

How2Focus: The Pitchers Zone

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Introduction

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consistently effective pitch command is more dependent upon focus acuteness than solely on physical superiority.

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Focus failure directly results in poor pitch command, pitches that are hittable or that are balls.

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However, the decline in pitch mechanics is often preceded by focus failure.

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Expected benefits from your Personal Focusing Plan include:

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Helping you stay focused with a consistent progression of focus from the moment you step on the rubber until the moment you release the ball from your fingertips. You will learn how to repeat this focus sequence despite frustration, bad calls, bad defense, rapid change, distractions, stress, and surprises. • Helping you persevere and overcome adversity, to conquer pressure and unexpected events, to be totally self-reliant, and be able to overcome the fears of failure or success. • Helping your ability to make quality decisions, to remain calm, to perform at a critical moment as you see and

think clearly under all circumstances. • Helping you develop superior focus so your body will remain relaxed, maintain a sense of rhythm, and keep your fine muscle coordination as you lock on a specific target. • Helping you increase the amount of time you pitch “In the Zone.” You will gain an ability to recover rapidly when out of the zone and know how to get back to your high level of performance. • Helping you to thoroughly prepare visually and mentally so that you can concentrate on one or more key mechanics in the bullpen. You will then be able to shift to a state of mind on the mound that is 100 percent focused on throwing a high- quality pitch through a specific target. • Putting you in control and allowing you to have a composed, clearheaded response to varying demands that occur when you pitch. It removes the uncomfortable and sometimes disastrous position of being at the mercy of what is happening around you. • Helping you learn how to control your concentration so you have the ability to stay consistently focused one pitch at a time.

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Chapter 1

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the most powerful pitcher’s skills are intention and attention, followed by a proactive action. T

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Pitch command is the ability to locate a pitch whenever you need to, wherever you need to. It is a byproduct of focus acuteness.

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Focus acuteness is a result of identification and commitment to a specific task at hand and subsequently following a sequence of visual focus progression repeatedly. The ideal task at hand is one of pitching a quality pitch to a

specific target. It occurs when you follow your eyes and allow your eyes to lead your brain and your body.

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With that kind of acute focus, you don't feel your body, you don't think about anything, and you don't hear anything. It is just like Kevin Costner said in For Love of the Game: You "Clear the mechanism" or perhaps better said, "As a result of your focus, the mechanism has been cleared."

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You can't locate a pitch, have pitch command, or exhibit pitching brilliance without focus acuteness. And you can't have focus acuteness if you are lost in thought, worrying about your body, or pitching unaware of what you see.

Chapter 2

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Centering is about actively processing the available and relevant information radiating from the target that is part of your task at hand. It's a proactive action that you can direct and control, and it produces a focused feeling like all of your energy is directed toward your intended target.

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I want you to attempt to see the last 10-15 feet of your pitch before you pitch it."

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“Could you throw that pitch?” “Sure, I think I can,” he responded. “Okay. Picture and feel yourself doing it, then center on your desired target and let it go.”

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The key was to be able to repeat it.

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Are you really prepared to go? Are you in touch with your rhythm? Do you have a sense of the right feel of each pitch as it comes out of your hand? Do you know what part of your pitch mechanics you need to work on?”

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“Here’s something to consider: In the 15-20 minutes before you go to the pen, sit down and look out about 60 feet at a make-believe catcher.” I paused, recognizing this was starting to sound a little strange. I then added, “From there, feel your complete pitching motion produce a high-quality pitch. Feel the ball release from your fingertips and see it bust the catcher’s glove as it has good life.”

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do it again, but I want you to remember how it is to get the catcher’s sign, feel the flow of energy through your body whether you are in the windup or stretch, feel the release of a great fastball. Then see the last 15 or so of the trajectory of the pitch and its attacking the glove.”

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not only can you do that before going to the pen, but you can also do it with your second and third pitches. Let’s try it again with your change-up. Remember to feel that energy building up in your body as you go through your stretch or windup as well as the proper release. Then see the last 15 feet of the pitch as it slows down and breaks downward.”

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perhaps about 30 minutes before going to the bullpen to get ready for the game, I want you to sit down on a stool about 60 feet away.” I could tell he was listening. “Now, initially look at yourself on the mound. Look at yourself as if you were the hitter. See yourself in the uniform you will wear tomorrow.” I paused. “And then see yourself pitching a high-quality pitch to a specific target—actually a great fastball—

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and notice your demeanor, rhythm, tempo and, of course, the complete throwing action including your follow-through.”

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“After seeing the same great actions two to three times, now let’s look at the same throwing action from three or four different directions. For example, see yourself pitching as if you were watching from the third base coaching box.” I paused and waited. I added, “Now, see the same pitching action, same demeanor, same rhythm and timing, from the first base coaching box.” He was into it. I then said, “So now, let’s see the same pitching action from a centerfield camera point of view.” I waited another moment and said, “Now this one will seem a little strange, but let’s do the same exact thing from the view of a helicopter. Yes, imagine a helicopter hovering over the field, looking down and seeing you from directly above.

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you need to do the same picturing of pitching that same fastball from the stretch.” I paused to make sure he was listening. After I could tell he was thinking, I slowly added, “And then do the same, in the windup and the stretch, with all of your pitches. Do the same with your slider, then with your change-up, and then with your curveball.”

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“Prior to going to the pen to get ready for a game, go through about 10-15 pitches in this same manner. Do it by observing your windup and by observing your stretch. Remember, rhythm

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I paused. “Knowing who your catcher is, picture him about 60 feet away. Knowing the opposing team’s lineup, feel your pitching motion and then the proper release of a high-quality pitch to a target.” I paused again. “You should make a decision on your pitch, and then see and feel it, then feel your pitching motion that is going to produce that pitch. As you feel the energy go through your body, sense it being released from your fingers to the ball and then see the pitch again as if it were even more real.”

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this plan takes a lot of mental energy. If you are going to use it, it is important that you relax as much as possible the day of the game. Don’t waste your energy on being too wound up or too tense.”

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“As you feel and see your high-quality pitches, I want you to feel yourself get in the stretch and realize you have to deal with men in scoring positio

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I then added, “Additionally, it’s helpful to sense a degree of upset for the adversity that you are experiencing. Perhaps it is bad calls by the umpire, some fielding errors or some chink hits. Without getting mad, get committed to even a greater degree on pitching a quality pitch through your intended target.”

