

COACHING WINDMILL PITCHERS - GETTING STARTED

INTRODUCTION

Coaching pitchers is NOT difficult. Just ask the 200 coaches who attended my recent Pitching Instructor clinic series. All you need is some interest and a little information to understand what you're doing. The interest has to come from you, while the information you need is in this hand out.

This summary is designed to help you get started developing young pitchers. But it is *only a summary*. It should point you in the right direction, and provide the confidence you need to do some constructive work with your pitchers. Hopefully, it will also wet your appetite to increase your knowledge and skill in this area.

If this is the case, and you would like to have a detailed text on the subject, obtain a copy of the manual series entitled, "GOLD MEDAL" Softball Pitching - Level 1 and 2". They are available from your local softball office, or from;

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COACHING ROLES

In terms of developing pitchers, a team coach has two predominant roles. Both require some basic knowledge, but neither is very complex. Nor is it necessary to have been a pitcher to carry them out. But your effectiveness with your pitchers depends on your understanding of the concepts. Here are the roles.

1. TEACH BASIC MECHANICS.

This is your primary role as a coach. It is critical for young pitchers, because basic throwing mechanics are the foundation of future development. Without a good, solid base of mechanics, potential for complete development is restricted. In fact my experience tells me that most physical problems in pitching can be traced back to basic mechanics. Your job as a coach is to teach these mechanics, monitor their progress and make corrections as required. This means you need to know and understand the principles involved, and be able to recognize the right technique from the wrong.

2. SUPERVISE DEVELOPMENT OF ADVANCED SKILLS.

To carry out this second role you need to know what these advanced skills are. Then you should know how to develop them to maximize the player's potential. In simple terms, this really means being able to advise your pitchers on what to practice and how to practice it. The alternative is to leave the development of your pitchers to chance.

This discussion focuses on the first of these two roles, and will provide a framework of ideas to use directly with your pitchers. Everything suggested here has been proven over a number of years with literally thousands pitchers, and they will work for you too if you apply them appropriately.

TEACHING THE MECHANICS

One can not overemphasize the importance of sound mechanics in pitching. Future development depends on it. Many pitchers fail to reach their full potential because they either don't or can't execute the basics. As often as not, learning them is simply a matter of getting the proper help at the right time.

There are four basic mechanics a pitcher must be aware of and execute. While they can be learned individually, they have to be combined into a smooth, fluid motion in order to generate maximum power and speed on the pitch. It is the manner of coordinating these mechanics that dictates an individual's pitching "style".

The four basic windmill pitching mechanics are:

1. THE STRIDE
2. THE ARM CIRCLE
3. THE ARM/HIP COORDINATION, and
4. THE FOLLOW-THROUGH

This analysis will clarify each of these, and help pinpoint where you should be directing your attention for best results. When teaching these mechanics it is important that pitchers understand the nature of power and the need to use body leverages to generate power.

THE FORCE FUNNEL

Have the pitchers visualize themselves standing at the end of a long tube or funnel. The small end of the funnel is at the catcher's mitt, and it extends out to the pitcher. The basic idea is that every movement or motion by the pitcher should be directed straight down the tube, to focus and maximize power.

Any movement of the arm, leg or body in other directions will divert energy away from the direction of force, and reduce power. This concept of a *Power Tube* or *Force Funnel* will help your pitcher develop the feeling of *exploding*, i.e. directing their total energy and force at the catcher, as they learn to execute the mechanics.

1. THE STRIDE

Always taken with the foot opposite to the pitching hand. (left foot for right handers). Length is individual, but the latest research shows that the stride should be 80 to 100% of body height. Look for energy in the stride. The pitcher should explode off the mound.

The stride foot should land directly in front of the pivot foot, i.e. in a straight line towards the target, with a tolerance of about 4 inches or 10 cm. to either side of that straight line.

The stride foot should land flat and as softly as possible, with a slight toe in of about 20 to 40 degrees or so. This is also supported by research.

**2. THE ARM
CIRCLE**

Arm should be extended but relaxed. The circle must be extended and lined up with the direction of force, but some slight bend in the pitching arm is normal.

The arm should travel straight up the front, be close to the head at the top, and straight down the back. Look for the shoulder to rotate open at the back side of the circle.

Arm should be in tight against the body as it passes the hip to release the ball. This contact between the inside of the arm and the outside of the leg at the point of release, is a key point in proper body mechanics.

**3. THE HIP
THRUST**

This is the most difficult part of learning the windmill technique. As the pitching hand approaches the point of release, the hips should spin forward, adding momentum to the pitch.

