

“The Most Important Things in Life Are Good Friends and a Good Bullpen”: An Interview With Scott Eyre¹ About Playing Major League Baseball With ADHD and How the Sport Can Help Struggling Students to Succeed

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In this interview, major league baseball world-series winner Scott Eyre talks about his attention and learning problems, how certain teachers helped him to deal with his struggles and how he managed to eventually become a big star in baseball. Reflecting on the way that his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) influenced his life, Eyre sees positive aspects of his condition (like the high energy level associated with his ADHD). He explains how his love for baseball helped him to learn how to focus on different tasks in life. In addition, he highlights how baseball can help build a sense of belonging regardless of one's disability. In closing, he expounds on how his experience as an athlete with attention and learning problems was helpful in supporting young struggling players that he coached.

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Insights: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. Despite your great accomplishments in baseball, we do not want to focus on your success as an athlete today, but instead raise an awareness of ADHD and the effects it has on individuals. When did you find out that you had this condition?

Scott Eyre: I was in Toronto with the Blue Jays in 2001. Here I was thrust into a starter's role for a couple of games, even though I was a reliever at the time. After one of these games, a reporter made a comment like: "In the second inning, you faced such and such." I was taken aback – I couldn't remember anything about that. However, I was able to recall everything about the third inning. Another time one of my teammates asked me: "How come that you knew everything about the third inning, but can't even remember the second inning?"

1 Scott Eyre is an American former professional baseball left-handed pitcher, who played in the Major League Baseball (MLB) for the Chicago White Sox, Toronto Blue Jays, San Francisco Giants, Chicago Cubs, and Philadelphia Phillies. He won the World Series with the Phillies in 2008. In his final season, he achieved an earned run average (ERA) of only 1.50 in 42 games.

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My entire life has been like that. Certain things stick in my mind and I can remember them vividly but others don't. Apparently, people noticed, for example, one of my teammates – Justin Miller – asked me one day if I had ever been tested for ADHD. I started laughing, but he was serious. Up to that point, I had never been tested but I decided to see our team doctor, who gave me some pills and said: "Take one today, take one tomorrow, take one the day after that at the same time every day." Already by the third day, I was sitting in the dugout actually watching the game. Normally, I was very hyperactive – never sat still and rarely stopped talking, but all of a sudden, I was sitting in the dugout all concentrated and focused, watching the game for three innings. Not a word. Nothing. I just sat there and watched the game. Chris Carpenter came up to me and asked: "Are you okay?" And then my trainer – George Poulis – who had also noticed the change in me, said, "When we go to Tampa Bay and play the Rays, I want to set you up with their team doctor." So when we went down there, I got tested for ADHD. When seeing the results, the doctor said: "How the hell did you make it to the big leagues without medication?" He prescribed some medication, and after starting to take this stuff, I began to pitch better. When I got to the bullpen, I started to remember things, how to get this guy out, what pitches to throw. Everything made sense. It was a very strange feeling. I thought, maybe this is just me being able to focus and stay on target with my thoughts.

Insights: So you were diagnosed with ADHD at a rather late point in your life. And getting good medical treatment helped you. Like other players – for example, Andres Torres, Derek Lowe, or Adam LaRoche – you have been very outspoken about your struggles with inattention and hyperactivity. Instead of handling it privately, you have repeatedly talked about your challenges in public. What brought you to the decision to not keep quiet about it after you realized you had ADHD?

Scott Eyre: Yes, I mentioned my struggles a couple of times in interviews, and then became really open about it after I got traded to the Giants in 2002. After that a couple of schools for students ADHD, dyslexia, and other problems emailed the Giants PR people and asked if I would come talk to the kids. So I did. And I told them: "Just because you have this challenge, it doesn't mean you can't do things in life. You can do whatever you want to do." When a major league player tells a kid that he can achieve something, he's going to believe it, even though that's not quite fair. They shouldn't believe me over anyone else. But noticing this reaction, I started to understand what an impact I could make. Parents sent me emails and letters, saying: "My child now takes his medication every morning without any fuss because of you." It made me feel very good.

