

# Is Velocity Overrated?

## Malone Led NAIA In ERA With No Pitchers Who Threw Gas In 2009

By **MIKE GRADY**  
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CANTON, Ohio — When a pitcher is evaluated, it's almost inevitable that the first thing considered is how fast he can throw.

At any professional ballpark, radar readings flash across scoreboards after every pitch.

Movies such as *The Rookie* glamorize players who are suddenly coveted by Major League teams because of their ability to throw mid to upper-90s fastballs.

High school players continually strive to throw the ball just a little harder hoping their powerful fastball will impress a scout and land them a spot on a college or pro team.

As a former professional baseball player and pitching coach at Malone University in Canton, Ohio, I believe that while velocity is indeed important, pitchers who lack exceptional speed can achieve a high level of success by perfecting their ability to locate pitches, especially on the inner part of the plate, by changing speeds, and by having confidence in themselves.

Last spring, the Malone University pitching staff ranked first in the NAIA in ERA (3.07), 4<sup>th</sup> in overall runs allowed per game (3.73), and helped the team win a school record 47 games (47-16).

Malone's pitchers, in 63 games, struck out 313 batters while walking 158 (1.98 to 1 K/BB ratio) and also set additional school records for shutouts (11) and saves (18) in a season.

Additionally, seven pitchers finished with ERAs of 3.33 or better. The success of last year's pitching staff was achieved with a lack of power arms. Nine pitchers saw significant innings, and only two touched 87 on the radar gun. The average fastball ranged from 81-84 MPH. Only one of those nine pitchers struck out more hitters than innings pitched.

Perhaps the best example of a pitcher who was successful without an overpowering fastball was Malone's No. 1 starter, Adam Boudler.

Ninety percent of his pitches were fastballs ranging from 82-84 miles per hour.

He used his curveball mainly as a show pitch. Boudler was named the Conference Pitcher of the Year after finishing 10-2 with a 2.09 ERA, four complete game shutouts, 40 strikeouts and 17 walks in 73.1 innings.

While he did not throw hard, he could locate his fastball (in, out, and up) better than any player that I have either played with or coached.

As the coach of diverse staff of pitchers, my goal is to set standards that everyone could follow while preserving their individuality.

I want all my pitchers to pitch smart and have awareness. I also want them to have confidence in their ability.

Listed below are three philosophies of pitching that I preached to my staff constantly throughout the year that help pitchers develop these traits.

### 2 Of 1st 3 Pitches For Strike

This replaces the goal of throwing a first pitch strike, which I kept track of in previous years.

The reason for this change in philosophy is that I do not want

to create additional pressure on my pitchers and I especially do not want them to have negative emotions when they fail to throw a first pitch strike.

We talked about working toward the broader goal of getting to a 1-2 count.

I showed them a batting average chart in specific counts to point out to them that hitters generally have a lower batting average early in the count.

Pitchers have the greatest advantage when the count is 0-2 and 1-2. We worked on being very aggressive early in the count for this reason.

Once we get to 1-2, the goal is to get the hitter out on that pitch (I called 1-2 the out count).

If we had a 1-1 count, since the emphasis was to get to 1-2, we threw more fastballs and change-ups instead of breaking pitches since fastballs and change-ups are generally thrown for a strike a higher percentage of the time.

### Pitch To Contact: Get An Out In 4 Pitches Or Less

I began keeping track of this after playing for the Washington Wild Things in 2005 when my pitching coach at the time pointed something out to me.

When I pitched, the opposing batting average against me in a 0-0 count was .090. When the count was 3-2, my OBA was .358!

Obviously, I had a major advantage early in count. I did not have an overpowering fastball myself and hitters gained more of an advantage with each pitch I threw.

This idea goes along with being aggressive early in the count.

It also gives pitchers an advantage if they do not show a hitter their whole arsenal early in the game.

For example, if a pitcher's best pitch is his change-up and he can get away with throwing a lot of fastballs the first time through the lineup, he will have more of an advantage when he faces hitters for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> time when he starts to throw more change-ups.

After each game, each pitcher knows how many outs he got in four pitches or less.

This is another way to convey the importance of being aggressive and getting to the 1-2 count and putting the hitter away.

### Pitch Inside With Fastball

On the first day of fall every year, I tell the pitchers that if they cannot pitch in, they can't pitch at the college level.

The emphasis of all of our fall workouts and practices is to build up each pitcher's confidence and ability to throw the ball on the inner part of the plate.

For players who haven't focused on pitching inside before, this can be challenging at first.

When scrimmages start, it does not take long for them to see that good hitters can be beat inside again and again even with an average fastball.

Hitters that like to get their hands extended tend to have a hard time adjusting to the inside pitch. Preventing power hitters from getting extended may still result in a base hit, but it is more likely to be a single instead of an extra base hit.

