

Salisbury: Meet Cole Hamels' Secret Weapon

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Sunday, September 19, 2010

Posted: 3:01 a.m.

By Jim Salisbury

CSNPhilly.com

On April 23, Cole Hamels climbed the mound at Arizona's Chase Field for his fourth start of the 2010 season. The left-hander breezed through the first three innings, giving up just one hit and striking out four over that span. His Phillies teammates supported him with a couple of early runs. With the way Hamels was throwing the ball, the game had cruise-control win written all over it.

The Phils, however, did not win the game. They suffered a 7-4 loss to the Diamondbacks largely because Hamels unraveled and allowed five runs in the fourth inning on two singles and three home runs.

What transpired that night in Arizona was not all together unusual. Hamels had been plagued by middle-innings meltdowns on his way to recording a 4.32 ERA during a disappointing 10-11 season in 2009. His difficulties that Friday night in Arizona — he gave up a fourth home run and his ERA swelled to 5.11 in the game — ignited a disturbing chorus back in Philadelphia.

Here we go again.

Since that awful night in Arizona, Hamels has been one of the best pitchers in baseball, reaching the lofty distinction for which he seemed destined when his work in the 2008 postseason earned him a World Series ring and two MVP awards. In 26 starts since that Arizona game, Hamels has a 2.70 ERA, the best mark on the Phillies' staff, and seventh-best in the majors, over that span. He has allowed just one run in his last four starts (28 2/3 innings) as he gets set to face the Atlanta Braves to open the season's most important series Monday night at Citizens Bank Park.

Hamels, 26, has been able to achieve this success because, unlike others, he never thought or spoke the words *here we go again* after that disastrous night in Arizona. The game ended and he let it go. Sure, he had failed, but instead of wallowing in failure, he would use it as a building block. He would try to grow from it. He would take the mound again in five days and start over.

Just like a man named Jim Brogan had encouraged him to.

"That's the number one thing I got from Jim," Hamels said. "Don't worry about failure. You can always start over. If you give up a home run, so what, start over. If you have a bad game, so what, start over. If you fail, don't stress, learn from it. Before, when things didn't go well, I'd kind of quit."

Rewarding the team's faith

Hamels is the biggest success story on the 2010 Phillies. Think about it. When the team traded Cliff Lee in December, fans and media howled in disapproval. *How could you trade a left-handed ace like that, especially after Hamels took a large step backward in 2009?*



Cole Hamels' resurgence in 2010 came in part because of the attention the lefty paid to the mental aspects of pitching. (AP)

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Now, this is not the time to re-ignite debate over the Lee trade. Suffice it to say that Phils believed trading Lee was a must, for a variety of reasons, if they were to get Roy Halladay, a pitcher they had long coveted. Trading Lee was, on the team's part, a major show of faith that Hamels could regain his 2008 form and be a strong left-handed complement to Halladay atop the rotation.

Hamels has rewarded that faith by recording a 3.01 ERA and a career-high 201 strikeouts in 30 starts. (His 11-10 won-loss record has been impacted by the ninth-worst average run support in the majors, 3.51.) Since July 1, Hamels has a 2.07 ERA in 15 starts, the third-best in the majors over that span, entering play Saturday.

There are many reasons for Hamels' revival, and they've been well told.

But now, Hamels is ready to tell the rest of the story, ready to talk about his work with Brogan and the impact the man has had on him.

Brogan, 52, is a Philadelphia-area native who played two seasons in the NBA with the San Diego Clippers. For the last 20 years, he has worked as a "performance specialist" based near San Diego, Hamels' hometown. He works with students, business executives, athletes, and anyone else looking for that edge that can come with focus and concentration. Super Bowl-winning quarterback Drew Brees is one of Brogan's best-known clients. He also works extensively with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

In June 2009, the Phillies were in San Diego. Hamels, who was having a difficult time duplicating his success from the previous season, did not pitch in the series. After a game against the Padres, Hamels' younger brother, Mitchell, introduced the pitcher to Brogan. Mitchell Hamels had been familiar with Brogan's work in the San Diego area.

