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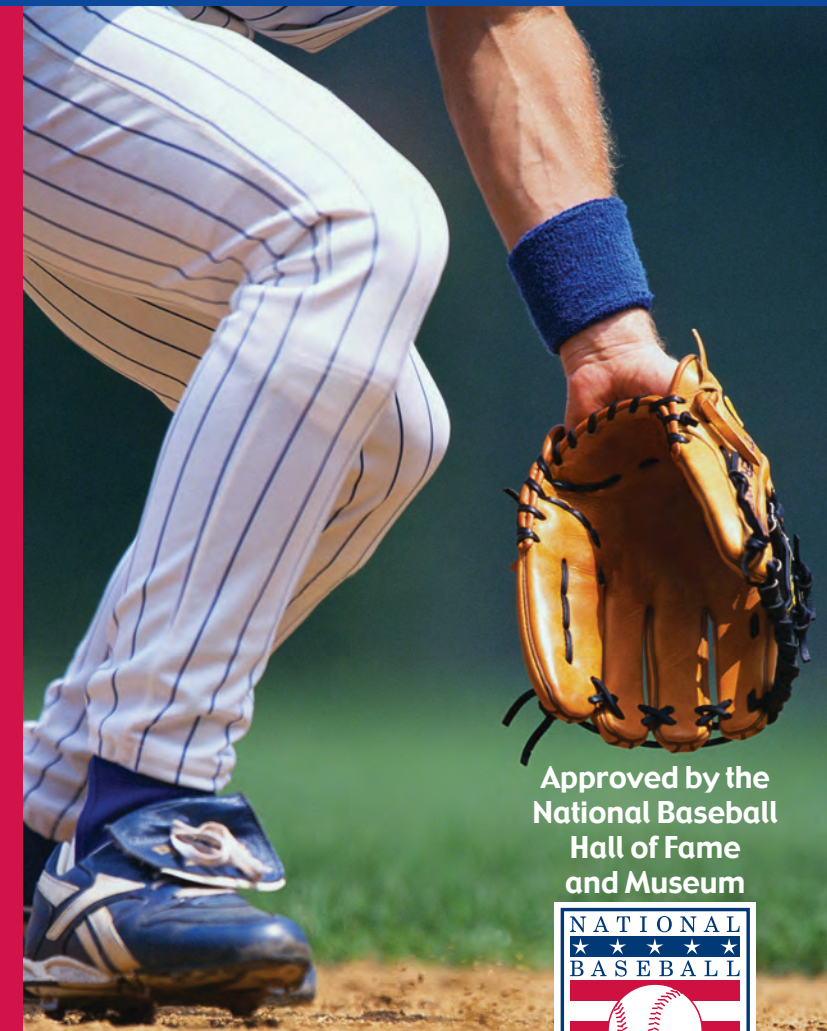
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PLAY BALL

Like the HALL OF FAMERS

**THE INSIDE SCOOP FROM
19 BASEBALL GREATS**

Johnny Bench
George Brett
Rod Carew
Gary Carter
Orlando Cepeda
Bobby Doerr
Dennis Eckersley
Bob Feller
Whitey Ford
Harmon Killebrew
Bill Mazeroski
Paul Molitor
Phil Niekro
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Robin Yount



