

# Performance Work with College Baseball Pitchers: CBT vs Brainspotting (A Case Study)

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By [Stephen Walker, PhD](#)



*From the Editor: Earl Poteet is one of a few selected Brainspotting practitioners who have trained with Dr. David Grand, its creator. He is a former head coach and player of multiple sports who has consciously begun to focus on the use of Brainspotting with performance problems amongst players that may be trauma based. Please take a moment to familiarize yourself on more recent posting explaining the underpinnings and applications for [Brainspotting in Podium Sports Journal](#).*

by Earl Poteet, MSW

Beginning in January of 2011, I had the opportunity to work with the baseball team with a Division II NCAA baseball team as their team psychotherapist. Since the head coach had never had a therapist work with any of his teams before, the foundation for working with the players was contingent upon them seeking me out for help with their performance on the baseball diamond. This meant that I could only work with a player if they approached me for help.

The first introduction that I had to the team I was given an opportunity to speak. Among other things I made reference to the fact that previous life traumas could possibly manifest in a performance block, even with a player who felt that there was no subconscious basis for it. During the course of the season, I built a good relationship with the players, as a means of gaining an empathic foothold should they ask for help.

It became apparent that most of the players were typical athletes in that they thought that if they just simply worked harder and maintained focus they would beat their performance blocks and slumps. I taught most of the players the neurobiological basis for performance anxiety that lies in the autonomic nervous system/limbic system areas of their body and brain.

From this teaching, most of the players were given experiential breathing techniques. Cognitive re-structuring of their thinking processes was emphasized. Relaxation cues were given to each of them according to their individual reactivity. And general cognitive behavioral philosophies, such as those taught in [“The Mental Game of Baseball” by H.A. Dorfman and Karl Kuehl](#), were given to the players as the head coach was familiar with the book and thought they were sound mental game baseball principles.

## **The Tale of Two Pitchers**

### **Pitcher #1**

Opening weekend began well enough with a doubleheader sweep at home over the visiting non-conference team. The team won the two games (By scores of 6-4 and 6-5, respectively), but not in convincing enough style to suit the head coach. During the team meeting prior to the concluding doubleheader the following day, the coach ripped into his team calling them “soft” and not worthy of facing better competition. His tirade was so complete, in fact, that the team had a difficult time in accepting why they were being so brutally criticized when they had indeed won the first two games of the four game series.

Scheduled to pitch the first game that day was a junior pitcher (whom I will refer to as Pitcher #1) who had not won a game in his previous two seasons at the junior college level. Having the head coach place additional pressure on his team to play better than they had the previous day, he struggled in the first game and they lost a slugfest. The second pitcher fared no better and the team dropped both games to even their early season record.

Of the fifteen pitchers on the pitching staff, only two of them decided to seek my help with their pitching performances. Of the four starters, only pitcher #1 sought out my help. He was interested in relieving the anxiety that had previously accompanied his performances on the mound in junior college and were now starting to carry over into his third college season.

Beyond the breathing and cognitive restructuring techniques already provided, Pitcher #1 received his first Brainspotting session, which took place prior to his third start of the season. In that session, he recalled a trauma that happened to him when he was a young boy. His father and he were in a store when 12 steel doors that were propped up fell on him as he was passing by. We processed that trauma using Brainspotting. He then took the mound for his second start on March 6, 2011, and pitched his way to a dominating first win (6 innings, 6 hits, 2 walks, 6 K's) as a collegiate baseball player. He was ecstatic to say the least.

During the next Brainspotting session, we engaged Dr. David Grand, who did a phone session with pitcher #1 in order to show the protocol of working through a session that involved going through the actual pitching motion to detect any spots where trauma might still be held.

The following two outings were a disaster for pitcher #1. He took the mound against two of the top-rated teams in the league on March 12 & 19, 2011. First, he experienced

a regression against the next opponent, giving up 7 hits and 6 earned runs in 2.2 innings against a good-hitting team. Again with the additional pressure of being placed in a position where he had to perform well, and with the head coach telling him he “wasn’t worth a sh\*t,” he got the first hitter to fly out and then walked the next four batters in a row and was then pulled from the game. He was placed in the coaches’ proverbial doghouse and not given another start the rest of the collegiate baseball season.

Thrust into the role of being a “mop-up” pitcher in games that were already out of reach to win, pitcher #1 sank into a mode of depression and semi-withdrawal. It wasn’t until prior to the last series of the regular season that he sought me out to do more Brainspotting work. During this last session, we not only processed all the frustrations of his current and prior collegiate career, but also performed a visual imagery and coaching component that was recommended by Dr. Grand.

