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## For closers, it's focus, not stuff, that makes the difference

By [James Wagner](#), Published: July 30

There is no prototypical closer. Some make their final-inning performance a show, staring down batters, using wild deliveries and larger-than-life personalities on the mound, adding deception to their pitches. Some lean on their talent and overwhelming command, throwing blistering fastballs or knee-buckling breaking balls, relentlessly pounding hitters.

Whatever a pitcher's style, the pressure-filled final three outs of the game are different from any other inning. That's because, regardless of a pitcher's talent or stuff, closing may be more between the ears.

"It has something to do with your makeup," said [Dennis Eckersley](#), a Hall of Famer who ranks sixth all-time with 390 saves. "It's not like guys don't have the guts to pitch the ninth inning. There are so many guys that have great stuff, especially nowadays. But there is something about the ninth inning. There's something about the finality of a game."

This season, the Washington Nationals have seen both sides of what can happen to a closer in the face of that pressure. [Tyler Clippard](#), thrust into the role unexpectedly, has mostly excelled, notching 20 saves in 22 tries as the team's primary closer.

But before him another ninth-inning novice, [Henry Rodriguez](#), a pitcher with all the talent needed to succeed, succumbed to the weight of the task. His struggles cost him the job he had inherited from injured closer [Drew Storen](#).

Last season, Storen saved 43 games in only his second major league season. Neither he nor Clippard has the blistering stuff of Rodriguez. Yet, they succeed because of, among other things, a focused mental approach. They minimize the pressure of the ninth inning, simplify and slow their thoughts.

In his first few saves this season, Clippard admitted feeling nervous when he heard the crowd rise to its feet, the heightened energy and louder cheers. He mostly throws a fastball at 92 to 94 mph that seems to rise but doesn't, and a dangerous change-up. What worked for Clippard was approaching the ninth inning just as he has every other inning he has pitched for the Nationals. He said he has had an uncanny ability, since he was young, to focus



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and tune out. Friends will try to talk to him while he's watching a television show at home, and he won't hear it; it just doesn't register.

"For whatever reason, I have a simplistic mind," he said. "I am really just focused on one thing at a time. Anything else, I'm not capable of comprehending anything else. I'm just really focused on the pitch and one pitch at a time."

That's the frame of mind that Fran Pirozzolo, a sports psychologist who has worked with the New York Yankees, Houston Astros and individual players, said he has seen in some of the best closers. Injured Yankee closer Mariano Rivera, arguably the game's greatest ever, has pinpoint accuracy with one predictable pitch, his cutter, but trusts the "automaticity" of what he does so much that he succeeds, Pirozzolo said.

Closers have little time to get into a groove like starting pitchers, he said. They have to stick with a few things that work. "Pitching is just a huge memory test," he said.

That simplistic approach aided Billy Wagner, a fireballing 5-foot-10 closer who notched 422 saves with the Astros, Philadelphia Phillies, New York Mets and Atlanta Braves. Wagner easily shook off a blown save and didn't overthink anything, Pirozzolo said. "He was very competitive, but not like some guys who get too cognitive about it," he said.

If an athlete's frame of mind is focused on what he may lose, his performance is likely to suffer, said Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago and author of the book "Choke."

"Your mind-set really matters," she said. "You can focus on what you might gain. Or you can focus, for example, on one thing you might want to achieve, one particular type of throw, or something you are going to do. The idea is that focusing on that, at least, robs you of the brain power that would focus on failure."

Rodriguez lacked control to start last season before he found his form in the season's final month as a setup man. That carried over into a strong spring training and he entered the season as the team's closer when Storen had elbow surgery. Rodriguez knew that pitching in the ninth would be different.

"It's the adrenaline of the game," he said. "You want to do the job well."

Rodriguez did the job well in April, saving five games with good command before his first blown save on April 28. But when he began to struggle in May, he couldn't recover. On May 21, the night he lost the closer's role, he hurled three pitches to the backstop before recording an out. His body language showed defeat. Now, pitching in earlier innings, he is still erratic.

"Only being human, when you see that yourself, it plays in your brain a little bit," Nationals pitching coach Steve McCatty said. "Instead of throwing strikes, it's 'Don't miss. Don't throw something bad.' That's the one thing he's got to get over, because his stuff is unbelievable."

Storen learned how to bounce back when he faced his biggest challenge as a first-time major league closer in 2010. Then-Philadelphia outfielder Jayson Werth, now a teammate, hit a game-ending home run off Storen. It's an experience the pitcher still calls the "best thing that ever happened" because he realized he was trying to pitch the ninth inning differently than he had in other innings.

It wasn't about throwing harder than ever, he said, but about sticking to your best stuff and minimizing everything

in front of you.

“Whatever pressure you feel in a situation is whatever you make of it,” he said. “It doesn’t change anything that you have to do. With pressure, the game is the same. It’s still just three outs.”

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