Frustrated with his season and looking for answers, Cole Hamels told Brogan he'd like to set up a meeting.

"OK," Brogan said. "Meet me at 6 in the morning."

"Six in the morning?" Hamels asked, incredulously.

"What are others doing at 6 in the morning?" Brogan asked Hamels.

"Sleeping," the pitcher said.

"That's just my point," Brogan said.

Hamels met Brogan at a gym the next morning. At 6 a.m. The next night, he pitched a shutout at Dodger Stadium.

Conditioning body and mind

The success that Hamels enjoyed at Dodger Stadium on June 4, 2009 did not follow him through the rest of the season. Intent on turning things around in 2010, Hamels committed himself to improving his body and mind.

He worked on his body, daily, adding the strength that would bring the life back to his fastball and allow him to pitch deeply into games every fifth day. He threw regularly. He sought instruction from pitching guru Tom House, a former major leaguer who works with pitchers in Southern California. He took to heart the advice of Phillies pitching coach Rich Dubee, who urged him to sharpen his curveball and add a cutter to the fastball-changeup repertoire that had carried him through his first four big-league seasons. At the urging of Dubee and teammate Jamie Moyer, he picked up a copy of *The Mental ABC's of Pitching*, a book written by noted sports psychologist Harvey Dorfman, who had helped Moyer and Halladay when they had reached crossroads early in their careers. (Hamels still spends time reading sections of the book before every start.)

Hamels' quest for improvement last winter included 18 sessions with Brogan at a gym in San Diego. In their first session, Brogan told Hamels, "If you're willing to do today what others won't, you can perform tomorrow like others can't." Brogan still tells Hamels that almost every time they speak, which is about twice a month by telephone. They had one in-person session this summer in Philadelphia.

"Cole has a work ethic like few I've seen," said Brogan, who knows a thing about the subject. It was work ethic,

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Brogan said, that took him from the basketball courts of Lower Merion High School and West Virginia Wesleyan to the NBA.

During their offseason sessions, which always began at 6 a.m., when the mind is uncluttered, Brogan put Hamels through a series of 26, "complex drills that require immense concentration." A non-disclosure agreement prevented Hamels from talking about the drills. Brogan, also tight-lipped about the drills, mentioned that one of them requires juggling tennis balls while walking on a balance beam. No, he's not trying to prepare Hamels for a job in the circus. He's trying to develop Hamels' concentration and focus to a level where those elements can join hands with the pitcher's athleticism and lead him to success.

Brogan became fascinated with this stuff after his basketball playing days ended. A business and psychology major in college, he studied the science of focus and concentration, studied how the brain works when it encounters challenges, and [now makes it his life's work](#).

"I wondered why some people achieved great heights while others with just as much skill faltered," Brogan said.

The answer, Brogan learned, was between the ears.

A focus and concentration coach

In his work with the Jaguars, Brogan has learned that many mistakes, from penalties to missed assignments, are mental in nature.

"I was walking through Jaguars' practice facility recently," Brogan said. "Beautiful place. They have a room where the receivers meet, a room where the offensive line meets, a room where the defensive line meets. I was like, 'Hold on, where's the room for focus and concentration?'"

"I hear people say baseball is 90 percent mental. Oh, really? Then where's the mental coach. You have a pitching coach, a hitting coach, a strength and conditioning coach — where's the focus and concentration coach?"

Much of Brogan's work involves helping a person reach deeply into the powers of the brain. His clients start with a goal and work backward toward achieving it. He tries to train their brains to work in pictures, in visuals. See the situation and react to it before it happens, the *déjà vu* effect, he calls it. Bases loaded, full-count, game on the line. Build a picture of the result you want. And don't just see yourself hitting the catcher's mitt with a perfectly located fastball. Hit a pea inside the mitt.

Brogan's clients learn to stay calm, learn to breathe. Oxygen is magic. Frustration is poison. And pressure? That's a myth. Pressure only comes into play if you let it. Don't let it.

Of course, it takes hours and hours for this stuff to sink in and make a difference.

Once unsure of how much he'd gain from a focus coach, Hamels is now a believer.

