

## Pitching - Strategy

When you get on the mound, have you thought through how you are going to pitch to the opposing team?

You may have a plan for certain hitter, but you must also have an overall plan that you can use throughout the game. You need to think through your strategy and have a basic philosophy that you can modify for each game.

The main purpose of the plan is to keep the opposing team off balance. They shouldn't step into the box and know that the first pitch is going to be a fastball, or if you get ahead in the count you usually throw an off-speed pitch. You want them to be off balance and not sure what you are going to throw in any given situation.

So what are some things you can add to your basic pitching strategy?

- Get ahead of the hitters!!! Hitters start drooling when they step in the box with a 2-0, 3-0, or 3-1 count. They know you are limited with what you can do and you have to throw a strike. They will often shrink their zone and if you throw it in that zone, look out. Your pitching strategy should always be to get ahead of the hitters.
- Change speeds often, but don't fall into a pattern. Your goal shouldn't be to change speeds on every pitch, but to keep the hitters guessing. If you always follow a fastball with an off-speed pitch then the hitters will learn that pattern and be expecting an off-speed pitch after each fastball.
- Vary pitch location. In addition to varying the pitches you throw you'll also want to vary the location. It's nice if you have the control to throw the ball at the knees on a consistent basis, but being able to run the ball up in the strike zone can be effective and keep the hitters off guard. The same can be said for pitching on the inside or outside part of the plate. If you consistently throw the ball over the same half of the plate, the hitters will adjust and look for the ball in that location.
- Pitch inside with your fastball. See if the hitters can handle the inside heat. This is a difficult pitch for most hitters to handle and it is the pitch they will be forced to look for on every pitch if you establish it. As you can imagine, if the hitter is looking for the inside fastball, all other pitches and locations will have a better chance of keeping the hitter off balance.
- Throw your fastball with different grips. Come in sometimes with a 4-seam fastball and sometimes throw a 2-seam fastball to get some movement. Hitters can adjust to a pitcher that always throw a 2-seam fastball that breaks the same way each time. Give them different looks to your fastball and they'll think your fastball is jumping.

Once you have a basic pitching strategy, then you can adapt that for each game. Why would it change from game to game? The primary reason will be the type of stuff you have on a particular day? Each day is different and you need to be prepared to battle on days when you don't feel like you're throwing the ball very well. One day you may have all your pitches and you can throw them all for strikes. On another day your fastball may be average and your having trouble throwing your off-speed pitch for a strike. Days like that are going to test your mental toughness. Can you battle on those days and still be successful and give your team a chance to win? Mentally tough pitchers will.

## Game Day Strategies

We'll lump these into two categories, you either have it or you don't. You can figure out the variations on your own.

### You Have It

On the days you have good stuff and are throwing strikes things can seem pretty easy. When you have it, concentrate on your pitching strategy. These are the days that you can really keep the hitters off balance because you can throw any pitch at any time. The biggest problem you can get into on days like that is over confidence and lack of concentration. Have you ever seen a pitcher throw shutout ball through 4 or 5 innings and then start getting drilled? It happens at every level. It may be that he is tired and has lost velocity, but it may also be that he has been so successful that he has lost his concentration and fell into a pattern that the hitters have caught on to. Here are some ways to avoid losing your concentration during a game:

- Have someone keep a pitching chart. It may be another player on the bench or someone in the stands. Review it each inning and see what you are throwing and when. Compare that with who is coming up in the next inning and decide how you're going to approach those hitters. This will keep you in the game and your pitching philosophy in mind during the game.
- Don't pitch the same way to a hitter multiple times, unless he is completely overmatched. You may be able to blow 3 fastballs by someone in the first inning, but you probably won't be able to do that each time he comes up.
- Keep reminding yourself of what's at stake. Make it a personal challenge to battle every hitter that comes up to the plate. Don't start thinking about what a great game you've had; there will be plenty of time for that after the game.

### You Don't

These are the tough days, but they can also be the most rewarding if you're successful. Here are some things to think about when you don't have your best stuff.

- Have confidence. Believe in your ability to get hitters out by pitching a smart game.
- Get ahead of the count. This is always important, but especially on days when you're having trouble finding the plate. If control is a problem, don't try and hit the corners with the first pitch.
- Keep the ball low in the zone. Use a 2-seam fastball over a 4-seam fastball. If you lack velocity you'll find that this can actually make your 2-seam fastball to move more than usual. Throw it low in the zone and try to get groundball outs.
- Don't abandon your pitching strategy. This really comes down to concentration. Some pitchers simply hope the hitter doesn't do any damage when they are not throwing well. They try to throw a strike and hope it works out. Others use it as motivation to focus that much more each hitter.

