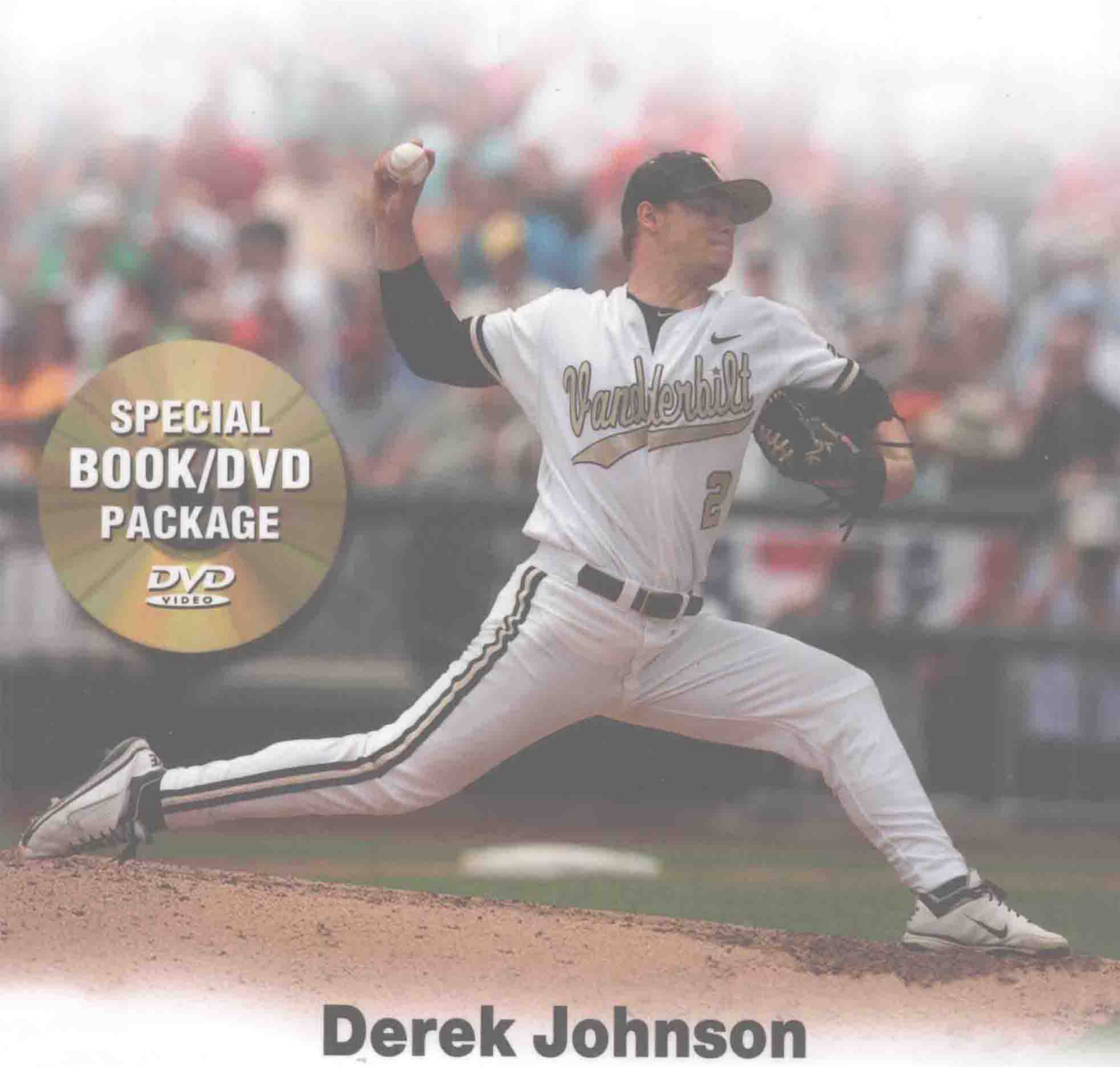
The Complete Guide to PITCHING



Derek Johnson

Foreword by David Price

The Complete Guide to Pitching

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Human Kinetics

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Human Kinetics
Website: www.HumanKinetics.com

United States: Human Kinetics
P.O. Box 5076
Champaign, IL 61825-5076
800-747-4457
e-mail: humank@hkusa.com

Canada: Human Kinetics
475 Devonshire Road Unit 100
Windsor, ON N8Y 2L5
800-465-7301 (in Canada only)
e-mail: info@hkcanada.com

