It’s a Monday morning not long before Padres spring training and manager Bud Black is on the field at Petco Park chatting with some players.

Judging from their relaxed expressions and Black’s easy stance, they could be discussing the weather or the players’ kids. In fact, they are going over who will fill the gaps in the team roster.

If Black makes it all look easy, it’s not for lack of effort. Rather, a 28-year career of pitching and coaching has only stoked his love of the game and several years of contemplation prior to accepting a managerial position has prepared him for the burdens of the role.

The studied approach has proved effective time and again for Black, propelling him from San Diego State University to the heights of professional baseball.

Beginning his third season, he has quickly established himself as a players’ manager with an even keel. With rigorous standards that underscore intellectual understanding of the game over mere physical might, he’s preparing the Padres to recapture the magic lost in last year’s disappointing 63-99 campaign.

It’s a daunting challenge for the first-time manager who is generally regarded as an anomaly in the sport. From completing his college education before signing with a professional team; to pitching left-handed; to being one of only about 30 pitchers in the 133-year history of the game to manage; Black has approached life differently— and achieved uncommon results. Not that he readily admits the uniqueness of his situation.

“It’s not common for ex-pitchers to be in this position,” he said. “But there have been some great managers who were ex-pitchers: Tommy LaSorda, Roger Craig, Bob Lemon. I think leadership comes in all different forms.”

Gaining an edge

From his childhood days in Longview, Wash., right through his college years on Montezuma Mesa, there was always something that set Black apart.

Bud Black takes a studied approach to professional baseball
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A few days later, Dietz con- tacted Black and they spent a day checking out San Diego and the campus. At the end of the day, Dietz surprised Black by offering him a full schol- arship.

“I know nothing about him at the time,” said Dietz. “But he made a good impression, was real polite, and the scouts I contacted in the Pacific Northwest said he had good control and command of pitches.”

Dietz, who presided over a baseball program that produced the likes of Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn and National League All-Star first baseman Mark Grace, believed in building the players’ character. He also believed that to be great, his players had to love baseball and really understand the game, anticipating moves and reacting as in a game of chess.

Black proved a good student and, by his senior year, he was making an impression on scouts with his all-around athleticism, pitching, batting and playing first base.

The field was not the only place he made an impression, however. He charmed a dinner hall meal card ticket taker, who would later become his wife. “The first semester, I would go in every night and say, ‘hey, how ya doin’,’” Black recalled. “The next semester, I didn’t get a meal ticket, but I still ate there; Nan let me slide when we started dating.”

That was just one reason Black decided to stay on at SDSU until graduation. Many players sign out of college, or even high school, but Black was intent on finishing his management degree.

“The academic side of my college life prepared me for interacting with people in the professional world. My years at SDSU laid the foundation for my career in professional baseball.” Black said.

Nothing before its time

By the 17th round of the 1981 major league draft, it looked like Black might need something to fall back on after all. But the Seattle Mariners drafted and signed him, kicking off what would turn out to be a 13-year pitching run.

He was a pitcher for the Kansas City Royals when the team won the World Series in 1985.

Black also pitched for the Cleveland Indians, the Toronto Blue Jays and the San Francisco Giants, earning respect during those years for his calm, collected demeanor.

“I always used to call him the coolest man in baseball,” said Bobby Meacham, who played with Black at SDSU and later coached for him on the Padres. “Right away you could tell he was a neat guy and a great athlete,” said Kirk Roland, a childhood friend and fellow SDSU alum. “But the thing that made Buddy popular in school is he took a genuine interest in everyone. It didn’t matter if it was the athletes or the rock ‘n’ rollers; everybody liked him. Bringing all walks of life together, I think that’s what makes him such a great manager.”

Even now, when asked, Black is quick to say interacting with the players across personalities and skills is his favorite part of his job. “I know that we might not listen to the same music, we might not enjoy the same movies, but we do share a common bond, which is baseball,” he said. “So there’s always common ground there.”

His affability would pay off again later when, looking to trans-fer from Lower Columbia Junior College in Oregon to San Diego State University, he met then SDSU baseball coach Jim Dietz.

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