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think of focus first and then go to a mechanical adjustment, only if necessary. If you are starting to lose it a little bit, stop, take a deep breath, clear your mind, relax for a few moments and then commit to a more attentive focus on your task at hand. Ninety-nine times out of 100, you will be back in synch, and you won't have to tinker with your mechanics."

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"Mark, this is based on the fact that when you switch your eyes rapidly from one point to another, you can't process a conscious thought in your brain." I went on, "So I suggest you look at one of the catcher's knee guards and then switch your eyes quickly to the other knee guard. Repeat that for three complete cycles and then switch your eyes directly to the catcher's glove." "So I don't have to stare at the glove?" he inquired. "No, to the contrary. Staring results in thinking and you can lose your focus quickly," I clarified.

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what in your mind was your task at hand?"

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pitch a high-quality pitch through a specific target. It was that simple. And it sure did work."

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"So when you got into the major leagues, what was your task at hand?"

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"Mark, you have to start thinking in terms of controlling what you can control. You can only control your approach. You can't control your results. Commit to focusing on your task at hand. In this manner, you will control yourself, which is all you can control."

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prior to throwing, I actively pictured my proper throwing action. Later I did a lot of mental bullpens before being able to do physical bullpens,” he shared. “Doing that, long before I could physically do it, helped me regain my pitching skills more rapidly.” “Did it really help?” I asked curiously. “Absolutely,” he said vigorously. “It made a big difference in my recovery.”

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use my eyes to clear my mind. Additionally, learning how to see my pitching action from multiple viewpoints, particularly a helicopter viewpoint, was a great benefit.”

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‘Picture and feel doing it, and then pitch it through a specific target

Chapter 3

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soft center occurred when he was focused on a larger area.

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think when I am pitching well I am in a fine center, but too often I’ve allowed myself to fall into a soft center. I am sure more than half the time I am in a soft center. I see everything and my pitches tend to go all over the place. For certain, I lose my pitch command when I am soft-centered.”

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Notice you went from a soft center to a fine center when you found the 23. But then you let it go back to a soft center and forgot all the other information I had requested you were to find. As you couldn't find the 23, you got further committed to finding it, but at the cost of remembering the other things you were supposed to do." "It was surprisingly difficult," he mused.

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"If you soft center internally in your body, you may have a sense of a part of your body or your entire pitching motion. If so, you will have a soft visual center on where you are pitching the ball. You'll have a general idea of where you want to throw it, but not a specific target."

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in the game, you want to learn to totally trust your body's actions and not center upon them. At the moment of release of the pitch you want to be fine-centered externally on a specific target you can see."

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I want you to feel how the floor feels under your feet, I want you to feel your shoulder, think about whatever you are thinking about." I let him do those things for a few moments.

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"Now you are looking at the electrical outlet, but are you fine-centered on it?" I asked.

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"Not at all. I have been thinking about my feet, my shoulder, and my thoughts."

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So now, I want you to recall what a good slider looks like. I also want you to remember what it feels like.” I paused, “Now, I want you to feel your body the way it feels when you pitch a slider and then see what you typically see of the trajectory of the pitch going through your target. Just see what you usually see.”

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develop the habit of not pitching a pitch without feeling your body pitch it, and seeing the pitch go directly to your specific target.”

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Step off the rubber and look midway down the catcher’s left knee guard. Now, picture a tight spinning curve breaking down to that spot on the knee guard.” Then I added, “Do it two or three times.” He nodded that he had done so and I asked, “What do you think?”

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“The best feel is a flow. It’s energy flowing through your body.”

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“Without a personal focus plan, Paul, you are just leaving everything to chance. One day you will do it one way and on another day you will likely do it differently.”

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you should have a personal focus plan for the days you pitch in the bullpen, in the clubhouse on days that you pitch, in the bullpen as you warm up, on the mound, between hitters, between innings, and in your after-game review.”

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good plan puts you in control and allows you to have a composed, clearheaded response to varying demands that occur when you pitch. It can provide you a simplified method for implementing and applying your skills in

any and all situations. It can remove the uncomfortable and sometimes disastrous position of being at the mercy of what is happening around you.”

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“It is a dynamic guide and is not a static, fixed rulebook. It is flexible so that you can respond to changes with little effort. You will find that you can just allow your actions to happen.”

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remember to do this slowly enough that you can decide on the pitch you want to pitch, feel the flow of energy through your body pitching that pitch, see the pitch produced by that great flow of energy, and see it go through your target.”

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Cover everything that is possible but be realistic. You should prepare for everything that can happen so there are no surprises.”

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look out at the intended endpoint of your pitches and then see the intended pitch come backward about 15 feet or so.”

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“You don’t need to do this all the time. But it is a good idea to do it in the bullpen until you gain the feel you are looking for. You can also do it with your last two to three warmup pitches between innings.

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When you throw in the bullpen, with your eyes I want you to draw a line on the ground to your intended target. You just need to do it for about 10-15 feet. So

look out on the ground (you will see your catcher in your peripheral vision), find a spot, and just trace a line to your target.” He looked at me with a rather curious look. “That will keep you in a fine center, out of your body and unaware of your surroundings. From there get your sign, take the time to feel and picture your pitch, and let it go.”

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if you sense you aren’t focused, if you sense a negative thought, quickly look at your catcher’s left knee guard and quickly make three cycles to his right knee guard, back to the left and so on. When you finish, look right at the catcher’s sign and start your routine.” He thought some more. I could tell he wasn’t sure this would work for him.

Chapter 4

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I did not ask Steve any questions about what had occurred in the last couple of years. My questions were about his approach to throwing a quality pitch in the World Series and the following year.

Chapter 6

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“Often hitters are like a driver driving down the highway. They look like they are looking. They look like they are paying attention, but they don’t see what is directly in front of them. They end up sort of seeing the pitch 15-20 feet after the ball is released. And, even at that, they often spin out and miss seeing the last 5-10 feet of a pitch.”

Chapter 7

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first step is to Analyze. It is important that you take a moment to see, feel and think about the upcoming shot.

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analyze quickly and move on to the next step. Do not continue to analyze.”

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second step is to Visualize what you plan your intended result to be. See it and feel yourself producing that result.

