



Baseball, specifically pitching, fascinates Trevor Bauer. Trevor Bauer fascinates me. So does baseball, but that's not what this is about. The 22-year-old Bauer was made available in trade talks this past offseason because the Arizona Diamondbacks turned what should have been fascination and inquisitiveness into contempt and a myriad of misconceptions. Without knowing what was said or how Bauer handled himself when questioned by the Diamondbacks front office, I'm perfectly happy to consider their loss our gain and welcome the chance to see Bauer pitching for the Indians for the next several seasons.

To call Bauer a student of the game seems like a monumental understatement. Studying the art of pitching consumes Bauer. He will stop during bullpen sessions to evaluate his mechanics on a high-speed camera. He looks disgusted with himself on the mound when a pitch winds up going where it shouldn't. He challenges the conventional wisdom of pitching on a daily basis, from his long-toss routine to his beliefs on how to pitch.

Everybody has that friend, colleague, or family member who thinks they are always right. It's off-putting and leaves a sour impression. It's especially frustrating if that person will go back and forth with you when they are very clearly wrong and you know it. But, to honestly be alienated with that person, you should have to know, without a doubt, that you are right. Matt Damon played Jason Bourne in the first three movies of the Bourne series. That's a fact. If somebody says that it was Jason Statham, they're wrong.

If the topic at hand is something more subjective, where there are multiple ways of doing something, there is no right answer. There is probably a method or answer that is right more often than others, but, there is no concrete answer. Think of it like a recipe. The conventional way to make it may be the most successful and most delicious, but some people make

alterations to that dish. They may add a spice or two. They may cook it at a different temperature. It may have a different texture. Ultimately, both people are getting to the same result - a completed dish with slight differences. And you cannot definitively say that the way you make it is better than the way the other person makes it unless you try it.

Pitching is subjective. There are so many ways to get a hitter out and so many philosophies on how to pitch. The Diamondbacks disagreed with Trevor Bauer's approach to pitching. They may have listened to him explain his methodology, but they didn't agree with it and tried to change it. As a result, it alienated Bauer and he was labeled immature and arrogant.

What's important to remember about Bauer is that he is not a guy who is challenged baseball's conventional wisdom on pitching to get his place in the record books or be a rebel. He studies his craft tirelessly and truly believes that what he does is the right way to do it. From his pregame routine with the Oates' Shoulder Tube and his long toss in excess of 300 feet to his way of attacking hitters up in the zone with his fastball, everything is a calculated decision. Everything is a conclusion based on his personal study of pitching.

So far, the Indians have allowed Bauer to be himself. Behind closed doors, they are likely offering suggestions, alternatives, or asking Bauer to explain himself. Players rave about Terry Francona as somebody who respects his players and is straightforward with them. As Justin Masterson said, via Matt Underwood on a recent TV broadcast, Francona treats the players like men. Respect, more often than not, is a mutual thing. The Indians visited with Bauer immediately after acquiring him to see his routine and talk to him about it. Bauer and pitching coach Mickey Callaway attended the same symposium at Ron Woolforth's Texas Baseball Ranch. The Indians respect Trevor Bauer. And, in turn, he respects them.

By allowing Bauer to be himself, the Indians are handling the situation properly. As I mentioned, Bauer's philosophies are based on deep study. He truly believes that his approach is the best and that it makes the most sense. It's clear that his belief is strong, hence the pushback towards the Diamondbacks' front office. As difficult as it may be to sit idly by, the only way to get Bauer to change would be to allow him the chance to succeed or fail. If Bauer fails, he's clearly perceptive enough to change. If Bauer succeeds, you let him be.

The relationship with Bauer has to go way beyond pitching. Think about kids who are labeled "unteachable" or players that are labeled "uncoachable". How often is the problem the kid or player and how often is the problem the approach that the teacher or coach is taking? Bauer is

a smart, perceptive person whose love of pitching goes way beyond most players. The way to get through to those people is to get to know them inside and out. Find out what makes them tick. Educate yourself on their ideas before shoving yours in their face.

