

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Chapman's quest for fire sometimes needs a bit of dousing

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It's baseball's "quest for fire," and the hottest place around these days is wherever the Cubs are playing.

The age-old fascination for a pitcher's ability to throw 100 mph or more is being satisfied by closer Aroldis Chapman's relatively accurate readings of 102 to 104 mph on successive pitches via radar guns. Chapman has humped it up as high as 105.1 prior to his arrival in Chicago.

And yet exceeding the century mark isn't always the desired result. Although most batters cannot catch up with Chapman's fastest fastball, the classic wisdom is the change of speeds to fool hitters. The logic is eventually, repetition of the fastball will enable the best hitters to time the pitch with their own bat speed – power supplying power.

A ranking expert on this is our old friend Lee Arthur Smith. The size of a power forward he once was at 6-foot-5, 260 pounds, Big Lee once was reputedly timed as fast as 101 mph. More likely he was a legitimate 95-96 mph, but seemed faster often pitching in creeping late-afternoon shadows in 3 p.m. games at Wrigley Field.

Smith threw hard with radar guns already perfected. But the game's promoters didn't obsess with his speed like is done with Chapman.

"They didn't throw it up on the (message) board on every damn pitch," said Smith, now the roving minor-league pitching instructor for the San Francisco Giants.

Relatively early in his career, Smith came under the tutelage of Fergie Jenkins, who counseled him to perfect a slider and forkball while learning to set up hitters. Unfortunately, Smith's mastery of the benders and dippers didn't wholly kick in during his Cubs tenure. GM Jim Frey rushed him out of town in his first trade in 1987.



Lee Smith (left) learned early on a good breaking pitch is necessary, and he advocates the same for Aroldis Chapman.

Predecessor Dallas Green also second-guessed Smith when he hung a breaking pitch serving up a homer to nemesis Jack Clark a few years earlier.

Smith's ability to employ the slider and forkball would serve him well in a closer's career that lasted until 1997 and produced a 478-saves total that should have landed him in the Hall of Fame. Father Time usually cuts down on a pitcher's speed, unless you're Nolan Ryan, in your 30s. And even Ryan had a sharp curve on which to fall back.

'Dawson would kill' closers' fastballs

Smith advises closers, including Chapman, to mix it up with benders every so often. A closer who throws nothing but fastballs runs some risks.

"Andre Dawson would kill these damn closers now throwing all fastballs," he said.

"The main thing is we didn't try to throw as hard as we could all the time. We tried to change speeds. I prided myself on knowing how to pitch, and not just being a thrower."

And if you do throw at century-levels, the trick is to not use maximum effort. 1980s Cardinals closer Todd Worrell, who could get it to 100 mph on occasion, said when he was throwing his fastest, it was like playing catch – free and easy.

So Smith is watching Chapman to see if he can locate his slider at just the right time.

"I like to see where he's using his breaking ball to right-handed hitters," he said. "They can't hit ball down and in."

Chapman's 90 mph slider deployed on occasion certainly satisfies Theo Epstein and posse. Like with most of their other recent decisions, the present baseball operations department has proven a refreshing break from the ill-informed policies of previous regimes.

Smith got the guff from Green, surprisingly, even though the latter was a former reliever. Back in 1968, manager Leo Durocher did not like homegrown reliever Bill Stoneman hanging his curve. He told Stoneman to keep throwing his fastball until the Pirates hit it off the Wrigley Field scoreboard. Stoneman was noted for the curve when he became a dependable starter, including a no-hitter, on the Montreal Expos.

The La Roche name was prominent in Chicago baseball once before 2016. In 1973, lefty Dave La Roche – father of Adam -- was the Cubs' prize off-season acquisition to shore up a sketchy bullpen. La Roche had a respectably hard fastball. But he ran into conflict with the John Holland-led brass. La Roche complained his bosses expected him to throw harder than he possibly could. La Roche had two poor Cubs seasons (composite career-highs 5.17 ERA and WHIP near 1.60) amid an otherwise effective 14-year bullpen career with the Angels, Twins, Indians and Yankees.

Fortunately, management had advanced in their thinking by the millennium. Andy MacPhail's people got on 100 mph thrower Kyle Farnsworth to complement the hard stuff with a bender. Eventually the combative, night-crawling Farnsworth listened well enough to last for a 16-season, nine-team career.

Kerry Wood was timed several times as high as 99 mph on his final pitch of the game in the eighth on then-assistant pitching coach Rick Kranitz's radar gun. But even though he was known as "Kid K," Wood was renowned for his other-worldly slider-curve that darted away from bats in his 20-strikeout game. After undergoing Tommy John surgery in 1999, Wood said he'd settle for a top speed of 95 mph if he could locate the fast-ball.

