



# Baseball Basics for Brits

## Volume 4. 'The Front Office': Owners, General Managers and Field Managers

In this volume of *Baseball Basics for Brits* we will be looking at the roles and responsibilities of various people within an MLB's ownership and management structure.

Any professional sports team, whether a Premiership football club or an MLB franchise, requires people to fill certain roles. Such similarities are helpful in understanding the structure of an MLB organization, but there are some important differences to consider as well.

Firstly, let's look at a traditional British sporting structure. In football, the standard set-up has a Chairman and a board of directors (generally referred to as 'the board'), a Chief Executive, a manager (who has full responsibility for the footballing side of the business), and then an assistant manager, first team coach and so on.

The major exception to this is in cases where a club also employs a Director of Football (you see similar positions in Rugby and Cricket). Typically they will be the individual that oversees the footballing side of the business (from the first team squad down to the Academy) and most importantly it will be their job to assemble the squad of players.

An MLB organization will basically follow this latter structure, where the manager doesn't sign the players. Different teams will occasionally have different titles for the same job, and the odd unique position does exist, but from this starting point we can piece together an

overview of a typical structure.

The people who run an MLB organization are collectively referred to as the **Front Office**. In general, the Front Office will include:

- An owner - or group of owners (with a principal owner among them)
- A President and vice president(s)
- A General Manager, who will have an assistant and often a 'special adviser' or two
- Various directors who will be responsible for different parts of 'Baseball Operations', such as Player Personnel, Scouting, Minor League Operations, Player Development etc,
- A Field Manager (normally just referred to as the Manager), Bench Coach, First base coach, Third base coach, Hitting coach, Pitching coach and a Bullpen coach,
- Various groups relating to non-baseball activities, such as broadcasting, marketing, media etc.

For our purposes, we will be looking at the sections relating to the Owner, General Manager and Field Manager in further detail.

## The Owners

The owner of a baseball team's main role is, obviously enough, to own the team. Sometimes one man leads the way with his money (and his mouth), while teams are more commonly owned by a group of investors, one of whom is the **Principal Owner** who gets the majority of the publicity (good and bad).

One such group is New England Sports Ventures, who not only own the Boston Red Sox but also Liverpool FC. Several MLB teams are owned by large corporations who see the team as one part of their business portfolio; the Atlanta Braves for example are owned by Liberty Media.

Why do these people get involved? Well, MLB franchises generate a massive amount of revenue and being an owner of one of only thirty MLB teams carries quite a social status. And hopefully some of them are simply big baseball fans who, having built a sizeable fortune, are living out a long-held dream by being part of the sport.

## General Managers

The General Manager (**GM**) is the most important person in the Front Office, ahead even of the 'Field' Manager. While the Field Manager is responsible for what happens during a game, the General Manager has overall responsibility for the entire organization.

It is the General Manager who builds the roster and makes transaction decisions (trades, free agent signings, calling up prospects from the Minor Leagues etc). The Field Manager may be asked for his opinion on a potential target, but ultimately his job is to do the best with the players he is given.

The position of GM is a genuine 24 hour a day, seven days a week job. They are the people who will ultimately carry the can if their team doesn't come up to expectations. Of course, the pressure and responsibility that comes with the job is exactly why people in the industry strive for years to land one of those thirty privileged positions.

While a GM is there to make the decisions, he relies on feedback from various members of the Front Office, not least his **assistant GM**. Teams may also have one or more '**special advisers**' to the GM (the Astros' GM Ed Wade currently has six, for instance). Frankly, in some cases these are just token roles given to people with strong links to the organization.

The GMs meet up for four days at the start of December each year in an event referred to as the '**Winter Meetings**'. Various matters relating to MLB will be discussed by the GMs, but the intense media coverage of the event focuses on the trade talks that take place. Often the Winter Meetings end up being a disappointment for fans, as the staggering level of rumours are rarely matched by news of actual deals being agreed. The meetings are useful in terms of laying ground work for future transactions though.