Insights: So you saw what an impact you were able to make on those children. You made them see that life is not just about your problems, but also about what you can achieve in life.

Scott Eyre: Yes. I remember a boy, Jeff, once asking me: “Do your teammates know you take your medication?” He was getting teased by schoolmates because he was taking his medication at school. I told him that it was totally okay and to not make a big deal out of it. Years later, toward the end of my career when I was with the Phillies, I got a letter from Jeff. He was a senior in high school by then and was about to go to Duke, a very prestigious institution. He wrote that a lot of his achievements were due to the encouragement I had given him years earlier. I wrote him a letter back saying: “You did all the work. All I did was being there.” So it’s been very rewarding. Experiences like this make me feel like I’m leaving an imprint of some type of goodness on this place.

Insights: That’s great. Role models who are open about their challenges can make a big difference. It does not make sense for kids to pick on someone at school because of his ADHD, learning disability, or speech disorder, if someone on their favorite sports team deals with the same condition.

Scott Eyre: Exactly. Having people around that support you in what you’re going through makes it easier to deal with.

Insights: We talked about the impact that you have had on young students. What was your life as a student like when you went to school?

Scott Eyre: Certain classes were fun. My psychology class, for example. I paid attention. It kept me engaged. But then when I went to a math class where the teacher was writing something on the board and talking about stuff, I would start looking around and get lost, hardly hearing anything of what the teacher said. I wouldn’t give oral speeches. No chance. I just took an F. Every time. Sorry. I’m not going to do it. You can’t make me do it, I’ll just take the F. I was okay with that. I had a good enough grades to play baseball. But when I went into a science lab and the teacher started talking about stuff that I didn’t understand, my mind started wandering. And I’m thinking about a baseball game for ten minutes and then another ten minutes about doing stuff at the beach or something. And then, twenty minutes of class has gone by and I didn’t hear a word. Most of the time, it was like that. When I had to read a book, if the first three pages didn’t make me lock in, I had a hard time getting through it. I would have to read some pages several times to understand what I was reading. But baseball interesting to me. That became my focus. I can’t focus on everything like normal people.

Insights: What you just said shows how important it is for teachers to incorporate the hobbies of their students into the lesson. For example, you can teach math using different baseball statistics, and you teach history and literature using baseball examples. There is probably not a single school subject where teachers cannot find a way to incorporate baseball.

Scott Eyre: Absolutely. You can translate baseball or other hobbies into

other areas. Teachers can be the stepping stone for kids. Teachers are a huge influence on kids' lives if they know how to get their students excited by incorporating their interests into lessons. I don't even remember some of my teachers, because they were not doing that. They had no impact. But I remember others, like Miss Howard from fifth grade, because she helped me all the time. If she noticed that I was looking at my paper, struggling, she would come over to ask if I needed help. For someone like me who had trouble concentrating, she made everything fun and engaging. I'll always be grateful to her because of that. Not every teacher goes above and beyond. But the ones that do make a big difference. You have to take an interest in your students. You have to know them and know what gets them excited. You have to use their hobbies and be mindful of their abilities when teaching a lesson. And you have to be patient, especially with kids with a learning disability or with ADHD. You have to find out what works for those children. That's hard for a teacher in a class of 30 or more, but some can do it.

Insights: Yes. And this is why we need the most capable and smartest people to become teachers. You made a couple of very important points. This interview will be read by teachers. I'm glad that you emphasized the impact teachers can have by caring, showing patience, and making lessons relatable to their students by using baseball examples or picking up on anything else that interests them.

Scott Eyre: Oh man, some of my teachers have made huge impact on my life even to this day.

Insights: Wonderful. Well, you picked baseball as your sport but wasn't that challenging because of your struggles with ADHD? There so much time in between the action, but then all of a sudden, you have to be totally focused.

