



11/28/10 10:00 AM EST

Going long to help keep pitchers healthy

Distance throwing gains proponents, remains controversial

By Doug Miller / MLB.com

Alan Jaeger turned on the television every night throughout October and had to smile, but by the time the World Series was in full swing, he admits that he had other outward displays of emotion.

"I'm not going to lie to you," Jaeger says. "There were some tears."

They were tears of pride and tears of sheer happiness. What Jaeger was fixated on, with every Tim Lincecum fastball and Neftali Feliz slider, was a culmination and a work in progress -- the ripening of the fruit of two decades of work and a lifetime of passion.

"What happened in the playoffs was very symbolic," Jaeger says. "There's a transition going on, thank goodness, of a mentality for the better. Long toss is coming back, and now I don't have to be the only one saying it. People are catching on, and I couldn't be happier."

Jaeger, 43, is a Southern California-based pitching coach and motivational specialist who, along with his business partner, former Major League player Jim Vatcher, runs Jaeger Sports, a company that sets pitchers up with throwing programs primarily based on the principles of old-school long-tossing and encouraging these athletes to throw more, not less, to stay in shape and optimize velocity and arm health.

Until recently, his theories flew in the face of a vast majority of Major League organizational mindsets. Since the early 1990s, Jaeger explains, "throwing programs" for big league teams and their farm systems had pitchers uniformly playing catch starting at 60 feet and increasing in increments of 30 feet, most likely maxing out at 120 feet -- the limit level prescribed by doctors in advising injured pitchers on their rehabilitation programs -- and minimizing the arc of the throws.

Jaeger's program is just about the opposite. His pitchers air it out as long and far as they feel like with increasing arc on the way out and diminishing arc on the way back in. Players can throw as far as 350 feet for 20 minutes, or however long they choose. Whatever feels comfortable. Whatever works for the individual.

"As human beings, everybody's different, and that can't be ignored," Jaeger says. "What also can't be ignored is that an arm is a living, breathing organism that needs to be utilized to its full potential. Why rein it in? Why not get the absolute most out of it and let it grow?"

Bolstered by the exemplary health of his two longest-standing and most well-known clients, former Cy Young Award winner Barry Zito of the Giants and three-time All-Star Dan Haren of the Angels, Jaeger knocked down Major League doors like a possessed encyclopedia salesman, until someone let him in.

"I've done the research and development for 20 years by default," Jaeger says. "It's my highest level of experience in any arena, so when you deal with pitching coordinators or farm directors or general managers or pitching coaches, they are experts in their fields, but they simply haven't had experience in cycling an arm into shape by being with a player for six weeks.

"They're more into grips, mechanics, how to set up pitchers, and how to be a big leaguer. So I had a lot to say and I'll keep saying it."

As it turned out, Texas was the first team to fully answer the doorbell.

During the spring of 2009, with the Rangers' dynamic young GM, Jon Daniels, and his impressive staff, including assistant GM Thad Levine and senior director of player personnel A.J. Preller, Jaeger was invited to the club's Spring Training complex in Surprise, Ariz., to sit down and offer his thoughts on what an organization-wide commitment to long-tossing could do for a team that hadn't won its division or reached the postseason all decade.

Jaeger's pitch wasn't hurt by the presence of team president Nolan Ryan, who had spearheaded an organization-wide commitment to not only improving the pitching but changing the attitude *surrounding* it. Ryan, who ranks fifth in Major League history in innings pitched and first in strikeouts, declared that the Rangers would no longer "baby" pitchers. There would be no more fear of innings and no more excuses.

"I really think that experience is a great teacher, and I think that with me on our pitchers, I think I have an appreciation," Ryan said during this year's playoff run. "I see things with our pitchers that a lot of people don't because they didn't stand on that mound and experience all the different things that I experienced in my career."

What Ryan and Daniels saw from Jaeger was something that made a lot of sense.

