

## AVOIDING ARM INJURIES IN YOUTH BASEBALL – RELYING ON FUNDAMENTALS AND GOOD COACHING INSTEAD OF INNINGS PITCHED AND PITCH COUNTS TO PROTECT YOUNG PITCHERS

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It becomes more and more bizarre each year – certain youth baseball organizations continue to publicly express concern for the safety of youth players by wrestling with concepts of pitch counts and innings per week that they allow pitchers to throw in games. Although such attempts to regulate pitching are admittedly better than no rules at all, the resulting pitching “restrictions” of certain organizations are actually not restrictive at all, and instead evidence these organizations’ fears that too much regulation will cause member teams to move to different youth baseball organizations.

Innings per week is a common practice in youth baseball, but what is the number of innings a week a young pitcher should throw? How can we determine how many innings pitched in a week is safe? When should a week start and end for purposes of counting innings? And how does any of this make any sense? I believe that the most important consideration is not the number of innings, but when they are pitched. It may be perfectly fine for a pitcher to pitch deep into both games on a Monday and the following Saturday for instance. But, it is clearly not safe under any circumstances to allow a youth player to throw 10 innings in 2 days which some youth organizations allow.

Relatively recently, pitch counts have become popular as a way of helping to protect pitchers. Although pitch counts are probably a better plan to help pitchers stay healthy than the innings pitched method, once again it is not the number of pitches thrown, but when they are thrown. How is it alright to throw every other game when sometimes that is every other day, just by saying we are holding the number of pitches to 75-80 pitches? Again, it’s not the number of pitches in a game, but when those games are played.

### EXAMPLES

Here is one scenario that happens often under rules allowing a player to throw up to 7 innings in 1 day: pitcher #1 pitches a complete 7 inning game and throws 60-65 pitches. Pitcher #2 has thrown 4 innings of a 7 inning game throwing 90-100 pitches. If pitcher #2 completes his game, he might throw 130-150 pitches. In this example, the 7 innings per game rule didn’t work, and if pitcher #2 in fact finished his game, he was made very susceptible to injury by his coach.

A second scenario we might have is pitcher #1 pitches deep into the game with over 100 pitches but remains loose with good actions and is not laboring. This pitcher is fine. Pitcher #2 is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> inning and is overthrowing, laboring, and has lost command at 40-50 pitches. In this example, the number of pitches allowed in a game didn’t work.

## SOLUTIONS

To resolve the problems that remain even after the implementation and adherence to pitching restrictions adopted by youth baseball organizations we must first start with players (pitchers) learning how to play catch correctly. Coaches need to monitor this, making sure players catch squared up, but throw in a closed position. Secondly, coaches need to watch the ball release of their players, recognizing an improper release. If it is wrong, correct it and don't allow it to continue. Improper throwing or bad mechanics doesn't just pertain to pitching. Every ball thrown poorly contributes to arm injuries. Learn how to play catch right! Next, pitchers (players) need to throw everyday. It just needs to be correct throwing. Throwing strengthens your arm. Muscles need work, use them.

All pitching need not be from a mound or at 100%. Flat ground throwing is easier on your arm; therefore, it is preferable to always throwing from a mound. You can gain the same good results from working on your pitches and mechanics without a mound. Actually you can receive great benefits in mechanics, rhythm, and repeating delivery without a mound or even a ball.

Throw to strengthen your arm. Long toss is a great way to do this. Get on a great long toss program and stick with the program.

The final recommended solutions are not easy. Youth baseball teams need to illicit the help of baseball people who know about arms, how they work, and then listen to them. Youth players need to throw a lot, but properly, and almost year round. Coaches need to understand there might be baseball after youth leagues. The game they are playing is not worth abusing a talented athlete's arm. They need to develop more youth players to pitch. Don't get hung up on winning, but learn to compete in every game. Understand you can learn just as much about your players if they lose as you can if they win.

Coaches need to protect their players. Don't expect or rely on youth organizations to do so; they can only come up with "simple" standard solutions that don't actually protect young pitchers in many circumstances.

Next: *Myths in Mechanics*

*Guerry Baldwin founded and heads East Cobb Baseball which is recognized by many in baseball as the top youth baseball program in the Nation. Coach Baldwin's also serves as the Head Coach of the 16U East Cobb Astros team and is recognized as an outstanding pitching instructor throughout youth, high school, collegiate and professional baseball.*