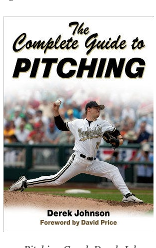
Taking a Page Out of Pitching Coach Derek Johnson's Book

If you've been following the blog, you know that I recently finished reading Brewers TV announcer and former player Bill Schroeder's new book, "If These Walls Could Talk." It is a fun, light read that will make you laugh out loud.

The second book on *Cait's Summer Reading List* was also written by a member of the Brewers staff; however, it is on the opposite end of the baseball book spectrum.
That's because **new Brewers Pitching Coach Derek Johnson** has quite literally written the book on pitching.

Published in 2013, Johnson wrote **"The Complete Guide to Pitching,"** while serving as associate head coach and pitching coach at Vanderbilt. The book is divided into three parts: the science of pitching, the art of pitching and total body conditioning. The book is aimed at kids as young as 8 up through college and is at times, heavily technical; Johnson talks mechanics, pitch selection, fielding, and mental strategies.



Brewers Pitching Coach Derek Johnson also lists "author" on his resume.

While I'm not really the intended audience for the book, I still wanted to read it before sitting down with our new coach for an interview. I was surprised to come away with not only a new perspective on a very complex part of the game, but also some great insight into Johnson's frame of mind as a coach.

After reading the book, I had so much I wanted to talk with him about that our interview lasted almost an hour. I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed picking his brain!

FROM BARN BALL TO THE BIGS

Johnson, 44, was born in Illinois and graduated from **Eastern Illinois University**, where he was a lefty pitcher, earning All Mid-Continent Conference honors; majored in P.E. and minored in English; and would later get his first job as a coach.

"I always liked to write and I liked literature; I like to read," Johnson said, of his choice to minor in English. Johnson said that he has also always wanted to write a book, but it wasn't until an opportunity came knocking that he had the chance. But we'll get to that.

Johnson has always had a strong passion for the game. He grew up in a small town called Arrowsmith, Illinois. His grandfather had a farm and Johnson spent a lot of time there.

"It was football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring. I spent a lot of time by myself, too, and I kind of gravitated toward something I could do on my own. I threw a lot of balls up against the stoop, I threw a lot of balls up against the barn, I threw a lot of fly balls off pitches of roofs. I read a lot about it. I knew all sorts of stats when I was little. So growing up, that pretty quickly became my favorite."

Like many little boys, Johnson dreamed of making it to the Major Leagues and, even though he had success in college, he decided to go the coaching route instead.

"I likely would have been a one or two year minor league player; I would have been released. Then I would have had to start my career. As it turns out, I started my career out right away. I was coaching the year after I was done playing. Looking back, it probably worked out for the best that way because I started coaching right away."

Right out of college, Johnson coached for his college team, where he found himself in a similar position to **Craig Counsell** when Counsell stepped into his role as manager last season—he was now coaching some of his former teammates.

"The trick of that was to be able to separate yourself because most of the guys on the team were your friends. So you're walking a fine line. Even the first three or four years, you're not that much older than the players. So, you had to really do a good job of separating yourself," Johnson said.

From there, he coached at **Southern Illinois University** (1995–97) and **Stetson University** (1998–2001) before making a home at **Vanderbilt** for 11 years, serving as associate head coach in addition to pitching coach over his final three seasons at the school.

At Vanderbilt, Johnson received many accolades—he was named college baseball's National Pitching Coach of the Year (2004) and National Assistant Coach of the Year (2010)—and helped lead the team to its first-ever College World Series appearance in 2011, guiding a staff that featured eight pitchers who were selected in the First-Year Player Draft.

To date, as a college coach, Johnson has guided the collegiate careers of 11 pitchers who have played in the Major Leagues, including **David Price and Sonny Gray**. Although Price and Gray are very different pitchers, Johnson says that his coaching style stays constant.

