

Morris: Dyson is the thinking man's ace



USC'S NO. 1 PITCHER HAS MOLDED HIMSELF INTO A CEREBRAL PART OF THE PITCHING STAFF

Sam Dyson

TIM DOMINICK/TDOMINICK@THESTATE.COM

Posted on 05.24.09

WHEN THE SUBJECT of ace pitcher Sam Dyson comes up, Ray Tanner goes into his Roden sculpture pose. Tanner cocks his elbow and his fist moves to his chin. Dyson is "The Thinker" on Tanner's South Carolina baseball team.

Tanner is not alone. Mark Calvi, USC's pitching coach, says Dyson is a smart kid. Bright kid. Very smart kid. Sometimes he out-thinks himself, Calvi says of Dyson. Sid Dyson says his son's intellect earns him a different line of conversation with coaches, catchers and scouts who know they are dealing with a mind as much as a body beneath his SC cap.

Dyson is in the third year of the thinking phase of pitching at USC. Over the course of a redshirt season, an injury recovery season and a season of SEC play, Dyson has experienced the growing pains that go with a transformation from thrower to pitcher.

He is projected by Baseball America to be a late first-round pick in the upcoming draft. There have been times this season when Dyson has

looked every bit like a first-rounder, his fastball reaching the mid-90s late in games. There also have been times when Dyson has looked every bit like an inexperienced thrower learning to deal with the adversity that comes with being a staff ace.

"He's had some ups and downs. It's kind of been manic pitching," Calvi says. "When he's good, you've seen it. ... When he's good, he's really, really good. When he's bad, it hasn't been so great."

Dyson's statistics for the season tell the story. He carries an 8-4 record and 5.31 ERA into this week's NCAA regional. In 95 innings, he has walked 33 batters and struck out 89. Opponents are batting .233 against him, but they have belted 18 home runs.

USC fans remember well his complete-game victory against Georgia, a performance in which Dyson appeared to get stronger and throw harder as the game progressed. He allowed two runs on four hits, walked one and struck out 13. They also remember well his showing at Tennessee when the Volunteers chased him after scoring nine runs in six innings.

"At times, he's extremely special as you've seen this year," Tanner says. "He can be as good as anybody in the country. Other times, it just doesn't happen for him. At times, he looks like he's having a bad night, and he convinces himself this is a bad night. When he has a good night, he's thinking, 'I'm good.'"

Dyson has not always been "The Thinker" on the pitching mound. Like most youngsters with an extraordinary arm, he was a one-pitch thrower, unless you counted fast, faster and fastest as part of his repertoire. From an early age, Dyson's parents recognized their only child as a gifted athlete.

But through his childhood, high school and initially at USC, Dyson's athletic career has been about dealing with the physical aspect of his game. Today, he is somewhat of a bionic man after surgeries on each shoulder and his right throwing elbow. He also wears a scar that crosses his forehead, the result of a childhood baseball accident.

It tells you something about Dyson that he is OK with removing his cap for television interviews, revealing his scar. While teammates and coaches often are reluctant to ask about it, Dyson says he never has tired of telling how he got the scar. He also has kept his hair cropped short to ensure its visibility.

Dyson was just shy of his sixth birthday when the accident happened on a T-ball field in Tampa, Fla. — his mother sitting in the stands and his father coaching on the field. During batting practice that day, Dyson's forehead ran full bore into a swinging bat, yet the boy did not so much as cry — or bleed — as he found his mother's waiting arms.

When Dyson's father walked toward him, he was aghast.

"He's got a hole in his head!" Sid Dyson recalls shouting. "Call an ambulance, he's got a hole in his head!"

The half-inch indentation proved to be a fractured skull. Three separate fractures required doctors to peel back the skin on Dyson's forehead, insert a few titanium plates and screws and sew him up with 27 stitches.

"The doctors said there was the smallest amount of (blood) clot in there, which was an absolute miracle," Sid Dyson says. "If it had been one inch in either direction, (the bat) would have either missed him or killed him."

Within a year, Sam was back playing baseball ... and basketball and tennis and golf and anything in which he could compete. His on-field intensity was evident immediately following the bat-to-head accident. Once, when Sid Dyson told his son to ease up in recreation games involving girls, Sam boldly told him, "I can't do that. I want to win."

Gwenn Dyson, Sam's mother, insisted her son attend Tampa Jesuit High, an all-male private institution, so he could be properly disciplined and educated. At Jesuit, Dyson quickly earned star status on the baseball diamond, both at plate and in the field.

Early during his sophomore season, Dyson was relieved of his pitching duties in one game with Tampa Jesuit comfortably ahead. Dyson stormed off the mound and Jesuit eventually lost the lead and the game.

"Coach said, 'You're going to have to pitch the whole game from now on,' " Sid Dyson recalls. "Every game, from then on, he pitched the entire game."

Dyson also made a name for himself on the football field. A coach had watched him kick a ball around a soccer field and asked if Dyson could kick for the football team. Soon after, he was Tampa Jesuit's punter and place-kicker and booted a 51-yard field goal his senior year.

Because of his head injury, Dyson was reluctant to play defense, so he began at tight end for Tampa Jesuit. Before long, Dyson was at free safety and earned a reputation as one of the team's fiercest hitters. Tampa Jesuit fans still talk about the time the 185-pound Dyson took on a 200-pound fullback in a violent collision that staggered both players.

