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Giambi Envisions Perfect Pitch

By JACK CURRY

TAMPA, Fla., March 9 — Jason Giambi is a technician with tattoos, a magician wielding a 32-ounce wooden wand, a thinking man's hitter. Giambi devises a plan before every at-bat and he adjusts it from pitch to pitch, continually reminding himself of the importance of swinging only at strikes. If a pitch misses the strike zone by two inches, Giambi's eyes will not usually deceive him. He will remain as still as a statue.

When Giambi peers at the pitcher, he pictures an imaginary box in his line of vision that depicts the strike zone. If a pitch enters that box, Giambi will consider swinging. If a pitch is not in the box, he will probably not swing. Giambi will create the box again and wait to see if the pitcher dares to unleash a ball in that dangerous area.

What makes Giambi's patient, intelligent approach so successful is his uncanny ability to recognize pitches, which is fueled by above-average eyesight and depth perception. Giambi can detect the type of pitch coming as soon as it leaves the pitcher's hand. Sometimes, Giambi even notices a tendency, how a pitcher grips the ball or places his glove, and knows the type of pitch before it is released.



Giambi has 20/13 vision in his right eye, his lead eye as a left-handed batter. That means he can identify an object from 20 feet that a person with 20/20 vision can see from 13 feet. But even more important is his depth perception. Bill Harrison, an optometrist who has worked with professional athletes for three decades, said Giambi's is in the top 1 percent of the thousands of baseball players he has tested.

"I can pick up the ball right when he lets it go," Giambi said. "It's a huge advantage. I got God-gifted when it came to the eyes. I've got real good eyesight. I got lucky with that."

John Giambi first took his son Jason from West Covina, Calif., to Harrison's office in Laguna Beach when Jason was 18 years old. After an examination, Harrison was dazzled and told Jason, "You have the exceptional vision that defines superstardom. I don't know if you want it, but you've got the exceptional-quality eyesight to hit a baseball."

Giambi wanted it. Giambi found superstardom. The Yankees aggressively chased him and signed him to a seven-year, \$120 million free-agent contract because he is an offensive dynamo. Giambi, a 30-year-old first baseman, has the rare combination of power and discipline. He is as content with a walk as he is with a single, and he is as likely to win a batting title as he is to win a home run title. To Giambi, being a complete offensive player includes a willingness to wait for strikes and to do damage when he is in the foremost position to pounce.

"What I've done is magnified my strengths and tried to eliminate my weaknesses," Giambi said. "My strength is I can hit strikes. I'm a terrible bad-ball hitter. Nomar and Jeter can swing at balls from the top of their helmets to the top of their shoes and throw out 200 hits. That's not my game. That's the thing I've really defined, trying to hit strikes. When I do that, I produce."

Alex Rodriguez, who is regarded as the best player in the major leagues, was in awe when he spoke to Giambi last September. Giambi, who was in Arlington, Tex., with the Oakland Athletics, spent more than an hour telling Rodriguez about his vision, his disciplined ways and even his imaginary box. "He's a wizard when it comes to hitting," Rodriguez said. "He takes it very, very serious. Can you imagine recognizing a pitch an inch out of the pitcher's hand? His vision is amazing."

The mound is 60 feet 6 inches from the plate, and Rodriguez estimated that Giambi picks up pitches at 58 feet. Giambi looks for the red spot formed by the seams of a slider. He looks for the upward trajectory that defines a curveball. He looks for the flat, sideways spin of a two-seam fastball or the forward, tumbling spin of a four-seam fastball.

Harrison said Barry Bonds, who walked 177 times, a major league record, while setting the home run record of 73 last year, is the only current player whose depth perception and pitch recognition are better than Giambi's. Rodriguez estimated that he recognizes pitches from 48 feet, and he figured that an average hitter knows at about 30 feet. Giambi agreed with those estimates.

"I think Jason Giambi will be the next Babe Ruth of New York," Rodriguez said. "He's the best left-handed hitter I've ever played against, period."

Giambi batted .342 with 38 homers and 120 runs batted in last season, making him the ninth player in history to raise his average for six straight seasons. But Giambi's attributes include selectivity, as he had 129 walks and a .477 on-base percentage, both of which paced the American League.

Giambi was fourth in the league in pitches taken last year, staring at 1,693 of 2,648 pitches (63.9 percent). Most players visualize the pitches they may hit, but Giambi also visualizes the pitches he is going to take.

Giambi does not keep notes on pitchers, but he has a feel for what each pitcher throws and trusts his recall. His refusal to swing at poor pitches helps him "take pitches away" from pitcher's repertoires and allows him to predict what they may throw next. The Yankees' Roger Clemens tried unsuccessfully to get Giambi to bite on his split-finger fastball during last season's division series, saying, "Gosh, will you chase that thing?"

Giambi's knowledge of and respect for the strike zone started with his father and continued with Mark McGwire, his former A's teammate. John Giambi did not know about his son's excellent eyesight when he made Jason, a natural right-handed hitter, bat left-handed the first time he picked up a red plastic bat. He did so because his favorite player was Mickey Mantle and he wanted his son to become a switch-hitter.

When Jason was 8, his father let him swing at any pitch. But when he was 10, his father gave him and his younger brother, Jeremy, who now plays for the A's, a chart that analyzed Ted Williams's hitting; his averages were superior when he hit strikes. Since then, the Giambi boys have been expected to swing at strikes. "It taught them at a young age that you were going to do better if you hit good pitches," John Giambi said.

When Jason Giambi joined the A's in 1995, he found major league pitchers were more adept at commanding the strike zone, and he batted .256. Giambi walked only 51 times in 536 at-bats in 1996, but McGwire lectured his good friend on being choosier and accepting walks.

Whenever McGwire discussed hitting, he made sure to include Giambi in the conversation. Sometimes, Giambi said, McGwire sounded like "Charlie Brown's teacher," and he failed to understand every lesson. But Giambi recalled 1999 as the season when every word seemed logical. In the past three seasons, Giambi has averaged 38 homers, 127 R.B.I., 124 walks, a .330 average and a .458 on-base percentage.

"The reason I've become the player I've become is because I was smart enough to listen," Giambi said. "I got the chance to figure out if something would or wouldn't work."

In response to another question about hitting, Giambi chatted for five minutes before realizing he had not come close to answering. He apologized but continued jabbering about hitting, right down to remembering his baby pictures with the red plastic bat. Even then, he was waiting to swing, waiting for a strike.

"I was," Giambi said, "born to do this."