Dissecting the arm and mind of Jaime Schultz

By Henry Molski
Sports Editor

The radiant sun heated up the playing field at Winthrop Ballpark to a balmy 85 degrees. The white-knuckle thriller in May 2010 between High Point University and Liberty University in the Big South Conference Tournament made it seem even hotter.

The oddity about Winthrop Ballpark is that it was designed without the sunset in mind. This left the sun reflecting fiercely off the press boxes and right into the eyes of High Point Panther freshman starter Jaime Schultz for the better part of the evening.

This didn’t slow Schultz down. Schultz logged a cool ERA just above four during the 2010 season and that was not about to change on this day. Through four innings Schultz had only given up two hits and was up to the ninth.

What happened in the top of the fifth was something that no one saw coming. Designated hitter Jeff Jefferies was at the plate for Liberty when Schultz’s catcher, Kyle Mahoney, called for a curveball. That’s when he felt it.

"That was weird," thought Schultz as he noticed a peculiar kind of discomfort in his elbow.

Mahoney signaled for another curveball.

"I’m throwing a fastball this time," thought Schultz.

Schultz threw his fastball, but then Mahoney wanted another curveball. Schultz obliged him.

"That’s it," thought Schultz after throwing the curve.

Usually a quick worker, Schultz started to pace about the mound. This was enough of a sign to get a reliever ready. Drew Daves was in the bullpen to warm up in a instant.

After a brief delay, on the mound with Schultz, his night was over.

The game went on without Schultz though. In a back-and-forth bout High Point held on to a one-run lead for most of the night.

In a night with many heroes for the Panthers, it took a stickbreaker with the bases loaded and the bottom of the ninth to decide the outcome.

High Point won.

But High Point also lost something that day.

The highly talented and charismatic leader of the team in Jaime Schultz would not be pitching in the Big South Tournament.

The Panthers did not win another game in the Big South Tournament.

In addition, Schultz was about to undergo one of the biggest changes in his life.

"The fall is a time for baseball players to get back into the swing of things. It is a time to practice the fundamentals and a time to strengthen up for the long grind of a baseball season.

Instead of getting ready to pitch for his 2011 sophomore season, Schultz now donned an imaginary red-shirt, meaning he would not play for the Panthers in 2011.

Schultz instead spent his time preparing for surgery. The long road to recovery had begun.

At first, Schultz’s injury wasn’t definite enough to put him under the knife. He sat out for all of summer ball to see if his arm would heal. Unfortunately, when he tried to throw again in the fall he knew instantly there was “no way.”

Diagnosed with an elongated ulnar collateral ligament or UCL, Schultz was to have the famous Tommy John surgery in which the damaged ligament in the arm is replaced.

In Schultz’s case, he couldn’t throw with the pain in his arm with just rehab,” said Tyler DePew, the team’s head athletic trainer. “With the velocity he throws, what it became was almost unplayable.”

Described by DePew as a fairly standard procedure nowadays, the primary purpose of Tommy John surgery is to replace the UCL. The procedure calls for a graft from the patient’s hamstring or wrist or from another cadaver. In Schultz’s case it would come from a ligament in his hamstring.

The surgery took place without any major speed bumps. The only thing the doctors were unsure about was if Schultz had, in fact, torn the ligament or just severely elongated it.

When Schultz awoke from surgery he immediately felt the fear rush through him. He could not feel or move his right arm. Schultz was the same comedian that he had always been all along, but some days were different.

There were days that he wouldn’t be the same,” said Jared Avidos, teammate and roommate of Schultz. “You could tell the rehab was long.”

Losing a stellar starting pitcher is tough. Losing a charismatic leader is even tougher.

“Jaime is one of the most charismatic I’ve ever coached,” said Craig Corzatt, the head coach of the High Point Panthers. “He is at his best when he is the most carefree. He has a tremendous presence on this team.

Nearly, the loss of a player of this stature would not be easy to overcome.