In recent years, it's become fashionable to separate General Managers into different categories relating to the way they evaluate players.

As some will have it, on one side of the fence are those who rely on the traditional method of a **scouting network** that forms opinions on players by watching them play, and on the other are the GMs who instead rely on **statistics**.

This polarized view gained currency thanks to the best-selling book *Moneyball* (and the reaction to it), which among other things explained the way the Oakland Athletics have embraced statistical analysis and challenged conventional wisdom to 'overachieve' on a relatively small budget.

As the main protagonist in the book, the A's Billy Beane has arguably become the most well-known GM in MLB, closely followed by the Boston Red Sox's GM Theo Epstein. Epstein, Beane and *Moneyball* gained plenty of attention in the sports pages of British newspapers in the period after Liverpool FC was bought by Boston's ownership group. Much of this attention focused on how the principles

of *Moneyball* might be applied in football.

In reality, all GMs and organizations rely on a combination of the two methods of evaluating players, although each will favour one over the other to varying degrees.

## Field Managers

Officially called the 'Field' Manager, they are in charge of the players assembled by the GM. As in all sports, the manager is the public leader of the team, the main communicator with the Press and the man who will be judged on the team's win-loss record come the end of the season. Supported by his **coaching staff**, the manager will perform all the usual roles you would expect (keeping egos in check, boosting confidence/giving the team a rollicking when needed etc) while having a list of tasks specific to his job.

Prior to the game, the manager decides on the starting line-up. This will involve taking various decisions:

1. **Which nine players will form the starting batting line-up?** This will depend on the fitness and form of the players he has to choose from. His decision on one or two batters may also be swayed by their historical performances against the opponent's starting pitcher.
2. **Which fielding positions will they play?** In most cases, this will be straightforward. The regular players will have their normal starting position and don't swap about much. When you have to add in a bench player or two, some positional juggling may be required.
3. **In what order will they bat?** Once the game begins, the batting order is set in stone. There are endless theories on what may constitute the **optimum batting order**. In an ideal situation, your number one hitter fits the prototypical **'lead-off' role** (someone who is good at getting on base and is a quick base runner), while your best hitters are in the 3, 4 and 5 spots. This

is known as the **'heart of the order'**. The 8 and 9 spots will be given to your weakest hitters, with the 9 role almost exclusively used by the pitcher in the National League. If a team is going through a lean scoring run, the manager will often try to spark them into life by making some changes to the batting order on a given day.

4. **Which pitcher will start?** As mentioned in *BBfB Volume 02: Rosters*, each team in MLB operates a **five-man starting rotation**. Normally this will determine which of the team's five starters will be pitching that day. If a pitcher is injured or completely out of form, he will be moved off the 25-man roster by the GM and be replaced by another. Particularly near the end of the season, the manager may decide to alter the order of the rotation to bring forward his best pitcher on **'short rest'**.

Once the starters are agreed upon, the manager has the other 16 (or 15 in the AL) players on the 25-man roster at his disposal to call on during the game. In practice, the other four starting pitchers are unlikely to be used unless the game goes deep into extra innings, but there are still plenty of pieces to utilize for **in-game substitutions**. The manager will make the final decision on these tactical changes after consultation with his pitching coach and bench coach.

On the batting side, the manager may decide to bring in a **pinch hitter** for an important at-bat in the latter stages of a game, or a **pinch runner** if the score is close and the extra speed on the bases could make all the difference. Similarly a below average fielder may be replaced by a light-hitting but strong defensive player in the same situation.

As for pitching, while a manager's life would be much simpler if a starter pitched all nine innings, in the vast majority of games the team's pitching is shared between several hurlers. With advice from his pitching coach, the manager will decide when to take his starter out

of the game and then how best to use his **relief pitchers**.

Any sports fan is well-versed in second guessing a manager's substitutions and pitching changes are probably the ultimate for this. When a pitcher gets into a spot of trouble, the manager has to decide whether to let him work his way out of it or turn to someone else. Some managers earn a reputation for having a **quick or slow hook**, with veteran pitchers more likely to get the benefit of the doubt than an unproven rookie.