At Malone, we went in a lot on 0-0 counts and in 1-2 counts. On first pitch, if the hitter swung at a well located fastball on the inside corner, the majority of the time he



### About Mike Grady

CANTON, Ohio — Mike Grady recently completed his 5<sup>th</sup> season as pitching coach for the Malone University Pioneers' baseball team.

The 2009 squad finished with a school record 47 wins and set several team pitching records.

Malone's 2009 pitching staff ended the season with a team ERA of 3.07, which ranked No. 1 in the country in NAIA.

Mike's pitchers also set team records for shutouts (11) and saves in a season (18).

In addition 7 of 9 pitchers on Malone's staff finished with an ERA of 3.33 or less, including Conference Pitcher of The Year Adam Boudler (10-2 2.07 ERA).

In Mike's five years as pitching coach, his teams ranked first in the American Midwest Conference in ERA three times.

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did not hit the ball hard and we got an easy out.

When we could pitch inside on a 1-2 count, the goal was to get "the freeze".

This happens when a hitter is trying to defend against the off-speed pitch away.

If he is cheating soft away, he has no chance to hit the fastball in.

While I certainly promote pitching in, I also realize that it must be done in the right situation and in the appropriate counts.

When facing aggressive power hitters, you have to be careful about pitching inside because if he is looking for something in and he gets it, the ball is going to get hit a long way. That is why we rarely pitch inside in hitter's counts when the hitter is aggressive.

In counts like 2-0 and 3-1, we usually threw a fastball away and tried to work back into the count except when we were facing the other team's best hitters who had power.

In this situation, we did not want to give in to a hitter that had the ability to beat us, and when we fell behind we would either spot a fastball down and out or throw the pitcher's best off-speed pitch.

Pitching inside effectively is a great advantage to the pitcher.

It takes the aggressiveness away from the hitter and makes him uncomfortable, and it tends to open up the outside part of the plate.

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When the target is in, we never want to miss over the plate.

If we are going to miss, we want to miss inside off the plate.

I must emphasize that we never intend to hit the batter and our target is at the knees on the inside corner — never up and in.

I have learned from my experience as a coach and a player that coaching pitchers is much more than setting a philosophy, working in the bullpen, or running PFP's.

Anyone that has ever coached pitchers knows that mental toughness is just as if not more important than raw talent.

Mental toughness should be thought of as a skill to work on just as a pitcher works on hitting his target. John Massarelli, manager of the Lake Erie Crushers in the Frontier League, once told me, "Pitching is hard enough. Don't make it harder on them."

With that in mind, I outlined three aspects of coaching pitchers that I feel are important to building confidence and creating trust and rapport with your players.

### 3 Against 1 Mentality

The three is the pitcher, catcher, and pitching coach.

I take the approach that all three of us are working together to get each hitter out.

This mentality helps the pitcher feel that his teammates and coaches are working with him, not against him.

As a player, I had a coach or two who would express anger openly in the dugout if I walked a hitter or if I gave up a 0-2 base hit.

When this happens, not only do you feel like you have to battle the hitter, you now have to battle your own coach.

### Communicate With Players

While at Ohio Wesleyan University I was fortunate enough to have former Duke University Pitching Coach Dave "Kobe" Koblentz as my pitching coach my senior year.

Not only did he know the mechanics of pitching more than anyone I have ever been around, he knew how to motivate players by being positive and encouraging.

He taught the game of baseball to us, and it was obvious he truly loved being around the game.

He made me feel that he was with me at all times, when I was throwing well and when I was not throwing well, and I truly appreciate him for helping me become a better player and person.

One thing that Kobe taught me

that stands out is to never to discuss the game with pitchers until the next game.

He said a player may not remember the 1,000 positive things you say to him, but he will remember what you said the one time you lost your temper and said something you regret.

For me, discussing the game (good or bad) the next day with players has helped me communicate with more effectively because the emotions of the day before are gone.

In the long run, it also helps build trust between player and coach, which goes a long way.

### Know What You Are Good At And Be Great At It

Don Carman, former pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, taught me the significance of working on this with my players.

Most coaches are very good at pointing out the skills that our players need to improve.

A productive meaningful practice should constantly push each player to improve the skills they are weak at. It is also important to work on what your players are already good at, with the goal of making them great at one or two of these areas.

These skills can include anything from specific pitches, location, pickoff moves, fielding, etc. For example, a pitcher who is working toward being great at locating a fastball, an effective drill is to set up a tee with a ball on it at home plate.

His goal should be to hit the ball off the tee each pitch.

To do this, a pitcher must be able to repeat his delivery and maintain a high level of focus with each pitch. The coach can then move the tee to a different location.

I cannot give enough credit to my pitchers for the work that they put into last season.

They set lofty goals for themselves before the season and they worked toward those goals everyday.

As a group, they were extremely self motivated and driven to succeed.

Last year's group also returned every pitcher from the 2008 team that finished 42-16. Having an experienced pitcher on the mound day after day is a huge advantage, especially in tight conference and tournament games.

In addition, the work ethic, team first attitude, and overall leadership of the three senior pitchers played an important role in our team's success.