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Marin Independent Journal (San Rafael, CA)

August 10, 2003

Section: Sports News

Radar Love: Baseball's fascination with speed diminishes chances for crafty young pitchers

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GIANTS OUTFIELDER Marvin Benard was watching the College World Series in the Pacific Bell Park clubhouse with several of his teammates. On the screen was Stanford pitcher Mark Jacmen, a 6-foot-9, 230-pound hard-throwing righty. Also displayed were his unflattering regular-season statistics: a 5.19 earned-run average, seven walks, seven strikeouts and five runs allowed in 823 innings.

Benard is a 5-foot-9 reserve drafted in the 50th round out of Idaho's unheralded Lewis-Clark State College, and could no longer contain his emotions.

"This guy is 6-foot-9 and he'll go in the first round!" Benard shouted for anyone in the clubhouse to hear.

Major League Baseball is replete with successful pitchers who throw below-average fastballs or are less than 6 feet tall. In fact, some of the most successful active pitchers - Atlanta's Greg Maddux, Seattle's Jamie Moyer, the Giants' Kirk Rueter, the New York Mets' Tom Glavine and Anaheim's Aaron Sele - rarely, if ever, break 90 mph on the radar gun.

Yet there are still many more flame-throwing projects in the majors than there are Madduxes. And for every one of those guys, there's 10 more in the minors who never make a lasting impression on a big-league roster.

However, not many scouts are looking for the next Rueter or Maddux, nor are their general managers asking them to. The scouts carry their radar guns and rarely send back reports on pitchers who throw slower than 90, and teams continue to draft kids who throw 95 but don't really know how to pitch.

"There are a lot of guys out there that don't throw 90 or even close to 90 and they get people out," said Giants announcer and former pitcher Mike Krukow. "I think those kind of guys should get a better look because if you can get people out, how you get them out doesn't matter. (A's reliever) Chad Bradford doesn't throw 85. Kirk Rueter doesn't throw 85 consistently, but his winning percentage is phenomenal. If you were looking at Jamie Moyer, you wouldn't sign Jamie Moyer. If you were the scout who recommended him, you would probably lose your job, yet he is one of the most proven winners in the league.

"I think the radar gun has its place, but I think it should be just one of the parts of the equation." Former pitching prospect Charles Scott said he made his name as a scout by finding guys who developed into major leaguers despite not throwing hard. But, he said, scouts and organizations are only willing to go so far for those type of players.

"Absolutely, it is safer for all of us to give a million dollars to Mark Prior, because he throws 97 and you can justify that money," said Scott, a 1982 graduate of Terra Linda High who has been a pro scout for seven seasons.

Prior, a young star with the Chicago Cubs, was the No. 2 selection in the 2001 draft after going 15-1 with a 1.69 ERA and 202 strikeouts in 13823 innings for USC. However, he is the exception to the rule - a smart guy who throws above 95, has command of his fastball, can throw off-speed pitches for strikes. Many other top picks have just the fastball and gaudy numbers against competition far below that of the Pac-10 Conference.

"I think (the radar gun) is a tool for scouts, no doubt about that," said longtime Braves manager and former general manager Bobby Cox. "But some of the best pitchers we've ever had (such as Maddux and Glavine) topped out at 86 and they are going to be in the Hall of Fame. Some of your best drafts come after the first few rounds, but when you get a guy like Prior, obviously he is the No. 1 pick in the draft. Those guys don't come along every day. You don't have to do any projection because he is already there."

Trying for the jackpot

Even those who aren't already at that level continue to get selected in the first few rounds, based mostly on their velocity and the teams' hope that the kid with an arm will develop into a pitcher. Scott once threw 95 mph, but said he didn't learn his craft well enough to make the majors after arm injuries robbed him of that velocity.

"I think what everyone is trying to do is hit the jackpot," Scott said. "Would you rather have Rueter and Moyer to pitch the first two games of a playoff series, or will you take (Arizona's Curt) Schilling and (Randy) Johnson? Those are the guys with special ability who also figured out what those guys who don't have special ability have to do to be successful. The one guy with the ability gets taken in the first round and gets a \$1 million signing bonus. The other guy is a 30th-round pick and he gets \$5,000."

Teams that go for the jackpot, however, often end up getting three lemons.

