

To Repeat

Mets' hurler Johan Santana can shoot you a changeup that looks exactly like his fastball – same grip, same motion, same candy stripe rotation of red laces and white horsehide - except that the heater smokes in at ninety-four miles an hour while the change trudges along in the mid-seventies. A hitter can finish his swing and be well along in his cussing before the pitch ever crosses the plate.

Santana perfected this legerdemain by carrying a baseball around constantly. The changeup depends on touch, feel – so the southpaw fondled a Spalding virtually every minute he was off the field for the six years he's spent in baseball, from AAA to the bigs, all the way to a brace of Cy Young awards and a megabucks contract with the Mets.

By contrast, Greg Norman recently tanked on the back nine of the AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am. He whipped through the front of the course like the Great White Shark of the '80's then blew sky-high to finish at 76. The problem, the golf legend acknowledged, is a simple lack of practice. Focused on his business empire, Norman plays few tournaments and both his swing and his concentration have suffered.

Lesson: no matter how good you are (or once were), you gotta practice. The same holds true in any endeavor, even (and perhaps especially) the Christian life.

Christians do not worship the will, but we see it as an important tool. Richard Foster laments that believers tend to "try" instead of "train." We face the 0-and-3 count of a midweek moral crisis only to discover that last Sunday's soon-forgotten sermon has left us with a clumsy grip on the Spirit's power. We spray our tee-shots into cultural sand traps because we try to slide by on once-weekly binges of prayer and praise.

The faithful fingering of the pages of Scripture in our "off-hours," the driving range discipline of daily prayer, the unseen exercise unto godliness through the classic spiritual disciplines – these are the actions that impart power in the very public moments of Christian living. As Johan Santana demonstrates, the only way to be ready "in season" is to know there really is no off-season – to grip God until we have his presence, literally, at our fingertips.

The wind-up, the pitch . . .
Doug