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Pitch Switch Aids Samardzija

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If you're willing to run across a football field and take a hit from some of the nation's top college defenders, what's so hard about changing a pitch or two?

[Jeff Samardzija](#)'s courage may be more evident wearing No. 83 for the Fighting Irish football squad. But it took some guts for No. 45 to scrap two of his pitches while heading into his junior year—his draft eligible year—in baseball.

Samardzija shelved his curveball and split-finger fastball and replaced them with a slider and a changeup. The results weren't particularly evident in his statistics. But he's a much better pitcher today, which is just one of the reasons the Chicago Cubs selected him Tuesday with the 13th pick of the fifth round of the Major League Draft.

"I wish there was more to the story than just the fact that we sat down and realized that the splitter and the curve were kind of...kind of terrible pitches for me to be throwing," said Samardzija, breaking into a laugh.

"We were kind of just living off my fastball. We looked at what I had and (the curveball and splitter) worked for what I needed to get done the first two years. But to take my pitching to where I wanted to go, it was a necessary change."

It wasn't like the pitches weren't effective. Samardzija was 13-4 through his first two years, allowing just a .209 batting average to opponents his rookie year while fashioning a 2.95 earned run average.

But as head coach Paul Mainieri put him in against better competition, opponents began having more success. They hit .272 against him in 2005 and his earned run average shot up to 3.89.

The statistics didn't appear markedly better in 2006. The .272 opponents batting average stayed the same, and his ERA was 4.33. But in the long haul, the slider and changeup will serve Samardzija better. After all, he's only been throwing the pitches for a few months.

"Last year Jeff threw a curveball and a splitter. This year he threw a slider and a straight change. Those two pitches are a big



part of the reason for his success,” said Irish pitching coach Terry Rooney.

“The slider is a much better pitch for him because of his natural arm slot, and his changeup is a very good pitch. Right now I’d say the changeup is his third best pitch, but he didn’t have to throw it very often. With his athleticism, the more he throws it, the better it will be.”

“The big thing between the curveball and the slider was my arm slot,” said Samardzija, echoing Rooney’s words. “I was in a slider slot throwing a curveball. With the splitter, it was tough to throw from three-quarters and keep the splitter down and not let it run up into a righty. It just made more sense.”

Throwing a changeup requires a tremendous amount of practice and patience. Most young power pitchers can get by without ever changing speeds. But on the higher levels, a pitcher must keep hitters off-stride by changing the tempo. Gaining confidence to throw a changeup is a big step.

“I had more control with the changeup almost immediately because I threw it a lot like my two-seam fastball,” said Samardzija, who also throws a four-seam fastball. “Maybe it was a little late (in my career) to make the change, but I felt like the extra time I had not doing (all of) the spring football helped make it work.”

Samardzija participated in just six of 15 spring practices, thanks to football coach [Charlie Weis](#)’ decision to allow him to focus more on his pitching this spring. The extra time helped, particularly with his changeup.

“Now, I’m 100 percent confident in (the changeup),” Samardzija said. “The more I threw it throughout the season, the more confidence I got with it. That’s the biggest part: throwing it in situations when it means something. You can throw it as much as you want in the bullpen, but until you get a guy in there with a full count and a runner on first threatening to walk the guy into first and second and nobody out, that’s a different thing than throwing it for the 20th time in the bullpen.

“Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t, but toward the end of the season, I’d like to think it worked more times than not. I have complete confidence in all four of my pitches.”



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