

Hickey has Astros pitching like true champions

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Astros pitching coach Jim Hickey doesn't spend a lot of time reminding players of mechanics or how to correct mistakes.

In charge of a pitching staff that includes Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte and Roy Oswalt, he doesn't have to.

On this team, his role is mostly one of motivation and understanding.

"I'm just a sounding board," said the man who never pitched in the majors. "Really, we don't need pitching coaches, we need pitching psychologists."

And in that regard Pettitte is one of his best patients.

"A pitching coach needs to be a good pin cushion," said Pettitte. "He's somebody that will talk to you during the game and listen to you and (you can) throw stuff off of him."

Hickey and the Astros are one win away from reaching their first World Series. They'll take a 3-2 lead in the NL championship series into St. Louis for Game 6 tonight.

The 44-year-old longtime minor league coach is constantly asked about how he handles conversations with Clemens. "You just do what

needs to be done and say what needs to be said for the most part," he said. "You don't think about who it is that you are talking to or what they've accomplished."

His advice varies more by situation than it does by player.

For the affable Hickey, knowing what to say isn't that difficult, whether it's Clemens or a rookie.

"Really deep down, just like everybody else, they're looking for the same types of things, the positive reinforcement, the pointing out certain things that maybe aren't going right."

Thrown into the job in midseason, he didn't have time to be awed by Clemens or anyone else. He called a

meeting when he first arrived to ask players what they needed and how he could help.

After Hickey came to Houston and manager Phil Garner took over, the Astros went 36-10 to claim a wild card berth on the final day of the season.

Garner said Hickey sat back and got a feel for the different players before immediately jumping in and giving advice.

"You're talking about a six-time Cy Young winner (Clemens), you're talking about Andy Pettitte, who is one of the greatest postseason pitchers of all-time, and Roy Oswalt, who has a lot of success," Garner said.

"I don't think these are guys that

you walk in and say, 'Hey, you need to start doing this now.' He needed to be somewhat laid back. He did a good job in the learning process last year."

Some might find it strange that a man who never threw a pitch in the majors is coaching someone like Clemens, but Pettitte said that short-fall doesn't lessen his effectiveness.

"He just does a great job of communicating with us and that's all you can ask for," said Pettitte, who gave up two runs and seven hits in Houston's 5-4 loss on Monday. "You get a good relationship with someone like that and the relationship is really what it's all about."

IN BRIEF

Arkansas State player refuses to wear Adidas

Arkansas State's leading returning scorer is sitting out because he refuses to wear Adidas shoes, which the team is obligated to wear because of a school contract.

Jerry Nichols, a 6-foot-6 outside shooter who averaged 9.6 points per game last year, has had two knee operations and said he was wearing Adidas shoes when he first hurt the knee. The school says Nichols has to dress by its rules.

"We have a contractual agreement with (Adidas), and it's not any different than any number of other contracts with other schools. There is not any stipulation or any research that shows any shoes are worse than any others," Arkansas State athletic director Dean Lee told The Jonesboro Sun newspaper.

Nichols, who last year shot 41.8 percent from 3-point range, practiced over the weekend while wear-

ing Nike shoes, placing tape to cover the brand's insignia. Nichols met with Lee on Monday, and Nichols was told to wear Adidas shoes or sit. Nichols sat.

Nichols said he was wearing Adidas shoes when he suffered a knee injury in 2001 while playing for Walters State Community College.

"I tore my ACL in Adidas in junior college back in 2001, and I'm not comfortable wearing Adidas," Nichols said.

Nichols has had two surgeries on his right knee, including one in late March following last season. Arkansas State's basketball team wore Nike shoes last year but that contract has expired.

"Adidas shoes are part of our uniform," Lee said.

Lee said there is no room for compromise and that the school is obligated to put Adidas shoes on the feet of athletes on the football, men's and women's basketball,

baseball and track teams, along with several other sports.

"This is not picking on any one student athlete. This goes for all student athletes that are under that contract," Lee said.

Nichols said he may seek relief in court if the university does not change policy.

"If I have to miss this whole senior season for some shoes, why wouldn't I (sue)?" Nichols said. "I have done too much this summer, working out, staying up here all summer to waste a year. So if it has to come to a legal issue then I will."

Arkansas State coach Dickey Nutt said he wants Nichols on the court, considering the team has its first exhibition in less than three weeks.

"I need all my players to be at practice, but it's out of my hands. That matter is in the administration's hands, so I'm just referring all questions to them," Nutt said.

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Adams: Pac-10 crown not out of Ducks' reach

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they went scoreless in the first half against Oregon before they ran up the score without class in the fourth quarter. The following week they topped Arizona State in the desert 38-28, thanks to Sam Keller, who threw almost half a dozen interceptions. Even the Wildcats made USC uncomfortable two weeks ago. Then there was last week, when the Trojans were rewarded by Matt Leinart's clumsiness. Very rarely does a team get a break from their own fumble in the last seconds of a game — it will surely be a highlight at this year's Heisman Trophy ceremony, brav-o.

So you think USC's remaining schedule makes them invincible? Not so fast my friend. The magician head coach Tyrone Willingham and his Huskies are jonesin' for a win, Washington State's offense is coming to life, Fresno State is not afraid to play anywhere (even the L.A. Coliseum), playing Cal in Berkeley is the team and site where USC was last defeated, UCLA almost topped them in 2004,

and Stanford is Stanford — always down for an upset.

I understand why Oregon fans couldn't bring themselves to root for Notre Dame last week, even if they wanted to. Hardly anyone I know is interested in supporting the faded glory surrounding South Bend, but even I could find a way to do it and the only thing I like about Notre Dame is its green jerseys. Trying to leap-frog from second place to first is a dirty business that subdues fans into gritting their teeth and backing teams that they wouldn't cheer for on any other Saturday — but it must be done.

Looking around Autzen Stadium, I could see that many couldn't bring themselves to praise Notre Dame because they want the best for Pac-10 teams, but think on this for a second. If Oregon toted the 2005 Pac-10 Conference trophy into the post-season, would you honestly give a flying fudge where the other Pac-10 teams landed? And would it even matter what bowl the Ducks went to? Remember, the Pac-10 trophy is good for one ticket to a Bowl Championship Series game

and would go great with the other hardware in the Casanova Center. Even if we have the same record as USC at the season's end, we would share the conference crown and both go Bowling at a BCS site. Oregon fans, it's okay to be selfish.

I have not lost faith yet in seeing the Ducks finish first and I refuse to quit on them. The drive for upsetting the Trojans didn't end following Sept. 24. It's still alive as long as Oregon is winning games. Nothing is over yet.

Go ahead and back USC; I honestly don't blame you. It would be nice to see a Pac-10 team playing in Pasadena this holiday season. But what would Bill Bowerman say, or Prefontaine, or Dan Fouts, or Joey and the Lukes? Or even John Belushi, "Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?"

At least I won't be the one telling the Ducks that I'm free to shop for bridesmaid's dresses in December.

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