"There's no stigma to working with a guy like this," he said. "It's not like I'm on a couch pouring my heart out. We're in a gym doing drills. You're dumb if you don't have a guy like this. It's made a big difference in me."

A year ago, you could tell when Hamels was having a tough game. He wore it on his face. His 6-foot-5 inch body drooped like a spent cornstalk.

Not anymore.

His confidence has been restored.

"I have a better idea of how to succeed for a full season now," he said. "I've learned you can't let your emotions distract you from what you're trying to do. That will drag you down."

Hamels added, "I don't stress anymore."

Which leads to the question, why would a young man with so much talent stress in the first place?

"Expectations," Hamels said. "When you've been there, done that, and you get there again and don't have the results you're supposed to, you stress. You press instead of breathing. I can calm myself now."

Hamels said he has techniques to compose himself when the heat is on in a game. He would not reveal them, but did admit he has used the old Curt Schilling trick of backing off the rubber and tying his shoes as a way to slow things down.

Slowing things down, at least in the mind, is one of the goals of Brogan's teachings.

"You hear people say, 'This guy or that guy is in the zone,' "Brogan said. "What's 'in the zone'? It's a high level of focus and concentration. I try to help people get there."

And if they don't get there? If that full-count fastball ends up over the wall?

"Don't worry about it," Brogan said. "Laugh. Tell the guy that was a nice home run. It's gone. It's in the past."

"You can't be afraid to fail. You'll never be great if you worry about what just happened. Look forward. If you're successful at everything, if you're not failing every once in a while, you're probably not doing what you're supposed to be doing. You grow from failure."

It was that idea that helped Hamels bounce back from that night in Arizona, when all of Phillies fandom was saying *here we go again*.

"That was a game where I put a lot of it to use," Hamels said. "I didn't stress. I knew I was learning a new pitch. I knew I could change things."

Praise from the pitching coach

Dubee, the Phils' pitching coach, is an occasionally brusque New England native. In spring training, he was outspoken in talking about Hamels' struggles in 2009. He said the pitcher was his own worst enemy. When something didn't go Hamels' way in 2009, frustration would set in, and his whole game, mental and physical, would unravel.

Despite being outspoken and publicly hard-edged, Dubee remained patient with Hamels, for he knows talent when he sees it. Dubee once said that Hamels "got too good, too soon." He never forgot that Hamels was human and young, really young, still a work in progress in many ways. He needed to improve the physical part of his game — he's done that with a deeper arsenal of pitches — and the mental side, as well.

Hamels' results this season have been impressive. Dubee is just as impressed with the man behind the results.

"I really like how he's handled the season — his presence, his maturity, how he's handled adversity in games," Dubee said. "Whether he has a good inning or a bad inning, he never changes his body language or loses focus. There have been times this year when he's gotten poor run support. It's never affected his preparation or the way he goes about his business."

Before every start, Brogan sends Hamels a text message. Brogan compared the message to a key going into an ignition. It triggers Hamels' thought process for the day, helps the pitcher not just absorb his game plan, but see it. The brain, Brogan said, likes to work in pictures. Draw a positive picture in the brain and the body will often follow.

"If it doesn't and you fail, we know what to work on," Brogan said.

Brogan isn't sure how much impact he's had on Hamels' season.

"Cole is the one throwing the baseball," he said. "I know nothing about pitching. With elite-level performers, there's that period of understanding the game and themselves that takes a few years. After that they can really dominate. Maybe we've helped speed the process."

"I know when I talk to Cole he gives a lot of credit to Charlie [Manuel], his manager, and his pitching coach. He has also mentioned how helpful Jamie Moyer and Roy Halladay have been."

Really, it doesn't matter who gets the credit. Thanks to a lot of folks, mostly himself, Cole Hamels is back to his 2008 form — having success and a lot fun pitching for the Phillies.

Here we go again, indeed.

E-mail Jim Salisbury at jsalisbury@comcastsportsnet.com

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awesome article

8:52 am Sep 20, 2010

Great read, I am passing this onto friends.....well written Jim. Thanks for this!!