The New York Yankees made Brien Taylor the No. 1 pick in the 1991 draft and he never made it to the majors.

Todd Van Poppel was supposed to have the best arm in the 1990 draft. He fell to the A's with the 14th pick only because he told everyone he was going to college. In retrospect, after examining his pro stats, he blew that decision. Before shifting to the National League in 2000, Van Poppel had the worst ERA in major league history by a pitcher with more than 400 innings (6.33). Even after two decent seasons with the Chicago Cubs, he is 34-45 with a 5.60 ERA and has pitched for nine major league organizations.

The Giants haven't had much better luck. After making Mike Remlinger a No. 1 pick in 1987, they struck out four straight times before picking Kurt Ainsworth in 1999. Steve Soderstrom ('93), Joe Fontenot ('95), Matt White ('96) and Jason Grilli ('97) have yet to pitch more than 20 games in the majors and none posted an ERA under 5.00 in their brief stays. Soderstrom and Fontenot are out of baseball and White and Grilli are back in the minors.

The A's made a similar run of mistakes in the '90s, starting with Van Poppel and Don Peters in 1990 and following with Benji Grisby ('92), John Wasdin ('93), Ariel Prieto ('95), Chris Enochs and Eric DuBose ('97) before the back-to-back selections of Mark Mulder ('98) and Barry Zito ('99). Peters, Enochs and Grigsby never made the majors. DuBose was recently called up by the Orioles. Wasdin (31-30, 5.22) and Prieto (15-24, 4.85) had lackluster careers.

Million-dollar arm, 10-cent head

The jury is still out on Ainsworth, who was injured for several weeks with the Giants before being dealt to Baltimore in the recent Sidney Ponson deal. It is also too early to tell if Jesse Foppert, the Giants' second-round pick in 2001, will enjoy a long and successful career. The San Rafael High graduate is a classic example of a touted prospect with a live arm who is trying to be turned into a pitcher after switching to the position in 2000.

Foppert is learning on the job and has quickly come to the conclusion that pitching in the majors is about more than just throwing hard.

"There is a lot more to it than how hard you throw, but it helps," said Foppert, who has balanced impressive performances with rocky ones in his rookie season. "There are plenty of guys - look at Woody (Rueter) - he doesn't throw hard. I guess it's just knowing your stuff and getting the most with what you can do."

When one looks at the offensive era currently existing in baseball, it's fair to wonder if too many strong-armed pitchers are trying to learn on the major league level instead of developing their skills in the minors first.

"I remember my first five years in the big leagues, if you threw 90, you threw hard," said Arizona Diamondbacks first baseman Mark Grace, who had more hits than any other player in the 1990s. "Now if you are 90 mph you are below average. They've got mop up guys who throw 95-96. Now most guys who get drafted are radar gun guys. They say, 'He throws 95 and we'll make a pitcher out of him.' They have a lot of money invested in them and they want to see them in the big leagues, so they rush him to see their investment.

"I think this hurts the young pitcher because he is in the big leagues before he has learned how to pitch. He is just a thrower. He throws hard, but he doesn't throw quality strikes. If you are not on the corners in the big leagues, you are going to get hammered.

"If I'm a scout, I mean any moron can read a radar gun and see if a guy throws hard, but I want to know what kind of off-speed pitch does he have," Grace added. "What is the command of the fastball like? You can get guys out in A-ball with a good fastball, but on this level they can hit that. What kind of heart does the guy have? How tough is he in a jam? Does he get a lot of ground balls? A groundball pitcher is always one out away from getting out of inning with a double-play ball."

Strikeouts sell tickets

All-Star pitcher Russ Ortiz, who throws hard but does not consider himself a strikeout pitcher, wonders if the focus on heat is part of the business side of baseball.

"I am not big on strikeouts or think that they make a pitcher good, but I know people enjoy seeing people throw hard because they want to see strikeouts," said Ortiz, the former Giant who was dealt to Atlanta last winter. "They may get strikeouts, but that doesn't mean they will be successful. As long as I've been playing, that is what (teams) look for - people who throw hard.

"There are not too many guys that have been successful that don't throw hard. I think that is the case of not knowing the game. Like watching Kirk pitch over the years, all he does is get better and better and he continues to work at the game. If he makes mistakes he is going to get hit, but he has been able to last in this game because he has been able to minimize his mistakes and he knows how to pitch.

