Craig Pippin

A Game of Falling Down and Getting Up

There comes a moment during each workout he teaches when Craig Pippin gets chills. It's that moment of greater awareness, which quickly evolves into transcendence—that enlightening experience when everything comes together for the athlete in training. As the details of the athlete's motion come into tune, so do the details of the athlete's character, and Craig knows there's no going back. "It's so much bigger than anything you can ever touch," he says. "It's something you feel—and it's the greatest feeling in the world."

As the founder of Pitchers Edge, a baseball training facility that uses a pre-hab approach for pitchers, position players, and athletes to enhance skills while reducing the risk of shoulder and arm injuries, Craig personally teaches between 400 and 500 workouts per month. By this logic, he gets the chills just over ten times per day. Still, it never gets old. "Pitchers Edge provides the opportunity for players to learn more about themselves, both on and off the

field," he says. "Beyond physical skills training, we put a premium on life skills, teaching the power of eye contact and a firm handshake. We want our athletes to learn how to feel good about themselves no matter what the situation is, and that comes from an unparalleled self awareness. After all, life—like baseball—is a game of falling down and getting up."

Pitchers Edge is in the business of results, and each set of results is tailored to the individual expectations of the nearly 5,000 people they work with each year. With facilities in Vienna, Virginia and St. Petersburg, Florida, it attracts athletes referred by doctors all over the U.S. who might benefit from training in overhand-throwing motion, including baseball, softball, tennis, and football players. Each staff member must be certified in the Pippin Pitching and Throwing System, a systematic program Craig designed from

10,000 hours of video observation and study. And while expert proficiency in the physical exactitude of the science is crucial, equally important is each staff member's ability to communicate and connect with the athletes. "From the atmosphere of our facilities, to our relationships with the players and families, to our analysis of their capabilities, to the routines we map out and support them through, we believe in attention to the tiniest details," he says. "We understand that those details can make or break an athlete's performance."

Much of the life training philosophy at the facility revolves around the importance of assessment and routine. Players are taught how to identify their strengths weaknesses, and we put together a training schedule designed to improve on those weaknesses incrementally over time. Such practices engender a sense of integrity, responsibility, and diligence that translates easily into the school setting, and beyond. The longterm outcomes of the athletes are chronicled on the lobby walls at the

facilities, with names of the players accompanied by notes of where they go on to school and what they do later in life. "It's all connected," says Craig. "We help teach players a posture and a way of presenting themselves that advances their prospects in life. From the moment we open our doors in the morning to the time we turn off the lights at night, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to these athletes and their future."

In many cases, finding the right solution for the right athlete means drawing on decades of experience to think outside the box. If a child performs well in practice but freezes up under the pressure of an actual game, Craig will instruct them to think of a time when he or she feels most comfortable. For one athlete with autism, that time was riding in the car with his parents. Craig taught him to make the motion of buckling his seatbelt before going into the batter's box, trusting that the



muscle memory would bring the relief needed to shrug off the fear and play the game relaxed. In the young player's next game, he hit a double. "It's that moment when things suddenly feel simple and easy for a player," Craig explains. "Things fall into place, and I can tell them that it's real—they've just taken it to the next level. It's all about setting the bar, getting there, and then raising it just a little higher."

For all the coaching he does, Craig respectfully instructs his athletes and their families not to call him coach. "I've always tried to create a sense of family wherever I go, and to me, that means having the athletes call me by my first name so it feels like I'm more accessible," he says today, a testament to the game-changing importance of family in his own life. Born in Bristol, Tennessee, the Pippins moved to Long Island and then to St. Petersburg, Florida, where they settled when Craig was five years old.

Craig's father, a quiet man and great listener who believed the best way to make a statement was to ask a question, worked as Director of the St. Petersburg Department of Parks and Recreation while serving as a part-time scout for the Baltimore Orioles and the Boston Red Sox. He had met Craig's mother in college, where he was a basketball player and she was a cheerleader. She worked as a guidance counselor and loved playing catch with Craig and his younger sister. Each summer, they enjoyed visiting her large extended family on Long Island, where she had grown up. "We're all very close, and I never hesitate to reach out to a family member if I'm struggling with something," says Craig. "I'm very fortunate and blessed to have grown up in an environment where family always came first, and I still live that way to this day. It's a mentality I try to bring to Pitchers Edge as well."

Sundays were the most poignant and meaningful examples of such an upbringing, when the family would go play ball in the park together. "I remember my father throwing me batting practice, with my mother and sister chasing balls in the outfield with our cocker spaniel," he says. "Then we'd go home, and mom would make pasta for dinner. That was our family time—always very consistent, and something I looked forward to every week."