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the third step is to Center on the task at hand. It's really a sequence of centering from the begging moment to the time to execute your shot. It includes 100 percent attention on the back of the ball at the moment of hitting it.”

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next step is to EXecute. You execute by letting it happen and not making it happen.”

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To get proficient and get benefit from the AVCEX Loop, I want you to begin the habit of doing a complete replay of what you just did. Do it after each shot.”

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“The four steps Boyd felt a fighter pilot should use were to Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. He called it the OODA Loop.”

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OODA loop was developed to assure fast, accurate and repeatable performance actions.”

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You execute by letting it happen and not making it happen.”

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To really get proficient and get the benefit from AVCEX Loop or the OODA Loop, I suggest you begin the habit of doing a complete replay of what you just did. Do it after each shot. In other words, you AVCEX, you hit your shot or putt, and then you review just how you analyzed, visualized, centered, and executed. Your replay is going to tell you exactly what you did. At times, you will find that your centering slipped. At other times, you will find the right pattern, the right sequence, and be happy with the result. Within time you will be able to repeat the proper formula, your AVCEX Loop formula, to hit consistent high-quality shots.”

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begin writing down the elements that they thought they each could use in their own Personal Focusing Plan. I encouraged them by stating, “It is a plan that will be unique to each of you and will evolve over time as a result of your own experiences. “In a few days we will get together and go over various elements you may want to use,” I added.

Chapter 8

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your eyes and your brain-based vision can slow down what you see. Once things look slow, your brain relaxes, and based on your level of arousal you will fall in the zone.

Chapter 9

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“Your task at hand is always to throw a quality pitch to a specific target.”

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When you are focused inside your body, you are either highly aware of how a part or all of your body feels or highly aware of a thought. It is possible you could be highly aware of a series of thoughts, running through your mind.”

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“When you are focused externally, outside your body, your vision, your mind and your body are relegated to subconscious functioning. When you do that, there are few, if any, thoughts in your mind.”

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“What happens when someone asks you, ‘What are you doing so differently that’s making your fastball move so well today?’ or ‘What goes through your mind?’” “All kinds of thoughts,” he said as he rolled his eyes.

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“Once you begin thinking about how you are throwing, your streak will invariably end. You will lose your timing and fluidity as you try to repeat what you just thought you were doing.” “I want to pitch ‘out of my mind!’” he said very firmly.

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“Most everything you physically do during the course of a day, your physical body’s actions, are controlled by your subconscious mind. You rarely think about what your fingers, hands, or feet are doing until you go onto the pitching field. Of course, off the field you can get by, even driving a car, without

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much conscious awareness of what you are doing.” I paused and before he could say anything I then added: “But the precision required in pitching performance, and the fact that most actions take place in less than one second, keep conscious performance from being very effective. Because you have pitched for so many years, your subconscious knows what to do. You just have to let it do its thing.”

Chapter 10

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when they had pitched well, there were some intangibles that they had used correctly, but when they struggled, those intangibles had not been used effectively. We talked about such intangibles as target selection, energy control, fine and soft centering, visualizing pitches, visualizing their pitching actions, and committing to a single task at hand.

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like most pitchers you probably analyze, replay and embed in your memory everything you did when you threw a bad pitch,” I stated.

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you throw a great pitch, do you give it an equal opportunity? Do you analyze, replay and embed it in your memory to the degree you do when you throw a bad pitch?” I asked. “No, I can’t say that I do,” he said as he looked directly at me.

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You want to master the ability to embed everything about your great pitches into your memory and become ineffective at implanting memories of poor pitches.”

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you are going to get where you want to be once you can capitalize on your successful pitches and learn to forget your poor pitches quickly.”

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when you want to clear your mind, simply find two targets. It makes no difference what they are, or how far away they are from you,” I instructed. As he looked around, I said,” It can be the toes of your two feet as you look down at the rubber, it can be the two sides of the rubber you are standing upon, it can be the inner edge of each dugout, it can be the two sides of the batter’s eye—whatever you choose is fine.”

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“Simply start by looking at the one on your left and then switch to the right target and back. Repeat that full cycle at least three times.” I could see Pete doing it on the toes of his shoes. When he finished, I said, “What are you thinking about now?” “Nothing, absolutely nothing.” He looked at me with a perplexed expression.

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when you make quick, distinct eye movements, you use a different part of the brain. By doing so, your attention leaves the area of the brain involved in thinking.” I paused. “Quick eye movements give all of us an effective method for thought stoppage.” I also showed him how to focus on what he could currently see so that he was literally focused in the here and now.

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you may have 10 successes in a day and one failure, and as a perfectionist, you may pick up on the failure to dominate your thoughts. The tendency may be to ignore what you do well and exaggerate what you do poorly. If so, you will lose perspective and drown yourself in guilt and remorse. Remorse is okay, but only if it leads to change.”

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have you ever felt like you were throwing the hell out of the ball, and expected your catcher after asking him something like ‘How’s my velocity?’ to agree, but he had a response that surprised you? For example, he might have said something like ‘okay’ and you were disappointed?”“Yeah,” he responded. “That used to happen all the time. It always ticks me off. I look at the guy like ‘do you know what you are talking about?’”“Have you had other times when you thought you weren’t throwing very fast, only to have your catcher tell you something like ‘Your fastball is great today—let’s keep firing it’?” He quickly responded, “Yeah, that has happened too. It never made any sense to me, because it didn’t seem to me I was throwing fast.”

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the difference probably was you were more centered on your glove when you were pitching with greater velocity. When you do that well, there will be less awareness of your body. You may feel like you are doing nothing. But it occurs when your focus is out over home plate and not within your body.”

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if your mind is screaming, ‘Pete, you xxxx...’ If at any time thoughts like these are occupying your mind, your target will appear small and further away.”“You’re right. Sometimes it has seemed that my catcher was 100 feet away,” he agreed.

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The real language of your body is visual information and visual pictures. Talking to yourself only works if it produces a visual image, which then communicates with your body.”

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“When you have pitched your best, literally, you were visually conscious and unconscious mentally and physically. This is a state of mind, a state of

concentration, a state of awareness that you can have on a consistent basis from now on if you prioritize it as important.”

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you need to finish each bullpen session when you pitch with your game face on. It is as if the white lines are painted, and the umpire has said ‘Play Ball.’ You imagine hitters in the box and you use your best pitching focusing loop.”