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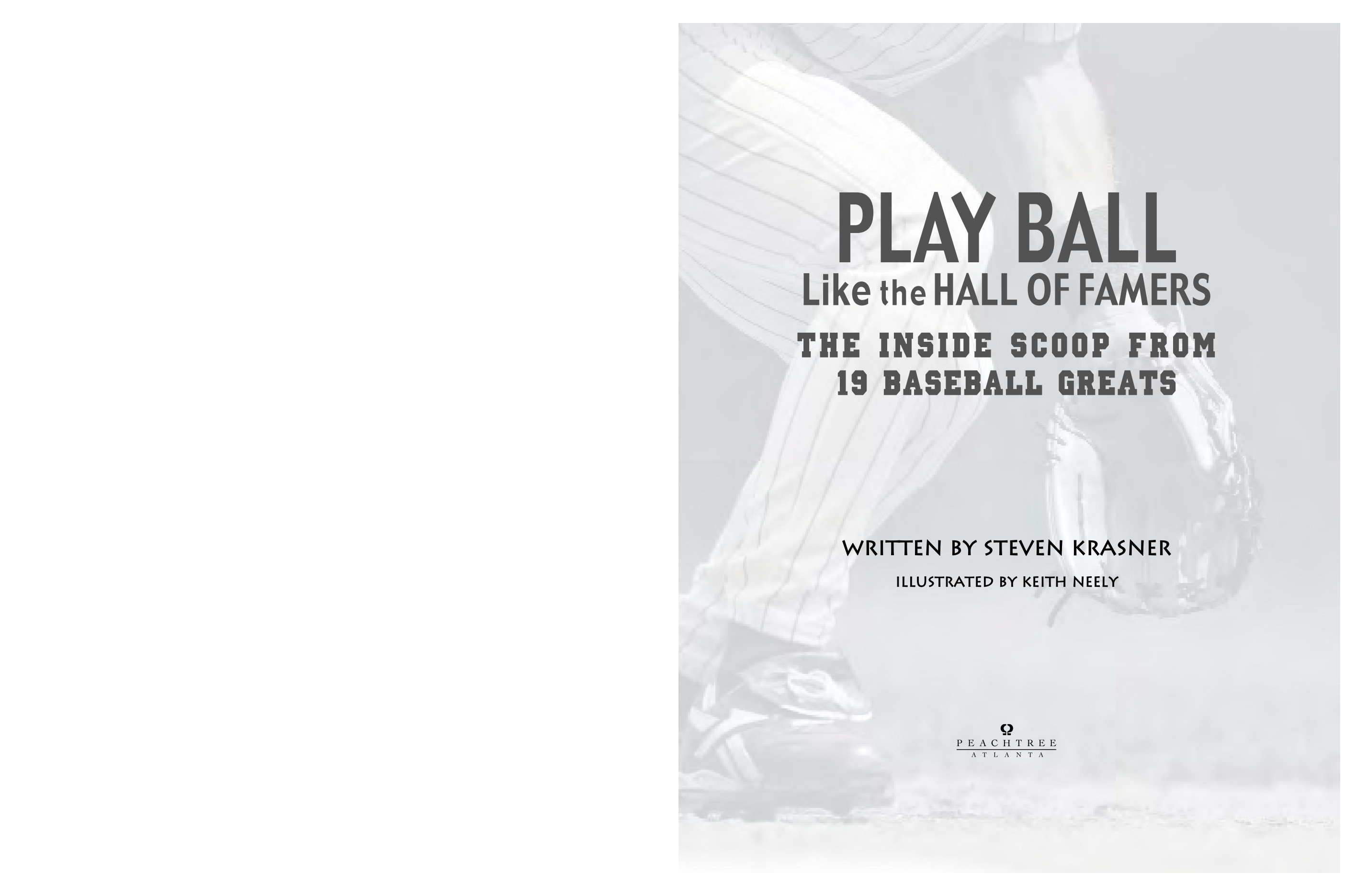


STEVEN KRASNER



PLAY BALL

Like the HALL OF FAMERS



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Like the HALL OF FAMERS

**THE INSIDE SCOOP FROM
19 BASEBALL GREATS**

WRITTEN BY STEVEN KRASNER

ILLUSTRATED BY KEITH NEELY


PEACHTREE
ATLANTA



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For my Hall of Fame wife, Sue Oclassen
—S. K.



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INTRODUCTION



It takes many muscles, working in rhythm, to succeed in baseball. A pitcher not only needs a strong arm, but also strong legs, in order to be effective on the mound. A hitter relies on his eyes, his hands, his arms, his hips and his legs to drive a baseball into the gap utilizing a nicely coordinated swing. But there's another muscle that's just as important, if not more so. The mind. That muscle between the ears is often that which separates a good player from a great player. To make it into the Hall of Fame, a player has to be as strong mentally as he is physically gifted. In this book, 19 Hall of Famers offer not only mechanical and technical tips that can make you a better ballplayer, but also insights into how mental preparation and focus can help you improve your overall abilities. Every inning, every pitch is part of a game-long chess match in which out-thinking your opponent can pay dividends on the scoreboard. Hitting, for example, can be broken down into the simple "see the ball, hit the ball" philosophy, and there's something to be said for that theory. But listen to Hall of Famers Rod Carew, Paul Molitor and George Brett. Their minds were racing as they dug into the batter's box. How did the pitcher get me out last time? What pitch did he throw? What pitch should I expect him to throw this at-bat? A little knowledge can go a long way, giving you the best chance to succeed. Similar mental exercises are performed all over the diamond, whether you're a power pitcher in the mold of a Tom Seaver and a Bob Feller, or a knuckleball specialist such as Phil Niekro, or a control artist such as Don Sutton.

