

Pitching with a purpose

A few years ago, a former professional baseball player mentioned a book that had made a great impression on him. It was called "The Mental ABC's of Pitching," by a sports psychologist named H.A. Dorfman. I read the book one spare evening.

It left an impression on me too, mostly for its moral tone. Dorfman offers to liberate people from what you might call the tyranny of the scattered mind. He offers to take pitchers, who may be thinking about a thousand and one things up on the mound, and give them mental discipline.

Others are eloquent about courage and creativity, but Dorfman is fervent about discipline. In the book's only lyrical passage, he writes: "Self-discipline is a form of freedom. Freedom from laziness and lethargy, freedom from expectations and demands of others, freedom from weakness and fear — and doubt."

His assumption seems to be that you can't just urge someone to be disciplined; you have to build a structure of behavior and attitude. Behavior shapes thought. If a player disciplines his behavior, then he will also discipline his mind.

Dorfman builds that structure on the repetitiousness of baseball. It's commonly said that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to master any craft — three hours of practice every day for 10 years. Dorfman assumes that players would have already put in those hours doing drills and repetitions. He urges them to adopt their own pregame rituals. He notes that Trevor Hoffman, the San Diego Padres closer, walks from the clubhouse to the dugout every game in the fourth in-

ning and moves to the bullpen in the seventh.

As a pitcher enters a game, Dorfman continues, he should bring a relentlessly assertive mind-set. He should plan on attacking the strike zone early in the count, and never letting up. He will not nibble at the strike zone or try to throw the ball around hitters. He will invite contact. Even when the count is zero balls and two strikes, he will not alter his emotional tone by wasting a pitch out of the strike zone.

Just as a bike is better balanced when going forward, a pitcher's mind is better balanced when unceasingly aggressive. If a pitcher doesn't actually feel this way when he enters a game, Dorfman asks him to pretend. If your body impersonates an attitude long enough, then the mind begins to adopt it.

Dorfman then structures the geography of the workplace. There are two locales in a pitcher's universe — on the mound and off the mound. Off the mound is for thinking about the past and future, on the mound is for thinking about the present. When a pitcher is on the pitching rubber, Dorfman writes, he should only think about three things: pitch selection, pitch location and the catcher's glove, his target. If he finds himself thinking about something else, he should step off the rubber.

Dorfman has various breathing rituals he endorses, but his main focus during competition is to get his pitchers thinking simple and small. A pitcher is defined, he writes, "by the way the ball leaves his hand." Everything else is extraneous.

In Dorfman's description of pitching, batters barely

exist. They are vague, generic abstractions that hover out there in the land beyond the pitcher's control. A pitcher shouldn't judge himself by how the batters hit his pitches, but instead by whether he threw the pitch he wanted to throw.

Dorfman once approached Greg Maddux after a game and asked him how it went. Maddux said simply: "Fifty out of 73." He'd thrown 73 pitches and executed 50. Nothing else was relevant.

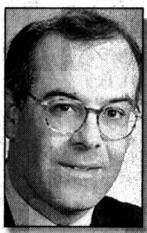
A baseball game is a spectacle, with a thousand points of interest. But Dorfman reduces it all to a series of simple tasks. The pitcher's personality isn't at the center. His talent isn't at the center. The task is at the center.

By putting the task at the center, Dorfman illuminates the way the body and the mind communicate with each other. Once there were intellectuals who thought the mind existed above the body, but that's been blown away by evidence. In fact, it's easiest to change the mind by changing behavior, and that's probably as true in the office as on the mound.

And by putting the task at the center, Dorfman helps the pitcher quiet the self. He pushes the pitcher's thoughts away from his own qualities — his expectations, his nerve, his ego — and helps the pitcher lose himself in the job.

Not long ago, Americans saw the rise of a therapeutic culture that placed great emphasis on self-discovery, self-awareness and self-expression. But somehow the tide seems to have turned from the worship of self, and today's message is: transcend yourself in your job — or get shelled.

A fitting reminder from opening day.



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