"You root yourself in fundamentals and fundamentals don't necessarily change across the board," Johnson explained. "Your personality doesn't change. Some of the things that you say are the same. Some of the ways that you go about it are different. That's really the trick of coaching…to try to push the right button and try to figure out what makes this guy work compared to this guy. Every situation is different and every guy is different, so we have a lot of layers that we're dealing with all the time."

Johnson graduated to pro ball in 2013 when he took the position of Minor League Pitching Coordinator with the Chicago Cubs. In that role, Johnson was responsible for all of the minor league pitching in the Cubs organization—from their academy in Venezuela to their Triple-A team in Des Moines, Iowa.

"That was obviously a new experience for me. I was a college coach for a long time and was used to having 15 or 16 pitchers. Now I have a 100. I couldn't be with those 100 every day. I had to develop relationships with guys on the run. So again, just in terms of my education about how people work and how this pro game works and what my role, what my function was, I was learning a lot of things on the fly. It was a lot of fun. I'm really glad I had the opportunity to do it," he said.

And in 2016, after college ball and spending some time in the minors, here Johnson is, pitching coach for the Brewers, fulfilling a dream he had as a kid.

"It took me 45 years to make it to the Big Leagues," Johnson said with a smile.

LEARNING CURVE

Every new position has its learning curve and pitching coach is no different.

For Johnson, he's working at a different level of the game, getting to know each individual on his pitching staff, and shifting back into game mode after traveling extensively in his role as Minor League Pitching Coordinator.

"Probably the biggest (difference between college and the Major Leagues) is that these guys are already kind of made in some ways. In college they're very impressionable. You can almost do whatever you want. They're that ball of clay, so to speak. In college you kind of have to teach them every aspect of the game. Here they know a lot, about all the parts of the game, so you don't have to teach them as much. It's more nuance, so your eye has to be even keener on some of the smaller details. At this point, too, it's taking what they do really well and trying to make that great. In college you're taking what's okay and making it good. It's further refinement in terms of what you're trying to accomplish," Johnson said.

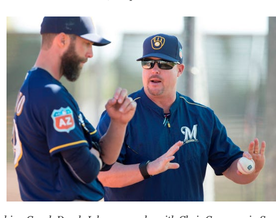
Coming into this new role, just as Johnson had to work on developing relationships with all the pitchers in the Cubs Minor League system during his time with that organization, Johnson has also had to get to know all of the Brewers pitchers in a fairly short period of time. Over his career, he had run into a few of them in college or the minor leagues, but he had never worked with any of them directly.

And, after spending a couple of months with them, Johnson says, he's still building those relationships.

"I know these players but I don't know everything about them. I don't know exactly what I'm going to get in the heat of the moment. We haven't gone through every scenario yet. The season is—it' s almost cliché to say—that it's young, but at the same time, my relationship with them and my understanding of them…I'm still trying to get there. And it takes a while. I can even remember at Vanderbilt. The best thing about freshmen is they become sophomores and part of that is just because you've had a year to get to really know them. You know what makes them tick, you see what they're like in the heat of battle, you see what they're like in adversity, you see how they recover from something bad happening to them. We're still kind of in the early stages of that. It's easy to know someone as a person, like I've known them for 7–8 weeks, so I kind of know what they're *like*, but I don't know *them* and that takes awhile," Johnson said.

As Johnson mentioned, at this level, it's more about refinement. As part of the getting-to-know-you process, Johnson says he had conversations with all of his pitchers after first taking the position and then, once Spring Training rolled around, it was more about seeing what he had to work with—not necessarily making any major overhauls at this point.

"You're not making any sort of wholesale changes with these guys, especially in Spring Training. You're just kind of watching—what do they do, what's their routine like, how do they work—and just try to figure out from there where we're going," Johnson said. "It's been fun so far. I mean a real education, no question."



Pitching Coach Derek Johnson works with Chris Capuano in Spring Training.
Photo: Scott Paulus/Milwaukee Brewers

And it's an on-going education. With the team in rebuilding mode and the roster also in flux due to injuries, it's only been a little over a month into the season and already Johnson has seen 19 pitchers make an appearance on the active roster.