"I imagine it is the same way for Greg (Maddux). He is not the hardest thrower in the league, but he is probably the smartest. The guys who throw hard are able to get away with a lot even if they don't have good control, but I think they figure that you can teach a guy to have control, but you can't teach a guy to throw harder."

Ortiz and many others suggest that the less powerful pitchers need to be that much craftier to be successful, but even the hardest throwers must have the control to locate the ball in the strike zone reasonably well and must have a good second pitch to keep batters off-balance. Teams usually try to teach young pitchers those two skills rather than develop ones with slightly less-gifted arms.

The problem with the teaching-the-arm-to-pitch theory is that not every arm is connected to a head that can learn the craft of pitching or the heart of a man who can battle through adversity.

"Obviously, you can't teach arm strength that is inherited in the player," Angels pitching coach Bud Black said. "Yet that is one of the challenges of coaching. If you do get a powerful arm guy with good stuff, sometimes those pitchers can be taught ... a lot of times you get guys that don't. There are hundreds of times guys have the stuff but they don't have the head."

History doomed to repeat itself?

Many players point to pitchers like Schilling and Johnson or, more recently, the Giants' Jason Schmidt as examples of players who threw hard and developed into All-Star pitchers as they grew older. Even some players now considered master craftsmen were once considered hard throwers.

"Anybody can hit the guy that throws hard," Benard said. "The guy that is hard to hit is the guy that can take speed off and put it where he wants to, like Rueter. A guy that throws 95, if you time him right, you have a chance. But a guy that goes 86, 56, 76 and comes from different angles or different directions inside, outside, up, down - those are the guys that are tough to hit.

"You look at Maddux. When he came into the league, he used to throw hard and he used to get lit up. He used to get lit up everywhere. But when he started taking some speed off and moving the ball around - a sink there and a curve there - the next thing you know he is Cy Maddux."

Just like pitchers overlooked because of a lack of velocity, Benard was passed over because of a lack of height, but he managed to carve out a substantial career for himself - one that few players

drafted after the 30th round, let alone the 40th round, achieve. He will both scoff and praise scouts for some of the patterns they fall into and the challenges they tackle trying to take in the draft, which he calls the crap shoot.

Benard points to the many players who went to his NAIA college - mostly because Division I programs weren't interested in them - and were undrafted or drafted late. The examples include Steve Reed (undrafted after graduation in 1988), Redwood High graduate Anthony Ferrari (44th round) and John Foster (25th) in 1999. Even A's All-Star closer Keith Foulke was a ninth-round selection out of LCSC in 1994.

The learning curve

There is much debate about the best means of developing pitching talent and if that talent can only be developed in players in their late 20s and early 30s after years in the big leagues.

Mike Krukow, who won 20 games in 1986, said he threw in the 90s when he was a struggling young pitcher in the late 1970s. He said that he and fellow Giants of his era like Rick Reuschel learned how to sacrifice velocity for movement and location to become better pitchers.

"I think the radar gun definitely serves a purpose because it gives you base reference," Krukow said. "I assume at age 21 or 18, when a guy is ready to sign, that he doesn't know how to pitch. I don't know how long it takes a guy to learn, but you take a guy like (pitching coaches) Rick Peterson or Dave Righetti and give them a 20-year-old kid who throws 90 miles per hour and they feel like they can teach them to pitch. They can cut the motion down to get the ball in the strike zone. I think every pitching coach feels the same way."

Aaron Sele came out of college throwing 88-90 and continued to throw that hard while picking up the fourth most wins (69) in the majors from 1998-2001. He's seen the drafting trend lead to guys who throw harder and harder and disagrees that the art of pitching can only be learned later in life.

"I think learning how to pitch is a process," said Sele, the 23rd pick in the 1991 draft out of Washington State. "I think people that say you can't know how to pitch until you are 30 are people who had great arms and just got away with stuff. Then, as they got older, their stuff isn't as good and they learn. But if your stuff isn't 95 from the get-go, then you have to learn.

"Obviously, when you see a guy who throws 95, you say this guy can learn how to pitch. I think you have just as good a chance with someone who throws 86 and knows how to sink the ball or throws a great changeup as you do with a guy who throws 95."

