Written by Gary Armida
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The following is the first in a series of articles authored by The Biz of Baseball's latest contributor, Gary Armida. Armida, working with former A's and Mets pitching coach Rick Peterson, and the staff of 3P Sports will be bringing you articles each and every month. In this first article, we look at the life of Rick Peterson, and his continued efforts to improve pitchers on a number of levels. - Maury Brown

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If one ponders that $330 million dollars was spent on injured pitchers during the 2008 Major League Baseball season, you might believe that something is inherently wrong with how pitchers are developed. Even with pitching related injuries at an all-time high, few organizations have an effective plan in place. Many teams are content with innings limits and/or restrictive pitch counts. Arguably, those approaches are not working. The Texas Rangers are being considered bold as team president Nolan Ryan implements a training program where pitchers are encouraged to pitch deeper into games and throw more pitches. This plan cannot accurately be evaluated for several more seasons. It is, however, a plan without much validation in terms of good, sound research. While baseball is quite progressive in strategic areas and training methods, it still lacks a definitive plan as to how to prevent pitching injuries. This problem is not limited to the professional ranks. The amateur pitching market is experiencing an injury boom unlike any other. In fact, according to the American Sports Medical Institute (ASMI), over the last 10 years, Tommy John surgeries have increased by 700 percent in the amateur pitching market. Perhaps it would be wise to address the amateur pitching market which should, in turn, decrease the percentage of major league pitching injuries. That’s a wise decision according to Rick Peterson, the former major league pitching coach for the Oakland A’s and the New York Mets.

“Forty-five percent of young pitchers under the age of 12 experience chronic elbow pain. That number rises to 60 percent when talking about high school age pitchers.”

Peterson, armed with over 30 years of professional experience as well as the research of ASMI, is now in the process of revolutionizing the amateur pitching market with, 3P Sports, a company which aims to teach amateur pitchers how to perform at their optimum level while preventing injury. In fact, Peterson’s entire professional life has led him to this point.

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Growing Up Baseball

Peterson had the good fortune to grow up in a baseball family. In fact, one could say that he grew up in baseball. His father, Harding Peterson, was a catcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1955 to 1959. A broken arm on a play at the plate robbed the elder Peterson of a long career, but he remained in the game as a coach and, later on, as a front office executive. Harding Peterson does have the distinction of being the starting catcher in the final games at the Polo Grounds and Ebbets Field.

Having his father involved in professional baseball afforded Rick the opportunity to interact with some of the greatest players and people of their generation.

“With Dad involved in the game, I was calling Danny Murtagh, Steve Blass, Vernon Law, and Roberto Clemente by ‘Uncle’,” Peterson said. “Being around those men taught me so much. For one, it was easy to see how the game should be played. Secondly, it helped take away that awe of talking to a professional player.” The latter lesson would serve him later on when first breaking into coaching. Peterson’s father would begin a coaching career managing in the minor leagues.

It was during this time that shaped how Peterson treats people. Many of his father’s managing positions were in the south during the ‘60s; the height of the Civil Rights movement. A young Rick Peterson would have a front row seat for much of the era.

“I can remember travelling on the bus with the team and we’d look for a place to eat,” Peterson said. “Dad would get off the bus and ask the restaurant manager if he would serve the entire team, not just the white members. If the answer was no, Dad would get back on the bus and we’d search for a place that would.”

In fact, it was during this time where Peterson would learn how to treat people properly. At seven and eight years old, he would sell popcorn and peanuts in the stands. “The stands were pretty segregated. African Americans sat on the first base side. I was going around the stadium selling popcorn. As I went down the first base line, someone stopped me and told me to not go in that section. I didn’t know why. I simply said, ‘They’re people. Don’t they like popcorn too?’ I learned from that whole experience that people are people. That is the beauty of baseball. Everyone on the team was the same.”

It is quite clear that this experience has helped shape the type of coach he has become. It was a regular scene to see Peterson go to the mound and put his hand his pitcher’s shoulder and ask how he was. He is not the coach that publicly berates a player. It is because of his demeanor (and knowledge) that Peterson is considered one of the most respected coaches in all of baseball.

Playing Career Cut Short

Having grown up around baseball, it seemed clear that Peterson was going to be a high-caliber player. He pitched through high school and was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in the 30th round. But, Peterson had multiple offers to attend college, including Harvard, Duke, and Tulane. Instead, he chose to attend Gulf Coast Community College. His rationale, like many professional prospects, was to improve in college while still being able to get drafted early. If he chose a four-year school, he would’ve had to wait until he was 21-years-old. His Gulf Coast team was filled with professional prospects. They would regularly beat powerhouse schools like the University of Florida or Southern Alabama.

During a spring tournament in Georgia, Peterson pitched a complete game in which he struck out 15, walked 7, and allowed six hits.