The next two games were visibly different for pitcher #1. You could see by the way he stood on the mound that there was a new-found confidence that had been lacking before. He went out and threw 4 strong innings in relief and gave the team a chance to get back in the ballgame. The final game of the season, during the season ending tournament, he was brought in at the end of the game and pitched well again. His ERA for the entire collegiate season was 10.02, but his ERA for the last two games that he pitched after the final Brainspotting session was 2.25.

## **Pitcher #2**

Pitcher number two was slated to contend as a starting pitcher from the beginning of the fall practice sessions working into the start of the regular season. Based on his capacity to throw a fastball in the upper-80’s to his decent off-speed and breaking pitches, he looked to compete for a starting position with the team pitching rotation.

The season that had started so poorly for pitcher #1 seemed to be the reverse for pitcher #2. In his first appearance in game two of the opening day doubleheader, he came in in relief and picked up the win in allowing only 1 hit and no runs in 1.1 innings of work, picking up the win along the way. The clock struck midnight soon enough for pitcher #2, however, after being there for the profanity-laced tirade that accompanied them out onto the field for the second doubleheader of the season. Once again called in for relief, pitcher #2 took the mound with the team already trailing by a score of 8-3 in the top of the 4<sup>th</sup> inning. Sent in with the expectations of delivering the stoppage the team so desperately needed, and with the expectations and negative talk coming from the coach, he gave up 7 earned runs on 6 hits with 3 walks. The date was February 13, 2011, and he would not pitch again until March 9.

When pitcher #2 had the next opportunity to pitch in a live game, it would come in a start in a non-league contest in the middle of the week (Games in the league were typically played Friday-Sunday). His outing was again not very positive as he gave up 3 runs on 2 hits with 2 walks in 2 innings of work.

His next opportunity would come against another non-league opponent on March 15. It is interesting to note that the entire team was looking forward to playing the non-league doubleheader against this team because they were not very good and teams were beating them by double digits coming into the games. Pitcher #2 got the start for the first game

and did not allow a run in 3 innings, although he still struggled with pitch command and walked 4 in picking up his second win of the young season.

While they swept this non-league team, they did so not to the liking of the head coach with victories by scores of 6-2 and 4-1. As a result, they were once again subjected to a torrent of verbal lashings from their head coach. Four days later pitcher #2 would take the mound in relief once again, this time against one of the better teams in the league, and he would surrender 2 earned runs on 2 hits with 1 walk in one inning.

On a league road trip, pitcher #2 was brought into the game that they were trailing by a score of 4-1 in the bottom of the 5<sup>th</sup> inning. He pitched well, stopping the bleeding and pitching 2 innings while not allowing a run with 2 walks. He would be brought in again on the final day of the series a day later and give up 2 hits in 2/3 of an inning pitched while allowing no runs again.

Next, pitcher #2 would get the first call out of the bullpen on April 2. The team had just lost a tough close ballgame to the same visiting team the day before and was in need of a win to keep their season alive. He came into the game in the third inning with the team already trailing by a score of 4-1 with runners at first and third. He allowed the inherited runners to score, gave up an additional 4 earned runs off 5 hits with 2 walks in 2.2 innings pitched. In an irony of baseball, he picked up his 3<sup>rd</sup> win of the season as the team exploded for 12 more runs in a 13-11 victory.

Pitcher #2 would get his next start against the worst team in the league on April 2, 2011. It was the final game of the 4-game set, and he was given the opportunity to start. He threw 3 innings, gave up 5 hits, 4 runs, 3 earned runs, and walked 4. He was relieved in the 4<sup>th</sup> inning and did not pick up the win. He would not take the mound again for a month when he was called into a game against the top team in the division on May 1, 2011 in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning where he gave up 2 earned runs on 3 hits. He would not pitch again that season.

I went into much more depth with pitcher #2's performance over the course of the season than pitcher #1 for a reason. Pitcher #1 struggled for much of the season with the exception of his first victory as a college pitcher in 3 years on March 6. Pitcher #2 had what would appear to be an up and down type of season where there were flashes of the potential interspersed with the control problems (as exemplified by a lot of batters walked) along with giving up runs as well as a lot of hits.

I truly believe that in all the years that I had the pleasure of playing baseball, and the privilege of coaching baseball at every level from little league to college, when an athlete is in the throes of competition it is difficult to have the courage to admit there is a problem. Magnifying this problem for pitcher #2 was the fact that he would have outings where he would have some success.

In the book "The Mental Game of Baseball" the authors talk about the typical psychological approaches to performing better on the field when playing the game. While the book goes into great depth in regards to cognitive restructuring, the crux of the book focuses on the ability to think positively while out-working your opponents. This is the approach that pitcher #2, and, most other athletes use. They believe that the

extra work is the answer in a vast majority of athletes today, rather than admitting that something else that is deeper could be affecting their performance on the field.