During the same era, reliever Terry Adams threw as hard as Wood. Briefly assuming the Cubs closer's role in 1997, Adams never perfected his breaking pitches or sharp command to stick around for a long career.

Cashner exceeded 103 mph

More recently, Andrew Cashner was a century project. The Cubs' No. 1 draft pick in 2008, Cashner likely was the fastest pitcher produced by either Chicago team. In his rookie season in 2010, Cashner could get it to 100 mph. Problem was, it was located just right for Paul Konerko to hit it out at 102 mph in a Crosstown Classic game. Cashner, of course, netted Anthony Rizzo from the Padres in a Jan. 6, 2012 deal, Epstein's first stroke of genius. Weeks after going west, Cashner was actually clocked at 103.3 mph in a San Diego spring-training game.



Before Aroldis Chapman, Bobby Jenks (left) recorded the top speed of any player in a Chicago uniform, while Andrew Cashner, a No. 1 Cubs pick in 2008, topped out at more than 103 mph as a San Diego Padre. Jenks photo credit [Keith Allison](#). Cashner photo credit [Arturo Pardavila III](#).

The hindsight of four decades bestows century-level speed on a trio of home-grown White Sox in the early 1970s – Goose Gossage, Terry Forster and Bart Johnson. But in an era when only a minority of pitchers on each staff were true hard throwers, the trio seemed faster than they were. The angular Johnson even was nicknamed “Senor Smoke.” More likely, they threw up to the mid-90s range.

Forster was actually timed at 94.9 mph in a ballyhoo experiment on the night of Sept. 7, 1974 at Anaheim Stadium. The lefty’s timing was a secondary reading to the main show – to determine if Ryan actually threw more than 100 mph via a Rockwell International infrared laser radar device in the pressbox. Ryan was timed at 100.8 mph compared to 100.9 three weeks earlier via the same contraption. I remember the incident well, being on the receiving end of baseball writer Richard Dozer’s story coming through on a smelly early FAX machine late on a Saturday night in the Chicago Tribune’s newsroom.

But eFastball.com actually rated Ryan’s swiftest pitch at 108.1 mph, using an “FFE” formula where the speed was measured at 50 feet [in an article about the fastest timed speeds in history](#).

Thus Ryan was rated as the fastest pitcher in history, ½ mph higher than Bob Feller in 1946. Rapid Robert was clocked by a chronograph, like a stopwatch/timer used to measure the start and stop times. The chronograph needs two or more “screens” to tell it when to start and stop as the object passes through the screens. Feller also was timed by such jerry-built methods as throwing while a speeding police motorcycle covered the equivalent distance. The Hall of Famer recalled his speed “duel” with the motorcycle when the Chicago Baseball Museum honored him for the 60th anniversary of his Opening Day no-hitter at old Comiskey Park in 2010.



Bob Feller (left) is honored by Dr. David J. Fletcher and the Chicago Baseball Museum in 2010 on the 60th anniversary of his Opening Day no-hitter at old Comiskey Park. Feller was clocked as the second-hardest thrower in MLB history after Nolan Ryan.

Smith rated Ryan and the Astros’ J.R. Richard, whose career was cut short by a stroke in 1980, as being able to throw as hard as Chapman. The official runner-up to Chapman in speed annals in Chicago history belongs to Bobby Jenks. Soon after his callup to the Sox in 2005, he was clocked at 102 mph.

Moral of the story is Chapman can survive by blowing away hitters with sheer speed, but better possess a Plan B. The evidence is so strong. Smith said he’d literally twist hitters into pretzels if he could throw a changeup as slow as, say, 86 mph.

The two greatest examples of taking something off maximum warp pitched in Chicago. Greg Maddux threw up to 94 mph in his early 20s, then realized by dialing back 3-5

mph for better location, he'd have success. His 355 wins and Hall of Fame induction two years ago was Mad Dog's ultimate vindication. And then there is the case of Mark Buehrle, ignored until the 38th round in 1998 due to his pokey fastball. Sixteen seasons, 214 wins, a Sox World Series ring and likely Top Five all-time popularity among Sox fans are his reward for staying in the slower lane.

Sheer speed, the baseball equivalent of the SR-71 Blackbird, is entertaining, and often effective. But the sure thing is putting on the brakes at just the right time. Test that strategy around Halloween if the Cubs are still playing and Chapman is on the mound.