The Panthers did struggle in 2011, stepping back from their 31-29 season in 2010 to 24-32. While Schultz was still always working out with the team and at all of the home games, he did not travel and he, obviously, did not make it on the field.

Still, with the ups and downs of rehab for Schultz, teammates appreciated his presence.

“Most of the time you could never tell he was injured,” said Avidos. “He’s always got that goofy kid.”

Baseball games can drag along from time to time. Seasons can drag even longer. This is why players of the game find ways to stay involved and have fun.

Schultz is an unspoken leader of the baseball bi-jinks for the Panthers. Whether he is organizing human dominos during a batting practice or covering a coach’s back with tape, Schultz is always in the thick of the action.

To combat his absence and injury, Schultz had to work at staying involved and in rhythm with the team. This meant doing everything from doing the day-to-day field work for the team to dressing up and dancing as the team mascot, Proudler, for promotional videos.

Schultz has the ability to define the character of the entire Panther team. Avidos said that he used to get mad when he played or even angry when he was on the field, but Schultz helped him change that.

“I was once playing a custom suit and laughing,” said Avidos. “[Schultz] is someone that you can always go to talk to.”

And beyond every game Schultz is dancing. If they are at home, he could be jumping off lockers. If they are on the road, he is dancing on top of bus seats.

There is not much that puts a smile on a teammate’s face quicker than Schultz’s dancing. Corzatt chooses to embrace this talent as well.

“The man is full of explosive fast-switch fibers,” said Corzatt. “This is why he can dunk at 5 feet 9 inches.”

Corzatt doesn’t see any improvement of the energy he produces. In fact, he cultivates it.

“You have to harness the energy,” said Corzatt.

Harnessing the energy will be a key to not only the Panther’s season, but in Schultz’s career, in 2012.

Heading into the spring season with High Point’s first game on Friday, Feb. 17 against Army, Schultz was prepared. Minor in-game adjustments remained, but Schultz believed that his arm was as healthy as every with coaches and trainers.

While winning remains a top priority for the program, coaches must additionally keep the health of their players in mind. Corzatt now has Schultz set up as a closer for the Panthers in 2012, a role new to Schultz at High Point.

Schultz will not be expected to take on as many innings this year with his newly reconstructed arm. This way the team can get the most out of his talent by putting him in the best role possible.

While the arm is fully healthy, some coaches do not want to overwork the newly ligamented arm. With short stints in the bullpen instead of long starts, Schultz’s arm should stay in full health.

“Great season,” said Corzatt. “A closer can be either a hero or a goat. That’s why you have to be mentally tough.”

This is why the coaches think that Schultz fits the bill perfectly. Schultz is a man who is easy-going and carefree enough to shake off a blown save and then go back out the next day and handle the fingers of era as a new pitcher.

Schultz’s outlook on life and his enthusiastic day-to-day makes him the right fit as a closer on the team, said Corzatt.

As far as personal goals go for Schultz, he already hopes to have at least six or seven saves in 2012. This would be a great bounce-back year for any college-level pitcher returning from injury.

High Point will also put a very talented group of men on the diamond with Schultz. Starmark’s Malcom Chappaud already has major league scouts coming in to watch him practice and infielder Mike Midsdornaz already was drafted entirely by the Baltimore Orioles. He chose to play college level ball first.

It has been over a year and a half since Schultz pitched in a game in which he gets to wear his jersey. He knows he would get the butterflies when he steps onto the mound.

“I don’t get nervous anymore,” said Schultz. “High Point is a school, and I’m ready to go now.”

It showed during his opening weekend. Schultz pitched six-and-two-thirds, allowing one on Feb. 17 and another on Feb. 18 in Panther victories over the Black Knights of Army. There was not a single worry about the outcome of the game.

As HPU faces the Big South Conference Championship in 2012, who wouldn’t want to see Schultz dancing around his home field with a trophy?