

NO MIXED SIGNALS: PITCHCOM TECHNOLOGY TAKES PLACE OF STANDARD HAND SIGNALS

Recent advancements in technology extend to the relationship between a pitcher and a catcher and how every pitch may now be called.

by Emily Messina

Gone are the days of catchers scrounging for whiteout or nail polish before first pitch. Say goodbye to the stress of hiding signs from opponents. The moments of squinting and deciding what small and specific sign is 60 feet 6 inches away are behind us. Times have changed, the PitchCom is here, and players are loving it.

The PitchCom is an alternative communication system that allows one person, through a device with a set of nine buttons, to deliver an audio message to another. In a baseball game, this is used between a catcher and a pitcher to decide on the next pitch without yelling, signing or a meeting on the mound.

In this case, the catcher has the transmitter which utilizes a push-button method, where each button signifies something different. The transmitter attaches with a piece of velcro to wherever the catcher desires. Some put it on the knee guard while others choose to put a wristband on their non-throwing arm. The pitcher has the receiving device that is typically tucked in the seam of their ball cap. Because it is placed by the ear, the call is not loud enough to extend beyond the pitcher. All teams are issued a few devices so that each pitcher doesn't have to hand it over to the next upon exiting.



PitchCom Transmitter



PitchCom Receiver

Each button the catcher can press corresponds to a pitch and can be set to make whatever noise is desired. There are even different modes that correlate with the different types of pitches, horizontal location, and vertical location. You could have any voice and any message set up. You can choose any language and any verbiage to suit the need of the battery. Theoretically, you could have a button of Morgan Freeman voicing "Fastball. High. Inside."

The PitchCom has been a successful edition for a multitude of reasons. With the pitch clock constantly winding down, an instantaneous method is much more efficient. The PitchCom allows the catcher to send over the pitch before the pitcher is even set. Sometimes the call is made while the player is grabbing rosin or circling the bump and not even turned toward the plate. This allows everyone to prepare themselves well before the pitch is thrown. It can also help to reduce mound visits, and thus, keep up the pace of play. The transmitter also provides easy communication; no more confusion about how many fingers are down or worry about runners looking in. RailRider backstop Rodolfo Duran noted how much better the system



is to use, especially when there is a runner on second. It takes away an opportunity for the opposition to try to read signs out on the basepaths.

The New York Yankees had the technology to work with over Spring Training in games and in practice. Catcher Mickey Gasper said he enjoys utilizing the PitchCom device as it helps make the game smoother.

“I got used to it this spring,” Gasper explained. “I was able to make some adjustments, and now I am really getting used to it.”

The devices are pretty standardized so the learning curve is not outrageous. There have only been a few instances of malfunction, which just results in exchanging out the system for another or a quick reset on the mound. Duran says the ease of the system really depends pitcher to pitcher.

“It’s easier with some guys, but with others not as much,” Duran added. “It’s a whole different experience.”

Not everyone wants to migrate to the PitchCom. And because it’s not mandatory, not everyone has to.

So, some pitchers choose not to add the new technology to their routine. Generations of the game up until this point have been played with the catcher calling the games by delivering the signs to the pitcher. The most important thing is comfortability. Whatever sets the batter up for success is the best method. Frequently, fans will see pitchers continuing their motions with a bend and a lean. Even though they aren’t looking to see a physical sign, the peering over the top of their gloves is a part of the delivery they’ve had forever.



There are a few differences in the system between the Major and Minor Leagues. In the bigs, up to five defenders can wear the receiver on the field as well. Typically middle infielders might choose to participate and help the defense prepare.

In addition, a few pitchers in the Majors have chosen to reverse the system by putting the transmitter on the pitcher and the receiver on the catcher. Those who have deeper repertoires with more pitches to decide from may want to take the lead. Veterans like Max Scherzer or Zach Grienke can prefer to choose first and see if their catcher shakes it off.

Despite some of the newer policies, like the pitch clock and shift ban, the PitchCom is less of a mandate and more of a new option. With the growth of technology, there are developments that can make the game a little bit smoother. And, the PitchCom is a pretty silent, inconspicuous addition. Fans would not be able to notice the difference throughout the contest unless they are trying to read the signs themselves.

Every policy is thoroughly tested, by the players who will use it, in the Minors and Spring Training. And, every policy must be approved by MLB and the MLB Players Association before being implemented. Even though it's not mandatory, pretty much every team and battery duo uses it.

For the most part, the reviews and results of the PitchCom system are positive in nature from the clubhouse. In the future, teams will see it as an effortless, standard practice in the game. Technology has already infiltrated the sport in the way of statistics, video content, and scouting. It's not just pre-game work anymore, now it's iPads in the dugout and PitchCom on the mound. What matters most is really what the players think of the inclusion of new gadgets. And in this case, it seems to be universally appreciated and largely successful.