This is achieved by the pitcher standing erect, keeping the weight back, and pushing hard against the pivot foot, which is now firmly planted. This forward drive forces the hips and upper body to rotate against the firm front side. At the point of release, the head should be centered over the base of support and lined up with the back hip.

Watch the pivot foot. It should dig hard into the ground and drag forward after release. Also listen for the sound of the arm brushing against the hip. This contact is essential for power, indicating proper weight distribution.

**4. THE FOLLOW
THROUGH**

The pitching arm should continue to about shoulder or eye height, then come to a natural stop. The body continues its forward motion until it too comes to a stop.

To complete the follow-through, the pivot foot drags forward to a natural position of balance for that pitcher. Watch for the tendency to accelerate the follow-through and forward movement of the drag foot, which disrupts the flow of power. At conclusion, the pitcher should be in a balanced position ready to move in any direction to field the ball.

INDIVIDUALITY

**INDIVIDUAL
APPLICATION**

In teaching these mechanics, focus on the principles involved and allow the pitcher to apply them in their own individual way. That's what pitching style is about. It is not necessary that all pitchers look exactly the same, although there will be some similarity if the principles are applied as intended. Individual differences add strength to the game and make it more interesting to play and watch, so let the players develop their own styles.

COACHING CUES

To monitor progress and identify errors, here are the key points to focus on . These "cues" are indicators of proper execution, and their absence should trigger immediate corrective or remedial action. Watch for them every time your pitcher throws. Learning to recognize the cues will lead to early identification of faulty technique, and keep your pitchers on track.

STRIDE FOOT

Make sure the stride foot lands in a straight line in front of the pivot foot and that it points inward about 20 to 40 degrees.

ARM CIRCLE

Make sure the arm is close to the head at the top of the circle, and is fully extended. Have the pitcher try to brush their ear at the top of the circle.

HIP THRUST Listen for the brushing sound of arm against hip. If you don't hear it, check the arm/hip coordination closely. The pitching arm must be in tight against the leg at the point of release.

FOOT DRAG Watch for the pivot foot to drag hard, leaving a noticeable mark in the ground. If this doesn't happen, the weight is probably too far forward.

CAUTION When making corrections with your pitcher try to keep things simple. Emphasize the notion of the "*force funnel*" to facilitate body alignment. Encourage the pitcher to develop a "feel" for the correct motion.

Also, work on one thing at a time. Nothing is more frustrating to a young athlete than to be bombarded with four or five key points at the same time. By focusing on one thing only, you will accelerate the adjustment and motivate the pitcher for the next step. When you get impatient with your pitcher, try doing the action yourself. You may discover some of the obstacles your pitcher is trying to overcome.

DEVELOPING SMOOTHNESS

What you are looking for, is a smooth, flowing style, with no wasted effort. Economy of motion comes from applying the principles of each mechanic with maximum efficiency.

REPETITION Smoothness and economy of motion are the products of many hours of practice and copious repetitions of the movement. Softball pitching is a skill which, by definition, is a masterpiece of repetition. Like any other physical skill, the more you repeat the action, the more comfortable it feels and the easier it becomes.

MUST RELAX Smoothness also comes with learning to relax during the pitch. This promotes coordination, enabling the pitcher to throw harder with less effort. By the same token, relaxation is tied to proper breathing, another essential in sports.

Teach the pitchers to control their breathing on the mound so they throw with their lungs depleted of air. Here's a suggested sequence for proper breathing while pitching.

1. Take a few deep breaths before stepping onto the rubber.
2. Step on the rubber with lungs 3/4 full.
3. Breathe out slowly through the nose while taking the signal, or before pitching.
4. Pitch when the lungs are almost depleted of air. This relaxes the shoulders and chest.
5. Inhale immediately following the pitch.

REPETITIONS

Young pitchers tend not to throw enough pitches to develop their technique quickly. There are two things you can do about this;

1. After you have taught the proper mechanics, encourage the pitcher to practice as often as they can. A workload of 400 to 600 pitches per week is not too much for a 12 year old. Once mature, they should be throwing 1,000 to 1,500 pitches per week.
2. Introduce the pitcher to the series of drills described in the next section. These will increase their repetitions and consume less time.

PITCHING DRILLS

Drills are probably the most common and important means through which athletes learn their skills and pitching is no exception.

The following drills are progressive in nature, although all are easy to teach and learn. If performed regularly, and with proper form, they will accelerate development and mastery of the pitching mechanics. Remember, however, form is critical. All drills must be performed as perfectly as possible; otherwise the pitcher will simply master the wrong technique.