"Alan is a high-energy guy with a passion for keeping players healthy," Daniels told MLB.com. "We hope this has enabled us to stay healthier throughout the season."

It has, and Texas has prospered on the mound, with the results speaking quite loudly for themselves all the way to the 2010 Fall Classic.

"The Rangers are symbolic of when an organization can do when they buy into a system that really helps players optimize their potential," Jaeger says.

Meanwhile, Lincecum, who won Cy Young Awards in 2008 and 2009 before abandoning the long-toss program his father, Chris, had taught him along with his unique and unmistakable pitching mechanics, suffered the worst month of his career this past August (0-5, 7.82 ERA) before going back to long toss.

"The whole purpose of it is to be able to get extension so I can get my pitches out in front and feel them coming off my finger tips, where I'm not pushing the ball to the plate, I'm pulling it, which is how I throw," Lincecum said. "I'm just trying to get that back that feeling, that's the whole reason behind [going back to long toss]."

Lincecum, of course, rebounded to go 5-1 with a 1.94 ERA in September and October and then went 4-1 with a 2.43 ERA in the postseason, including two of the victorious Giants' four wins in the World Series.

But even though Jaeger has had a breakthrough with Texas and sees the benefits of long-tossing with Lincecum, he realizes he still has a long way to go.

Detractors and disbelievers are around every corner, and plenty of big league teams are among them.

Former Red Sox pitcher Dick Mills has a business built around teaching mechanics and maximizing velocity, and he is a staunch opponent of long-tossing. He has released countless YouTube videos angrily decrying this practice. In his latest, "How Long Toss Can Ruin Your Pitching Mechanics and Your Arm," he says, "Why would you practice mechanics that are totally different and will not help a pitcher during a game? And why would you practice throwing mechanics that are clearly more stressful where the arm does most of the work?"

The Kansas City Royals aren't quite as blatant as Mills, but they have their doubts about long toss, too. Director of Minor League operations Scott Sharp says the club has a pitching philosophy that is tailored to the individual but that long-tossing doesn't go beyond 120 feet very often.

"Everyone says, 'Some teams do and some teams don't long toss,' but they don't define what long toss means," Sharp says. "For us, any time you're throwing over 60 feet, six inches, that's long-tossing because it's beyond what a pitcher does in a game.

"But as far as 250 feet, 300 and beyond ... we discourage that. A lot of the information we gathered through our doctors, through our trainers and also through certain surgeons indicates that long toss like that is not good for you over the long haul.

"We don't encourage our guys to do that because of the propensity to get out of your mechanics to throw the ball that hard. ... Where in the game do you have a release point where you would need that? So why are you training your body to throw in that manner?"

"We had guys who were extreme long tossers when they signed, and we gave them certain latitudes, and before you know it, they felt like they don't need to do that anymore."

Jaeger can only disagree, forge ahead with his philosophy and keep a running list of teams that are catching on -- in addition to Texas, other clubs who have embraced long tossing to some degree include Arizona, Washington, Oakland, St. Louis, Minnesota, the New York Yankees, Toronto, Detroit and the Angels.

And then there are the individual pitchers who do it -- a list of some of the game's youngest and brightest, including David Price, Mat Latos, Ubaldo Jimenez, Mike Leake, Clayton Kershaw, Cole Hamels, Josh Johnson and the 2010 American League Cy Young Award winner, Felix Hernandez of Seattle.

"I do it every day," Hernandez says. "I can't imagine not doing it. I've done it since I was a kid throwing with my brother in Venezuela. Some days I'll go and throw 300 feet, easy. Some days I won't. It all depends. But I definitely think it makes me better."

Jaeger hears that and smiles again. He knows his years of work are paying off.

"It's really a labor of love because I know how important pitching is to the game of baseball and I know there are very simple ways to keep pitchers healthier and make them stronger," he says.

"Hopefully someday everyone will agree."

***Doug Miller** is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

[MLB.com](#)