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Bunting. Hitting for power. Pickoff moves. Outfield play. Working behind the plate. Turning double plays. Running the bases. Stealing bases.

These are vital aspects of the game that take on added importance as you move up to the full-size diamond.

And who better to teach about these skills and the mental thought processes that augment these physical abilities than Hall of Famers?

Each chapter also includes the Hall of Famer's childhood baseball memories, his big-league memories, and any superstitions he may have had, in addition to a glossary of terms and a section called "The Mental Edge."

The players in this book were voted into the Hall of Fame by members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America. The yearly voting is very selective, generally resulting in only one or two players being inducted each year.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum is located in the picturesque village of Cooperstown, New York. Each player inducted is honored with a plaque that features his likeness and accomplishments, all of which dominate the Hall of Fame Gallery in the museum. The museum exhibits also feature artifacts and various topical displays covering all aspects of baseball history.



JOHNNY BENCH



Elected: 1989

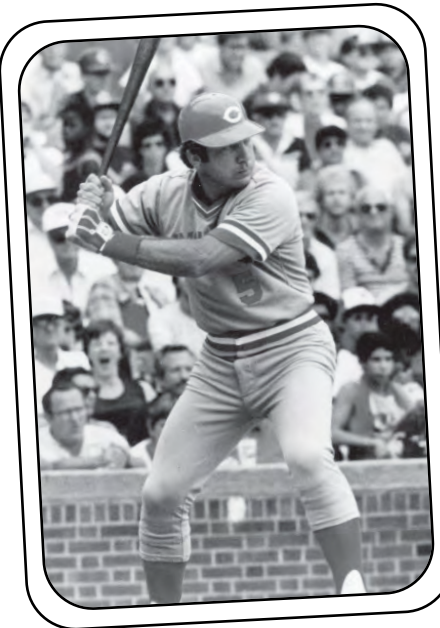
Position: Catcher

Born: December 7, 1947, at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Height 6-1; Weight 210

Threw and batted right-handed

In Bench's first full season (1968), he won the National League's Rookie of the Year Award. As one of the leaders of Cincinnati's "Big Red Machine" teams of the 1970s, Bench was an outstanding, durable, defensive catcher. He won 10 consecutive Gold Gloves. He was equally impressive with a bat, belting 389 home runs. Bench earned two National League Most Valuable Player Awards.



National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY

As the pitch nears the plate, do you go out and get it or wait for it to come to you?

You want the ball to come to you.

There are certain times when the ball is getting into the strike zone or going down and out of the strike zone where it will get away from you and you have to reach for it, but for the most part you want the ball to come to you.

PLAY BALL LIKE THE HALL OF FAMERS

Why don't you want to reach for the pitch as a rule?

The ball gets to you faster than you can actually reach out, grab it, and pull it back. So the whole concept in catching is to sit back as comfortably as you can, with your arms relaxed and never stiff.

Is there one basic way to receive the ball?

The important thing is to catch every ball. There's not necessarily one way of doing it.

You want your catching position to be as natural and as comfortable as possible. Squat down the way that is easiest for you to squat. Don't worry about setting up high, and don't worry about getting your arms inside your knees. Be as comfortable as you possibly can and continue to practice as much as you can until you learn how to catch every ball.



How do you give a target?

You see some people with the glove up to give that great **target**, but the target should be given and then the hands should be relaxed so the arms can work in sequence, moving in an arc that can cover any area where the ball's thrown.

What does "framing pitches" mean?

Framing pitches means trying to make sure that when you catch the ball you give the impression that the ball is in the strike zone even if it's not, even if it's just off the plate.

How do you catch pitches so you're framing them?

You actually catch the ball in the web with a lot of the glove showing over the plate. The ball itself might be a couple of inches off the plate, but sometimes if you catch the ball this way you might be able to steal a strike call.

JOHNNY BENCH

This is one of those times when you're reaching just a little for the ball because you have to go get the ball instead of catching it so far back. If the umpire can see the glove, he might react with the strike call.

