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Optometrist helps hitters keep eye on ball

By Scott Brown, Florida Today

VIERA, Fla. — [Brad Wilkerson](#) stood in the visiting trainers room at Space Coast Stadium with his left index finger aimed at the space between identical pictures of a wooden dock leading to a shimmering body of water.



Optometrist Bill Harrison shows Nationals trainer Tim Abraham an eye muscle test he gives to players.

By Michael R. Brown, Florida Today

With his eyes focused on the tip of his finger, Wilkerson — who cracked 32 homers last season and got on base enough to score 112 runs — tried to see a third image between the two identical postcard-sized ones taped to the wall.

What does this have to do with hitting a baseball, perhaps the hardest thing to do in all of sports? Everything, if you ask Washington Nationals interim general manager Jim Bowden.

"A baseball's coming in at 95 miles an hour and changing planes. Sometimes it's coming in at 76 miles as a curveball. Sometimes it's an 84-mile-per-hour slider," Bowden said. "All the different speeds, all the different locations, all the different rotations means your eyes have to be phenomenal so you can identify what the pitch is, where the pitch is going to be and whether to swing or not to swing."

That belief explained the presence of optometrist Bill Harrison and his son, Ryan, at the Nationals spring training camp recently.

The two, who have worked with George Brett, [Tony Gwynn](#) and [Barry Bonds](#), tested the baseball vision, i.e. depth perception, of every player in camp as well as some minor leaguers who have been training in Viera.

During sessions that took generally half an hour, the Harrisons showed the players eye exercises that, if done regularly, can improve read-and-react skills at the plate. (**Related item:** [Examples of exercises](#))

The drills, including the aforementioned one Wilkerson engaged in, can be done at home. Some are also available online and benefit players of all ages, the Harrisons say.

"A player said to me recently, 'You know I've always been told to see the ball, but no one ever taught me how to see it.' That's kind of what we work on, how to see it," Bill Harrison says.

Harrison has been doing this for more than 30 years. A self-proclaimed "hippie at Berkeley," Harrison pitched for the University of

California. But an arm injury ended any hopes he harbored of playing professionally.

Instead, he went to optometry school and became fascinated with the vision that allowed Ted Williams to become not only one of the best hitters of all time but also a decorated Navy fighter pilot.

"I learned that it was possible, not common, that you could train depth perception to get better," Harrison says. "You can get better at it, and that's what a lot of our drills are about."

He wrote of his desire to get players' vision to where they could read a label on a spinning record to Kansas City Royals owner Ewing Kauffman in the early 1970s.

Intrigued, Kauffman called Harrison, and the two chatted for 90 minutes. Before long Harrison found himself working with the Royals.

Among those in the organization who embraced his concepts were John Schuerholz, Jack McKeon and Brett.

Schuerholz, now with the Atlanta Braves, is one of the top general managers in baseball; McKeon manages the Florida Marlins and led the team to a world championship two years ago; Brett is just one of 25 players who have collected at least 3,000 hits during their big-league careers.

If any of the Nationals were skeptical about what Harrison preached, all they had to do was talk to [Jose Guillen](#) about the benefits.

When he got tested in 2003 as a member of the Cincinnati Reds, Guillen's vision rated as fair. Bowden says testing this year showed Guillen's depth perception to be the best in camp.

A journeyman who had never hit more than 14 home runs in a season, Guillen swatted 31 while playing for Cincinnati and the Oakland Athletics in 2003 while also batting a career-high .311. Last season the Nationals' probable cleanup hitter posted a .294 batting average with 27 homers and 104 RBI for the Anaheim Angels.

"He is living proof as to why it's important for the players to do these exercises," Bowden says, "because it helps them see the ball better, identify what kind of pitch is coming better and be able to make better decisions at the plate."

Examples of exercises

Optometrist Bill Harrison and his son, Ryan, prescribe many drills for players who want to improve their baseball vision. Some of those can be found at their Web site, www.baseballeyesite.com. Here are three others:

·3-D depth perception — Players work out the muscles of the eyes by pointing to the middle of identical pictures and trying to form the same image between them as quickly as possible. "It's kind of like weightlifting for their eyes," Ryan Harrison says.

·Eye track — Players take a string with mini-baseballs on it and hold the beginning of it at the tip of their nose. They look at each ball until they see an X where the string goes through the narrow opening on the baseball and go down the line.

·Eye-speed concentration poster — Players take a board with 50 numbers that aren't in sequence and find particular ones as quickly as possible. There is a sports ball on each number, and they have to call out what kind of ball it is when they locate a number.

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/baseball/2005-03-16-eye-exercises_x.htm

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