I fully believe that the reasons that pitcher #1 sought me out to do Brainspotting sessions, and pitcher #2 never did fit this rationale that is so prevalent in sport. Pitcher #1 understood what I told the team in the beginning of the season. He understood that there could be a deeper trauma that was interfering with his ability to move forward and become the type of dominating pitcher at the collegiate level that he wanted to be, and that his ability showed that he could achieve. Pitcher #2 simply thought that if he continued to utilize the power of positive thinking, combined with the proper breathing techniques on the mound to regulate his autonomic nervous system and simply work harder, that he would be successful.

The practice of Brainspotting with this college team as a means of resolving a players deeper traumas and improving their lives is noteworthy. The traditional use of Dorfman's approach (having everyone simply work harder and think positively about themselves and their performances) has shown to be limited, since many athletes will still suffer from the deeper issues and unresolved traumas. In the world of highly competitive sports, which college baseball definitely falls under, it is the position of this paper that sport psychology consultants can no longer ignore the previous lives of the athlete in addressing their performance in the here and now.

### **Where Are They Now**

At the conclusion of the collegiate season, the two pitchers went to the same league for the summer season of 2011. Although they pitch now for different teams, they face the same teams in competition, and still have the same velocity and pitch selection, which continues to make this a valid comparison of the efficacy of utilizing Brainspotting with traditional sports CBT.

It is important to also note that although this comparison is little more than two case studies, the results are congruent due to the shared experience of playing for the same college coach and facing the same competition and engaging in similar training regimens. Although the results will be placed into question over small sample size, the continued study of measurement variables is likely to show validity in the shared experience of the two pitchers at the collegiate and summer season levels. This comparison could also offer a useful qualitative analysis opportunity.

People may argue that the time frame used in this comparison is not extensive enough and does not provide longevity of results. This is indeed true, however, there is enough data and variance in approach to make this a valid inquiry, especially as a primer for more sophisticated research design going forward with larger samples.

Just the same, for the young man who is Pitcher #1, this brief period has not only improved his pitching performance over the short-term, but as he related to me "It has made the game fun for me to pitch again." We are not only helping young athletes by helping them improve performance, we are also increasing self-esteem, self-efficacy, resiliency, and a desire to achieve even more for themselves.

The author is providing this information partially as relevance of the use of Brainspotting as a protocol for improving the performance of pitchers at any level of play in the game of baseball. The invitation must now be made to the greater sports psychology community for further study and investigation of the efficacy of treating sports performance problems as psycho-social problems that result from previous life traumas.

### 2011 College Pitching Statistical Comparison

(Both Were in Their Junior Season)

	G	GS	W	L	SV	CG	IP	H	R	ER	BB	K	K/G	HR	ERA
P#1	11	5	1	6	0	0	32.1	53	41	36	20	26	7.24	0	10.02
P#2	10	3	3	0	0	0	19.1	26	23	21	19	11	5.12	0	9.78

### 2011 Summer Baseball League Statistical Comparison

(As of August 9, 2011)

	G	GS	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	W	L	SV	2B	3B	ERA
Pitcher 1	9	8	61.1	49	16	15	15	43	6	0	0	5	2	2.20
Pitcher 2	9	8	43.2	56	41	29	25	30	1	4	1	9	0	5.98

**\*Note-Pitcher #1 earned a no-decision in over 6 innings pitched in his last outing in his teams victory. It was to date, the most hits and runs he has allowed all summer thus far in giving up 5 runs on 10 hits. His ERA is still in the top ten, prior to the last outing, he was leading the league in ERA with a 1.17. Pitcher #2 has the 5<sup>th</sup> worst ERA in the league as of this writing.**



About Earl Poteet, MSW

Earl has been a professional therapist/case manager/counselor/teacher/coordinator since his undergraduate days at the University of Southern Colorado in 1979. Graduating Magna cum Laude from Colorado State University in 2008 with a Masters in Social Work. Trained in the cognitive-behavioral aspects of human behavior and psychology of “Love and Logic”, his 30+ year history as a part-time professional stage and radio entertainer, he sought out training in Dr. David Grand’s Brainspotting to work with people in resolving their previous life trauma’s issues to achieve great progress in their lives.

Earl has worked in the world of athletics as a Head Baseball Coach at the high school, collegiate and semiprofessional level. He has served as an assistant football and basketball coach as well. In addition to playing baseball, football & basketball, Earl currently enjoys an occasional round of golf. Earl operates under the principle that everyone deserves the utmost that life has to offer and to live up to his or her personal and professional potential. Earl is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) in the state of Colorado.