Chapter 12

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You have to learn how to think in pictures. I will refer to it as visual thinking, picturing, imaging, or visualization. I also want you to remember in pictures, in what we can call visual memory as opposed to verbal memory.”

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“Feel thinking is what you do, but you can get better if your actions are preceded by visual thinking. In fact, visual thinking produces that feel[A18]. You are going to learn that visual thinking will help you gain the feel you need to execute many of your actions.

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“How many of you have been told you need to focus better, that you need to concentrate?”

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“So what happens when you try harder or bear down?”

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“Don’t you tend to tighten up? Doesn’t tension set in and result in you losing your rhythm? When you try too hard, even your mind can begin to race?” Most of the pitchers nodded. Dennis Leonard said, “I have to relax my body to pitch. I’ve tried to try harder, and it just doesn’t work for me.”

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“It is true that when you have the best concentration you aren’t aware of anything else. However, let’s try something. At this moment block out the way your body feels. Block out any fatigue or sleepiness. Block out any background sounds. Block out any thoughts about yellow grizzly bears.” I then paused. Everyone laughed thinking about those yellow grizzly bears. “Did you notice in your effort to block everything out you became more aware of them?” I asked. Everyone nodded and gently shook their head in agreement. I went on, “Blocking out how your body feels, your fatigue, any background sounds, and those yellow grizzly bears just makes you more aware of them. Blocking out simply does not work.”

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“When you don’t pitch well, what are some of the questions you ask yourself?” No one offered anything, so I continued. “I suspect they are something like the following: ‘What’s wrong with me?’ ‘Why is my breaking pitch so inconsistent?’ ‘Do I need to throw harder?’ ‘Am I pushing off enough or falling off properly?’ ‘Am I extending or am I following through?’

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“You need to ask yourself questions that will help you. The right questions can be helpful. Do some of your questions just create a lot of noise and no answers?”

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no matter what the score may be, losing or winning, instructional league, intrasquad game or an in-season game, you have the same task at hand. If you were to move from A Ball through AA, on to AAA and into the major leagues, you still have the same task at hand.”

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“Chasing goals leads to a roller-coaster ride. You feel up when you get it done and plunge downward when you don’t achieve your goals. It can be a terrifying ride.”

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the way you reach your goals is to commit to a very specific and consistent task at hand.”

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‘My task at hand is to pitch a quality pitch through a specific target.’”

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“If you don’t know your task at hand and if you don’t commit to it, there is no way you are going to have the proper focus and concentration.”

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“We are talking about every pitch, no matter what the game’s situation is at the time. We are talking something you can control. If you would commit to throwing a quality pitch to a specific target on every pitch, how effective would you be?”

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“There will be times when things don’t work out as intended. You must ask yourself, ‘Did I make the right decision in selecting the type of quality pitch and

selecting of my intended target?' This is a learning experience and with experience, your decisions will get better and better."

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Syd Thrift spoke up. "Did you fellas hear Dr. Harrison say 'pitch a quality pitch'? He didn't say 'throw a quality pitch.' He also said 'through your intended target' and not 'to your intended target.' Do you understand why he has chosen those words?"

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"Your pitching mechanics are going to break down if you aren't focused correctly," I exclaimed. "Your focus is vital."

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The word is 'centering.' Everyone centers their attention 100 percent of the time. When your centering is solely on your task at hand, you are focused with the proper concentration. Anytime you are centered on something other than your task at hand, you don't have good focus or concentration."

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"Centering is an active effort of directing your energy to a target to process relevant, available information. It isn't about aiming your eyes. It isn't about blocking things out. Centering is about actively processing the available and pertinent information radiating from the target that is part of your task at hand. It's a proactive action that you can direct and control." I took a breather so they could think about it and then added, "Centering produces a focused feeling like all of your energy is directed toward your intended target."

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"When you focus on a small target, we would like for you to think of that as a fine center. A fine center is full attention to a very small target or area. It might be the dark pocket of your catcher's glove, an edge of the catcher's glove, or even a scratch or crevice on his knee guard. It's a little bit of an out-of-body experience. "At other times you may be aiming your eyes toward your catcher,

but seeing or being aware of a much wider area.” I paused. “When you see a large area, that should be thought of as a soft center.”

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training the eyes to access the visual centers in the brain to increase the speed the body reacts or acts. We believe eye-mind-body control is the essence of athletic greatness.

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When I pitched well, I could see the trajectory and the spin of my pitch going to my target. So I guess I did.”

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we think your pitchers should learn it is important to picture what they want and not picture what they want to avoid.”

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“But can’t you perform without picturing?” Chuck countered. “Sure you can, but when you don’t, you’re forced just to react. Everything that will come to mind will be unplanned and most likely inaccurate. Reactive performance sometimes is superb, but too often it can be quite poor.”

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“Ironically, when they talk to themselves, their bodies do not understand words. Telling themselves to take a step or a swing will not make the body do it. Muscles do not hear!” added Bill Lee. “We all tend to use a lot of words. The words must create a detailed, accurate picture to be effective.”

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centering as an active effort of directing your energy to a target to process relevant, available information. It isn’t about aiming your eyes. It isn’t about blocking things out. Centering is about actively processing the available and pertinent information radiating from the target that is part of your task at hand.

It's a proactive action that you can direct and control. An active centering effort produces a focused feeling."

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Since it is physical, 'centering'—unlike 'concentration'—is a process each of you is capable of controlling and learning."

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"Another way to think about your visual centering is to compare yourself with a flashlight. You can be like a flashlight with a very wide, not very bright, beam or you can place a shield over your flashlight with only a small pinhole. The light that comes out of the pinhole will be narrow, but will project further because it is very bright. In a dark room, the wide flashlight allows for a soft center. The pinhole flashlight allows for you to only fine center your attention.