Europe: Human Kinetics
107 Bradford Road
Stanningley
Leeds LS28 6AT, United Kingdom
+44 (0) 113 255 5665
e-mail: hk@hkeurope.com

Australia: Human Kinetics
57A Price Avenue
Lower Mitcham, South Australia 5062
08 8372 0999
e-mail: info@hkaustralia.com

New Zealand: Human Kinetics
P.O. Box 80
Torrens Park, South Australia 5062
0800 222 062
e-mail: info@hknewzealand.com

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This book is dedicated to my A-plus wife, Tasha, and our children, Teague and Taite. Thank you for your patience and love throughout the writing of this book and for letting me follow my dream.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to Jim Scott, my high school baseball coach; Dan Callahan, my college coach; and Tim Corbin, whom I worked for at Vanderbilt. Thank you for teaching me about the game and about life.

Thanks to Dana Cavalea, strength and conditioning coach for the New York Yankees, for writing chapter 10 on strength and conditioning; thanks for providing wisdom where I couldn't. And lastly, a heartfelt thank you to Ron Wolforth, Paul Nyman, and Brent Strom—all wonderful friends who have graciously allowed me to "borrow" ideas and programming from them. Thanks to all the pitchers who have taught me as much or more about pitching than I have taught them. Finally, to Mom and Dad for giving me all the opportunities to better my game and allowing me to find my passion.

DVD CONTENTS

The DVD included with this book will enhance your knowledge of pitching. This DVD demonstrates the techniques and drills discussed in the book. The techniques and drills that appear on the DVD are marked with a symbol in the margin:

FOREWORD

July 4, 2009, was the date of my 10th Major League start. My previous start had been my very first high-quality start of my Major League career. I had gone six and one-third innings against the Florida Marlins, giving up only one run and recording my second win of the season. I was pitching at Ameritrade Field, also known as The Ballpark at Arlington, which was the home field for the Texas Rangers.

I looked back at the box score, and it showed the game-time temperature as 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It felt even hotter on the field. Growing up in the South, I have never minded pitching in hot weather, but this was a little ridiculous.

My team, the Tampa Bay Rays, batted in the top of the first inning against Texas pitcher Derek Holland. Carl Crawford hit second for us and managed a double to deep center field, but Holland was able to get three outs without Carl's hit making a difference.

Then it was my turn on the mound. Ian Kinsler led off for the Rangers and I was able to get him swinging for a strikeout on a 1-and-2 pitch. Next up was Michael Young. He worked me to 3-and-1 and then I walked him. Marlon Byrd then came to bat and the same thing happened—a 3-and-1 walk. The cleanup hitter for the Rangers that day was Andruw Jones, whom I grew up watching. Living in Tennessee, I was an Atlanta Braves fan and Andruw had his best seasons with the Braves. My first pitch to Andruw was called a strike. It felt good to go ahead 0-and-1. Then on my next pitch, Andruw hit a long fly ball to left-center field. It quickly became clear the park wasn't going to hold it and I had to watch as Kinsler and Young scored in front of Jones rounding the bases for a home run. I was losing 3-0 with only one out in the bottom of the first. I was able to get Hank Blalock to hit a slow ground ball to our shortstop Jason Bartlett for the second out, and then Nelson Cruz struck out swinging on a 2-and-2 pitch. I was out of the inning with no further damage.

In the top of the second, Bartlett hit a solo home run for us off of Holland to make the score 3-1 as I went back out to pitch my half of the second inning. It's always a good feeling when my team scores for me, so I felt charged as I went back to the mound.

David Murphy was first up for the Rangers and I was able to strike him out looking on an 0-and-2 pitch. That was a nice way to start the inning. The rest didn't go so well.

Texas' catcher Taylor Teagarden hit a double off of me to deep center. I then walked Elvis Andrus and walked Kinsler to now have the bases loaded. Michael Young then hit a line drive on a two-and-oh pitch that went in for a double, scoring all three base runners. Marlon Byrd followed Young again. After I worked him to a full count, I walked him for my fifth walk of the game. Byrd would be the last hitter I would face. Our manager, Joe Maddon, slowly walked out into the Texas heat to pull me from the game.

My line for the day: 1.1 innings pitched, 3 hits, 6 runs, 6 earned runs, 5 walks, and 3 strikeouts. To this day that is definitely the ugliest game of my career. I hope it remains that way.

