

PITCHING for younger players: 8 – 12 yrs. Old...

Things to look for...

First: realize you are dealing with KIDS...they are NOT adults; they are far from professional...they are just KIDS trying to learn the game...trying to enjoy the game. Relax and let them be KIDS. There is NO quick fix or magic dust to developing a player. It takes time. Years. Your job is to provide correct information with a near infinite amount of correct repetition opportunities...along with positive reinforcement.

You can be focused, demanding, and even critical in a positive manner; what you can't be is a raving lunatic screaming at KIDS or umpires because they can't perform at your standard of "excellence." Nobody expects you to bring cookies and ice-cream to every game...but if you intimidate more than instruct and encourage...your coaching experience is not going to be positive for you or the KIDS.

That is my Unsolicited philosophic pearl...now to the "things to look for."

Pitching...

I suggest giving EVERY (e-v-e-r-y) player a chance to pitch. What do you have to lose? A quick way to find out "who the pitchers are"...put everyone in center field and have them throw the ball to home plate three times. The kid(s) with the arm strength are your most likely pitchers...

Not all kids will WANT to pitch. Don't force them but give all of them the opportunity.

For MOSQUITOES...I strongly suggest all kids throw out of the "stretch" position as opposed to developing a wind up. Some kids can use a wind up and throw strikes...for most MOSQUITOES throwing strikes is a big challenge. Throwing from the stretch enables basic mechanics to occur more readily. With a full wind up too many factors come into play to prohibit consistency...aka...throwing strikes.

STRETCH POSITION...

For a RHP the right foot is placed against the pitching rubber: NOT on top...in front along the edge. Most mounds have a hole in front...work in the hole or off to one side.

At this point all you need to do is have the ball gripped correctly (across the seams); hands together with the ball in the glove. The pitcher is standing "sideways" with his glove shoulder pointed at home plate (chest facing the third base line). Raise the arms to chest level and the left leg simultaneously. LIFT don't kick. Lift...and then place the leg down (don't swing it down like a gate...the leg moves forward...not sideways). Once the leg begins to come down the hands separate with the ball hand going DOWN to touch the right leg thigh: "thumb the thigh fingers to the sky."

It is very important (critical) the throwing hand fingers are ON TOP of the ball and NOT under it. THIS IS A MAJOR KEY TO PROPER THROWING. The throwing elbow should come up as high as the back shoulder and the elbow should bend 90 degrees (fingers are still ON TOP of the ball). The throwing arm is aligned with second base in a high cocked position...NOT low level or pointed down.

The basic motion from the “stretch” is ‘step toward the target and throw.’ The critical part is: “thumb the thigh fingers to the sky”...aka...fingers are on top of the ball NOT under.

Be sure to stress the GLOVE hand elbow be up (level with the front shoulder) and pointing toward your target (home plate). The glove fingers should be pointed DOWN not up.

- Pitching rules dictate “how many” pitches a MOSQUITO pitcher may throw in a game. Common sense should prevail in not abusing kids by over using them.

PWEE PITCHERS...11 – 12 year olds...

This group is a bit older and in some cases more capable of developing consistency with their pitching motion and throwing more strikes. That should be your goal as a coach: get your pitchers to throw strikes. If they can't do that on a consistent basis...it is not going to be fun for anyone. The best pitch in baseball is a STRIKE.

I very strongly suggest: at the PWee level throw NOTHING but FASTBALLS and CHANGEUPS. Do NOT, do NOT, do NOT have your kids throw curveballs. What is the point? Nobody can hit a curveball at age 11 – 12...so Freddy is UN hittable. Big deal. If Freddy is throwing curveballs at age 11 – 12 there is a GOOD chance he will do permanent damage to his elbow and will not be pitching at age 15 or 16 or ever again. Is the price of winning some games in Pwee worth the risk of permanent damage? Obviously not. The consensus on the foregoing is virtually universal...with few idiot exceptions. The last four words are mine. I stand by them.

PWEE MECHANICS...

At this stage proper mechanics are very important. Learning and “getting” proper mechanics are best done before age 13. After age 14 if proper throwing mechanics are not properly ingrained it is VERY difficult to overcome...if not impossible. Throwing a ball is the single most important skill in baseball. If you can't do it properly you risk injury and you will struggle with the game as you get older.

- One of the best pitching coaches in BC feels pitchers at this age should continue to work out of the stretch...right up to age 17 – 18. I don't personally endorse that view point...conversely...there is nothing wrong with it provided the leg raise is done properly. You need to develop some “coil” in the leg lift. To do that: your

left pant pocket (RHP) should be seen by the batter...or...the digits on your uniform top. All other mechanical check points remain the same as the MOSQUITO list above.