**1. PENDULUM
DRILL**

This drill is designed to develop the feeling of throwing with the whole body rather than with the arm. Start with a long step forward, the stride foot well in front of the pivot foot. The pitching hand is at the top, or back half of the circle. Bring the pitching arm down to the release point, and hold it tight against the body for a second. The weight should be on the back foot.

Complete the movement by pushing hard with the pivot foot, forcing the body and hips to rotate forward. The arm then continues to a natural follow-through position.

As the motion becomes more natural with repetitions, allow the arm to swing right through without a pause. But ensure the arm makes contact with the hip each time.

_____ This drill is designed to develop a perfect circle and promote arm/hip coordination.

2. DRY PITCHING

_____ Start in the pitching position - long step forward - stride foot in front of pivot foot.

Pitching arm makes continuous full circles at rate of about 1/sec. Circle must be aligned with target, with arm close to head at the top.

Arm must make contact with hip at point of release on each repetition.

_____ This drill promotes upper body rotation to increase power. The pitcher will throw a ball so a catcher is required.

3. STATIC PITCHING

_____ Start with feet spread sideways, about shoulder width apart. Pitcher is facing the catcher at about 8 to 10 M. distance.

Pitcher throws with windmill motion, while feet remain in place (static). Work on full rotation of upper body with each pitch. Weight should be on the inside or pivot foot at release.

Start at easy pace, and increase speed gradually as motion becomes more comfortable.

_____ This drill will improve hip thrust and coordination. Pitcher throws ball to Catcher about 8 M. distance.

4. HIP PITCHING

_____ Similar to Static Pitching except feet are in pitching position - stride foot in front of pivot foot.

Pitcher must use strong hip thrust as pitching hand releases ball. Try to develop a sense of power without using arm strength. Keep weight back.

Start easy; increase speed as motion becomes more comfortable.

5. HIP POPPERS

The drill will emphasize proper use of the legs, refine arm/hip coordination and improve power of hip thrust.

Teach the drill in three phases.

Phase 1. No stride - no ball. Pitcher starts standing sideways to catcher, stride foot forward, feet well spread, knees bent.

Practice accelerating hip thrust by using both legs in opposite directions. Straighten the stride leg to push back while pivot leg pushes forward. Use the counteraction of both legs to accelerate rotation and increases power of hip thrust.

Phase 2. With stride - still no ball. Start with feet together, glove side to catcher. Take stride and use both legs to produce hip thrust as in Phase 1.

When motion is smooth, add arm circle without ball. Coordinate arm motion with hip rotation.

Phase 3. With stride - throwing ball. Same as Phase 2, except now throw ball to catcher about 8 to 10 M. distance.

Start easy, increase speed gradually. Make contact with hip on every pitch. Keep weight back - head over hips. Focus on feeling of power without using arm strength.

For a more detailed analysis and illustrations of the softball pitching mechanics and development drills, refer to the manual, "**Gold Medal Softball Pitching Level 1.**" This publication is available from your local softball office, or the publisher noted at the beginning of this paper.

BASIC STANCE AND GRIP

These are not critical issues at the beginner stage, but as pitchers develop higher level skills, they take on increased importance. As a coach you should simply explain the options and then let your pitcher develop the technique most comfortable and effective for them.

STANCE There are two basic methods here. One has the feet close together (narrow stance), while in the other, the feet are spread wider across the width of the rubber (wide stance). Each has its advantage, but the most important factor is, what is most natural and comfortable for the pitcher.

The narrow stance offers a strategic advantage in that it permits some lateral adjustment during the count. By moving left or right, the pitcher can change the angle of delivery to increase the effectiveness of various pitches.

The wide stance takes up most of the rubber which limits any lateral adjustment. It does provide a wider base of support which is preferred by some.

In both cases, the rear, or stride foot should be placed with the toe just touching the back edge of the rubber. The pivot foot (front) overlaps the front edge of the rubber enough to avoid the spikes or cleats of the shoe digging in. This also places the front foot in a good position to push against the edge of the rubber.

BASIC GRIP Depending on the size of the hand, the ball can be held in 2, 3 of 4 fingers. The main thing is that the grip be firm and comfortable. It is a good idea to teach the pitcher to hold the ball across the seams and, initially at least, to release the pitch directly off the ends of the fingers. This produces a downward spin which will come in handy at a later stage of development.

WANT TO LEARN MORE? WHY NOT BECOME A CERTIFIED SOFTBALL COACH? REGISTER FOR A COACHING COURSE WITH YOUR LOCAL SOFTBALL ASSOCIATION. DON'T PUT IT OFF.....DO IT NOW!!!

INSTRUCTION PAPER**"DEVELOPING WINDMILL PITCHERS - GETTING STARTED"**

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