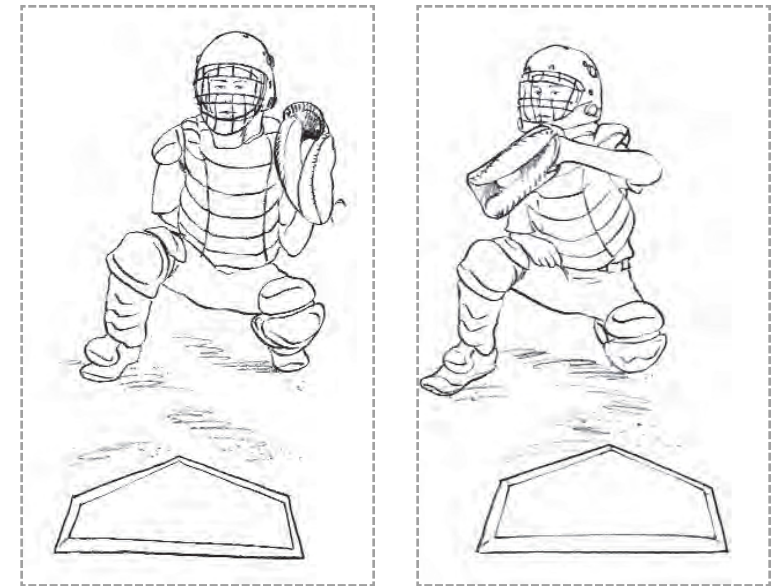
On a ball that's off to the side of the plate, you roll your hand over so the thumb and fingers are pointing out to the left or to the right. You receive the ball into the web, hoping that much of the glove is still covering the plate.

On a ball that's down, you turn your hand downward with your fingers pointing down so the web is down. Most of the glove, though, is still in the strike zone.

And of course, on the ball that's up in the strike zone, you're trying to catch the ball in the web with your fingers pointing up.

What are some of the major factors in deciding which pitches you might call for in a game?

You have to pay attention to and be comfortable with which pitches are working best for a pitcher on any particular day. Is the fastball moving, for instance? Is the pitcher able to change grips on the baseball to make the ball sink or run away or run in?



PLAY BALL LIKE THE HALL OF FAMERS

How important is it for the catcher to have the pitcher's trust?

The pitcher needs to have confidence in you and to know that the pitch you call is the right one.

You also have to work together throughout the game. For example, you may call for an inside pitch. You may want the fastball, but you want the sinking fastball, so you might have two different calls for the fastball. You need to have some kind of camaraderie with each pitcher so you can do that.

The best results come when a pitcher has complete faith in you, trusting that you understand what the pitches are going to be and that you know what **sequence** to use with the hitter.

What kind of location are you seeking from your pitcher?

For one thing, you want to throw first-pitch strikes, but that doesn't just mean thigh-high over the middle of the plate. That's a pitch any hitter likes.

I don't mean you can't throw a pitch over the middle of the plate. For instance, you may throw a sinker over the middle of the plate, but if it's down around the knees, there's nothing wrong with that location.

Do you want the pitcher to be hitting the corners of the plate all the time?

Some pitchers get so wound up trying to hit the corners that they end up missing, falling behind in the count, and getting so frustrated when they don't have their best control that they start aiming the ball. And when they do that, the ball isn't going to be moving in the strike zone. The ball is going to straighten out, and that pitcher's going to have a tough day.

How important is that movement in the strike zone?

If a pitcher is getting movement on the ball in the hitting area he's going to be much more successful.

How much effect on your signal-calling does the hitter have?

You have to have a sixth sense for what particular pitch the hitter might be looking for. So sequences can change throughout a game with a particular hitter.

JOHNNY BENCH

What are you trying to do when you call a pitch?

The real idea is to try and get the hitter to swing at your pitch.

There are a lot of pitchers who say, "I've got this particular pitch and I'll challenge him right now and go right to it" rather than just working around and trying to make the hitter **chase** a pitch out of the zone.

But you want to call a pitch that allows the pitcher to throw to a weakness the hitter has, because every hitter has a tendency not to hit the ball as well in one area as he would in another.

In calling games, do you work around certain hitters?

There are certain hitters you're going to have much more success with than others. So you try to avoid the guy who's going to give you the most trouble.

Against him, you try to hit the corners of the plate. Sometimes you walk him. It's an unintentional walk, because you aren't standing outside and throwing the four traditional wide pitches. But you're trying to make that hitter chase a pitch, and if he decides to swing at a ball, then you've really put the percentages in your favor.

How much information can you learn about a hitter even before a game begins?

In the big leagues, there are scouting reports. Younger kids don't necessarily have those.

What you need to do is watch hitters in batting practice, see hitters' tendencies, check out their stances. Can they handle the inside pitch with that stance? Does this hitter **step in the bucket**? If so, he'll have trouble reaching the outside pitch, so that's what you might call for when he's up, have him chase the ball outside.