The Indians seem to have done their homework on him and are now getting to see his thoughts and ideologies in practice. At times this season, Bauer's performance on the mound has been frustrating, walking 15 batters in 16.1 innings of work, largely because of erratic fastball command. As a stand-alone issue, the walks are a problem. But in the context of the rest of Bauer's stats, he has allowed just nine hits over those 16.1 innings and a well-below-league-average line drive rate of 16.3 percent. Inducing weak contact is a tremendous asset for a pitcher and it can limit the damage that walks do.

Bauer's entire philosophy of attacking hitters has to do with working the fastball up in the strike zone and then changing speeds and eye level with his breaking ball. Fastballs up in the zone produce more fly balls and more swings and misses than fastballs down in the zone. Bauer once proclaimed on Twitter "I hate ground balls". Why? Bauer explained in [this interview](#) with Nick Piccoro from last summer.

*Yeah. It was controversial. I knew that when I posted it. It was part of the reason I posted it. I like to post things that make people think. The initial reaction to 'I hate ground balls' is, 'Oh my God, the sky is falling! How could anyone...' But when you actually look at it and think about the statistics behind it, it makes a lot of sense. Hitters are trained to hit the ball hard on the ground. Fly balls are bad. You don't want to hit the ball in the air. Hit the ball on the ground. Pitchers are taught to get them to hit the ball on the ground. Something's got to give. Hitters and pitchers can't both want the same thing. And ground balls have a much higher chance of producing a base runner. You've got to field the ball, throw the ball and field the ball again. That's three things you have to do. A fly ball you just have to catch it. A strikeout you don't have to do anything. Ground balls statistically go for hits a lot more than fly balls.*

*"Sure, fly balls produce more power numbers and stuff like that. But everyone gets so scared of the home run and the double, but if you actually have a plan on how to disrupt hitters' timing and you're not just guessing, 'Oh, I think this pitch here' 'I think that pitch there.' With Effective Velocity and understanding the physics behind a swing and hitters' timing and stuff like that -- I'm not scared of giving up fly balls. If I do a good job of disrupting a hitter's timing, they're not going to be able to hit it out of the park. So, to me, strikeouts and fly balls are key. The more of those I can get the better off I'm going to do. The amount of fly balls that I get aren't going to produce the amount of hits that some other pitchers' fly balls may produce. At least that's the theory. And, so far, it's proven out. I don't know how it's going to play at the big league level.*

*"It's just stuff like that that challenges the conventional wisdom. 'Do it because everybody else does it.' I'm not exactly in that mold. People don't know how to take it sometimes. It's not just frustration. 'Oh, I gave up five hits on ground balls today so now I hate ground balls.' I feel like I'm doing a better job of sequencing pitches and stuff like that if I get the ball hit in the air than if I get it hit on the ground."*

He's not wrong. From 2008-13, the yearly batting average on ground balls has ranged from .229-.237. In that same span, the yearly batting average on fly balls has ranged from .224-.239. It's Bauer's cerebral approach that gives him this philosophy. We take ground balls for granted because we see them so often, but, as Bauer correctly points out, it takes three individual plays to make a ground ball out. For a fly ball, the fielder has to catch the ball.

It may seem inconsequential to have such a small difference in batting average between ground balls and fly balls. Every hit is a bad thing, regardless of when it happens or the situation. Every hit gives the opposition a higher percentage chance of scoring runs. Any edge a pitcher can gain to prevent hits from happening is a good thing.

While Bauer's logic is correct, he still has to make an adjustment. Not only do Major League hitters lay off the high fastball more than minor league hitters do, but Major League umpires do not call the high strike. That forces Bauer to walk a very thin line. Major League hitters will punish pitches up in the strike zone if they aren't located almost exactly where they're supposed to be.