“I easily threw over 200 pitches that day. Many scouts came up to me wanting to sign me. The

next day our game goes into extra innings and ny coach asks me to pitch in relief. I come in during the 10th inning – I didn't feel right during warm-ups – but I got the first guy. On the first pitch to the second batter, I feel something pop in my shoulder. After that, I was never the same. I never pitched a game without arm pain."

This story is similar to one that many amateur pitchers face. Overuse is one of the leading causes of pitching injuries. Peterson, unfortunately, was the classic victim of overuse. It is same overuse that he has helped pitchers avoid during his 30 years in professional baseball.

Ahead of His Time

Much of Peterson's coaching career has been spent at the forefront of several movements. First, he was one of the first coaches to actually think about the mental side of the game. Secondly, he was the very first coach to ever take his pitchers to the famed lab of AMSI in Alabama for a biomechanical analysis. Sadly, he is still the only coach who makes this a routine for his pitchers. Finally, he was given considerable visibility due to Michael Lewis' Moneyball. The downside of being at the forefront of these three movements? Well, let's just say that the "traditionalists" didn't quite get what he was about.

Peterson can recall the day he decided he would go into coaching. "I was in San Diego at the time and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to pitch," Peterson recalled. "I was on a seven-day fast, doing a lot of meditation; a lot of Yoga. It was on the third or fourth day of the fast when it hit me—I'm a teacher. What did I know best? Pitching. I had some offers to get into coaching so I decided that coaching would be my way to make a difference in somebody's life."

He started out as a minor league instructor for the Pittsburgh Pirates. During that time, his early childhood spent among baseball stars helped him as he would often speak to coaches and pick their brains.

“I can remember asking (Braves pitching coach) Johnny Sain about so many things. He would always be at the field at 7AM, just standing in the bleachers looking out over the field, almost like Patton. I’m sure he’d see me walking towards him every morning saying ‘What does this kid want now?’ I’d ask him about pickoffs, teaching pitchers certain pitches, situations, really anything. Mel Stottlemyre was another person I would speak to quite a bit. I could walk up to anyone having grown up around Baseball. I learned so much. I was and still am so fortunate.”

After spending time in the Pirates and Indians farm systems, Peterson was hired by the Chicago White Sox as a pitching coach for one of their Single-A affiliates. However, he got to Spring Training and was informed that he was going to be the Double-A pitching coach for the Birmingham Barons. This is where circumstance meets destiny as the now famed Dr. James Andrews was about to open up his lab in Birmingham, as well. Peterson was, literally, the first professional coach to walk through those doors.

“At first, I was like why do I have to do this? But, once I saw what could be done—identifying potential injuries and having the opportunity to be proactive about injuries—it was a seminal moment in my career.”

He describes that time of his life as his education in biomechanics. As the first, and only, coach to utilize the lab, Peterson forged a friendship with Dr. Andrews and Dr. Glenn Fleisig.

While in the White Sox organization, another one of Peterson’s strengths and beliefs would be called to the forefront. One day, he was called to General Manager Larry Himes’ office.

“Because of my educational background in psychology, they wanted me to interview for a new position as the Director of Sports Psychology,” Peterson said. “The White Sox, after seeing the success Dr. Harvey Dorfman had with the Oakland A’s, decided to put money into a new program. Well, I called Dr. Charles Maher to help me put together a program. I can remember the interview when Jerry Reinsdorf asked me why he should invest money in our three-year proposal. Well, I told him that if you look at all of your reports about your Double-A and Triple-A players and see how many read that they ‘lack focus’, ‘have confidence issues’, or ‘isn’t working hard enough’. Those are all mental skills. If we could help those issues, he would have more viable major league players which increases his franchise’s worth. When Reinsdorf was still hesitant, I told him that we’d do it for free at first and show him how valuable it can be. After

hearing that, Jerry said to just do the program as proposed."

All wasn't smooth in this relatively new venture of looking at the mental side of a player. Baseball was, and still is, full of men who discount the importance of psychology when it comes to an athlete. Larry Himes wasn't ready for a full program. Instead, he ordered Peterson to work with five players as part of a pilot program. One of the players involved in the program was White Sox legend and future Hall of Famer Frank Thomas. The impact of the program began to infiltrate the White Sox organization. Peterson recalls the case of a relative unknown, pitcher Brian Drahman, as validation.

"We acquired Drahman from the Milwaukee Brewers, I believe, and he was guy who had a good fastball and a plus-slider. For some reason, he couldn't put it together. I think he had an ERA of about 9 when he came to us. Well, one day he goes out and tosses a 1-2-3 inning. Larry Himes calls up and asks what's going on with this guy. I tell him that he lacks the mental focus to be consistent. Himes yells that he should be in the program. I respond with that 'you told me I could only have five players'. Obviously, the program expanded."