GAME DAY

On game day, you'll find Johnson at the ballpark well in advance of the game watching video from the previous day, to try to confirm scouting reports or help make any sort of adjustments. He'll also talk about that day's game plan and make his notes on that.

"I've been doing a lot of quality pitch stuff with our starters, so it's going back and determining how many quality pitches we're throwing. That's preparing us for whatever side work we have that day," Johnson said.

Then it's a matter of preparing the side work, going through it with the pitchers, and then it's game time.

On a daily basis, Johnson works with both the starters and the relievers.

"Obviously the bulk of my time is with the starters, but I try to get out and watch the relievers play catch and kind of talk through different things that I saw the night before, or we have a pre-series meeting for scouting, so of course I'm there and (Bullpen Coach) **Lee (Tunnell)** leads that, but I chime in as much as possible."

Johnson said his relationship with the relievers is one that he works hard at maintaining.

"I've heard where some coaches really don't do that, it's mostly hang with their starters and let the bullpen guy take care of the bullpen pitchers. I'm not sure that would work for me personally just relationship-wise. I want to get to know those guys and I want them to know we're here to help if needed," he said.

So what does a pitching coach do during the game?

Johnson said he's not calling the game from the dugout. That's on the pitcher and catcher. Actually…

"Truly, it's on the pitcher. It's a suggestion. The catcher is giving a suggestion and the pitcher is nodding his head yes or no and that's the way it should be. We have places to grow there, chances to grow there as a staff as this year moves on," he says.

Johnson says what he's most focused on is looking ahead to match-ups for the bullpen.

"A lot of it is trying to figure out matches for our bullpen, as it goes. Sometimes it feels like you have to have a crystal ball because you have to look 5–6 hitters in advance for that. And then it's trying to put out little brushfires during the game. Maybe what we could do from at-bat to at-bat. I'm really fortunate. I've got two older catchers who take a lot of pride in the way they call the game and what they know. I've got a lot of younger pitchers out there who have to execute. It's a premium thing and they're learning how to do that. I can focus on maybe making small adjustments from at bat to at bat but then you think ahead to who we're going to pitch if this happens or if that happens…. There are a lot of layers," he said.

And what's really going on when he does make a visit to the mound?

Derek Johnson visits the mound in Spring Training. Contrary to what movies like 'Bull Durham' would have you believe, these guys are not discussing what to get Jimmy for his wedding present.
PHOTO: Scott Paulus/Milwaukee Brewers

"Usually my thought on a mound visit is you're looking for an out or you're looking to slow the guy down; those are really the two reasons and they can both work together," Johnson explained.

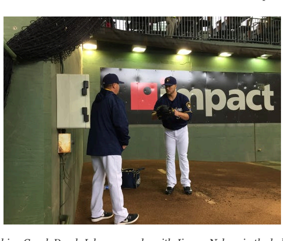
"He needs to slow down and you need an out. Again this is where getting to know guys and understanding their personality in the heat of the moment, or getting to know what his language is, so for me, that's a really tricky one and it's going to be different with every pitcher out there. I like to talk about what's going to happen and kind of paint a picture of what's going to happen with the next guy. Sometimes it's just about saying 'Hey I'm just out here to give you a break, that's it. You're doing fine. This hitter is… this is what we've done with him,' maybe here's a suggestion or two… in some cases, it's going out and saying 'Hey we definitely can pitch around this guy, this is what we have going on,' so there's some strategy things, too. Really the trick is, it's sort of the contact and the human element of it. I want to see where his eyes are at. I want to see his mannerisms to say 'hey this guy's vibrating right now; we need to maybe think about getting him out,'" he continued.

DETAIL-ORIENTED

Johnson stresses the importance of routine for a pitcher and we discussed what one might do between starts.

