

CB: What are some of the teaching techniques you use as an instructor at Top Gun which may transfer over into baseball instruction?

BARGER: We sit down before each mission and talk about exactly the way we will perform, whether there are two of us or four of us — however many different airplanes there are. We go over what exactly each person is responsible for. We have a solid game plan. Then we talk about what ifs. What if this happens or that happens? We play the whole evolution beforehand before we even get into the game. By the time we get out there, there aren't too many surprises, which can be useful on both fronts of what we do and baseball instruction is striving to accomplish.

CB: Does the Top Gun School focus on competition with pilots for the goal of being the best or was this editorial license played with the movie Top Gun?

BARGER: There really isn't any competition out here. We are really trying to build the team concept. While everyone gets evaluated throughout our school, it really isn't a posted grading system or anything like that. They always get immediate feedback on how well we felt they performed after that particular mission.

It may be useful to take the baseball team as a whole after practice or a game and go over what the team did well and what the team didn't do so well. Here is what we need to work on. Then individually, the coach may find it effective to go over what each player did well and not so well. Here's what we need to do the next practice for upcoming games. That can be a very valuable tool.

CB: In baseball if you have a bad day, you can go home and try to figure out what went wrong. But a naval aviator must be almost flawless when he is in a combat situation much as a brain surgeon is when he performs a delicate operation. One bad day at the office for a combat pilot engaging in a dog fight means almost certain death.

BARGER: Prior to the Top Gun School, we had a kill ratio up about 10-1 during the Korean War. During the Vietnam war our kill ratio was 2-1. Then we started our school 25 years ago, and we now have brought that back up to 12-1. It has been a significant increase. All we do is spend a great deal of time hammering home the basics. It is nothing too cosmic or too difficult.

It is the "keep it simple" principle, and really hammer the basics home so they don't make any basic mistakes in combat situations. We take our jobs very seriously. It is a great opportunity for our top Navy and Marine pilots to come out every day and usually a couple of times a day. They go out to simulate whether they came home alive or dead. It's a driving factor if there is a chance you can go out and not come back.

CB: There is a fear factor, although not to the extent of combat pilots, in baseball when a pitcher is throwing a 90 mph fastball which whizzes past your skull. Is there any technique you use as an instructor at the Top Gun School which help pilots be less scared which could carry over into baseball instruction to help alleviate fear as a batter?

BARGER: We really don't work the fear issue that much. We focus on trying to make our pilots so offensive and better equipped and better prepared that there isn't really that much of a fear factor in it. Maybe that in itself is enough to carry over into baseball. Maybe the best approach in baseball is to convince hitters they are as good as they can be and better than the pitchers they will face. All they need to do is go out and do the basics just like they have been doing it, and they will be just fine.

CB: Are there any unique vision training exercises being used by naval aviators currently? College and professional baseball programs are tapping a wide assortment of vision exercises thanks to people such as Dr. Bill Harrison of California and other experts in the field. If there are, such exercises may be useful for baseball players.

BARGER: We really don't. There are, however, some folks who would like to try and make that happen. But we really don't do anything too special.

Our guys are generally spatially oriented very well because of the 3-dimension, high-speed world they need to work in every day. The visual experiences our pilots have to perform in are just basic functions such as looking at radar, looking outside and looking back in at our radar. It is a little bit different than you experience in an athletic situation. You don't quite need the scan rate as you would a hitter where you adjust your eyes as the baseball gets closer.

CB: Being quick is an integral part of being a great pilot. The same can be said of a top-notch baseball player whether it be a batter with a quick stroke, pitcher with a quick move to first base or a runner with a quick move to steal a base. Do you have any unique training exercises to make your pilots quicker while they are engaged in combat, or is repetition still the best tool to become more proficient and quicker?

BARGER: I have a psychology degree, and I spend some time talking about that sort of thing. It is mostly a mental quickness as opposed to a physical, visual type of quickness. There are a finite number of options when one of our pilots is merging with another airplane. There are also a finite number of options for a hitter at the plate or a fielder in the field when a ball is coming at him. If he can mentally prepare himself prior to that happening and then as it's happening be able to keep a steady thought process, then he will do very well.

We find that guys who perform very well in airplanes are the guys who may not be as physically gifted as some of the other guys, but are ones who are mentally gifted and can think quickly. Those are the ones who do very well. Pilots who come through the Top Gun School are generally very outgoing, very sharp mentally. You would be surprised if you saw the physical aspect of people who come through the course.

They are not your 6-foot-7, southern California beach kind of guys. They are regular guys who think very well and make decisions very quickly.

CB: Is there any way you can improve physical quickness when training your pilots?

BARGER: Definitely. The more times you see something happen or the more times you think something through, the more comfortable your brain and body gets when you are faced with that situation. I think that improves your reflexes and helps you make decisions. That's exactly what we do when we brief (meetings prior to missions) and debrief (meetings after missions). We go over again and again and again what to expect prior to the mission. In the debrief, we go over what they did see and what they need to do the next time that happens to make them perform better. That could definitely carry over.

CB: Do your pilots use virtual reality or flight simulators to depict combat situations?

BARGER: We use flight simulators in a semi-circular dome where projectors show enemy aircraft in combat with them, and you can fight against an image in that dome in the cockpit mockup. But we really don't do a lot of that. Most of the Top Gun flying is live flying against live adversaries.

CB: How do you feel pilots acquire razor sharp instincts when it comes to combat situations? Baseball players must react to situations and also possess those baseball-specific instincts as well.

BARGER: Most of the reflexive capability is already in the guy before he comes out here. I don't think there is any way to sharpen those instincts other than mental and verbal rehearsals and verbal debriefs after the mission, as well as live flying we do here. I feel strongly that if a pilot sees something during a mission which he is prepared for and talks about it afterward, then the next time he encounters that scenario, he will perform much better. That happens all the time.

CB: Pilots must pull a tremendous amount of Gs at times. Is there any physical conditioning which pilots use which could benefit baseball programs across the USA?