A manager's in-game influence doesn't just end at determining who is on the field at a particular moment. He can send messages to his batter and/or base runners (*via* his third base coach, as explained below) to carry out a pre-designed '**play**'. He (or his bench coach) can motion to his defense to shift from the standard alignment in an attempt to match it with the strengths/weaknesses of the specific batter at the plate (in the same way that cricket teams set different fields for different batsmen).

Finally, he can also influence what sort of pitch is thrown by his pitcher if he so wishes. Such a decision will be relayed to the catcher (you will notice the catcher always looks into the dugout before turning to the pitcher and signalling which pitch he wants the pitcher to throw), although in most cases such decisions are left to the catcher. He will be following a pre-game plan on how to pitch to each batter – again, in the same way cricket teams will formulate a plan on how to get a specific batsman out.

A manager can also play a valuable role for his team as a sacrificial lamb. Umpires in MLB do not like having their authority questioned and won't think twice about throwing a player out of the game if they argue with a call. As soon as the situation starts getting heated, the manager will get the riled-up player out of the way (the first base or third base coach may also do this if they are close to hand) and then argue the player's case for him.

More often than not, the manager will end up

being **ejected**, but at least this means that the angry player stays in the game and has a chance to take his frustration out on the baseball the next time he comes to bat. The manager who owns the record for most ejections is Bobby Cox. He was given the heave-ho 158 times (plus 3 ejections in the postseason) before retiring at the end of the 2010 season.

The manager will normally be responsible for assembling his **coaching staff**, normally consisting of six people: a bench coach, a first base coach, a third base coach, a hitting coach, a pitching coach and a bullpen coach.

### **Bench coach**

Anyone familiar with the role played by an assistant manager in football will immediately recognise the responsibilities of a bench coach. Prior to a game, the bench coach will lead the warm-up routines (stretching etc). When the game starts, the bench coach is there to assist the manager in various ways, such as being a sounding board for the manager on in-game strategic decisions. As the manager's assistant, it is normally the bench coach who takes over when a manager is ejected from a game.

### **First base coach and Third base coach**

The first base and third base coaches man their positions when their team is batting. It is their job to **relay signs** to the batter and any men on base, as well as to **direct traffic on the bases**.

It is one of the strange sights that will attract your attention when first watching baseball games on TV. The camera cuts to a man in full uniform, standing in foul ground near third base, wiping down his sleeve and frantically patting his chest and belt as if he's trying to find where he put his car keys.

He's not having a fit, he is relaying signs to the batter. There are any number of different messages that the coaches may be relaying to the batter and any runners on base. The main objective is to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

**Example:** the manager may decide that the time is right to call for the 'hit and run' play. This means that the men on base will start running as soon as the pitcher begins his wind-up and the batter makes sure that he puts the ball in play. There are two key benefits to this play if completed successfully: 1) even if the batter is put out at first base, the other base runners will have been able to advance a base due to their head start, 2) if the batter gets a hit, there's a good chance that the base runners will be able to advance by more than one base.

If the hit and run play is called for, all involved need to know in advance to ensure that they play their role correctly, but the coaching staff clearly cannot just shout out "hit and run" because the element of surprise is also important.

So, the third base coach and first base coach will let all involved know via a **coded sequence of signs**.

The first base and third base coaches are also on hand to help their players run the bases.

If a player is on second base and the batter hits the ball into the outfield, they will start running towards third base and will immediately look at the third base coach who will signal to the runner whether they should keep going to home plate (signalled by doing an impression of a windmill) or to stop at third (arms outstretched and showing the palms of the hands).

The player should have a good understanding of where the ball was hit to, but having the third base coach there is a big advantage because he can concentrate on watching the ball and what the fielding side are doing, allowing the runner to go full pelt without trying to look behind to see what's happening. The third base coach may also shout at the runner to slide into third base if it looks like it will be a close play.