"Every guy's a little bit different and they shape their routine differently, but typically, the day after (a start) is a pretty heavy recovery or starting the recovery process. The next day, a lot of our guys won't throw. Some of them will throw, but just very, very lightly. I give them a choice, however they want to do that. So much at this level is kind of working off what makes them feel right. The key element of the whole thing is within four days they need to recover as best they can. As the season goes, that gets harder, so it changes and tweaks as the season goes, but typically that's going to be his kind of day. The second day (after the start) is going to be a side day. He'll throw 30–45 pitches depending on what they need and what we're working on. One of the things we've tried really hard to do is evaluate the last game and pull things from it to be able to work on in the bullpen."

Johnson doesn't believe in doing the same thing in the bullpen every time. He likes to focus on what worked well and what can be improved.



Pitching Coach Derek Johnson works with Jimmy Nelson in the bullpen between starts.

He says that the next couple of days, there will be one or two strength sessions, with the day before the starter pitches being a lighter day.

"I have them work on some pick-off stuff on flat ground. Some guys choose to do a flat ground and then day five is pitch. So you're getting a couple of strength sessions in, lots of arm care, the throwing varies from guy to guy and then any sort of skill work, drill work type stuff that we want to employ," Johnson said.

Speaking of drills, it was obvious beginning in Spring Training that Johnson is a big proponent on working on fundamentals, an approach that should serve him well with a younger team.

"I think small things change everything. I think it's easy to leave out details because there are so many of them. This game is great because it's intricate. It's great because there are so many nuances and ways to approach it, but I believe in the end that small things can change everything," Johnson stated. "Really at this point in these guys' careers, they're obviously really pretty fine-tuned and they kind of are what they are in a lot of ways, too, so making wholesale changes, big adjustments, that's not going to happen. But you can effect change through something small. It's like the Butterfly Effect….That's a big thing as a coach to do, to effect change positively and not negatively. So my feeling is you've got to keep it fun, you've got to keep it light, but you also have to take care of the detail parts of the game."

CALL TO THE PEN

Although I've seen Johnson's unique and thorough approach to the game in action for just a short period of time, hearing him talk it's easy to see why he was sought out to write his book by the publisher, **Human Kinetics**.

Johnson said originally, they thought the book could be done in a year, but instead, it took five.

"It took five because I wanted to do it right. It took five because I revised it a lot," Johnson said.

He says that for the most part, writing the book came easy because he had a lot of the material already; however, the most difficult part was trying to appeal to such a wide audience of 8-year-olds to college players.

"Baseball is very incremental in a lot of different ways, so what you're giving to an 8-year-old for them to understand is completely different compared to how you're coaching a college kid. So to write that book is really hard….I had to cut a lot out. So, it's a good book, but it wasn't exactly the book I would've wanted to write. I would've left the 8-year-old out, to be honest. I would've wanted to be more technical, but still I'm very proud of it," he said.

While the technical/mechanical side of pitching also didn't apply to me directly, I did find a lot of the foundational and mental components of Johnson's book to be fascinating.

I think that this passage in particular tells you a lot about what Johnson brings to the Brewers: "I believe that to be successful, a pitcher must first possess and exhibit four essential traits: (1) a work ethic that will not take 'no' for an answer; (2) the ability to prepare at a championship level every day; (3) accountability for himself and his career; and (4) a sense of humility for himself and the game. In turn, these traits create a mind-set, a mentality. The pitcher must have the mind-set of a champion—the mind-set of a warrior."

At one point in the book, Johnson describes a hypothetical situation that he would give his college pitchers at the beginning of a new season, designed to help them keep the game as small and as manageable as possible:

"I first ask the pitchers how long it takes to deliver a pitch from start to finish….They usually respond by guessing 2 or 3 seconds per pitch, depending on the outcome. Next, I ask them how many pitches a starter would normally throw in a game to which they reply, 'Approximately 100.' I then stress that if each pitch and outcome takes approximately 2 or 3 seconds and the pitcher throws 100 pitchers, then the pitcher must be ready to focus intently and stay present for approximately 200 to 300 seconds, or 3.3 to 5 minutes per game. I point out that is this very obtainable! I finish by explaining that the pitcher can spend the rest of the time using positive self-talk, practicing white noise (nothingness), or planning for the next inning while sitting in the dugout."