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look in the middle of the chalkboard at an "X" I had written on the board. Then I asked them to think about their bodies. "Think of the heel of your right foot. Now think of the fingers with which you grip a ball." Some had stopped looking at the "X" on the chalkboard and I reminded them to keep looking at the "X"

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I then asked them to think about some of their best pitching performances of the season and followed that by asking that they think about some of their worst pitching performances. Several of the pitchers closed their eyes, some looked up and away from the "X" and a couple had some very slow eye blinks. Then I asked that they listen to all the background sounds in the building. At about that time, a door closed down the hallway. There was also a sound of a radio in an adjoining office. I shuffled my feet. "So guys, I want you to think about how focused you stayed on the 'X' on the board. You started with a fine center, but you naturally went into a soft center. At times you blinked, closed

your eyes, or looked away. But even when you aimed your eyes at the 'X' you did not actually see it. You were rather glazed, and when you were aware of seeing, you saw the entire front of the room." Most everyone nodded. "So how well have you pitched when you were in a soft center?" I asked.

Chapter 13

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'soft center,' which is what you normally do so that you take in a wide picture. And we also talked about having a 'fine center' in which your focus is pinpointed."

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"Whenever you are thinking about anything, good or bad, you are in a soft visual center." I paused.

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"When you work on mechanics or get involved in thought, even if positive thoughts, you are in a soft visual center." Tom Linnert, a Baseball Academy pitcher, said, "This idea of soft centering and fine centering helps me understand why sometimes I have a lousy bullpen session and then get into the game and pitch effectively. I think when I get on the mound in a game, I actually get better focused."

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when you pitch without a pinpoint focus you are practicing, training and developing the ability to soft center? This is what commonly happens when you go to the bullpen and work on your mechanics."

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there is a time you should just be focusing on mechanics, but you also need to work on the rhythm and tempo you will use in a game, focus the same way you will do in a game." A young Baseball Academy pitcher offered this: "I have often wondered why I often can't get past the first inning. And if I do, I pitch

much better. I think a lot of times in my first inning my thoughts are all over the place. I'm usually worrying about my mechanics. If I can make it through first inning, a lot of times I sort of settle down and then I do as you say—I 'fine center' on the glove."

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"You should now be thinking, so what? "Here's the so what. Look at that 'X' on the chalkboard and think about how big it appears. How clear are the chalk marks? Notice how the two lines that make the 'X' are not equal lengths, nor are they equal widths. There is a very slight difference in each line." I could tell they were rather puzzled. "Notice that when you looked at the 'X' with such intent to see the details, you were not aware of your body, you were not thinking, and you had such a narrow visual focus that you were not aware of anything else. This is what we call a fine visual center."

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"Your attention was on a very small area, and you were not aware of anything else. That's when you are fine centering. Does that make sense?" They were nodding.

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"You were all an infant once and when you were, you were pretty adept at learning. As an infant, you were willing to fail, but often didn't give up until you got what you wanted.

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"Yes, your actions were usually stimulated by desire, or at least by interest. That desire frequently was associated with the desire to touch, to taste, or see better." I could see they were thinking a bit and I added, "We were all an infant once. Though we likely can't remember what we did, check infants out." I watched the pitchers looking at each other as if they were thinking, "Where is this guy going?" I continued. "When infants start attempting to sit up, they

don't quit if they fall over. They do accept a helping hand and then continue striving to sit up until fatigue sets in. Once fatigue does set in, infants seize the opportunity to lie down and relax. The same quest for success follows with crawling, climbing up and walking."

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common stage of blissful ignorance before learning begins. This stage is like not knowing how to drive a car, ride a bike, throw a ball or swing a bat, yet not having any concern that your technique is not correct. Burch labeled this happy yet incapable stage as 'unconscious incompetence.'"

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"Likely at this stage, one's focus or centering is all over the place. There is not a consistent focus progression or loop." I said that setting them up for a better understanding later.

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"This is the most difficult stage, where learning begins, but usually you experience a lot of upset. Maslow labeled this awareness, yet incapable, stage as 'unconscious incompetence.'"

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"So the baby looks at his shoes and gets his hands on his lace-up shoes and consciously begins to tie his shoes. You might finally get in a car, on your bike, with a ball in your hand or a bat in your hands, and decide you are going to 'just do it.' The baby and you are very determined you are going to try extra hard to get your goal accomplished. It is a very self-conscious and awkward stage, as you and the baby are very aware of every next move you are going to make. You are very conscious of what you are doing. Often the timing is off and the coordination of the body's actions is less than perfect. At this stage, you may feel somewhat better, but still not be very smooth or fluid in doing your desired actions. There is often a feeling of awkwardness, as you need to continually think carefully about what you are going to do next. And, even when your actions are done correctly, because you are so conscious of your

body you likely don't do the action as fast as is desired. Maslow labeled this somewhat capable stage as 'conscious competence.' "Conscious competence occurs typically when focused internally, to some degree, but not as intently as in the unconscious incompetence state," I added.

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fourth state is where we are going to get. Yes, your performance is automatic, as you don't have to think about it and proceed to do it properly. You do it smoothly and rapidly. Maslow labeled this somewhat capable stage as 'unconscious competence.' And it usually occurs when the eyes are fine focused on a specific target."

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"But you can't do it with your eyes closed or while wearing a blindfold. Your eyes are a big part of your performance, and they are a big part of your learning process. "Even at the unconscious incompetence stage the motivation to do something is often because you see others doing it. And as your motivation pushes you into the conscious incompetence stage, you begin to see that you are doing it right or reaching your goal. As you move to the conscious competence stage, you likely observe that even though you are conscious of doing it, you see you didn't succeed. You just weren't fast enough. But finally, as you move into the unconscious competent stage, you use your eyes to focus on the appropriate target. As a result of pinpointed visual focus, your performance becomes an out-of-body experience."

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"The effect is that it will appear to you that the actions slow down, and the glove looks larger. You are highly visual and your body performs freely, naturally and rapidly. You have entered into the visual flow that takes you to the zone."

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"It helps to repeat your visual memory over and over again." And again, I was setting up for insights I would expand upon later.

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“If you are in a soft center at the time of pitch release, your equilibrium will likely be compromised and your body will get tighter. The resultant tightness in your shoulder and arm makes it very difficult to execute your mechanics correctly. Guys, I’m telling you that fine centering on your specific target is of great importance.”

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a high-quality, accurate, realistic picture that encompasses feel and sight communicates to the motor systems in your brain just what to do. It provides the brain and body a program to follow.”

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Chuck nodded, and Syd added, “If their task at hand is mechanics in the bullpen, let’s not be concerned about the results of the pitch. The focus should be only whether they center correctly on the mechanical thing you want them to work on.