The first base coach's main responsibility is to help the runner on first base by advising on

when they may be able to steal second base and shouting at the player to return to first base if they think the pitcher is about to try and **pick him off**. The first base coach will often time the pitcher's delivery to see whether it is going to be possible to steal off him (i.e. if his pitching motion is relatively slow, the runner will be able to get a good jump and have a better chance of beating the catcher's throw to second base).

Outside of their in-game responsibilities, the first base and third base coaches will typically lead training sessions on fielding and base running.

### **The Hitting coach and the Pitching coach**

The hitting and pitching coaches can be taken together as they broadly do the same job: working with their respective group of players to help them improve their craft and to correct any faults that may have developed in their techniques.

In both cases, they will rarely be doing 'major surgery' on the **batter or pitcher's mechanics**. If either have serious flaws in their basic approaches, they will not make it to the Majors in the first place.

A hitting coach will get to know each hitter's swing and what makes them effective. If he notices that the batter is doing anything differently (and this could be a seemingly very minor detail, like starting with his hands in a slightly lower place than normal) then he will work with the batter to correct it.

If he sees something that he thinks could be improved upon (e.g. he may think a particular batter could make better contact if he takes less of a stride before swinging) then he will pass this on to the batter and work with him to make the necessary change.

A batter's swing is a complex group of small movements and details. A minor chink in this chain can put the whole swing out, leaving the batter struggling. The batter will work for hours in Spring Training and during daily **batting**

**practice** to get their swing right. A batter cannot be thinking about his technique while trying to hit a 95 MPH fastball, so when they actually come to bat in a game, their instincts take over.

These instincts should turn to the swing that has been imprinted in their memory after all that practice. The trouble is, without even being conscious of the fact, it is easy for a batter to slightly change his mechanics (sometimes through tiredness or compensating for a slight injury). The batting coach is there to put him back on track.

A pitching coach does a similar job for the pitchers. Again, he will watch the pitcher's delivery closely to make sure that no bad habits are creeping in and will correct any faults if they appear. Prior to each series, he will go through the opponent's batting line-up with the scheduled starting pitchers and the catcher, discussing how best to approach each batter.

The pitching coach will offer advice to his pitchers during the game, both when they are sitting in the dugout and when he is on the mound. If a pitcher starts struggling, the pitching coach will make a **visit to the mound**, generally to give the pitcher a pep talk rather than suggesting any technical changes.

The manager will visit the mound in his pitching coach's place if he is going to make a pitching change. Consequently a visit from the pitching coach means it's time to bear down and get yourself out of trouble; a visit from the manager means you're on the way back to the dugout.

### **Bullpen coach**

Their main responsibility is to work with the pitchers when they are warming up in the **bullpen**. During a game, the camera may pan on to the pitching coach talking on a phone.

They're not ordering a takeaway, they are talking to the bullpen coach. He will be advised on which relief pitcher(s) the manager wants him to start getting ready.

The bullpen coach will then ensure that the required pitcher is fully prepared to enter the game when called upon. Note that some teams will also have a designated **Bullpen catcher**. The bullpen coach may also work with one or two of the starting pitchers who are on an 'off-day'.

### **Captain**

While not a part of the Front Office, this is a good opportunity to briefly explain the role of being a captain. In the main British sports, every team has a nominated captain when they take to the field and throughout the game's duration (if the original captain is substituted, another player will take on the role). This is not the case in MLB: there is no obligation on a team to have a captain and the majority do not (some may have 'unofficial' captains, although in these cases they will be referred to as **'leaders'**).

The role of captain in MLB is largely an honorary position bestowed on one of the team's best players who, for varying reasons, is particularly seen as being a leader and role model for the organization. Derek Jeter, for example, has spent his whole career with the Yankees and, in 2003, he became only their eleventh captain in team history.

### **Further Reading**

*The Thinking Fan's Guide to Baseball* by Leonard Koppett (Sport Classic Books, 2004)

*Baseball Field Guide: An in-depth illustrated guide to the complete rules of baseball* by Dan Formosa and Paul Hamburger, (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006),