While Drahman would not have a long career, he did reach the Major Leagues and is the answer to a trivia question as he was the first White Sox pitcher to win a game at the new Comiskey Park.

The final piece of the Peterson's coaching belief also occurred while with Chicago as the White Sox were on the cutting edge of data analysis.

"Chicago was way ahead of their time when it came to data. We'd have printouts of tracking pitch selection and hit results. The problem was getting any uniformed personnel to look at it. The printouts weren't user friendly at all. I would literally stare at them for hours at first. They gave great information, but nobody wanted to put the time into looking at them," Peterson said.

And so it began as baseball would start to produce a seemingly endless amount of data that most traditionalists would scoff at. This battle still rages today. One can only imagine the reaction to these seemingly foreign printouts back then.

As a result of manager Gene Lamont's firing, many of the White Sox coaching personnel were fired, Peterson included. He finished the season as a consultant for the Boston Red Sox before getting hired as a minor league coach for the Toronto Blue Jays. He didn't last long in Toronto despite helping the career of a young Chris Carpenter who was taken to ASMI for a biomechanical analysis. In a telling moment about the Blue Jays' idea of pitching development, Peterson was fired and was told by a front office executive that, "The Blue Jays never want to hear the word 'biomechanics' again." As the Blue Jays go through a season with scores of pitchers on the disabled list, one has to wonder if they still hold that same organizational philosophy. All would be fine for Peterson as he was about to land with an organization that would finally see the importance of his beliefs.

Moneyball

It seemed that Peterson's belief in approaching pitching with science, psychology, and baseball data came to its apex when he landed his first major league coaching job as the Oakland A's pitching coach.

"There was so much resistance in the game as I was coaching," Peterson reflects. "Heck, I was fired twice within a year and a half. But, then I got to Oakland. Billy Beane was the first guy who got it."

In Oakland, Peterson would routinely take his pitchers to the lab in Alabama for a biomechanics evaluation. The "Big Three" of Tim Hudson, Barry Zito, and Mark Mulder would propel the A's into the playoffs year-after-year, despite having one of the lowest player payrolls in the game. Many detractors of Peterson will point to the fact that he had talented pitchers and that anyone could do well with Hudson, Mulder, and Zito. While those pitchers are quite talented, they have not had the same level of success after they parted with Peterson while Hudson and Mulder have both had major surgery. Additionally, Peterson had pitchers such as Gil Heredia, Billy Taylor, Jason Isringhausen, Jeff Tam, Corey Lidle, and Billy Koch have career years while also staying healthy. His attention to biomechanics helped the pitchers stay healthy. His mental

approach helped those that he worked with stay focused while his teaching helped prepare pitchers to succeed. It cannot be coincidence that the majority of Oakland A's pitchers, youngsters or journeymen, had career seasons under Peterson.

"I was very fortunate to be in Oakland. Billy (Beane) had a sabermetric program for pitching. We looked at data to help call games, how to approach certain hitters. He believed in using the lab to help prevent injuries."

Because of the reliance on data and forward thinking, the A's were annual pennant contenders while having one of the smallest payrolls in the game.

Moneyball to the Mets

Before the 2003 season, Rick was hired by the New York Mets to essentially build the pitching program he employed in Oakland. Mets' management was completely in awe of Peterson during the interview.

"I came to the interview and pulled out the charts from Oakland. Everyone in the room was simply amazed. The Mets had nothing like it in place. In fact, that whole first year was basically spent telling the tech people how to collect the data, format the reports, and what we were actually looking for. Jim Duquette and I really built the pitching and research program."

Duquette, the General Manager of the Mets at the time, states that this was one of the main reasons for bringing Peterson to the organization. "The statistical and research department was quite lacking when I first took over as General Manager. It was one of my top priorities and a big reason for wanting to bring Rick to New York. When he came with his system, it galvanized our approach as an organization," explains Duquette.

The Mets' ownership was intrigued with the Moneyball concept. Duquette explains, "I read the book and thought it had value. I told Mr. Wilpon about it and he felt it was important enough to examine it. We had meetings in which we examined the strengths as well as the myths of it. Art Howe was not portrayed well or accurately for that matter, in the book. He was our manager at the time so it was a bit uncomfortable. But, the principles of running an organization were important to look closely at."

However, the idea was quite misunderstood by ownership and other personnel. Once, Peterson was approached by Fred Wilpon, who expressed excitement about his pitching program because the team could pay for the best players to do “all of this stuff”. Obviously, Peterson disagreed stating that the Mets didn’t need the best players, but that they simply needed players “who could do this stuff”. It seemed that the Mets were so far behind in the use of objective analysis that they resorted to buying copies of Moneyball and insisting that each employee write some sort of book report. Duquette and Peterson helped change the statistical analysis culture for the Mets organization.

