

# Open to change: Brewers pitcher Corbin Burnes hopes new mental approach helps him rebound from poor season



By Will Sammon (/author/will-sammon/) 5h ago

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PHOENIX — An 8.82 ERA in 49 innings during a second season in the big leagues doesn't just grab attention. It triggers reflection. It necessitates change.

Corbin Burnes' failures and struggles last season are the reasons why he sends a screenshot each week to someone he met for the first time just a couple of months ago. They call it a "success checklist." There are about 25 tasks. Some are daily activities. Others are weekly. The Brewers' pitcher, who is competing for a rotation spot in spring training, completes them all. Then he submits them. This is part of his new routine. This is part of his plan to rebound from a season that started with so much promise and ended awry.

"To his credit, the guy has not missed anything," sports psychologist Brian Cain said. "He has been as dedicated, disciplined and committed as any athlete I have ever worked with, and that includes Olympic medalists and guys like Georges St-Pierre (mixed martial artist).

"It has been really, really impressive."

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Burnes, 25, was a trendy pick for a breakout last season. In 38 innings and 30 appearances in 2018, he went 7-0 had a 2.61 ERA and held opponents to a .199 batting average with 35 strikeouts. He secured a spot in the Brewers' rotation to start the season. But the breakout never happened. Instead, a nightmare occurred. After four starts in April, his ERA was 10.70. Too many mistakes with his fastball. Too many home runs. He was removed from the rotation.

Burnes' problems last year weren't mechanical, he said. The stuff was there, too, evidenced by a nasty slider and 70 strikeouts. And, he said, he felt fine. Toward the end of last season, Burnes' agent Mark O'Brien suggested working with a mental performance coach. O'Brien connected Burnes with Cain, whose client list includes pitchers David Price and Jake Arrieta. Burnes had never worked with a sports psychologist.

"I was thinking," Burnes said, "maybe that was the missing piece. I knew coming into the offseason that the main thing I wanted to focus on was the mental side of things. I took a lot from last year. When you get kicked in the teeth, you learn what's going to work and what's not going to work.

"You learn a lot about yourself."

Burnes needed to refine a routine. He needed a little more structure. Or, as Cain puts it, Burnes had to figure out "what his process was."

Within the first couple of phone calls, Cain surmised Burnes, who attended St. Mary's College (Calif.), was an intelligent guy, polite and present in conversation and someone who understood why mental strength would be helpful. Detailing how to improve in that area occurred next.

Burnes spent most of his offseason at the Brewers' training complex in Arizona. He took 10 days off to go on a cruise with his fiancée but returned by mid-October. Cain lives in Arizona, so he and Burnes met frequently and texted daily. They spoke often about how UFC fighters and champions, guys Cain has worked with, mentally prepared. They rewatched his starts and tried to pinpoint what was happening inside Burnes' mind when he struggled to get outs. It was vital for Cain to then learn how Burnes spent his time, too.

Changes were made. Cain put him through a mental training program used by Navy SEALs. In addition to all of the physical work and studying he needed to do, Burnes listened to podcasts, read books, and spent 10-15 minutes each day watching the show, "The Selection: Special Operations Experiment."

More importantly, Cain wanted every hour accounted for, so Burnes started scripting his days. The checklist was made, and it includes simple tasks like making a bed every morning. Burnes performs meditation exercises and uses visualization techniques. Some of this is now part of his new process of preparation.

"For a lot of guys in major-league baseball, they have gotten there because they just have such tremendous ability, and Corbin has a tremendous amount of ability," Cain said. "But to be able to get that ability to come out on a consistent basis is as much about the 6 inches between the ears as it is about anything else.

"A lot of times, these guys get to the major leagues and they don't necessarily know exactly what their process is or how they prepare to be as elite as they can be. Once they get that, it gives them a different level of confidence."

On the field, the Brewers certainly have a plan for Burnes, too. Manager Craig Counsell said Burnes is being stretched out as a starting pitcher during the spring. It's unclear if he will start the season with Milwaukee or at Class AAA San Antonio.

Soon after last season, Burnes attended a meeting that included a presentation about how he should build around his slider, which had an impressive 35.9 percent whiff rate, according to Brooks Baseball. Burnes invested time in the Brewers' pitching lab in Maryvale, refining the slider and improving his other pitches. Catcher Jacob Nottingham, who recently caught one of Burnes' bullpen sessions, said this is the best Burnes "has ever looked."

When Burnes spoke to reporters recently, it was the mental work of his offseason that he seemed most eager to discuss.

"I put in just as much off the field, on the mental side of things, as I did physically," said Burnes, who also had LASIK this past offseason. "That's probably what I pride myself on the most; the mental work I've done and how much I've grown as a player and as a person."