After the game, I started walking back to the team hotel. I didn't know what to think. Did I even belong in the Major Leagues?

Just a few steps into my walk, I dialed the phone of Derek Johnson, or DJ, as I call him. We talked during my entire walk to the hotel. He told me I was *the* guy—the number one

starter, the starting quarterback—and that I always needed to think that way no matter how things were going, good or bad. He told me that it was all a mind-set and the difference between great big-leaguers and average big-leaguers is all mental. He said I needed to put myself above everyone else in my mind.

You see, DJ had started telling me to be *the* guy the second I stepped on Vanderbilt's campus in 2004. It was like he saw something in me that I didn't know was there. He helped to bring that guy out of me. And for that, I am forever thankful to Derek "DJ" Johnson.

DJ has an insight into pitching like no one else. His thoughts on the mental side, on the mechanical part, and on strategy have helped me in every game I've pitched for the last eight years. He laid the foundation for the pitcher I am and continues to help as I grow to be the pitcher I want to become. Derek Johnson is truly the best.

David Price
Tampa Bay Rays

INTRODUCTION

It has often been said that hitting a baseball thrown at 90-plus miles per hour is the most difficult thing to do in all of sports. As a former pitcher, I can attest that being on the other end of that equation isn't exactly easy either. And, just like baseball, writing this book wasn't a piece of cake, but it was sure a lot of fun.

Baseball is a simple game, or so I thought when I first started playing. I didn't analyze how I held my bat; I simply gripped it and swung hard. Similarly, it never occurred to me that there was a "proper way" to grip a ball or lift my leg when throwing. I just threw the ball as hard as I possibly could over and over again. But as every kid who has donned a uniform eventually learns, the game of baseball becomes increasingly more difficult as players advance to higher levels. In many ways, the same can be said of coaching. Mastering something involves taking the complex and comprehending it so thoroughly that it becomes simple. With this book, my intent is to simplify the complex things about pitching.

When my collegiate career came to a close, my former coach and very dear friend, Dan Callahan, provided me with an opportunity to coach. Initially, my coaching consisted largely of relaying instruction and information that I had learned from my coaches through the years. Most of the pitchers whom I worked with were fairly talented and made modest improvements during their time with me. I pointed to them with pride, thinking that I had influenced their development. And for those who did not develop, I convinced myself that I could not be at fault because they were "uncoachable." Deep down though, I knew that this wasn't always the case. Deep down I felt as if I had failed myself, and more important, I had failed the pitchers. Because of those players who didn't succeed, I began to question what I was teaching and how I was teaching it. Those questions drive me now, and I believe they should drive anyone who coaches young people.

I began searching for answers and found others who were more than willing to help. Ron Wolforth, owner and operator of the Athletic Pitcher Pitching Ranch in Houston, Texas, was instrumental in my quest. He introduced me to great pitching minds such as Brent Strom, Paul Nyman, and Tom House. I learned as much from these men as I possibly could. I built on and adapted aspects of that knowledge while developing an approach that fit my experience, observations, and personality. This approach has yielded fairly good results, which would not have been achievable without the generosity of fellow coaches who were willing to share their experiences—along with good recruiting from the men with whom I've shared an office. It is my hope that with this book I can repay the favor and help coaches and players more fully understand the art and science of pitching.

So what is that approach? In writing this book, I spent a great deal of time pondering that very question. It would be easy to focus on the individual aspects of development, such as a pitcher's mechanics, arm strength, intensity, commitment, and dedication. Of course, these are all important ingredients in the recipe for any successful approach. However, for the recipe to be a success, ingredients must be added in the proper amounts and at the right time—for the recipe to taste right, some must be added before others.

And this concept also applies to my approach to pitching. I believe that to be successful, a pitcher must first possess and exhibit four essential traits: (1) a work ethic that will not take "no" for an answer; (2) the ability to prepare at a championship level every day; (3) accountability for himself and his career; and (4) a sense of humility for himself and the game. In turn, these traits create a mind-set, a mentality. The pitcher must have the mind-set of a champion—the mind-set of a warrior.

All four traits must be present before a pitcher, or coach, can devote the time and effort to the development of the physical skills. That is not to say that the skills are not important; they are, and they will be covered extensively in this book. However, I've seen many pitchers with great mechanics and overpowering stuff who struggled, fizzled, and faded into oblivion. Alternatively, I've watched while players with fewer tools and less stuff succeeded at the highest levels of the sport. Why? I firmly believe it is because of these essential traits.

