



Burkett aims to throw strikes after leaving baseball

Florida Marlins' pitcher John Burkett is a versatile athlete: He's a competitive bowler when he is not pitching, and he excels in both sports. He has yet to pitch a perfect game, but he has bowled five 300 games. The 6-foot-3, 215-pound former San Francisco Giants' righthander was a key factor in the Marlins' winning streak of eight victories in a row and 15 out of 17 games in the 1995 season.

Prior to the beginning of his baseball career, Burkett bowled extensively in his youth and had plans to join the PBA Tour before he was drafted by baseball. He eventually wants to bowl as a pro, but his baseball career comes first.

"I want to bowl more, and I definitely want to bowl on the pro tour more than once a year," he said. "I've bowled in the Showboat [Invitational] the last three years, and I'd like to do it after my baseball career is over. I'd probably bowl three or four tournaments a year, but nothing serious."

Burkett, who is originally from Beaver Falls, Pa., the hometown of NFL Hall of Famer Joe Namath, regularly bowls in a league in Phoenix, where he lives in the off-season. One of his team's subs is Mike Aulby, a friend who has coached Burkett extensively.

The Marlins' pitcher uses the entire approach when he bowls to gain more power. His high arm swing is natural, and its timing is similar to his wind-up motion on the pitching mound.

Burkett said the similarities to throwing strikes in bowling to those in baseball are in the focus of hitting targets.

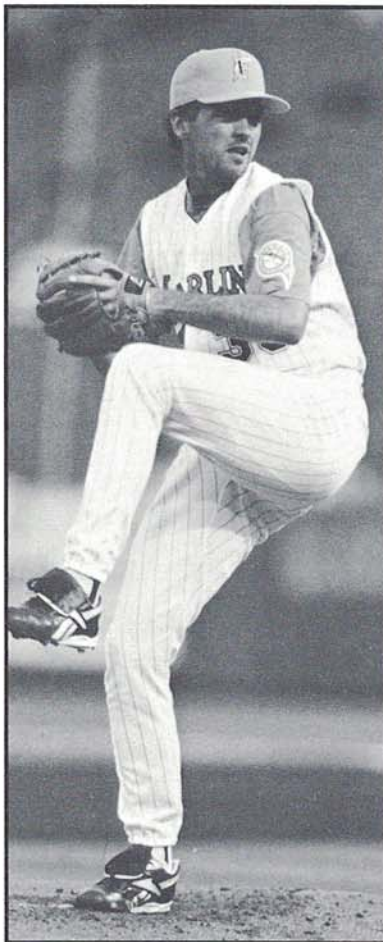
"In bowling, you are concentrating on a mark, and you try to come as close as you can to hitting it," he said. "In baseball, I'm not a power pitcher, so control is important and I'm able to concentrate. Bowling gives me that concentration and keeps my pitching sharp where I can look into a mitt."

Consistency in body mechanics is important for Burkett, and correct repetition in his form helps him perform his best as a professional. He uses a similar stance on the pitcher's mound as he does on the approach when he's bowling. The more he bends over, he claims, the higher his concentration.

Another similarity between baseball and bowling, according to Burkett, is the ability of a pitcher or a bowler to change speeds to hit targets to either fool the batter or get the pins down.

"You have to be able to change speeds to

be any good," he said. "When bowling lanes are not hooking, you have to turn it down. In baseball, you're constantly changing speeds, changing location, changing your mark or target. In bowling, you don't have to move around the lane all the time. If you're on the same pair of lanes, you might have to move a couple of boards and that's it."



John Burkett

Burkett considers bowling a legitimate sport compared to other major sports.

"I've played two sports professionally," he said, "but I don't get to bowl on tour all year, so I don't want to make it sound like I know everything about the tour because I don't. But from what I've seen out there, it's tough. It's a thinking person's sport, and you've got more science involved in it than people think. You go out there and bowl a lot of games, week after week after week, and it's hard physical-ly."

Nonetheless, Burkett feels that comparing the physical stresses upon an athlete's body in bowling and baseball is like comparing apples to oranges.

"In both baseball and bowling, your legs get tired, but pitching a game is more physically demanding over the entire body—your chest, lats, and arms. When you wake up the next day, you're sore from head to toe. In bowling, it's your legs, wrist, hands, and your fingers get beat up, but you don't feel totally sore."

Burkett believes that in many respects bowling is as grueling mentally as baseball.

"I'm mentally worn when I pitch a nine-inning ballgame because you have to figure out how to get Tony Gwynn of the Padres out four times and not just one time. You've got to face him again and again. He's going to make adjustments, so you've got to make adjustments and stay ahead of him all of the time. That's not easy to do when you're talking about a .330 lifetime hitter.

"In bowling, you are switching from lane to lane with different conditions and trying to figure them out, and you do it in 10 frames or before you know it, you've got a 130 on the board. The two sports are similar in those respects, except you go against a person in baseball, and you go against lane conditions in bowling."

Burkett said in 10 years he would start his pro bowling career by hitting the western region tour first to get adjusted to bowling regularly in tournament competition and then he would eventually move up to the national tour.

"I would have to bowl some regional stops first and then go to the national tournaments," he said. "I really don't understand all of the stuff you have to do, but you need to go to school to become a PBA member. You can bowl on the national tour as an amateur like I do, but once you cash in two of them, you've got to go to school. You learn about working with weight blocks and roll and revs and reaction with the balls, and I don't know anything about that stuff. Some of those guys out there on tour help me with it, but there's nothing like knowing it yourself and being able to make the adjustments. It's like throwing the baseball different ways. A lot of the deal is knowing what the bowling balls will do and what balls to go to in certain situations and what weights to put in them."

It looks as though Burkett will have much to look forward to in both sports. The only question left: Will he be as talented a pro bowler as he is a major league pitcher?

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