

Martin's impact behind the plate still integral part of Blue Jays' blueprint

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DUNEDIN, Fla. – There isn't a player at Toronto Blue Jays camp with more responsibilities than catcher Russell Martin.

As his teammates get geared up for the grind of the regular season Martin not only has to prepare himself, but he has to get an entire pitching staff ready to perform in time for opening day.

The Blue Jays have four catchers in major-league camp and there are a couple of bullpen catchers around, too. Martin is notoriously meticulous about how he handles the pitchers he's going to catch, though, making this time of year particularly important.

J.A. Happ and Drew Storen are the club's two high-profile offseason acquisitions on the pitching side, but fortunately for Martin the bulk of the staff from last season has returned.

That's made Martin's job a little easier compared to his first spring training with the Toronto, especially as Martin [took on the difficult challenge of learning how to catch](#) R.A. Dickey's knuckleball.

"Last year it was a whole crew that I had to get to learn. There was a lot more homework that I had to do," says Martin. "This year I can keep my focus on the new guys. For right now my focus is definitely on Happ, Storen, Jesse Chavez as well. And so far, so good."

Happ, of course, is familiar with Toronto, having pitched there from 2012-14, but this is the first time he's worked with Martin. The veteran left-hander [signed a three-year, \\$36 million deal](#) with the Blue Jays after undergoing a bit of a career renaissance in the second half of last season with Pittsburgh. The hope for Happ is that he continues down that track and it's reasonable to surmise that having a catcher with Martin's credentials behind the plate should help with that.

"We're still getting to learn each other, but we've had several conversations already and it's getting better and better as he learns how I pitch and I try to learn how he likes to call a game," says Happ. "I think it's going to take some time but I certainly think getting to throw bullpens [in spring] from the start and beginning of games is enough time to get there."

Storen came over from the Nationals [in an offseason trade](#) that sent outfielder Ben Revere to Washington to solidify the back end of the Blue Jays' bullpen.

Whether Storen or Roberto Osuna is Toronto's closer has yet to be determined, but the 28-year-old right-hander is relishing the opportunity to throw to Martin.

"He's really easy to work with. Obviously he's very sharp back there," says Storen. "I like what he calls and there's also certain things that I like to do. Little things like [throwing] a two-seam [fastball] in [certain situations.] That's the kind of stuff we're going to tidy up."

So what does it take to get there? First off, Martin asks each pitcher he's going to catch a series of questions to lay down the basics.

"On my end, it starts with how's the ball moving? What's the action on the fastball? What type of break is on the breaking ball? How do you want me to set up behind the plate? Where do you want me to set up on the changeup?" says Martin.

"You go pitch by pitch and discuss how to set up and what they like to do. Happ likes to elevate his fastball, so that's something I have to stay aware of. Every pitcher has a different mentality. My job is to learn it, understand it and continue to establish that relationship."

From there, the trust builds with repetition and the chemistry can slowly but surely get to a place where the game-to-game structure and necessary adjustments that come with it are second nature.

On the whole, having a catcher in Martin on the team that is naturally so detailed oriented gives manager John Gibbons and his coaching staff one less task to worry about.

"That's why we got Russ last year, he's one of the best in baseball at handling pitching staffs," says Gibbons. "He was a huge part of getting us where we went last year. That's why we sunk a big investment in him – he's that good."

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