It is not uncommon for a coach, teacher, or parent to harp on the importance of developing a solid work ethic supported by organization, dedication, and discipline. With my pitchers, I focus on a model of a work ethic that is different in nature but still supported by these attributes. This work ethic requires an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, specifically pitching knowledge. If a pitcher wants to be the best, he must work when no one else is working, train uniquely, seek ways to improve his training, be comfortable in an uncomfortable setting, and go where no one else dares to go. I will often paraphrase this old saying: "Most people know what to do and how to do it, but very few are actually willing to do it." I want a truly willing pitcher on my side. Those guys will win more games than the other guy.

As the pitcher continues to gain knowledge, he must then understand how to best train based on what he has learned. This is preparation. Most teams and players at any level prepare for a season or a game, but what separates a "have" from a "have not" is the *way* he prepares and the confidence he builds as a result of the training. He might ask himself, "If I truly prepare, then how can I fail?" Or even better, he might say, "If I prepare judiciously and purposefully, then I *will not* fail." Teams and players do not win simply by having more talent than the opposition. Winners have a purpose for doing what they do, they have a defined time for when they do it, and they leave nothing to chance. No stone is left unturned. Everything counts. This is purposeful preparation!

Another quality that is essential for a pitcher is the willingness to take responsibility for his own success, his failures, and most important, his career. We live in a "transfer of blame" society—failure always seems to be someone else's fault. Parents invest more time and money in their youngster's career than ever before, so if "Little Johnny" doesn't become a star, it must be someone else's fault. The player doesn't develop into a high-level performer because of poor coaching or not enough playing time. Although some of these outside reasons do exist, the player should look inward first. Baseball is a game of failure, but the failures are really the opportunities that the game presents to better yourself. Good players take responsibility—bad ones blame something or someone else.

The last quality that a pitcher must possess in order to become extraordinary (extraordinary is what we are looking for) is a sense of humility. Two types of players play the game of baseball—the humble player and the player who is about to be humbled. The humble player leads by example and serves other people before serving himself. He recognizes that everyone around him has an important role, and that he is a small part of a bigger thing—the team. He wins with humility and loses with honor. He lets his actions and accomplishments speak for themselves, and he plays the game with joy and unbridled passion. He is slow to speak, but quick to listen.

Throughout this book and DVD, you'll find advice, guidance, and instruction on nearly every aspect of pitching. You'll learn how a pitcher can refine his mechanics, develop new pitches, improve physical conditioning, recognize a hitter's weaknesses, shut down a running game, and much, much more. What you will not find are instructions for developing character, accountability, and commitment. The development of those traits is the responsibility of the pitcher alone.

CONTENTS

PART III Conditioning for Pitching

PART I

The Science of Pitching

ONE

Foundation

Let's get something straight from the very beginning: Becoming a skilled pitcher is very difficult! I'm not trying to sound pessimistic, but pitchers need to understand from the beginning that they must master many layers of proficiency in order to become successful at the highest levels. This is a fact that overwhelms even the greatest athletes, because what works at the present level might not work at the next. If pitching were easy, everyone would do it. The same can be said about the game of baseball. I have spent a lifetime pursuing knowledge of the many layers of pitching, and I suspect that I will spend many more years fitting the pieces together moving closer to what I consider "right."

When teaching young athletes the art of pitching, most coaches would agree that the first step is to lay a foundation of guiding principles. The coach can then build on this foundation while teaching the skills and techniques that pitchers must master to be successful. Foundations create expectations, foster a mentality within the group, set guidelines, and provide a general map on where to go, how to get there, and why. Just as important, foundations give the pitcher a resource to go back to when things aren't going as planned. And if you've ever spent any time around baseball, you undoubtedly understand that things often go awry. A good foundation can provide remedies for many flaws and can keep the pitcher on track as he works to acquire skill. Figure 1.1 represents the seven foundational elements of a pitching program. Although other things could certainly be considered foundational, these seven philosophical concepts provide a solid foundation and should be taught on a regular basis:

1. Joy
2. Balls and strikes
3. Me versus me and me versus you
4. Intent
5. Skills and abilities
6. Balance
7. Training versus trusting