Posted by [aequitas0118](#) at 8:52 am Sep 20, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Yo Jim, good stuff man

8:28 pm Sep 19, 2010

Excellent article, very informative and intriguing. This Brogan guy is the S**T ! Can we get the rest of the Phils to see this guy in preparation for the playoffs ???? Dubee is right, the change up is the second best pitch for any good pitcher and Cole has a great one.

Posted by [EasySwings](#) at 8:28 pm Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Hamels

5:35 pm Sep 19, 2010

in my opinion he is beter then in 08 form.... if Hamels had the wins he could be in the running for the Cy Young.....gotta love the walk offs

Posted by [philliesllover430](#) at 5:35 pm Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

can we

4:07 pm Sep 19, 2010

Just take it easy on them for today if they lose? They're not going to win every game from here on out. They had their chances and it was frustrating, but these things happen over the course of a season. I'm talking to you Regio!

Posted by [craig](#) at 4:07 pm Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

amazing again

6:03 pm Sep 19, 2010

forget everything I just said

Posted by [craig](#) at 6:03 pm Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Fantastic article

12:32 pm Sep 19, 2010

Cole has looked great this season. Early in the season he didnt look so well, now he's got an 2.70 era through most of the season. makes you excited about what the kid will do next year huh? The phillies need to send Howard and Werth over there. They're two guys that when things are going bad, they make them worse!

Posted by [weststar11](#) at 12:32 pm Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Great Article

11:54 am Sep 19, 2010

Thanks Jim for giving us outstanding insight on what Cole is doing to better himself personally and professionally. He certainly is not the pitcher from last year and this article clearly shows why! GO PHILS!

Posted by [kiwi11](#) at 11:54 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Coach

11:35 am Sep 19, 2010

And don't the Phils just hire this guy as a "focus and concentration coach?" Lord knows the batters sure could have used one of those through the middle parts of the season.

Posted by [Defx](#) at 11:35 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Whew...

11:33 am Sep 19, 2010

"Trading Lee was, on the team's part, a major show of faith that Hamels could regain his 2008 form" That was what scared me the most about trading Lee; they were banking this season on the 2008 Hamels and Lidge showing up, and I really didn't think either of them would. Hamels just seemed like he was too screwed up in the head and on a downward spiral, and Lidge... well who could really figure him out? However, Hamels has come out this season and, not regained 2008 form, he has been better than 2008. Lidge, hasn't quite regained 2008 form, because he obviously hasn't been perfect, but he's been pretty close, and I have confidence in him again. I'm looking forward to this stretch run and hopefully more repeats of 2008 will follow.

Posted by [Defx](#) at 11:33 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

This guy would be perfect for Jason Peters!!!!

10:59 am Sep 19, 2010

I read the first article on a guy who is mentally soft but extremely gifted.....then I read a second article on a guy with the same traits....3 minutes later!!!! someone introduce Jason Peters to Jim Brogan!!!! hell it couldn't hurt and Im sure Peters ain't doin anything at 6 am anyways (who is besides Cole hamels?)

Posted by [TL](#) at 10:59 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Cole

10:27 am Sep 19, 2010

Congrats on a great season Cole, lets make this run special... And lets go down Broad St. again...

Posted by [mtownlb40](#) at 10:27 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Cole

8:36 am Sep 19, 2010

I'll admit that I was one of those whoe called him soft last year (even after the WS MVP), and I kept waiting for him to blow up after not getting run support. I give him a lot of credit for showing a lot of guts and maturity. Great to see us throw in a home grown ace with our hired guns!

Posted by [craig](#) at 8:36 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

27

8:31 am Sep 19, 2010

I thought it wuz gonna be about his vag.

Posted by [chris__13](#) at 8:31 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)

Sweet Read

3:42 am Sep 19, 2010

Outstanding piece, Mr. Salisbury. Awesome to know some insight as to what's being going on during this amazing run for Cole. Quite inspiring as well. Thanks.

Posted by [Reclamation](#) at 3:42 am Sep 19, 2010 | [Report Abuse](#) | [Log in to reply](#)
