

Majors

► Equal parts mentor, mechanic and confidant, pitching coaches are the glue that hold pitching staffs together, as freelancer Joel Poiley learned this spring. BaseballAmerica.com/majors/stories

NO SHORTCUTS

Clayton Kershaw's relentless work ethic helps him rise to the occasion, no matter what

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Clayton Kershaw cracked open a window into the future on May 25, 2008. One minute, Vin Scully was introducing the television audience to the 2006 first-round pick from the Dallas suburbs with the smooth cheeks and slight hesitation in his delivery. Thirty-two pitches later, Kershaw walked off the mound having struck out the side against the Cardinals in the first inning of his major league debut. The crowd of 46,566 at Dodger Stadium exulted in the possibilities.

Amid the cheers, the fans had no idea how deeply the blips between “good morning, good afternoon and goodnight” would resonate with Kershaw. A decade later, he recoils at the notion that he made things look easy by whiffing Skip Schumaker, Ryan Ludwick and Troy Glaus in that Sunday matinee in Los Angeles.

“Yeah, and I walked the second guy and gave up a double to Pujols,” he said.

The box score is testament to his annoyance. Kershaw walked Brian Barton on four pitches before allowing a double to Albert Pujols for his first big league run allowed. That’s his biggest takeaway from the inning.

Kershaw recovered from that indignity to go six strong, and he’s encountered very few blips since. If he handed the ball to Dodgers manager Dave Roberts after his Opening Day start and kept on walking, he would go straight to Cooperstown on the first ballot.

Kershaw turned 30 years old on March 19 and has three Cy Young Awards, an MVP, five ERA titles, four strikeout titles and seven straight all-star nods. He’s paid like an ace, with three years and \$98 million left on the mammoth contract extension he signed in 2014. Kershaw has to decide by November whether he will exercise an opt-out clause in the deal. Based on his 21.1 scoreless innings in the Cactus League, he’s not exactly stressing it.

He’s committed to performing with the same maniacal focus that he’s invested in every workout, every game and every pitch since his arrival at Chavez Ravine almost 10 years ago. There is no other way.

“If there’s one thing you can take pride in, it’s going out there every fifth day for your whole career and maintaining that level of performance,” Kershaw said. “The organization entrusted me with a lot of years and a lot of money to do that, and I don’t take that for granted. It’s a responsibility I put on myself. If I don’t feel like doing something or working out that day, you have to remember that. The bottom line is, I want to earn everything they’re giving me, and continue to do that.”

Kershaw’s ability to survive and advance is a testament to the same relentless pride that drives elite athletes to find a second gear and keep performing. Roger Federer and Serena Williams display it in tennis, and Michael Jordan and LeBron James are among those who have set the standard through the years in basketball.

Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw has won three Cy Young Awards, five ERA titles and four strikeout titles in an 11-year career. Like all elite athletes, he possesses sharp mental focus and an unmatched work ethic.



For the great ones, the watershed moment might be spotting a weakness early in a career, addressing it and turning it into a strength. As a rookie, Kershaw had difficulty commanding his curveball in a way that would allow him to consistently throw it for strikes. Early in 2009, manager Joe Torre and hitting coach Don Mattingly summoned him and told him he was going to be challenged to succeed as a one-pitch guy. So Kershaw began tinkering with a slider with the help of pitching coach Rick Honeycutt, and a Cooperstown-worthy pitch was born.

Kershaw’s pitch choices through the years reflect his ability to read situations and adjust. His fastball usage peaked at 72 percent in 2009 and gradually declined to 47 percent in 2017. Even with almost 2,100 innings of big league wear on his arm, Kershaw’s velocity has held firm at a tick under 93 mph. But he threw fastballs last year at the same rate as Jason Vargas, who threw the slowest fastball (85.6 mph) by a pitcher not named R.A. Dickey.

“None of this is on purpose,” Kershaw said. “It’s just a matter of what’s working—what you feel like you need to do to get guys out. I never go into a season thinking I’m going to use a certain pitch one way or the other. The hitters will tell you what you need to do.”

That clinical breakdown tells only part of the story. Kershaw has suffered back problems and been forced to make changes in his training regimen. He’s encountered some rough patches in the playoffs and added those setbacks to the laundry list of things that drive him. Teammates watch him in the weight room and in bullpen sessions and marvel at how his attention to detail never wavers.

“He’s unmatched as far as competitiveness goes,” said Padres catcher A.J. Ellis, perhaps Kershaw’s closest friend in the game. “I know that’s a cliché . . . But Clayton is unmatched with his ability to mentally push himself through situations. For me, what makes him so special is his ability to pitch at the highest level in a 1 o’clock game, on a getaway day, when there are 1,100 people in the stands . . . He has the ability to get to a level that no one else can match in that moment because of what he does mentally to prepare.”

Challenges continue to arise as Kershaw enters the latter half of his career. Will he stay in Los Angeles or exercise his opt-out and follow the magnetic pull of his native Texas? When he’s tending to his preparation, talk of legacies and a potential gargantuan payday are strictly verboten. It’s all the about tending to the moments. And arguably nobody does it better. ■