

PITCHERS ARE ATHLETES TOO!!! The Over-Mechanization of Youth Pitchers

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Let's talk mechanics. Everybody seems to think that "mechanics" are all that matter in pitching. How many times have you heard a coach say, "let's fix his mechanics," or "his mechanics are poor," or "he is not mechanically sound." Such statements concerning a player may be true, but often the corrections and techniques used by coaches to "fix" pitchers are not sound. More often, and even more problematic, many coaches simply do not let their pitchers be what they should be first and foremost – athletes.

Pitchers, especially young pitchers, are mechanized into oblivion. If you look up the baseball team of any high school or college on the school's website, you will usually find the baseball team grouped with other sports on an "Athletics" webpage of the school. That would seem to indicate that baseball players, including pitchers, are considered "athletes" just like track, basketball and football players. Why then do so many coaches not let pitchers be athletic as opposed to strictly mechanical in the manner in which they perform? Very few athletes that could be characterized as mechanical in their movements have a great deal of success in any sport. In fact, athletes that are mechanical in nature are often described as lacking rhythm, grace, and athleticism.

None of this is to say that proper mechanics do not play a role in the development and success of a young pitcher. To the contrary, there are basic "mechanics" that are important but are often not taught. Let's start with the basics - playing catch. If instructed how to simply throw a ball correctly, pitchers can carry these proper techniques through their baseball years and implement such basic mechanics while still being athletic when pitching. Teaching a young player to throw a ball correctly requires coaches to monitor their players during their warm-up time to insure they play catch right. Coaches should require young players to "throw with a purpose." This means having a plan to throw to a specific target (your partner's positioned glove), proper footwork, closing the front shoulder and staying "in-line."

We should remember that the best players at a young age are generally the best athletes. They have good arms, speed, and good hitting abilities. Coaches should always teach young players the basic mechanics of

throwing a baseball, but coaches should also take into consideration the individual athlete (i.e. his body type, natural arm angle, the things he does to make himself comfortable when pitching, etc.) when instructing a player on more advanced pitching techniques. No two players are exactly alike. Why then do so many coaches want to make “cookie-cutter” pitchers that practice and use only the exact same mechanical philosophy of the coach regardless of individual athletic differences that may exist among the group of young pitchers?

To illustrate, there are numerous myths often associated with being a good “mechanical” pitcher that are either incorrect or “over-taught” to a point where coaches are not letting their pitchers be athletes. Several examples are as follows:

Myth #1: You need to get to a balance point before going to the plate.

Truth: You need balance in your delivery, but not if that balance causes you to hesitate, gather, stop, or any other pause caused by attempting to feel a balance point in the middle of your delivery. Balance relates to rhythm, athleticism, and repeating delivery. Balance means keeping your shoulders over your hips and allowing your momentum to continue toward the catcher and home plate, not left or right.

Myth #2: From the wind-up it matters where your non-pivot foot steps.

Truth: The only thing that matters is that your initial step is repeatable and that your energy remains at the rubber. Your energy can't go back, left, or forward, depending on your step, causing you to go multiple directions before going to the plate. Any start works, be athletic, have rhythm, and repeat your process.

Myth #3: A high front leg kick promotes a better lower half, therefore increasing velocity.

Truth: A high front leg is good as long as your leg is picked up and not jerked up, and as long as you don't swing your leg coming out to

the plate. Keys here are don't swing your leg up, don't swing it coming towards the plate and don't slide hips and rotate them late.

Myth #4: Front shoulder high, front arm pull and rotate your body violently speeds up your arm.

Truth: It probably does, but at what cost? There is a natural tilt between front and back shoulders when throwing a baseball. The front shoulder is higher than the back shoulder; however, this does not need to be exaggerated. Over tilting can and usually does cause the front shoulder to fly open, putting all the pressure on the back shoulder, thus potentially causing shoulder problems.

Myth #5: Follow through is one of the most important mechanics of pitching.

Truth: Follow-through matters, but it can't be forced. There are too many young pitchers who force their follow through because they don't understand what is supposed to happen after the ball is released. This causes their body to over-rotate. The important object here is to control the head, front shoulder, and front hip. Keep those parts in-line and the whole lower half will generally allow the pitcher to throw where he is looking. The finish of the pitch will come natural and can be a step through, high back leg or whatever the player does naturally and athletically to "finish" the pitch.

Myth #6: Tall and fall, drop and drive - both are good or both are bad.

Truth: There have been a lot of pitchers successful with either of these techniques. Usually, body type will help a coach determine which technique best enhances the pitcher's throwing motion. Tall pitchers staying high in the back and then throwing downhill have success. On the other hand, there are plenty of pitchers that are shorter that have had great success using all the big muscles to drive to the plate. Pick a motion based on what best helps your player, not on what may or may not be in vogue currently.

In summary, if there was a perfect way to pitch, everyone would pitch the same. Coaches should allow their pitchers to be athletes and understand that techniques that may work for one player may not for another. Basic pitching mechanics are important and should be taught. It is often a specific set of nuances and advanced and specific techniques of pitching that coaches wed themselves to that many times will not work for all athletes/pitchers.

Finally, as a parent, I would be careful about allowing my son to be taught pitching by just anybody who claims to be a “pitching coach.” There is more bad information being taught than good. There are actually coaches giving pitching lessons who never pitched, and don’t even throw well. Find someone who has had success with young players, ask questions to his clients/players, make sure you have proper information about your instructor and then stick with the one you choose. Too much information can sometimes be as harmful as incorrect data. Don’t be swayed to use multiple coaches; in general this just confuses the player. Also, try to make sure your son’s pitching lesson is 1st or 2nd of the day for the instructor. This generally helps in the sense that it is more likely the instructor will devote the attention to your son you are paying for as opposed to “going through the motions” just to pick up a fee.