Scott Eyre: You're absolutely right. If you watch a team of eight-year-olds, you will see kids paying attention in one moment and then in the next, they're just looking at the butterflies. That was pretty much me. I wouldn't say that I chose baseball; instead baseball chose me. My mom is a huge baseball fan, and we all watched baseball on TV. It kept my attention like nothing else. It was weird. It caught my attention early on and has been something I have loved ever since. With five kids in my family, baseball was also something we were all able to do outside. With one pitcher, we would play two on two. My sister and brother would be on one team and my two other brothers would be on the other. We made it work. My mom loved it. She would sit outside and watch us play. Playing baseball was ingrained in me as a kid.

Insights: So baseball chose you.

Scott Eyre: Baseball chose me, yeah.

Insights: That's nice. I've heard it said that ADHD doesn't only have to be something that you struggle with. Some people have an endless amount of energy because of their ADHD and seem to be able to channel that towards success on the

playing field. How was that with you?

Scott Eyre: I think that my ADHD was something that I drew strength from due to all the energy I had. As a relief pitcher, I felt like I could pitch every day. I can't tell you if it was because of my ADHD or because I just wanted to play baseball every day. Baseball was just such an outlet for me, it was a release.

Insights: So it was easy for you to focus your energy on something that you love.

Scott Eyre: Yeah, exactly. There were days when I would have too much energy and I couldn't sit still. I would be in the bullpen and just walk around. And oftentimes, I was talking too much. Sometimes my teammates would tell me that I was annoying. With the Phillies, I had some of the best teammates ever, Durbin and Condrey and other guys. When I would start talking and rambling, they would go: "Scott!" and I would ask: "Am I talking too much again?" And they would say: "Yea." That helped me to focus. Like I said, I had so much energy, I had to let it out. For example, when batting practice was rained out, we would just be inside for three hours doing nothing, and my energy was building up. And when I went to the bullpen and had to sit there for seven innings before I might pitch, it would build up even more. So my release was talking, talking, talking. And moving around. But those guys with the Phillies kept me in check in the best way possible.

Insights: I am happy that you had such a good relationship with your teammates. It says something about the connection you had with them if they were able to tell you that you were talking too much without stepping on your toes.

Scott Eyre: Oh, yeah. However, over the years there were also teammates that didn't like me because I talked so much. A lot of times, I just rambled. Just talking to talk. I couldn't help myself. So some guys would say: "Dude, you never stop talking. You are annoying." All I could say was: "I am sorry, I get it."

Insights: Well, it's not possible to be liked by everyone.

Scott Eyre: Oh yeah. I am learning that more and more as I get older.

Insights: However, I know a lot of couples where the wives complain that their husbands don't talk.

Scott Eyre: Well, that is not the case with my wife!

Insights: Let's talk about your life after your professional career in major league baseball. I know that a lot of former players have trouble structuring their lives because when you play for one of the teams in the big leagues, everything is taken care of.

Scott Eyre: Yes. Everything. Your clothes are put in your locker. Your shoes are polished for you. And your day was so structured. Literally, on the board was written what you would be doing the entire day: 5:00 am team meeting, 4:30 pm batting practice, ... you had somewhere to go every day. And you got a lot of stardom treatment. For example, you usually get into a restaur-

rant faster than other people. That always bothered me though, so I never took advantage of that. I wanted to wait like everybody else. But it's a celebrity-type life. And then you finish baseball, and it's all over. I know a lot of players who have struggled with that and ended up with problems like alcoholism or drugs.