I would imagine the Indians have made the suggestion to Bauer to use the fastball down in the zone a little bit more often. They certainly have the right kind of evidence to do it. Bauer is fixated on throwing strikes. Major League umpires don't call the high strike. That resonates with Bauer, who does everything for a reason. It won't stop him from working up in the zone, especially in hitter's counts to induce fly ball outs, but it will get him to re-evaluate his approach in certain instances and against certain hitters. It's a subtle change with a lot of merit. The kind somebody as analytical as Bauer would appreciate. It's not a major overhaul. It's a slight variation. Even somebody as set in their ways as Bauer is will take that coachable point and run with it. Because it makes perfect sense and can be backed up by statistical evidence. To return to the example above about what actor played Jason Bourne, there's no subjectivity to Major League umpire strike zones. The data is very clear to see and is factual. Umpires are more likely to call low strikes than high strikes, something that [Mike Fast of Baseball Prospectus wrote about](#) back in 2011.

The take rate of Major League players has to have affected Bauer. As Bauer told David Laurila of Fangraphs in [this interview](#) , his goal is to retire every hitter in four pitches or less.

*"I think the term 'pitching to contact' is kind of a catch-all phrase for throwing strikes. It's 'pitch to contact; we want you to throw the ball in the zone.' I pitch to contact, but less than 80% on-time contact is what I shoot for. Once I get to two strikes, I don't want anybody making contact.*

*"I think people misinterpret the phrase 'pitch to contact' as wanting guys to put the ball in play, as opposed to just wanting to throw strikes. Ideally, if you could throw three strikes to every hitter, and have them swing and miss at every single pitch, that'd be the ideal game to throw because they have no chance of getting on base. The more you pitch away from contact, the better chance you have to win, as long as you're throwing the ball in the zone.*

*"That is kind of a dichotomy that people don't really realize. To most people, throwing the ball in the zone means that you're going to get contact — people are going to hit the ball. It's true. If you throw the ball in the zone, people are going to make contact. But, if you understand the swing, and how long the bat is actually in the hitting zone, and how to work front to back with hitters, meaning changing speeds with one pitch at 95, the next at 80, the next 87, the next 75. If you can work front-to-back like that, speed-wise, you really disrupt the hitter's timing so they're never hitting anything hard. The whole pitch-to-contact term to me is like a catch-all, simplistic phrase. I don't really like the term.*

*"My goal is to throw 75% to 80% strikes, and 75% to 80% first-pitch strikes, at different speeds and different movements. When my pitch count runs up on me, it's because I just can't locate anything like I need to that day. It's not like I'm trying to pitch away from contact, or that I'm scared of throwing the ball in the zone, or anything like that. It's just that I'm not really executing as well as I do some days.*

*"I never really change my approach, because if I execute how I want to, my pitch count is going be down. My goal is to have every at bat over in four pitches or less, and the only way you do that is by throwing three out of the first four pitches for strikes. That way they're either on base with a hit, or it's a ground out, a fly out or they strike out, because there were three balls in the zone they had gotten to hit. Keeping my pitch count down and my approach go hand in hand. It's just that I have to get better at executing my approach."*

That doesn't sound like a kid who is hard to deal with. He admits that he has to get better. Almost every baseball mind would acknowledge that simply throwing strikes isn't good enough. It's about quality strikes. It's about changing speeds. It's about upsetting a hitter's timing.

Remember all of this the next time you watch one of Bauer's starts. He's just 22 years old. He's still learning Major League hitters, the Major League strike zone, and he's still learning as a player. Very few 22-year-olds enter the league as polished, refined, finished products.

Trevor Bauer's ceiling is incredibly high. He studies the game harder than anybody. He strives to be the best. He wants to see all of his hard work pay off. Perhaps, he wants to validate his practices, his ideologies, and his methods to prove something to the detractors and naysayers. We should consider ourselves lucky to have somebody who cares that much on our side.