With Peterson’s approach, the Mets saw their pitching staff perform at an elite level. By 2005, the Mets ranked in the top five in every major statistical category. In just two short seasons, he took a group of older pitchers mixed with young, inexperienced players and molded them into a playoff caliber staff. Still need some proof as to the quality of Peterson’s work in New York? The 2006 pitching staff had two late season additions, John Maine and Oliver Perez. Both were essentially “throw-in” type players in trades. Maine was an inexperienced pitcher who came to New York with a career ERA over 7 in 43.2 Major League innings. Instantly, he and Peterson found some flaws which led to a six win, 3.60 ERA finish to the season. In 2007, Maine would have a career season, winning 15 games, posting a 3.91 ERA, 3.5 walks per nine innings, and 8.7 strikeouts per nine innings. Since Peterson’s departure, Maine has walked more, struck out less, and has had trouble staying healthy. Oliver Perez is the prime example of the Peterson’s invaluable work as a Pitching Coach. He came to the Mets with a 6.63 ERA. After a winter of working (and a nice playoff appearance), Perez enjoyed his career season in 2007 by winning 15 games, a stellar 3.56 ERA, 4 walks per nine innings and 8.8 strikeouts per nine innings. Perez had a slow start to 2008, but he hasn’t reached the level of 2007 since Peterson was fired by the Mets (seemingly for the sake of making a change). The change in performance, especially Perez, is quite clear. Rick Peterson’s methods work.

Finally, 3P Sports

Essentially, everything that has happened in Rick’s professional life has led him to this point. 3P

Sports is finally a reality after 30 years of experience and actual results. “3P Sports has always been in my head. The program benefits young pitchers because it is the actually program I use with major leaguers that allows a pitcher to perform at his optimum level, keeps him healthy, and prepares him for the mental side of the game. The 3P Sports pitching program has been used for 11 seasons at the Major League level”, states Peterson. That program has led to incredible pitching success. Now, amateur pitchers have the opportunity for an individualized training program that has over 30 years of research behind it. Utilizing a web based application, an amateur pitcher will have access to age appropriate programs to guide them through their training process as well as address the other two areas of the Peak Performance Triangle (skills and competencies and performance based behaviors).

As mentioned, the 3P Sports pitching program is based on Peterson’s Peak Performance Triangle. First on the triangle are the skills and competencies which are the technical components of a pitch delivery in order for a pitcher to achieve the proper delivery for a high level of success. The triangle also incorporates physical behaviors such as the necessary conditioning. Lastly, performance-based behaviors balance the physical with the inner game of mind control that manage all external actions. At the heart of the triangle (and program) is the biomechanical analysis.

A biomechanical analysis involves filming a pitcher while a computer records every movement of his delivery. With the recording, the computer will analyze a pitcher’s delivery compared to the elite pitchers in the computer system. Peterson has brought over 80 pitchers during his 11 years as a major league pitching coach.

“As Dr. Andrews says, it is the best prehab program out there. With the analysis, the pitcher will now have knowledge of any ‘red flags’ or ‘yellow flags’ in his delivery. Red flags are any movements in a delivery that will lead to a high probability of injury. Yellow flags are less critical, but over time, those movements can lead to injury,” states Peterson. If an amateur pitcher is armed with the knowledge that something in his delivery is causing or can cause injury, he is less likely to be injured.

3P Sports is now a reality and a company with a mission. “Going back to the mid-90’s, I knew it would make a difference in people’s lives. I just wasn’t sure how it would start. I needed the technology and the business people. But, I always knew that I had something. As fate would have it, I would find the business people in Steve DeAngelo and Scott Zahn. Then, my team of baseball experts all signed on—Jim Duqette, Al Leiter, Tom Glavine, Jeff Mangold, Dr. Harvey Dorfman, Dr. James Andrews, and Dr. Glen Fleisig. No other team can make this type of a difference when it comes to keeping pitchers performing at an optimum level and healthy. Our

goal is to bridge the gap between potential and peak performance."

With over 30 years of research including both scientific and on-field results, Rick Peterson and 3P Sports is providing the amateur pitcher with the tools for success and, more importantly, health. Peterson has a motto that governs his actions every day. He states, "It's the privilege of a lifetime to make a difference in people's lives." He believes that 3P Sports can make a difference in the lives of young pitchers, just as it has with professional pitchers. Judging from his professional record, he is correct.

For more information on the 3P Sports Program, visit www.3psports.com

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Gary Armida is a contributor to The Biz of Baseball. He is the former Owner and Executive Editor of FullCountpitch.com. Currently, he works as a freelance writer contributing to The Biz of Baseball and New York Baseball Digest. To read more of his work or to contact him, visit his personal website, garyarmida.com .

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