Craig studied and played sports all through childhood, leaving little time to work. He got a job as a busboy at a seafood restaurant called Nautical Nelly's, but soon had to refocus all of his time back to training. He played American Legion summer baseball and on the high school team, intermixed with basketball camps and long Friday evening sessions of shooting hoops at friends' houses. All through his career, his parents never missed a home game, and Craig never forgot to wear the medal they had given him when he was twelve—a pendant with an engraving of St. Christopher on one side to keep him safe during travel, and the word *family* etched on the back.

Craig graduated from high school at age 17 and decided to take a gap year at a preparatory school in Virginia to better prepare him for college. There, he played basketball in the hopes of pursuing the sport at the college level. Being away from home and coming into his own, it was a year of growth that resulted in a scholarship offer to play basketball and baseball at the University of Florida. "The whole student-athlete concept is very real, especially when you're a freshman struggling to keep your GPA up while adjusting to a new environment with large class sizes," he reflects. "It was there that the journey really began, figuring out how to balance study and commitments and travel with the team. I ended up leaving the basketball team so I could focus all my time and energy on school and baseball."

Craig's college baseball career had started off strong when he pitched a 2-1 game against Miami University. He soon found, however, that such victories weren't the norm for his team. After playing his freshman and sophomore years as a starting pitcher, he made the bold decision to ask the coaching staff to be transitioned over as an infielder to be in the hitting lineup. The change would cut his scholarship dollars in half, and he would have to get a summer job again at Nautical Nelly's, but he was resolved it was the right thing to do. "I felt it was something I could do to help the team," Craig recalls. "I wanted to swing the bat and improve our outcome, and I had confidence in myself. It was the first time I really took a stance, respectfully communicated that stance, and then held my position despite the consequences. I knew it was the right thing to do."

As the fall of the 1977 school year geared up, he led the team in hitting and had positioned himself to be the starting third baseman when the Yankees came to play an exhibition game. "It was going to be Reggie Jackson in right, Mickey Rivers in center, and Roy White in left," he recalls. "My

mother is from Long Island, so it was a dream for me. The game was to be broadcast far and wide, and my whole family was listening in."

But when Craig showed up at the clubhouse before the game and opened his locker, there was no uniform waiting for him. Assuming it was a slight by the coaching staff because of his decision to switch from pitcher to infielder, he marched outside, got in his car, and drove away. Over the radio, he listened to the landmark game he was supposed to be playing in and felt his destiny slipping away. By the third inning, he pulled off the road and called his family on a pay phone for solace. "I remember saying, 'Mom, Pop, they didn't have a uniform for me,'" he recounts. "But my father told me I needed to drive back. Thankfully, I listened."

By the time he pulled back in to the clubhouse parking lot, it was the fifth inning. After a few short conversations, he learned that the lack of uniform was an unintentional error, and at the start of the seventh inning, he walked into the bullpen. The coach decided to let him swing the bat, and when he did, he hit a two-run homerun. "I was running for the life of me, and I didn't wake up until I crossed second base and Yankees SS Bucky Dent said I could take my time because I had hit it out of the park," Craig says. "If I hadn't reconsidered my decision and gone back, I would have been listening to the end of that game on the radio. The 1977 Yankees were a team for the ages, and it was an incredible moment-for me, for my family listening on the radio, and for the trajectory of my character and career."

The team ended up going to a Super Regional that year, and when Craig returned to pitching during his last two years, the upward trajectory of the team continued. At the end of four years, he had built up a population of memories he would treasure for a lifetime-not just on the diamond and the turf, but of the many friends he had met along the way. "Those college relationships can really last forever," he remarks. He had pictured himself wearing the blue shoes of the Kansas City Royals, a relatively new team at the time, and in 1978 was drafted to fulfill that vision. "As a boy, I'd fall asleep at night listening to the soothing static of the games coming through my AM transistor radio," he remembers. "Now, I was living them."

From there, Craig was sent to Rookie ball and faired well enough to be moved into Class A

in Ft. Meyers, and then Double-A in Jacksonville. After returning from spring training, he was given his first release and then picked up by the Pittsburg Pirates to play in Buffalo, New York. In the spring he reported to Spring Training in Bradenton, Florida, and contracted to play in Hawaii for their Triple-A Club. When he returned, he had served his five years in professional ball and was officially a free agent, able to negotiate with any team. He signed his first major league contract with the Cleveland Indians, which took him to Puerto Rico, Maine, and then Venezuela to play. By that time, he had also played in Barranquilla and Cartagena in Colombia.

When he returned from Venezuela, he went back to major league camp, and the Kansas City Royals signed him back as a free agent. "It was great to be back," he remembers. "I'm glad I was gracious every time I was released and that I never burned bridges. I was also rehired by the Cleveland Indians as well."