That's the sixth sense the good catchers have. That's how you learn to be a good caller of a game. You notice things about the batter, even as the game is going on.

How does a catcher run a game aside from pitch-calling?

A catcher needs to know what's going on all around the field.

If I knew there was a left-handed hitter who was a **dead pull hitter**, a few

PLAY BALL LIKE THE HALL OF FAMERS

things would run through my mind. Can we pitch him away because he's going to try to pull it? Does the first baseman have to play deeper to guard the line? Do you shift the right side of the infield more toward right because he's likely to pull the ball? Do you move the left side of the infield?

You have to be aware of the outfielders' positioning. Let's say I'm going to try to pitch a particular hitter down and in with breaking balls and fastballs away. I have to figure out if I need the left fielder playing straightaway or toward the left field line. And because this particular hitter's tendency is to pull the ball on a breaking ball, there's a good chance a hit will be on the ground to the right side, so I know where I want my infielders playing.

I have to make sure the fielders are in the right positioning for the way we're pitching to this particular hitter. That's the way I have to approach it as the catcher.

What role does psychology play in the catcher's job?

There are several different types of pitcher mentalities and psyches that you have to take into account as a catcher.

Some guys need to be reassured, for instance. Some have to be told exactly what they need to do and have everything programmed.

First there's the pitcher you're very comfortable with. All you have to do with him is make sure he's on track mechanically, maybe make sure he has his motion right, remind him to stay back in his delivery or keep his arm on top or take a deep breath. Or you might pace a pitcher by fixing the dirt in the batter's box and controlling how fast you work behind the plate.

And then there's the guy you really have to get on. He might be a little lazy. He might let his concentration slip. So sometimes you have to emphasize with a little bit of authority that he's not doing it mechanically the way he should.

How do you deal with these different personalities and mentalities?

Say you need the pitcher to give you a certain pitch.

With one guy you might go out there and say, "Look, here's the situation. Here's a batter who's going to pull the ball, so make sure you get over to cover first base on a ground ball hit to the right side." Or, you tell him, "Here's a batter we're not going to let beat us. Don't aim it. Let me have breaking balls down on the outside corner."

With other guys you go out to the mound to talk to him so you can calm

JOHNNY BENCH

him down. Maybe you just want to make him aware of the situation that has come up in a game, to make sure you slow him down at times because you see that he has become frustrated with what has been going on. And you remind him how he needs to approach the game at that point.

Depending on the pitcher and the situation you might say, "Everything's going to be fine, just take a deep breath, get after it right here, and let's get the situation in hand."

What's the bottom line for a catcher as psychologist?

You've got to be able to understand all of your pitchers. As a catcher, I have to bring each pitcher to the highest level he can reach.

How important are the legs for a catcher?

You have to work hard and get your legs in the best shape, almost stronger than they need to be. Guys get strong in their upper body, and you want your arms strong. But the legs are the real key. You've got to block the plate. You've got to withstand people trying to knock you over at the plate, and you've got to come out of your crouch to throw. So there's a great deal of strength needed in the legs.

How can a catcher have a good game?

There are four ways a catcher can have a good game to contribute to the team. The first priority is to call a good game, especially when you need to help a pitcher who maybe doesn't have his good stuff that day. A catcher can throw out runners. He can block home plate. And he can hit.

How important is it for a catcher to be able to separate his offensive and defensive responsibilities?

You have to be able to do that. There are some guys who might put down the signals for a fastball or a curveball, but they're really not thinking about the situation in the game and what might be the best pitch at that point. They may be thinking about offense, maybe a tough at-bat they just had.

If you lose your concentration and don't focus on what's happening right now, it could put the pitcher and the team in a tough spot.

As a catcher, how difficult is it to concentrate on hitting when it's your turn to hit?

You really have trouble doing that. Maybe the first time up it's all right, but you're still worried about your pitcher and calling a good game.

There are so many variables that go into concentration. There are certain days when your best pitcher is out there throwing—like (Hall of Famer) Tom Seaver, for instance—and then you don't have to worry quite as much behind the plate. But then you have pitchers who make you have to work a little harder. You know it's a day when you're going to have to score a lot of runs to win.

When it's time for you to hit, maybe there's a pitcher out there you pretty much own, someone you've had great success against in the past. Or maybe it's a guy who gives you a lot of trouble. So you have to concentrate on hitting. That usually happens when you take your bat out of the rack and go to the **on-deck circle**. But even when you're getting your bat and getting ready to hit, there are times when the pitching coach or the manager will come to you and want to know something about your pitcher.