Said Counsell, "What you always appreciate is when a player goes through a tough season and he takes stock of everything and makes tangible decisions to change some things and work on some things."

In theory, the preparation, the routine, the confidence should all translate. For Burnes, that's the plan, at least. Will this all work?

Results won't be seen until after Burnes steps on a mound, faces a live batter, struggles and moves on after making a mistake. But Burnes is confident in his process. He says he already feels a difference. It's been that way for him since mid-January, he said. Either way, after last season, they were changes worth implementing and trying.

"I needed to give myself the most tools and the most opportunities," Burnes said, "to have the 2020 season be the best year up to this point of my career."

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*(Photo of Burnes: Isaiah J. Downing / USA Today Sports)*

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**Will Sammon** ([author/will-sammon/](https://twitter.com/will-sammon/)) covers the Milwaukee Brewers for The Athletic. A native of Queens, New York, Sammon previously covered Mississippi State for The Clarion-Ledger, Mississippi's largest newspaper. Prior to that, he was the paper's high school/recruiting editor and covered high school football and recruiting for The Opelika-Auburn News and worked at Newsday. Follow Will on Twitter [@WillSammon](https://twitter.com/WillSammon) (<https://twitter.com/WillSammon>).

 14 COMMENTS

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**Gary D.** 4h ago

Thanks, Will. It became pretty clear last year when the Brewers opened their remodeled complex in Maryvale that this team was determined to overcome its revenue disparities via optimization of players, and primarily homegrown pitchers. They're secretive about their sports lab, but it has become the focal point of their build-a-better-ballplayer operation. And now we see that sports psychology has entered the picture as well. The days of the conventional offseason appear to be over for most of these Brewers. The sports lab is open year-round, and this organization appears willing to do anything to help turn modestly paid players into stars.

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**Will Sammon** STAFF 2h ago

@Gary D. For sure. Like mentioned in the article, though, this was Burnes, his agent connecting with someone, so kind of a bit more on the individual with this specific thing, to be clear. But your point is def something I agree with.

 2 

**David G.** 3h ago

This is awesome, Will! Navy Seal training and the pitching lab and everything in here just gets me so excited for his season.

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**Will Sammon** STAFF 1h ago

@David G. Thank you, David. Seems like he has certainly put the work in.

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**Mark L.** 3h ago

Good luck Corbin. Brewers fans got your back and hope you figure it out.

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**Blake J.** 3h ago

I believe in Corbin Burnes. The kid has filthy stuff and he can overcome the command problems with the mental toughness his building this off-season. There's no doubt in my mind about that.

The one thing I would like to say Corbin, though, is that he can't forget to have fun. A routine, a checklist, a Navy seals regiments, it's all great. Just don't forget that you're playing a kid's game. Enjoy it.

Give it your all and keep working, Corbin.

 - 

**Will Sammon** STAFF 1h ago

@Blake J. That's a good take, Blake. Easy to forget that part. Getting on top of everything like he seemingly has should help

👍 1 ↻

**Bryant O.** 20m ago

@Blake J. Haha, very good point. And while I agree with you from a general outlook for most people. Transcendent athletes are rarely well adjusted and are typically militant in preparation.

So, if Burnsey turning into Tiger Woods on the mental game is what it takes for him to top the rotation. I'm for it!

👍 ↻

**Cody C.** 3h ago

Very interesting article. If Corbin is able to bounce back to his 2018 form suddenly the pitching staff looks a whole lot more complete. Keep up the good work Will!

👍 2 ↻

**Brian S.** 2h ago

Holy \$h!t. That's pretty impressive. After last year I never thought he could come back from that. Once you get beaten down mentally and your confidence takes a hit when the problem is nothing physical its damn near impossible to come back from that. This gives me hope. And if he takes off like he did two years ago... wow... that's a game changer.

👍 2 ↻

**Jonathan D.** 2h ago

Best of luck to Corbin Burnes. In watching him pitch last year, I think it was perplexing for us, too, as fans to figure out why his nasty stuff wasn't playing well.

Glad to see him working on it earnestly.

Here's hoping the law of averages works out for him this year. [Sometimes that's all it is]

👍 3 ↻

**Bryant O.** 16m ago

I made a drunken bet just before last year that Burnes would win a Cy Young in 5 years. I'm sticking to that stupid proclamation.

Like Stearns has said, pitcher progression is rarely linear and I just think that his stuff is way too filthy to not be a big league pitcher. People often forget that pitching, especially as a starter, is really an art form, a chess match. Just being a spin rate darling isn't enough. I'm glad he's taken his lumps now, I think he's got a good shot at being a productive member of the rotation this year and beyond.

👍 1 ↻

**Will Sammon** STAFF 10m ago

@Bryant O. Let me know how much you win if it hits.



**Bryant O.** 8m ago

Just a friendly \$50 wager 😂😂



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