



Pitching and hitting share a common end game: Hit the target.

One action (pitching) has a stationary target, while the other (hitting) has a moving target capable of curving, splitting, fading or decreasing in velocity during its trajectory. In a traditional sense, one is an action and the other is a reaction. However, the best hitters will disagree with that claim, saying that hitting is anticipation more than a reaction, especially in offensive counts.

"Wait for the money ball" was a line shared by a former batting champion and home run leader during my recent spring training visits. According to this one legend, "most hitters panic while others know the (guy) on the mound will eventually deliver a money ball." This is also known as a mistake pitch.

"Watch the ball and look at the target" may be the two most popular phrases in baseball's instructional library. On a certain level, it's good advice. But from a different perspective, it may be some of the worst advice a well-intended coach can share with an athlete.

"When I look at nothing, I see everything" is a classic line I use to open talks about visual psychology. It's a line that former major league great Manny Ramirez shared with me 10 years ago in a quiet moment. Dr. Les Fehmi describes it as "open focus," and it can also be applied to pitching.

For clarity, open focus is not "soft fine focus," as that term has been used for decades in the visual training world. The open focus model is premised on how one pays attention to a certain task or event. Through neurofeedback results spanning decades, Dr. Fehmi found that open focus training dissolved the rigid attention syndrome (RAS) that dominates how most of us view the outside world.

This narrow-objective way of focusing has consequences, namely a change in the brain's electrical rhythm, which impacts muscle tension, heart rate and hormones. Quite simply, Fehmi and open focus look to find the holy grail of performance—the zone, mindfulness and flow through the visual system.

But that's enough science, so let's get back to the diamond.



Former major leaguer and 1985 World Series hero Buddy Biancalana said it best in his book, *The 7 Secrets of World Class Athletes*.

"There is an inverse relationship between strong intention and execution," he wrote. "Trying harder creates tension, creates anxiety and an overeagerness to succeed."

Both the pitcher and the hitter are going in the wrong direction when they try to look harder at the given task. This is the classic process-versus results-oriented paradigm, but with a visual fix. As both pitchers and hitters learn how and what they are paying attention to impacts performance, the "end game" (the catcher's glove for a pitcher or "see the ball" for a hitter) becomes less of a priority.

Don't believe me? Pull up some old game clips of Mariano Rivera. When we filmed his pitching video, "Calm Before the Storm" in 2000, I asked him one question: What are you looking at as you deliver a pitch?

His answer was simple.

"Nothing."

The perils of target fixation in other situations have greater consequences. Giving a lecture to soldier-athletes at the U.S. Academy at West Point gave me added perspective and confirmed to me that the great performers have different visual search strategies during high-stress encounters.

"Although in high-pressure situations, the target may be the most important object in the field of view, excessive focus on it—to the point of losing situational awareness—can be deadly," said Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Watrud. "It is vital to maintain overall perspective of the entire flight environment by maintaining a continuous scan of everything."

Warning: Don't tell your pitchers to look at the pretty co-ed sitting in the front row during their delivery, either. Somewhere between burning a hole in the catcher's glove and staring at the cute contemporary on the front row lies the answer.

Introduce the pitcher to the space between the mound and home plate (the runway) and let him experiment with different distances he visually "touches" to stay open. Attending to space, as Dr. Fehmi's research shows, has a tremendous impact on calming the brain and improving body awareness.

Allowing pitchers to improve command and repeatability problems may be more a function of adjusting their visual awareness and a realization that fixating at the end game doesn't always win the prize.

From the traditional "eyes closed bullpen" to runway markers between the mound and the plate (in an effort to soften and open the pitchers' fixation level), advanced pitching coaches have more tools than ever in the never-ending challenge of hitting the target. But don't forget the ultimate drill the best coaches use, either—a dialogue that has the pitcher explain where his visual attention levels are prior to release.

Think about all of the pitchers with control issues who could be saved by Ramirez's and Rivera's "nothing" strategy.