There's a lot going on for a catcher. But if a player can't handle all of it, then put him at first base or in the outfield.

★★★ **YOUTH BASEBALL MEMORIES** ★★★

I played Home Run Derby all the time. I learned to try to hit the ball out of the ballpark. I grew up in such a small town (Binger, Oklahoma) that there weren't a lot of other kids around. There were three kids I grew up with and played ball with. We made up games. Some people had Wiffle balls, but the point of the games was always to see how far you could hit the ball.

When I was 14, I was playing American Legion baseball with 17- and 18-year-olds. Back in those days you always felt bad if you didn't get two or three hits a game.

We won the state championship. I actually pitched the six games of the finals of each tournament, the county and district tournaments. I had a heck of a curve. I threw a big curveball from different angles. I could make guys' knees break with my curveball. How hard could I throw the ball? Over the plate.

I hit .633 my senior year in high school (Binger High), so I don't feel like anyone looked at me as a pitcher. They liked my offense a little more because I had power and I could catch, although no one saw me catch much.

I pitched a lot, and we had another kid who caught who wouldn't play third, so I played third base too. And when I played American Legion baseball, they already had catchers, so I had to go to another town and I played a lot of first base. It was either play first base or sit on the bench. The last year I finally got to catch.

★★★ **BIG-LEAGUE MEMORIES** ★★★

Winning the World Championship (in 1975 and 1976) is probably my biggest memory. But almost every time we went out on the field was a special moment during our days as the Big Red Machine.

I remember playing in the 1969 All-Star Game in Washington and hitting a home run off Mel Stottlemyre my first at-bat. I hit it very deep to left, where they had a high wall. That highlight actually came during my two weeks of summer camp in the Army. Our camp was in Virginia, not far from Washington, and they let me off from duty to play in the game.

My first year (1968), I went to the All-Star Game in Houston. I was picked as catcher. Willie Mays came over to me in the clubhouse before the game and said, "You should be the starting catcher." That was one huge highlight, that he would say that to me. Jerry Grote was the starting catcher, but they let me catch the ninth inning.

There were other highlights, like the home run I hit off Pittsburgh's Dave Giusti to tie the game in the playoffs in 1972. I led off the ninth with a home run. Then, of course, there was hitting two home runs against the Yankees in the fourth game of the 1976 World Series and being MVP of that series.

★★★★ **SUPERSTITIONS** ★★★★★

I had no superstitions as a player.

Did I throw with the same guy every day? No. Did I wear the same sweat-shirt every day? No. If I were on a hot streak I might reach into the locker and grab the sweatshirt I wore the day before, but as temperatures change, so does the uniform. I might not even need a sweatshirt the next day.

MENTAL EDGE

When a game is over, no one on the field is likely to be more exhausted than the catcher. The mental exhaustion will be just as great, if not greater, than the physical exhaustion.

As the game wears on, sweat is pouring down his face and arms, his leg muscles are fatigued from the up-and-down squatting nature of the position. His arm muscles are tired from all of the throws back to the pitcher, not to mention any throws trying to gun down base-stealers. His body is bruised from foul tips and pitches thrown in the dirt. The sweat-soaked equipment seems to weigh twice as much as it did when the first pitch was delivered.

But despite all of that, the catcher has to stay sharp mentally. The catcher's concentration can't waver. He keeps thinking.

How strong is my pitcher? What pitch is his best one today? What should I call in a certain situation? What is the umpire's strike zone on this particular day? What do I see the batter doing in the box, possibly giving away his approach to the next pitch? Is the runner at first looking to steal second? Does my pitcher need a breather? Should I go out and talk to him? What should I say? Should I bark at him, sternly telling him to bear down because I sense he's losing his concentration? Should I crack a joke to get him to loosen up because it's a pressure situation and he's too tense?

The catcher's mind, and body, cannot rest at any point in the game.

—S. K.

GLOSSARY



Chase: To go after a pitch out of the strike zone.

Dead Pull Hitter: A right-handed hitter who generally hits the ball to the left side of the field; a left-handed hitter who generally hits the ball to the right side of the field.

On-Deck Circle: The place on the field between the plate and the dugout where the next hitter waits his turn to go to the plate.

Sequence: The order in which signals are given.

Step in the Bucket: When the batter's front foot moves away from the plate, toward the foul line, as the pitch comes in and he begins to swing.

Target: Where you want to throw the ball. For a pitcher, the target is where the catcher holds up his mitt.



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—Gertrude Ederle, first woman to swim the English Channel

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