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Deep Breath as Pitchers Rethink Routines



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Alan Jaeger, standing, teaches pitchers to recall a relaxed state of mind when they are on the mound.

By LEE JENKINS
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ENCINO, Calif., Feb. 11 — A dozen of the best pitching prospects in baseball lay side by side in the dark, their eyes closed, their mouths shut, their minds open.

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They pulled their sweatshirt hoods over their faces. They let their feet dangle over their yoga mats. They breathed in unison, inhaling for three seconds through their noses, exhaling for five seconds through their mouths.

Alan Jaeger stood among them, his voice soft and his cadence slow, matching the instrumental music playing on the stereo.

“It’s August, September, October,” Jaeger said. “It’s the ninth inning. You’ve got to finish. Come back to this moment. Come back to this breath.”

It was actually early February, in a small tae kwon do studio in the San Fernando Valley. Outside, children laughed on a playground. In a back room, an agent talked on his cellphone. But the pitchers could not have been more still if they were on the rubber.

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J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Matt Hirsh, right, took part in Alan Jaeger's yoga classes with his brother, Colorado Rockies pitcher Jason Hirsh.



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Jason Hirsh was drawn to Jaeger after seeing how his training had helped pitchers like Barry Zito and Joel Zumaya.

"They're in a trance," Jaeger whispered.

Many pitchers prepare for the season by hiring personal trainers. Others work out at their old high schools. Some sit on their couches. And those who have tried everything, and are still looking for more, come to this studio on Ventura Boulevard, to lie flat on their backs.

Jaeger's regimen lasts five hours a day, and for the first four hours, no one touches a baseball. The pitchers meditate, stretch, listen to music, perform yoga poses, meditate again and listen to more music. They talk about dreams and visualize games.

"The first morning, you ask yourself, How does this have anything to do with baseball?" said Jeremy Plexico, a minor league pitcher for the [Washington Nationals](#). "Then you get on the mound and you feel totally different, totally balanced."

Meditation and yoga are not new to professional sports. But baseball players are famously old-fashioned, still warming up with a game of pepper and a cheek of tobacco. Breathing exercises and downward-facing dogs tend to prompt eye rolls in the dugout.

When Jaeger began his program in the early 1990s, after his pitching career at Cal State Northridge was undone by anxiety attacks on the mound, five of his friends signed up. Four of them eventually made the major leagues.

Today, one of baseball's most durable arms belongs to the [Giants'](#) Barry Zito, who started training with Jaeger in college. One of baseball's most electric arms belongs to the [Tigers'](#) Joel Zumaya, who used to drive six hours round trip to see Jaeger in the off-season.

"Zito, Zumaya and Zen," Jaeger said. "Those are powerful Z's."

Pitchers have been known to rub snake oil on their arms when someone has success with it, so Jaeger's studio was predictably crowded this winter. First-round draft choices and top prospects rushed to spend part of their bonus money on yoga mats.

Jaeger, 42, is well schooled in Eastern philosophy and West Coast baseball. His pitchers are mostly in their early 20s, on the cusp of the big leagues, young enough to try something new and old enough to recognize that they need a little help.

Plexico had shoulder surgery two years ago. His teammate Clint Everts had elbow surgery. They moved this winter to Huntington Beach, Calif., so they could be close to Jaeger. Their next-door neighbor is Collin Balester, another Nationals prospect, who drives the car pool to the valley.

"My arm just wasn't getting better," Everts said. "I was willing to try anything. I didn't care what people would think. I didn't care how different it might be."

So he and Balester climb on top of each other in the studio, looking as if they are re-enacting the Ultimate Fighting Championship. They stretch each other's quads and hamstrings in a way that is rarely seen during batting practice at R.F.K. Stadium.

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When they finish stretching, Jaeger puts them through a variety of excruciating yoga poses, with names like Dolphin, Pigeon and Warrior. In one pose, the pitchers make like ballet dancers, placing their right ankles over their left knees and raising their arms.

In theory, they are improving their balance, sharpening their concentration and learning to take deep breaths in the face of high anxiety.

“If you can calm yourself down in the middle of those poses, you can do it in the middle of the game,” said Errol Simonitsch, a pitcher for the [Minnesota Twins](#). “That’s why, before every pitch, you’ll see me take a deep breath.”

By thinking about his breaths, Simonitsch is limiting how much he thinks about his pitches, and he has a better chance of blocking out distractions. He simply rocks and fires. By the time he reflects on the pitch, it is already released.

This technique was popularized by Zito, who takes so many deep breaths on the mound that it can look as if he is hyperventilating. When Zumaya made his major league debut last season in Kansas City, he ran down the tunnel for a moment to do his breathing exercises.

No one laughed at him, at least not after he touched 103 miles an hour on the radar gun. And no one laughed at Zito, not when he signed a contract in December for \$126 million.

“I thought it was a little kooky at first,” said Jason Hirsh, a pitcher for the [Colorado Rockies](#). “No one does mental training. Everyone just tells you to get big and strong. But I always thought, If it works for those other guys, why can’t it work for me?”

Hirsh represents the flip side of the [steroid](#) controversy, a 6-foot-8 pitcher who has spent the past four off-seasons trying to build up his mind. The meditation and the yoga are all part of a three-hour warm-up designed to prepare the arm for action.

After their studio work, the pitchers drive to nearby Pierce College and assemble on a patch of grass behind the left-field fence. They stretch their arms using rubber tubes, with one end of the tubes connected to their wrists and the other to a chain link fence.

About four hours into the workout, someone finally takes out a ball.

In spring training, pitchers usually throw for 10-15 minutes. At Pierce, they throw for 30-40 minutes. In spring training, they are rarely allowed to play catch more than 120 feet apart. At Pierce, they stand more than 350 feet apart, lobbing balls into the sky.

The amount of time that pitchers throw, and the distance they throw, has long been a source of debate in the baseball community. Jaeger says arms must be developed, not coddled, and he encourages regular long-tossing.

Because Zito has never missed a start and because Zumaya credits Jaeger with adding 5 miles an hour to his fastball, the debate is becoming more heated.

Several major league teams — including the [Mets](#), the Nationals and the [Athletics](#) — are starting to endorse more rigorous throwing programs. Others are reluctant. At spring training, pitchers must follow organizational policy, even if they do not agree with it.

“When these guys are here, they are in a sanctuary,” said Jim Vatcher, a former major league player who assists Jaeger. “When they leave, you hold your breath.”

Some of the pitchers, like Hirsh and Simonitsch, are heading out this week, reporting to spring training. They are hoping to make the big-league roster, help their teams into a

pennant race and enjoy all the success they have visualized in the dark.

The lights are about to come on.

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