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# the mentalist

Nationals pitching coach Steve McCatty has nurtured his staff into one of baseball's best.

Will it finally pay off?

BY TOM DUNKEL  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN McDONNELL

ORF ZIMMERMANN  
GRASBURG DETWIL  
BLEVINS SORIANO



**The line unspooled with a flick of his right wrist in the late-afternoon sun; a smooth, sidearm cast.**

“I’m a catch-and-release guy,” said Steve McCatty. ¶ He stood on the manicured bank of a man-made lake in Viera, Fla., ringed by luxury condominiums and stocked with bass, tilapia and carp. All that was missing was valet parking. Space Coast Stadium, spring-training home of the Washington Nationals, was only a mile away. Whenever possible, McCatty, the team’s 60-year-old pitching coach, squeezed in a little condo fishing after practice. The brain, he says, needs to be periodically purged of distraction. “Clear the mechanism” is how Kevin Costner put it in “For Love of the Game,” one of McCatty’s favorite baseball movies.

With the regular season underway, “Cat” — as everyone calls him — clears his head by strolling the field at Nationals Park for as long as an hour after games, avoiding the steep stadium steps because that would be “real exercise.”

He fished incognito in Viera, wearing a plain white baseball cap and gray pullover. McCatty keeps a low profile at the ballpark, too. “I feel comfortable lurking in the weeds like that bass,” he said.

Last year the figurative Big One got away from the Nationals. Manager Davey Johnson, pumped up after winning the East Division in 2012, brashly proclaimed

# FISTER STOREN GARO SORIANO GONZALEZ



“World Series or bust!” The Nationals struggled early, caught fire late, but finished 10 games behind the Atlanta Braves. Washington didn’t even make the playoffs. Johnson retired, and tighter-lipped Matt Williams was lured away from the Arizona Diamondbacks to replace him. This time around everybody is content to *think* World Series.

If the Nats are going to become a truly elite team this season, they must collectively clear the mechanism and move ahead with renewed confidence. McCatty is key: The Nationals likely will go as far as their pitching carries them.



**At left:** Nationals pitching coach Steve McCatty, center, watches pitcher Ross Detwiler during morning practice at spring training in Viera, Fla.

**Above:** McCatty with Stephen Strasburg.

The message McCatty repeatedly delivers is, learn from failure, master situational pitching, throw strikes and “trust your stuff.”

Much of the burden falls on McCatty’s trio of not-yet-superstars; he has to find a way to make them fully realize their potential. Can Gio Gonzalez eliminate those spurts of wildness and be consistently sharp? Will Jordan Zimmermann continue his upward trajectory now that he’s a known commodity? Then there’s Stephen Strasburg, Garbo in spikes. He has to stay healthy, go deep into games, and wear the thorny crown of leadership comfortably. As McCatty told all his pitchers, “It’s time to do it. You have the ability.”

Williams retained McCatty in part because of his track record: Out of 30 major league clubs, the Nationals ranked seventh, second and eighth in earned run average the past three seasons, respectively. This is McCatty’s 19th year as a coach and 34th in professional baseball, which includes nine years pitching for the Oakland Athletics. In the strike-shortened 1981 season, Cat went 14-7 (most wins in the American League) and threw 16 complete games (in 2013 the entire Nationals staff had six). Arm trouble derailed his career in 1988. He lived the highs and the lows. The message McCatty repeatedly delivers is, learn from failure, master situational pitching, throw strikes and “trust your stuff.”

Williams also was aware that McCatty has held this job since June 2009, meaning he is the only pitching coach

most of his young-gun hurlers have known. “The thing I like about Cat is he keeps us mentally where we need to be through a long season,” says reliever Tyler Clippard. “For me, that’s the best thing a pitching coach can do.”

Amateur psychology comes in handy. Consider the buttons McCatty pushed on June 8, 2010, to settle Strasburg down for his inaugural start in the big leagues. “Merry Strasmas!” the media crowed. The baseball world was watching on MLB Network. A standing-room-only crowd rocked Nationals Park, chanting “*Steeeee-phen! Steeee-phen!*” as he warmed up in the bullpen. With the excitement reaching its peak, McCatty murmured in Strasburg’s ear. “You know what? You’ve done *nothing* in this game! It’s me. They’re cheering for *me!*”

Together they emerged from the bullpen and strode toward the Nationals dugout. McCatty milked the moment by theatrically doffing his cap. Strasburg couldn’t help but smile, which apparently calmed his nerves. He tamed the Pittsburgh Pirates, 5-2, giving up two runs and four hits in seven innings, striking out 14 and clocking 100 mph on a few amped-up fastballs.