When I retired, I was no longer Scott Eyre, the major league baseball player. I was just dad, husband, person. Nothing more and nothing special. I couldn't go to a Tampa Bay Rays game and park in the players lot. I had to park far away from the ballpark, walk through the lines, wait at concessions like everybody else. What helped me a lot was my wife writing me a list with things to do. The honey-do lists are good for me. My kids went back to college last weekend. So my wife and I are empty nesters. So yesterday, it rained and stormed all day long, and we just sat in the house and didn't do much all day. At one point, I got up and started walking around the house and said to myself: "I'm so bored. I don't know what to do." But the truth is that there's lots of stuff to do. And when my wife makes me list, I work through that list and I'm good.

Insights: So it helps you a lot that you have your wife who structures the day for you.

Scott Eyre: Oh yes. She is so amazing, I'm so lucky. We will have been married for 24 years this November. She's the best.

Insights: That is wonderful. I am very happy for you both. I know you that you coached a high school team. I was wondering if there were any situations where you were able to relate to kids who also struggled with attention and learning problems?

Scott Eyre: Oh yes. I have been at St. Stephen's High School for the past 10 years. There was a kid who graduated last year, Max (name has been changed to retain anonymity), who had ADHD. So when he had to take a test in class, he got extra time. Well, some of the kids on the team made fun of him because of that. For example, once when we were doing bunt defense, they were going: "Coach, do we get extra time for Max?" Everyone was laughing, including Max. Afterwards, I went up to Max and asked, "Does that bother you?" and he went: "No, because I know they love me. They are my teammates. It bothers me when other people do it, though." I reassured him and said: "Well, trust me, I have been through that." We had some long conversations about it at other times, too. I think it gave him strength and stability that I as his coach and former major league baseball player had gone through the exact same thing. He has done well and is on a Fulbright scholarship to Florida State University. He is smart, it just takes a little longer for him to process things, and he has learned to cope with that. Part of that may be because he and I talked about it in connection with pitching. I tried to use pitching to teach him to focus. I think it was important for him to have someone that he was able to talk about his struggles.

Insights: It seems that it all comes down to being patient and being caring. You mentioned that when you talked about your own teachers at school and now with Max. Max was okay with his teammates teasing him because he knew they loved him. It shows that it is the relationship that counts.

Scott Eyre: Yes. I couldn't agree more.

Insights: You said earlier that it was much easier to focus when you played baseball, because you love it so much. But apart from your particular love for the game, can you think of any features that make baseball suitable for helping kids who struggle at school?

Scott Eyre: It's the team. A lot of times, you are alone with your problems. But when playing baseball, you have a team. And you can rely on someone else to help you out. That assurance is so important. Let's say you are a left fielder and you can't get to the ball. You have to rely on your center fielder. You just have to rely that he is going to be there. You are running for a ball, but you know that your teammate is right by you in case you miss it. I don't know, it's just something about baseball that makes you like a family. I haven't seen some of my teammates in 10 years. But if I saw them, it would be an instant hug. It's like we are brothers. We are a family, and that family feeling helps you with a lot of struggles. As I said, some days I would be talking too much, but my teammates were so in tune to what I needed and would just say things like: "Hey, slow down a little." It helped, and it was okay for them to say that because we were family. They didn't do it in a rude, mean, or disrespectful way; it was always caring, and that is so important for kids who need extra help. Being in a sport or in a team helps so much. While it doesn't necessarily have to be baseball, I do think that baseball is great for building a team spirit, because the games take so long and you spend so much time in the dugout together. If a kid has trouble learning, he is going to succeed in the end because of his teammates, knowing they have his back.

Insights: Great. It reminds me of what you said a minute ago about Max.

Scott Eyre: Of course, there can always be setbacks. That happens in all areas of life. For example, your teammates are not always supportive. But by and large, baseball creates that family feeling. If you are part of a good team, your learning disability is not that important any more. You are part of a team and don't get defined by your disability. My teammates always tried to make me better. It reminds me of the sentiment on a sign my aunt Tracy gave me: "The most important things in life are good friends and a good bullpen."

Insights: That's a great saying. Thank you so much for being so open, Scott.

Scott Eyre: I appreciate you reaching out, Matthias. That was nice.

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