In fact, some believe throwing hard may retard the growth of some pitchers.

"A guy in high school who throws that hard, they just don't get into jams," Grace said. "Kids can't hit a fastball at 95, so they throw down the middle and are blowing guys away. Hitters start hitting that in the pros and suddenly the guy realizes he has already given up two or three runs because the hitters are timing him. Then he starts questioning himself ... 'Do I have the ability to get through this?'"

"A guy like Schilling didn't come into his own until he was in bigs five to seven years. He was just a thrower. But he became a pitcher who finally learned how to use off-speed pitches and learned how to respect hitters. You can go out there and have no respect for these guys. That is a great competitive attitude to have, but you are also going to get your (expletive) knocked off, trying to be bully with a fastball. If we know what is coming, we are going to hit it."

A different way of thinking

A's general manager Billy Beane is considered one of the more creative general managers in baseball, one willing to go against the modern conventions. Two of the A's "Big Three" pitchers, Tim Hudson and Barry Zito, rarely break 90 on the radar gun. The third, Mark Mulder, dislikes the radar gun so much he requests that his speeds are not displayed while he pitches at the Coliseum, but he also pitches in the high 80s and low 90s. The A's still selected Zito with the ninth pick of the 1999 draft and drafted the 5-foot-11 Hudson in the sixth round in 1997.

"We just want guys who can get outs," Beane said. "Ultimately, results are what we are looking for. What is more important is when a hitter picks up a ball from a pitcher - not necessarily what the radar gun reads - because a guy can throw 95 and hitters see the ball well, and others throw 85 and the hitter picks up the ball late. Our philosophy here is not to use the radar gun as a means of scouting, but it is a tool for scouting."

A's regional scout Will Schock echoes that sentiment.

"There are guys in the Southern League now who throw 94 and aren't going to pitch in the big

leagues because I don't know how to pitch or can't throw strikes," said Schock, a former pitching prospect and 1982 Tamalpais High graduate. "Others are at 88 and have a better idea.

"There was a guy in our system, Jesus Colome ... he touched 100 more than once, and we traded him for Jim Mecir, who throws 88. He's on the staff now. Some teams value velocity more highly, but if you look at the bigs, guys like Jamie Moyer, Rueter and Bobby Jones with the Mets are successful and not throwing hard. Then you've got guys like (the Giants') Felix Rodriguez who throws 97-98 but can't be a closer because he has no second pitch."

"I think velocity is one thing that is overpaid the most. Just because a guy throws hard, he gets more in the draft. You have to be discriminating."

Proving them wrong

Rueter isn't sure what he'd tell scouts tell scouts to look for if he were running an organization, but he knows it wouldn't just be velocity.

"It is easy for the scout to see the guy who throws 96 and think they can develop that, but not a lot of scouts want to put their name next to a guy who throws 86," Rueter said. "I don't worry about what people think or say, but there were a lot of people who told me - even when I was in the minors - that I didn't throw hard enough. People always told me I didn't throw hard enough. Now, I could care less what they say. But I always felt like I had to put good numbers up in the minors because they might give up on me a lot sooner than a guy who throws harder."

Despite his shortcomings in speed, Rueter was 24-13 with a 2.14 ERA in the minors before being called up by the Expos. He won his first 10 major league decisions - the second most in history.

He still ended up bouncing up and down to the minors over the next three seasons despite maintaining a 16-14 record over that time. He has since become the Giants' most consistent starter and one of baseball's most dependable since moving to San Francisco in 1996.

There may not be many other Rueters out there, toiling in high schools or colleges, in semipro or independent leagues. Will they be spotted? Will a scout take a chance and try to convince his organization to develop a finesse pitcher?

"There is always be guy who slips through, but there are 30 teams out there and all it takes is one team," Schock said. "The independent leagues are there, too, and we scout them more. You have to face it ... most of them aren't good enough to make the next level. Guys like Rueter and Maddux that do make it are the needles in the haystack.

"Scouting is something where there is so much difference of opinion. One team values some things and another doesn't. It is a really opinionated profession and who is to say who is right? You don't know until two or three years down the road."

Of course, two or three years later, that undrafted 85-mile-per-hour craftsman may get no closer to the mound than on a company softball team. Meanwhile, another 95-mile-per-hour thrower flames out in the minors.

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