- For those incorporating a “full wind up”...the feet are shoulder width apart with the shoulders at a 45 degree angle facing the plate. The feet are on top of the pitching rubber. For a RHP the left foot comes back no more than six to eight inches MAX; the front foot turns and falls into the hole in front of the rubber and the left leg LIFTS (doesn't kick) to present the left pant leg pocket to the hitter. This is a coiled position.
- The throwing hand, which has been holding the ball inside the pitcher's glove, separates from the glove when the leg begins to come down. The foot moves forward (it does NOT swing out to the side). The front foot should land (ball of the foot...not the whole flat foot at once) firmly at a 45 degree angle on a flexed front knee...on a “straight line.” The front foot should land in the same spot EVERY time...that is consistency. Without the same landing spot your control will be all over the map.
- At hand separation: the throwing hand goes DOWN with the thumb brushing the thigh and the hand then coming up in a nice easy circle with fingers on top of the ball: thumb the thigh fingers to the sky.
- Make sure the GLOVE hand elbow is UP and pointing to the target. The glove fingers should be down. Do NOT tuck the glove into your body under your shoulder right away...this will cause you to open your shoulders too quickly and you will lose velocity and throw ‘with just your arm.’
- The landing of the front foot should be firm but flexed. The throwing hand should come past your left knee (RHP) and the outside of your landing leg...not the inside. Relax on the follow through...bend your back and stay down: don't not recoil your throwing arm...it must DEcelerate. If it does not you risk a shoulder injury. Too firm/stiff front leg will result in arm recoil or a spin type of follow through...often with the result a high pitch.

TEN COMMON FAULTS...with young pitchers...and old ones too!!

1. Leg lift: it is a LIFT...not a kick. The front foot hangs...it is pointed down...the LIFT should be consistent otherwise control problems will result. Don't rush the LIFT.
2. Head movement: your head should begin over your front foot and be centered in your body to give you balance. It should not tilt or lean to one side. Keep it straight and take it forward. If your head tilts your shoulders tilt...more control problems. Keep your eyes on the target...always.

3. Tilting your body forward or back: strive to have a straight back when you lift your leg during your wind up. Do not lean forward or back. Your chest should point toward the third base line.
 4. Hand separation: once your leg begins to go down your hands separate and your throwing hand goes DOWN (on back) to “thumb your thigh fingers to the sky.” Your throwing hand should be ear high with the fingers on top of the ball.
 5. Both elbows UP: the front (glove) elbow is UP pointing toward the target (home plate); the back elbow is UP shoulder high...the throwing hand is ear high with fingers on top of the ball...the front leg is down (on the ground); the chest is still pointed to the third base line...this is the power position.
 6. Stay closed: RHP chest is pointed to the third base line when the front foot lands. If you open too soon (shoulders face home plate) you lose lower body torque and subsequent velocity. If pitches are low and outside...usually you are opening too soon. If you are bouncing pitches you are gripping the ball too tightly.
 7. Pushing off the mound: do NOT push off the mound. Pushing off does NOT increase velocity. It does result in control problems.
 8. Front foot landing: if the front foot is too stiff or too loose you have a problem. Too stiff = high pitches and no follow through...the throwing hand does not get between the front knee and ankle. Too loose = shoulder stress and loss of velocity. Do NOT land on your heel. You want to land on the ball of your foot (this won't always happen). Stay “on the line” with your foot at a 45 degree angle.
 9. Follow through: the throwing hand should finish between your front knee and the ankle on the outside of your front leg. Do not throw and “recoil.” Recoil results in arm strain. Your arm needs to decelerate...otherwise a sore arm results.
 10. Fielding awareness: pitchers need to realize once they throw the ball they become fielders. An awareness as well as a good follow through will enhance their ability to field their position.
- There are many other aspects to consider...I have touched on some of the common ones. In my opinion (also shared by those who know what they are talking about): the two ABSOLUTE critical – vital – paramount fundamental features required to throw a ball correctly: (1) Shoulders sideways (lead shoulder facing the target) with the front elbow shoulder high pointing at the target (2) Throwing hand fingers ON TOP OF THE BALL...”thumb the thigh fingers to the sky.” If you don't observe those two things...”you ain't doin' it right and you ain't gonna have much success!”...(you will develop a sore arm)...sorry.
 - Young players need constant monitoring and constant reminding about proper mechanics. Don't be shy (be positive and encouraging) about correcting obvious faults. Critical: fingers on TOP of the ball.

JDS