SlowTheGameDown’s Player Performance Enhancement Program

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“Every pitch, play, and action should begin with what a player sees, and every play and every action should end with what a player visually focuses upon.”

How2Focus: The Hitters Zone

Harrison, Bill; Harrison, Ryan

Chapter 1

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It was my visual discipline, not super eyesight.

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He uniquely had superior visual discipline. Visual discipline is a key, and this is an area where I want each of you to get better. It will give you an edge over other players.”

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“So you agree that as important as the physical and mental sides of the game are, the visual side is also very important?” They each nodded affirmatively. “So we better split that pie up into thirds,” I suggested and they nodded in agreement. “How much time do you spend training the physical side of the game?”

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“Well, let’s take this last season. How often do you think you saw the ball really well?”

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Changing direction, I asked, “So tell me what happens when you are getting ready to hit, and you look down to your coach and he flashes you a take sign?”

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“Did it ever occur that you start reading and then your mind drifts to something else?” I asked. And then I went on, “Is it possible that your eyes are looking at the page, but your focus is elsewhere?” “For sure. And that is exactly why I don’t like to study. It seems like nothing registers,” said Frank.

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I think you are going to find that when you are calm, focused, confident, and in control, your hitting and fielding mechanics will show up.”

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Even when you aren’t concentrating, you are focused on something such as music in your mind, random thoughts, etc.” George said, “I do that all the time.”

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“When you have a visual focus acuteness, vision is the dominant sense. You become fully attentive to a visual flow. It is very unique because what you see, as well as time, seems to slow down. This visual flow allows your subconscious mind to be free to help you. You are in the moment with a clear mind. When you get into this state of mind, you lose yourself in the action, as you are free of self-conscious thoughts and anxiety. It’s also when you are free of awareness of your body parts, distractions, and stress.”

Chapter 2

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I placed four targets on the wall. A small picture of a baseball glove was placed about 18” outward to the left and a small picture of a baseball bat was placed another 18” outward to the right, giving about a 3’ separation. I then placed a small picture of a baseball hat 18” above and a small picture of a baseball shoe about 18” down below, again leaving a 3’ separation from the hat and the shoe. So the targets were of a baseball glove, a baseball bat, a baseball hat, and a baseball shoe.

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I then asked George to simply look at each target as I called them out. I asked that he pause one second before shifting his eyes to that target. I varied the pattern of the targets I called out. My experience was that bad listeners struggled with this simple drill. They were always thinking ahead and didn't listen. But George was a listener, and the drill was easy for him.

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"What occurred is that you lost your centering—you didn't center your full attention on the ball very well. In fact, your centering went to the awareness of what your body was doing." "It sure did," he agreed. I stated, "George, that is the natural tendency. It is a natural reflex. Body awareness disrupts your vision, but it is a reflex you can learn to break. It requires relegating more of your attention to the ball and letting your body instinctively just take care of itself. You have to let go."

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He paused a bit and said, "I dunno" and then proceeded to notice his feet also were just jumping up and down again. "Dang it!" he exclaimed. "The same thing can occur if you are trying to do something physically and you start thinking about something else," I suggested. "It's becoming clearer to me that I don't want to be thinking when I hit," he responded.

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"Doc, it is clear to me that when I don't give 100 percent of my attention on seeing, I don't do as well. For sure when I start thinking about what I want to do, I then do worse. Also, if I am aware of my body, I do badly. I have to learn how to stay visual."

Chapter 3

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his primary thought after every pitch of every at-bat was “How well did I see the ball?” You can learn how to ask that same question and when you aren’t seeing it well to “amp up” your ability to see it as well as possible.

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it is a natural reflex for the eyes to move ahead of what you are doing at any given instant.”“Move ahead?” he asked. “Yes. This natural visual reflex is operative in most of the daily actions. The first thing to realize about taking your eye off the ball is that prior to this act the mind has left the ball. It occurs because the natural reflex is for the eyes to always be looking ahead,” I responded.

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let me review how your eyes usually work for you. When you wake up in the morning and go to the sink, you likely look down, find a washcloth, or perhaps grab a toothbrush or a bar of soap. Once you spot what you are going to grab, you then look away.” I noticed that he nodded in agreement.

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“Even when you open a door, you tend to look at the doorknob, and then look away as you grab it.”“Yeah, I do that all the time.”

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“I suggest you use pregame or pre-practice drills daily to train your brain to overcome this natural reflex. Otherwise, the common things that happen every day ingrain the wrong way. In catching a ball, you should track the ball all the way into your glove. In your normal warmup, you should field ground balls and keep your eyes on the ball in the glove for a second after the ball is secured. In soft toss or batting tee drills, you should hit 20 or more balls, in which case

you do not look up to see where the ball goes. You should do this in batting practice also.”

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“Perhaps your external vision as provided by your eyes can’t see the ball, but your subconscious brain vision will remain focused on it. That is, if you make an effort to see the ball to contact. Otherwise, your eyes will give up on the ball several feet before you want them to, and your brain will lose focus on the ball. Your brain’s continued focus on the ball is more important than seeing the ball clearly.”

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one other benefit is that it makes pitches look slower if you see them early and see them as deep to the glove as possible. If you only catch a glimpse of a pitch, it makes it look super-fast. By seeing the entire pitch, you literally slow the ball down.”“Now that makes even more sense.”“So George, let me ask you. When you hit a ball in a game, do you know where it goes?” George thought, “Yeah, I think I do most of the time.”“So why do you need to look up as you hit the ball?” I inquired.

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track the pitch to the glove with the eyes only. In other words, head movement should be minimized. This allows for having a more relaxed neck, and also more relaxed and better functioning eye muscles.

Chapter 4

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“Replay a failure once. Attempt to learn as much from that failure as you possibly can. And then forget it. Don’t dwell on the negatives. What you did is over and gone. The present is all that matters. Wipe the chalkboard clean before you go out there.”

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When you preplay what you want to happen in any situation, you will know in advance what to pay attention to and how to react. When you don’t preplay, you’re forced to react. Everything that will come to follow will be unplanned and most likely inaccurate.”

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“Preplaying is simply thinking through your performance before it happens by seeing your performance from beginning to end as you expect it to unfold. With this, you can literally see, hear, feel and sometimes smell and taste your actions in your mind before you play or act.”