## Individual Hitters

Now were down to the level of a hitter stepping in the box. How do you go about pitching to him? First, use what you know about the hitter to try and give you an advantage. If you've never faced him before, watch his practice swing. The practice swing will tell you what location he likes the ball. If a left-handed hitter comes to the plate and he takes a practice swing at what would be a low inside pitch, you can bet that's the pitch he likes to hit and will be looking for. Try to start him out with a fastball out and up.

When you have faced the same hitter more than once, you will have some experience to draw from. How does he handle my fastball? Does he have trouble adjusting to off-speed pitches? Does he have a tendency to chase pitches out of the strike zone?

Good hitters adjust very quickly to a pitcher. If you always throw your fastball with 2-seams and it always breaks down and in to a right-handed hitter, you may get the good hitter to miss it once or twice, but he will learn the action on the pitch and adjust to it. It's much more effective to have a 4-seam fastball, a 2-seam fastball that breaks in and a 2-seam fastball that breaks away, and be able to use them all. That way you can give that hitter 3 different looks with just your fastball.

**Goal: Make the hitter uncomfortable.**

**Approach:**

- Change speed
- Change location
- Change the break on the ball

The following are some strategies that you can use with a particular hitter:

- Find out if he can handle the inside fastball. There is nothing that makes a hitter more uncomfortable than knowing he can't handle the inside heat or that he has to commit himself early to hit this pitch. We're not talking about knocking the player down or brushing him back, but establishing the inside part of the plate and letting the hitter know that you will throw there.
- Make the hitter change some aspect of his swing from the pitch you just threw. You throw an inside fastball just above the belt and the hitter fouls it off and was a little behind. What is the hitter thinking when he is getting ready to get back in the box? Most likely he is thinking that he needs to be a little quicker. If you come back with the same pitch in the same location, you have given him the edge because that is the pitch he is prepared for. Given that situation, you could:
  - Throw a fastball outside and down.
  - Throw a curveball outside and down.
  - Throw a low inside changeup.
  - Or you could throw something else, remember you don't want to be predictable.

In all these cases you have changed speed and/or location from what the hitter was prepared for. Strive to work inside and outside along with up and down. If you can do this while changing speeds effectively you'll have a hitter that doesn't know what to expect and that will make him uncomfortable.

With all strategies, there are exceptions to the rule. If a hitter looks completely uncomfortable with a pitch, don't be afraid to throw it again. The thing to remember is to try and make it more difficult than the time before. For example,

if you get a hitter to swing at a high fastball and he didn't even come close, you may want to come right back with it but try and throw it an inch or two higher.

- If the hitter is willing to swing at a pitch outside the strike zone, exploit it. Don't waste pitches when you get ahead. Wasting pitches is when you throw a ball so far out of the strike zone that there is no way the hitter will swing. It accomplishes nothing. It does nothing to the hitter but make him feel better about the count. All hitters would rather be 1-2 versus 0-2. You certainly don't want to give up a 0-2 hit, but on that count you want to stretch the zone with a good pitch that he may swing at.
- Constantly analyze. What are the hitter's strengths? What are his weaknesses? What adjustment is the hitter going to try and make based on the pitch I just threw? How can I take advantage of that? What's the count? What runners are on base? How many outs?
- Don't be afraid of failure. Try to make the best pitch you can and don't worry about the rest. Sometimes it will go your way and sometimes it won't. Don't dwell on things that don't go your way. Simply bear down and focus on the next hitter.

## Visualization

It takes practice to become comfortable with your pitching strategy and how you are going to handle game time situations. One tool you can use to help prepare yourself is visualization. The night before a game (or anytime for that matter), sit in a quiet spot and simulate a few innings in your mind. Imagine different types of hitters coming to the plate, go through the lineup a few times and see how well you can remember how you are handling the opposing team and each hitter. This exercise while only in your mind will help you prepare for the mental part of the game. Make sure you picture yourself being successful. It doesn't mean you need to throw a perfect game, but put yourself in difficult situations and then visualize yourself successfully handling those situations.