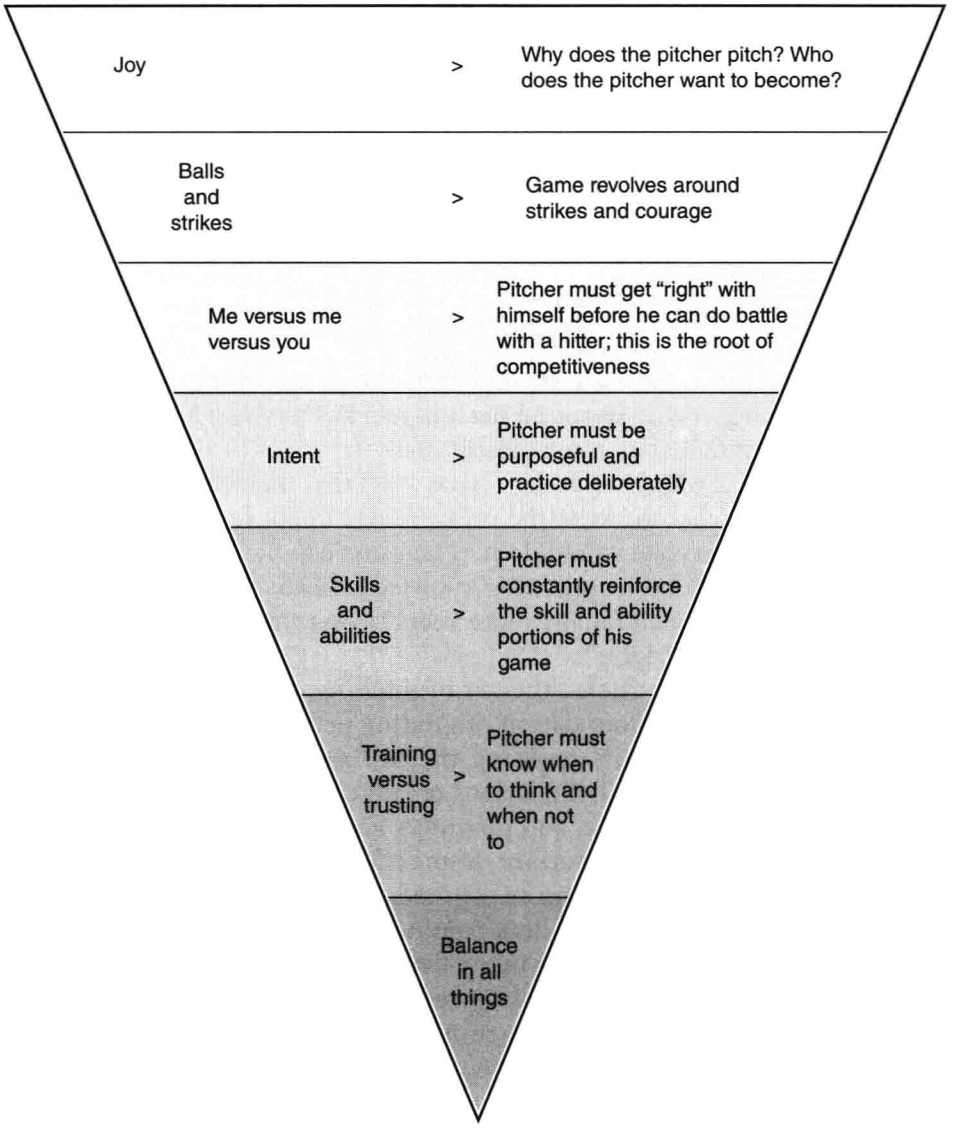

Figure 1.1 Conceptual model of the seven elements of a pitching foundation.

First Principle of the Pitching Foundation: Joy

Joy, or enjoyment, is what drives people in their pursuits. We seek happiness, and therefore we do things that make us happy and generally stay away from things that do not. So, the first principle of the pitching foundation is to find joy in pitching and in the game of baseball.

The first question that a pitcher needs to address within this foundation is "Why do I pitch?" It may seem funny and too elementary to even ask such a question; however, if the pitcher is being totally honest with himself, he might be surprised at some of the answers. This question is important because the answer provides the pitcher with insight into two other questions that can greatly impact the success of a pitcher: "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to be?" Outside of baseball, philosophers have wrestled with these fundamental questions for centuries, and the baseball pitcher should be clear in his answers. When a pitcher has a solid understanding of who he is currently (when he knows himself as a pitcher) and has a plan for who he wants to be as a pitcher, only then does he progress toward realizing his potential. In other words, the pitcher keeps perspective on where he is currently and what he needs to do to take the next step.