A few weeks later Strasburg presented McCatty with a framed photo of the two of them waltzing to the dugout. He inscribed it, “To Cat. Thanks for letting me be part of your special day.”

**McCatty has pitched** in the playoffs, worked as an ESPN analyst, even posed for a *Playgirl* spread back in his fluffy-hair days. But winning a World Series “is something I haven’t experienced,” he admits. He would like to share that euphoric feeling with his current crop of pitchers. The long road began in Viera.

The day he went fishing, McCatty arrived at Space Coast Stadium at 6:30 a.m. and immediately changed into work clothes, slipping his uniform pants over thigh-length, baggy underwear. Mark Weidemaier, the defensive coordinator and advance coach, delights in noting those undies “went out of style in 1932.” That doesn’t faze McCatty, who disdains spandex. “It makes you feel like you’re encased in a sausage wrapper.”

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**RELIEVER TYLER CLIPPARD**

He is proudly old school. After checking with trainer Lee Kuntz about the health of his pitchers (all’s well), McCatty pored over his “book.” It holds the secrets of his universe. The book actually is a worn leather binder containing a half-dozen sheets of paper crammed with data on the number of innings his pitchers have thrown, their rest days, how often relievers get up in the bullpen during games. McCatty also roughs out starting assignments three months in advance. He revises the book constantly, but no information ever gets entered on a computer, and he wouldn’t dare bring a laptop into the dugout. “It’s not me.”

At 8:40, McCatty strode into the clubhouse. He chatted briefly with relief pitcher Josh Roenicke and Gonzalez, then left to attend a coaches’ meeting, where a recurring topic of discussion has been major league baseball’s adoption of instant replay. At 9:15, Williams convened his daily closed-door meeting with players. That’s a new wrinkle. Davey Johnson had about as much use for player meetings as he did sacrifice bunts.

McCatty stepped onto the lush grass of Space Coast Stadium at 9:40 a.m. and headed to the right field bullpen. The next half-hour constituted the meat of his day. He worked with nine-year journeyman Luis Ayala and prized prospects Matt Purke and Sammy Solis, who have yet to pitch in the majors. McCatty is a minimalist with mechanics. He presumes players have a gut sense of what’s right for them. Craig Stammen’s crimped motion is probably best suited for throwing darts, but his pitches sink like cannonballs. When Stammen got called up from the minor leagues in 2009, McCatty advised him to resist the temptation to alter his style. “You’re gonna be a wuss if you change *anything*,” McCatty said.

The coach stood at the back of the bullpen clutching a beat-up bat he has had for 14 years and no one else is allowed to touch, his “Linus security blanket.” He watched, chin in hand. Ayala kept elevating his cut fastballs. “Not a good idea,” McCatty said. Solis’s curveballs drifted over the heart of the plate, which makes hitters salivate.

“It just comes back middle,” Solis said.

# WINS SORIANO STOREN FISTER RG MATTHEUS GONZALEZ CLIPPARD



**Top:** In 2012, McCatty clowns with then-hitting coach Rick Eckstein. At right is third baseman Ryan Zimmerman. **Below:** Pitcher McCatty, No. 54, after an Oakland playoff win in 1981.

“What does that tell you? Stay back.”

Solis’s upper body was getting too far out in front of the hips, affecting his command. He focused on that tweak and snapped off a wicked curve.

“That’s a real good pitch,” McCatty said.

**The next afternoon** the Nationals beat the Mets, 5-4, in their spring training opener. A day later they squeaked by the Braves, 16-15. The following morning McCatty was back in the bullpen, working with Strasburg on how to hold runners on base. Whenever he turned to gaze at an imaginary runner, Strasburg’s pitches would tail low and away. He cursed, chastising himself.

“Don’t get frustrated,” McCatty said. He told Strasburg to vary his timing, mix up the head feints. Sometimes just staring at a base runner is enough.

“Make him uncomfortable?”

“Right.”

By the end of their session, the ever-stoic Strasburg had put his hat on backward and was playfully suggesting it might be a new way to deceive runners. That tiny bit of clowning was a good sign. Mechanism cleared.

McCatty later hustled over to another field to watch Clippard throw batting practice. He got buttonholed by David Salzberg, a government contractor and Nats fan from Vienna who was collecting autographs on two balls. Salzberg congratulated McCatty for molding a terrific staff. McCatty scribbled his name but deflected the compliment. “It’s not my work. It’s the pitchers.”

But David Salzberg knows his baseball and his Nationals. He sees that bass lurking in the weeds. As McCatty walked away, Salzberg whispered, “It *is* his work.” ■

*Tom Dunkel is the author of “Color Blind: The Forgotten Team That Broke Baseball’s Color Line.”*

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