Fascinated by this (*Hey! That's pretty smart. I could even apply that approach to my golf game!*), I asked him more about it. Johnson explained his thought process:

"You have to focus, you have to concentrate, you have to bear down. I've heard coaches say, 'Three hours, that's all it takes' and I got to thinking about that one time and you know, it's really not true. It's not three hours. When you break it down to the small parts of the game, and say 'I need to be totally immersed for five minutes,' I think that helps pitchers manage it. If you're ever tried to concentrate for three hours…that's not easy. I don't know many that can, so anyway, that's where that came from," he said.

Johnson also stresses the importance of catchers in his book and talked about how fortunate the Brewers are to have two great catchers in **Jonathan Lucroy and Martin Maldonado** helping the young pitching staff along.

"They both work really hard. They do their homework. They understand scouting. They're looking at video of opposing hitters and trying to come up with a game plan of what we're going to do. The toughest part about a game plan—number one is executing it and number two is to take the individual who is going to pitch that night and customizing it to him. So it's really knowing our pitchers very well, what they can and what they can't do on any given day. Unfortunately, you have guys who have A and B and C games and sometimes that C game is tough. You're kind of wobbling through it. But our guys do a good job with doing their homework on the opposing hitters and trying to figure out things that we're going to do against them. Then there's the in-game part of it, too. You're evaluating from at-bat to at-bat, you're evaluating from pitch to pitch, because some of these guys will sit on pitches. Some guess. There's always a little bit of cat and mouse going, but I think our guys are well-equipped. They work hard at the scouting part of it. I feel like our younger players are in very capable hands," he said.

Goal-setting is something else that Johnson talks about in his book, and that's something he has emphasized now at the Major League level as well. (You'll also recall new Brewers Bench Coach Pat Murphy also spoke about the importance of goals in his interview, too.)

"I talk about 'double vision' in the book and that's having your eye on today and your eye on the future. That's to me a really important part because these guys are trying to stay in the game as long as possible. So you do have to take care of today, but you have to understand the broader picture and the future part of it, too," Johnson said.

Johnson also discusses the concepts of team unity vs. team chemistry in his book and he believes that the dynamic of our team has been pretty good so far.

"Chemistry happens in my mind as a result of a process, as a result of things that happen along the way that bond, or don't. But unity can happen just in terms of it all pulling in the same direction. We talked about that in Spring Training. There are going to be some rough patches, but I think we've had some older guys who have really stepped up, both on the pitching staff and on the position side and I think it's held the boat together. I mean, we'll see, because chemistry is a process of things that happen over time, but I think right now we're unified enough and we're trying to stay on the same page. I've had really good looks at that and it's good," Johnson said.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

While his staff has had its share of pitching struggles so far in this young season, Johnson has acknowledged this publicly and believes better days are ahead.

"I put a lot of pressure on myself. I want to do right by these guys and try to help them perform as best they can. I feel as responsible for his as they do. That's just the way I am…. I want to believe there will be better days ahead…. I'm not the one throwing the pitches, but at the same time, I'm the one responsible for it or partly responsible. I'd like for it to be going better. It sure would help me out a lot. But that's what I'm here for," Johnson told *Journal Sentinel* beat writer **Tom Haudricour**t in a recent interview.

With a young team and a lot of new faces, it can be difficult to build the team chemistry, but Johnson and the rest of the coaching staff have clearly brought this team together in a short amount of time. Now, it's a matter of further fine-tuning those skills of the pitching staff through a focus on routine and fundamentals.

-Cait

@CMoyer

By Caitlin Moyer on May 16, 2016.

Canonical link

Exported from Medium on May 12, 2020.