So, the question "Why do you pitch?" becomes a search of the soul and brings deeper meaning to the pitcher's pursuit of becoming skilled. You may be thinking that this question is too deep for a young pitcher to comprehend or relate to, but I would politely disagree because the answer is alarmingly simple—the answer should be that he pitches because he experiences a deep and profound joy when he pitches or when he is working on the skills of pitching. Joy, pure joy, provides the pitcher with the fuel needed to find out who he is currently (the style or essence of the pitcher) and a plan for who he wants to become. Joy is natural and comes from within. It is unforced by any outside stimuli (e.g., parents or coaches) and can be seen on the beaming faces of youngsters playing a game of catch in the backyard or hitting their first home run. When true joy is present, playing the game becomes easier, and the work needed to acquire skill doesn't seem like work at all. It seems much more like fun. It comes from the gut, and lives in the heart. Therefore, the first principle involves pursuing the art and craft of pitching with unbridled joy.

Second Principle of the Pitching Foundation: Balls and Strikes

The second principle is also easy to understand and goes right to the heart of the game. This principle is a word play on one of the most fundamental aspects of the game—balls and strikes. In baseball, the pitcher throws the ball across the plate, and the hitter attempts to hit the thrown ball somewhere on the field of play, thereby starting the action of the contest. Without strikes, the game cannot be played. To have the best chance of succeeding, the pitcher must develop the ability to consistently throw strikes in different areas of the strike zone, making it more difficult for the hitter to hit. Throwing to these areas requires great skill and precision, and it is difficult to do consistently.

Unfortunately, other factors come into play that make the pitcher's task more difficult. Pressure (both internal and external), inconsistent mechanics and mentalities, and general fear can prevent the pitcher from throwing strikes. He becomes scared of what the outcome might be or the consequences of failing and becomes

unable to make pitches. He throws balls. Of course, not all balls are thrown out of fear or ineptness—balls also occur because pitching is a difficult skill to master. In addition, sometimes the pitcher *wants* to throw balls so that he can set up the next pitch, or he may be trying to get a hitter to chase a ball out of the zone. This too is all part of the game. But the definition of the word *balls* that I am referring to here deals with the intestinal fortitude of the pitcher. It takes courage to throw strikes! If the pitcher has the courage to throw the ball across the plate and do so repeatedly, he will give himself and his team a much better chance to win the game.

Third Principle of the Pitching Foundation: Me Versus Me and Me Versus You

The third principle builds directly on the first two. The pitcher must find joy in his heart to have any chance of identifying why he pitches, who he is, and who he'd like to become. As the pitcher moves through this process, many things happen to impede his progress. He will fail and succeed while competing at the game, and his mind and ego are like a bank account that involves a large number of transactions—confidence deposits and debits. With a good outing, a pitcher's confidence usually gets better, while a poor outing can sometimes destroy the poise of the pitcher. This is the nature of the game and always will be.

Essentially then, the pitcher is battling two opponents at all times—not just the opposing batter, but also himself. Me versus me is the pitcher's battle against himself, and me versus you is the pitcher's battle against the hitter. It is the battle within as well as the battle on the outside. Ultimately, pitching becomes easier when the focus is less internal and the pitcher learns to manage his emotions so that he has a stronger commitment to simply executing pitches and doing battle with the hitter. Put another way, the pitcher learns how to conquer fear and how to "get out of his own way" (me versus me), and he condenses pitching into simply making pitches and doing battle with the hitter (me versus you). This is the root of competitive behavior—a need to prove oneself in a sport arena. The hitter tries to take something from the pitcher (i.e., get a hit, score a run, or win the game), and the pitcher proactively tries to stop the batter from achieving that goal.

Me versus me and me versus you will also create a mentality for the individual pitcher as well as an entire pitching staff. Pitchers need to have an edge about them when they do battle with a hitter. This desire starts in practice and progresses to the game and potentially their life. Pitchers need to feel as if a hitter is trying to take something away from them—and they have to do something about it. This needs to be a confrontational battle. It needs to be personal. In short, the pitcher knows why he pitches (joy), who he is, and who he wants to be. He throws strikes with courage, and he learns to manage the battle within so that his primary focus can be on battling the hitter.