Those kinds of jarring tackles caused Dyson to dislocate his left shoulder, and the decreased velocity on his fastball by the end of his senior season was a sure sign of right shoulder problems. As a result, the Washington Nationals waited until the 19th round of the 2006 draft to call his name.

So, Dyson took off for USC, in part because both his parents are natives and many of his relatives live here. He arrived in Columbia as damaged goods, and surgery on both shoulders and his right elbow meant a redshirt.

Rehabilitation meant easing Dyson into USC's pitching plans a season ago. He pitched mostly in non-conference games, and there was some frustration at being unable to cut loose on all his pitches. Dyson learned to work out his emotions on the driving range, where he can consistently hit a golf ball 300 or more yards.

This year, it has been all about learning to pitch instead of throw. When Dyson talks pitching, the cerebral side of the game comes through. He is a two-time member of the SEC all-academic team and has kept his grade-point average at USC above 3.0.

"I don't know the percentage, but I know the majority of pitching is mental," Dyson says. "You have to go out there and not fight the atmosphere but keep yourself in the moment of every pitch and not get sidetracked with what happens around you."

In the aforementioned game against Georgia, Dyson's maturation as a pitcher was on display in the first inning when the Bulldogs loaded the bases with two outs. Georgia's Zach Cone came to bat with a chance to knock Dyson off his game early.

"Sometimes you don't have all four of your pitches, or all three, or even two," Dyson says. "Your set up in a situation where you only have a couple of pitches to get this guy out. You don't have this pitch, so you have this pitch left."

"I felt like I could throw anything from the way I was throwing in the bullpen. I worked backwards a little bit. But everybody thinks I'm just going to go after them, go after them, go after them with fastballs. I figured I could go with something off-speed, and it wouldn't have to be a great pitch."

"I got him on an off-speed pitch."

Dyson's strong-minded belief that only he knows what pitches are working or not working has led Tanner and Calvi to give their pitcher unprecedented freedom on the mound. The coaches frequently permit Dyson and catcher Justin Dalles to call pitches on their own.

"He has a mindset of what he wants to throw," Dalles says. "He feels comfortable with whatever is in his mind. He's got good enough stuff to get away with it. It's basically him calling the game."

That is the part of Dyson's personality that he carries to the mound. Tanner says Dyson marches to his own drumbeat. While he is supportive of his teammates, Dyson rarely participates in much of the rah-rah aspects of college baseball. He has been known to ignore teammates' fist bumps as he exits the mound following an inning.

Dyson says it is all about focus, and not losing it during a game. Away from the field, he simply prefers to spend time with his girlfriend, Lauren Bingham of Tampa, and his dog, Callie.

"I don't get caught up in the college lifestyle," Dyson says.

Although Dyson has hired an advisor for the upcoming draft within NCAA rules, there is no doubt who will decide if he returns to USC for another season.

"Sam knows what he is looking for. He knows the situation," Tanner says. "He's very comfortable in his own skin, and I think he listens to people. He cares about other people's opinion. But he makes his decisions."

Dyson will say only that he'd like to pitch USC to the College World Series and improve his draft status. Otherwise, he is thinking — and rethinking — only about how to improve as a pitcher every time Tanner and Calvi give him the ball.

Someone recently offered Dyson a book by former major-leaguer Ron Darling that details the mental aspect of pitching. Dyson thought for a minute, then declined. He said he already thinks enough about pitching.

Listen to Morris Tuesdays from 4-5 p.m. on ESPN Radio 93.1 FM.

THE GOOD TIMES ... THE BAD TIMES

Sam Dyson's three best and three worst outings this season:

BEST	IP	H	R	ER	BB	K
March 20, vs. LSU (W, 7-3)	7	2	1	1	6	5
April 17, vs. Auburn (W, 8-3)	9	6	3	3	1	8
May 14, vs. Georgia (W, 7-2)	9	4	2	2	1	13
WORST	IP	H	R	ER	BB	K
March 14, at Mississippi State (L, 13-6)	4.1	9	8	7	2	6
March 28, at Kentucky (W, 20-19)	6.2	8	8	8	4	5
May 8, at Tennessee (L, 9-5)	6	8	9	9	1	3

RON MORRIS

COLUMNIST

NCAA BASEBALL | The teams that are awarded host sites for regionals will be announced today. The full field will be released 12:30 p.m. Monday on ESPN.

Arms race

Sam Dyson is the 14th-ranked right-handed pitcher eligible for the draft, according to Baseball America:

1. Stephen Strasburg, San Diego State
2. Alex White, North Carolina
3. Kyle Gibson, Missouri

4. Tanner Scheppers, St. Paul Saints
5. Aaron Crow, Fort Worth Cats
6. Jacob Turner, Westminster Christian Academy (St. Louis)
7. Shelby Miller, Brownwood (Texas) High
8. Zack Wheeler, East Paulding (Dallas, Ga.) High
9. Mike Leake, Arizona State
10. Eric Arnett, Indiana
11. Chad Jenkins, Kennesaw State
12. Kyle Heckathorn, Kennesaw State
13. Garrett Gould, Maize (Kan.) High
14. Sam Dyson, USC
15. Brody Colvin, St. Thomas More (Lafayette, La.) High