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your body responds best to preplay. It is a method of internally communicating directly to your mind and body and preparing it for action. And, believe it or not, preplay requires a lot less time than talking your way through an event does.”

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“Always remember, with a visual picture you act. Without a visual picture, you react.”

Chapter 5

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Everyone is expected to perform, but nowhere are they taught how to perform. It isn't taught in school. It isn't discussed in books. It is just an expectation."

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"I want you to remember when you played really well. Think about some of the best fielding plays you have ever made." I paused and then said, "What do you remember?" Wohlford thought for a moment and replied, "Gosh, I don't remember very much." "You were probably totally unaware of your body, free of thought, had a peak level of concentration, and time appeared as if it had slowed down," I stated.

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"What else do you remember?" I asked. George thought about it. "Well, I recall everything looked as if it were in slow motion." And then he thought further. "The ball looked like a big beach ball slowly rotating as it came toward me," he said as he made his hands act as if they were holding a big ball. I didn't say anything, and then George added, "I can remember that happening when I made plays in the field. And I certainly can remember it happening a few times as a hitter." "So everything looked larger, clearer, slower, and brighter than normal?" I offered. "Is it safe to say you were highly visual?" "Yes, you are right. The ball seemed larger, clearer, slower, and brighter than before," George enthusiastically responded.

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seeing things in slower speed is normal; that is when you are centering your visual attention more completely on the task at hand. Most of the time you don't do that and the apparent speed starts racing."

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"If you see less than the full path, as everyone does, the visual centers in your brain just moved on. But the brain fills in the gap of what you didn't actually see," I pointed out.

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“So if a pitch travels 60 feet, you have the potential to see 60 feet. But because you don’t see the ball early, don’t follow it effectively, or see it late, you may miss the first 10 feet or the last 10 feet. The ball seems as if it is going faster than it really is.”

Highlight (orange) - Page 77

“That’s what occurs when, even against your will, you follow your coach’s sign to take the pitch. You stop thinking or feeling your body, and invariably

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the ball looks slower and more hittable.”

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“The first step is analyze. It is important that you take a moment to see, feel, and think about the upcoming shot.

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analyze quickly and move on to the next step. Do not continue to anal-ize.”

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“The second step is to visualize what you plan your intended result to be. See it and feel yourself producing that result. F

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I picture not making a mistake. And when I picture it, that is what happens.”

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the third step is you center on the task at hand. It’s really a sequence of centering from the beginning moment to the time to execute your shot. It

includes getting focused 100 percent on the back of the ball at the time of hitting it.”

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next step is to execute. You execute by letting it happen and not making it happen.”

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Analyze, Visualize, Center and Execute—if we take the first letter of each word, we end up with an acronym that says AVCEX. You need to AVCEX

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begin the habit of doing a complete replay of what you just did... after each shot. In other words, you AVCEX, you hit your shot or putt, and then you review just how you analyzed, visualized, centered and executed. Your replay is going to tell you exactly what you did. At times, you will find that your centering slipped. At other times, you will find the right pattern, the right sequence and be happy with the result.

Chapter 6

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We introduced the idea of looking at the pitcher’s release and then switching their eyes directly to the point of expected contact. This eye switch allowed the eyes to be a little more acute, cleared the mind from thinking, and the overall effect was to make the action appear slower. As minor a factor as this can appear to an observer, the players immediately noticed that they started moving toward the ball a little quicker.

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They were encouraged to look for a portion of the ball as opposed to the entire ball. They learned that by looking at the bottom of the ball, their body

tended to stay lower, as it should. They also found that when they looked for the outside of the ball on a ball they had to run after, they extended their reach further and caught more balls securely

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look at certain points in their surroundings and to tell me how far away they were from the point. I required that they tell me the number of steps it would take for them to walk to the point. After they had made a verbal estimate, I asked that they actually walk to where they were looking and to count their steps. At the very beginning, most players underestimated how far it was. They were surprised to be off as much as they tended to be.

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When they are on a visitor's field, I encourage pitchers to go to the ballpark midday and out to the mound to become familiar with the view surrounding home plate.

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I also encourage hitters to go; even if they stand behind the tarp covering home plate, it gives them an opportunity to take in the view. After taking in the view, I ask them to look away or close their eyes and recreate the scene. Usually, they find their personal image of the scene gets better after three or four looks and comparisons. At game time, they find this helps them lock into their job or task of just seeing the ball. After getting comfortable at home plate, we ask that they go out to their expected defensive positions and do the same. This pre-game preparation idea is well received by players who want to give 100 percent to playing the game.

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“Verbal thinking is how students are taught to think. It is what they are tested on. Visual thinking is how athletes need to learn to think. When tested under

the pressure of game time, it is visual thinking that allows you to perform at your best.”

Chapter 7

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One of the greatest and most productive hitters in recent years, soon to be inducted into Baseball’s Hall of Fame, just said that he knew very little about hitting mechanics.” And then I thought further. “And he basically said that to become a good hitter you learn from immersion. You do it a lot. And then you rely on your eyes to help you see the ball well.”

Chapter 8

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various ways to keep his mind clear and free of thought as he was waiting for the pitcher to go into his pitching motion. We settled on the method of looking at the middle part within the 6 of the 360 on the left center field fence and at the pitcher’s head. Barry switched his eyes back and forth at the same speed and rhythm of his lower body movements. Everything was in synchrony. He got everything in rhythm by using his eyes. His eyes, his brain, and his body all worked together.

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He allowed the pitcher to go into his motion, and then as the pitcher took the ball from his glove, Barry switched his eyes to the exact release point just prior to the ball appearing.

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that could help him develop better eyes. One

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idea was for him to get into his left-handed hitting position and catch pitched balls with a glove on his left hand.

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developed a very vivid sense of a small window a few feet out of the pitcher's hand that the ball had to pass through. If the ball wasn't coming through that small window, Barry would take the pitch.

Chapter 9

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switching the eyes from the pitcher to the inside contact point, back out to the pitcher, then to the outside contact point, keeps you from thinking. These eye movements clear your mind and put you on automatic pilot.

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while I was in the zone, I moved beyond the completion aspect of hitting. Absorbed in the act, it no longer mattered what team I was playing against or who was on the mound. There was only this: The ball came at me in slow motion, and I hit it."