By age 30, Craig had played professionally for nine years in six countries and was offered an opportunity with the St. Louis Cardinals, but he knew it was time to move on. He had done well as a closer—the pitcher that helped the team get outs when the game was on the line. "I decided that what I had accomplished was fulfilling enough. At that point, I wanted to spend more time with the next chapter of my life—my newborn son Quinn—and stay closer to home," he says.

From there, he founded a Deli with Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda, learning business and entrepreneurship through the school of hard knocks. He also started a food company with seventy employees, contracting with Wal-Mart in Arkansas to supply product to 250 stores. "It was a good learning experience, but not the world for me," he recalls. In search of his rightful place, he took a job with a Manhattan wealth management firm called IIG, married a flight attendant, and had a son, Quinn, who became Craig's best friend from the moment he was born and would grow up to be a remarkable ballplayer in his own right. At the firm, in an office with a window overlooking the Statue of Liberty, Craig served as the liaison to high-profile clienteleplayers in the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL. He worked there for five years, and during that time, he and his wife parted ways.

Also during that time, in 1999, Craig was playing a basketball game near his home in

Northern Virginia when he went up for a rebound and ruptured his patella tendon. The injury required surgery, physical therapy, and a lengthy recovery, and Craig wondered if he'd ever be the athlete he once was. Commuting to New York City on Amtrak with a cumbersome cast on his leg, he began realizing that things weren't as they should be. "The guys I was working for were wonderful and incredibly gifted in managing the portfolios of the clients I brought to the company, but I realized I just wasn't fulfilled," he recalls. "Meanwhile, in physical therapy, I was seeing so many athletes far younger than I was. I became deeply interested in injury prevention, and I developed a vision of building a program where players of all ages could become strong enough to keep themselves safe from injury."

Around that time, Craig met and later married Renee, an amazing woman with two children. They merged their families into one, and for the first time, things were starting to feel truly right. Craig began considering the idea that he could find the same kind of fulfillment professionally. To translate this vision into a reality, Craig began collecting measurements and video footage documenting the strength levels of athletes of all ages, ranging from six-year-old players to major league players. Analyzing specific aspects including physical strength and flexibility measurements, he processed this data amassed from over 19,000 athletes during a period of well over two decades. Many of these measurements on individuals were recorded over time as they grew physically and in ability, allowing Craig to build a better understanding of what had caused his own injury and what might lead to injuries in other people. In 2001, he visited the Birmingham lab of Dr. James Andrews, a renowned sports medicine and orthopedic doctor. There, he studied the biomechanics of healthy arm movements and developed the injury prevention training philosophy upon which Pitchers Edge is built.

In the beginning, Craig started off training a handful of athletes wherever he could find the space. As interest grew, he leased two squash courts at the Regency Sport and Health Club, and when he had amassed a following of sixty children, he moved to a 40- by 100-foot training area with two indoor pitching lanes. By the time Pitchers Edge grew into the facilities it is today, Craig's former students were accomplishing big things. One of the players whom he had trained for

twelve years went on to pitch in the leagues, and then returned to northern Virginia to purchase one of the Pitchers Edge facilities.

Now, Pitchers Edge is an organization that never lets lack of funding stand in the way of a child's opportunity to learn and grow. If money's an issue, they work it out. They also send gently used baseball equipment to inner cities in the U.S. or to South American countries, adhering to Craig's vision of bettering the lives of more players at every opportunity. And, just as it was when Craig was young, family always comes first. "Renee and I adore family, and we really embrace that time together," he says. "Though it sometimes feels like we're working 24/7, with her playing a major role in managing the businesses, we still make that time to be thankful for the amazing gift we have in being together."

In advising young people entering the working world, Craig remembers the day in third grade when his teacher asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up. Amidst the aspiring attorneys, doctors, senators, presidents, Craig stood up and proudly declared that he wanted to play professional baseball. "From an early age, I was motivated to accomplish that, and I made it happen," he says. "It won't be the same for everyone, but it's incredibly important to follow your dreams and do what you love. There will be sacrifices, but it will be your choice. You'll be able to contribute so much more to society if you're able to do what you love. Figure out a way to pay your bills while doing it, and you'll get there."

Beyond that, Craig leads optimism - something he learned from his mother, who saw hope and promise in each and every day. "Even if we're going through tough times, I always lead by taking the approach that everything's going to be alright," he says. "It's what I try to do for my family and for the players I coach. The glass is always half full." It's an attitude that becomes critically important in building the future leaders of America, instilling the tenet that baseball, entrepreneurship, and life are each defined by resilience. "It's all a game of falling down and getting up," he affirms. "I want each individual I work with to have the skills to pick themselves up, no matter where life might take them."

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