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four or five days into it something changed. I began to enjoy it. After the first 15 or so swings, my mind would quiet and the swings would start to feel more fluid. I began to enjoy the 20-30 minutes I spent at the tee every day, even developing a routine of moving the tee to different places in the strike zone. I would visualize game situations and pretend I was facing all of the pitchers that I was currently being forced to merely watch from the distance of my seat

in the dugout. I began to notice the sound of the ball swishing against the back net, like a perfectly shot basketball. I even made a ritual of placing the ball on the tee the same way every time. My breathing became rhythmic: inhaling as I put the ball on the tee, holding my breath as I got in my stance, and exhaling as I took my swing. What was happening here? My tee work had started out as a form of punishment, yet suddenly it felt like something else, something more than just a hitting exercise.

Chapter 10

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Jason learned that he didn't need to take much batting practice. He wanted to hit five to six balls really hard and didn't care if it was indoor drills or on-the-field batting practice. After that, he put all of his time and attention on visualizing the various pitches the starting pitcher can throw. And he also pictured his reactions to those pitches. In most cases he practiced in his mind taking the pitches he didn't want to swing at.

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"I know what the curveball looks like. It appears to go upward as the pitcher releases it. It's the only pitch that does that." I responded, "Jeremy, you are absolutely correct. Seeing that slight change in trajectory allows you to see the curveball sooner than waiting to see the type of spin that every curveball has. Of course, once you see that curveball trajectory, you need to look for the spin rate and spin direction to project what the curveball is going to do."

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"When you use your eyes properly, you are going to slow the ball down. It will appear to be in slow motion. When that happens, your mind and body go on

automatic pilot, and they will perform better than ever. It will seem as though you are not thinking, and you won't feel your body until afterward."

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"If you don't make seeing the ball your #1 priority, you aren't going to be very good at it. And as you've noticed, you won't even be aware of not seeing the ball."

Chapter 11

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"Much of it had to do with handling distractions on the field, gaining a deep focus defensively and offensively, and the ability to slow the ball down."

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would get better with daily work. But I also urged him to do most of his training when he was physically and mentally tired, after a workout.

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if he hadn't learned what we initially developed

Chapter 12

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that 80-90 percent of physical reactions were preceded by a visual cue that triggered those actions. Furthermore, I told him that most physical mistakes and errors were commonly preceded by a visual breakdown on tracking the ball.

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every play and every action should begin with what you see. Furthermore, every play and every action should end with what you see!”

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you want to follow the sequence of picturing the ball, seeing it, and then hitting it. Usually, when you don’t hit it, the reason is that you didn’t picture the right thing in advance or didn’t see the ball properly.”

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“You need to take a lot of batting practice or swing off the tee so you get to the point that you know what a good swing feels like. And so you can make corrections without dependency on your coach.”

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“When you go into a game, all you can do is think about seeing the ball and hitting it. You won’t have time to think about your mechanics.”

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“You must clear your mind once you step into the batter’s box

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if you are lost in thought, your reaction time on defense is slower if the ball is hit toward you.”

Highlight (yellow) - Page 124

A thought at the time the pitch is released will result in a slow bat.”

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tension deteriorates your ability to see, to think, to control your body's physical actions. Under tension, your voice cracks, your fingers drop things, and your eye muscles stop functioning properly.”

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he rarely peeked to see where the ball was going.

Chapter 13

Highlight (pink) - Page 131

depth perception enhancement drills.

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Feel is not reliable. If you are tired, sore, or didn't sleep well, you aren't going to find the right feel.” Then, “When you see the ball really well, you are going to be able to react properly, and that proper reaction will produce the great feel.” I told him, “The best feel, Sean, is no specific feel at all. It is a feeling after you do something well, like hit a missile to a gap, and is a feeling of a great flow of energy through your body. It is a moving feeling, not a static feeling.”

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Hitting coaches and scouts say that Sean did not possess all the expected MLB tools, though he could generate great bat speed, and did not have a classic mechanics approach. He told me that every hitting coach he has ever had wanted to change him drastically. He never changed from his basic style.

Highlight (yellow) - Page 134

I encouraged him to keep his eyes in motion, switching them from spot to spot while he was going through his physical actions. My goal was to have him stop staring, which was when he really started thinking too much.

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I also encouraged Sean to get much more aware of the pitcher's exact release point so that at the time of the pitcher's release he was looking directly at the release point instead of searching to find the ball.

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"What was the feeling you had?" I inquired, knowing that he likely felt nothing. He paused, chuckled a moment and said, "Bill, I didn't have any feeling at all. It proved you have been right all along. My hitting was not as dependent upon getting the right feeling. The key is to see the ball really well and let it happen."

Chapter 15

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averaged about 500 at-bats each season?"

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average four pitches per at-bat,

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you swing at about half of those pitches.

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on how many did you have perfect swings?"

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probably spend close to 100 percent of your time striving for a perfect swing. Here you are, one of the era's greatest sluggers, and yet your success for perfect swings is quite low. You don't need a perfect swing!"

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what percentage did you see really well?"

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"Really well means that you saw the ball early with good pitch recognition, you tracked the ball so well it appeared to slow down, and you saw the late break in the pitch as you stayed focused on the ball all the way to contact."

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"Let's make it a goal to see one more pitch per at-bat exceptionally well. That would be 450 or so per season. Do you think that is a workable goal?"

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"When you get in the box and go through your preparatory actions, where are you looking?" Delgado's response was not unexpected. "I don't know. I just sort of look out toward the pitcher."

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Ryan then asked, "When do you see the ball well enough to read it, to know what it is doing?"

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I try to see it as early as possible. But usually the ball is out of the hand 15-20 feet. I used to see it earlier."

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"Do you see the ball deep enough to focus on the late break of pitches?"

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when they are involved in thoughts or actually feeling their body—they use their peripheral vision and not their central vision. When this occurs, what they see looks small, fast, without detail, and as if a ball has more trajectory.

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when he does not think or is not aware of his body, he is more likely to use his central vision. He pointed out that with central vision the spinning of the seams is visible, and the ball looks larger and clearer as if it is going slower and with less change of trajectory.

Highlight (yellow) - Page 149

what made it difficult to see the ball, including physically starting too late and too soon.

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he did not time his body actions with the pitcher's actions, because he was so aware of his body that he didn't have much awareness of the pitcher. It became clear that there was considerable inconsistency in his approach to see the ball.