

SIX STEPS TO THE PERFECT PITCH

In working with young pitchers, make clear that good pitching takes good practice. Pitching skills won't develop by just throwing the ball, but pitchers can learn by throwing at a target, facing a hitter and trying to use a consistent, correct delivery. Break the pitching motion down to six component skills.

Gripping the Ball -- Teach your players that holding the ball in their fingertips - as opposed to jamming it into the hand - will help them get good velocity and wrist snap for control. Have your pitchers vary their grips on the seams to experiment with the fastball and change - ups. For example, gripping the width seams causes the pitch to sink; gripping the ball across the seams makes the pitch appear to rise.

Delivery -- As with general throws from the field of play, the overhand delivery is the most effective throwing motion for young pitchers. The overhand technique ensures maximum control and puts less strain on young arms.

Windup -- The pitching motion begins with the windup. Keeping the front part of the ball side foot in contact with the plate side of the pitching rubber, the pitcher shifts the weight to the back leg and takes a backward step.

Pivot -- The pivot is the most essential part of the pitching motion. During the pivot, the pitcher keeps the weight balanced and eyes towards the target. The pitcher pivots on the ball of the front (ball side) foot to turn it parallel to the rubber. At this point, the pitcher shifts the weight forward onto the pivot foot and lifts the opposite leg into the air.

Stride -- From the pivot and leg lift, the pitcher must drive the back foot off the rubber and stride toward the plate with the leg kick. The length of the stride depends on the height of the pitcher and what feels most comfortable. Too long a stride makes the ball go high; too short a stride makes the ball go low. Have your pitchers experiment to find what works best. During the striding motion, the stride or the glove side foot remains closed (the stride foot points towards third base for a right handed pitcher). The moment before the foot lands, it opens and points towards the plate. When the foot opens, the hips open, which brings the upper body through. The toe and heel of the striding foot should land simultaneously (although the ball of the foot takes most of the shock), lands in the same spot with each pitch and land softly to avoid any jarring in the delivery. The front knee bends so it can absorb the impact of landing with full weight on the front foot. Keeping the knee straight causes undue stress and strain on the front leg.

Follow-Through -- A good follow-through is critical for speed, control, and proper fielding position. As the pitcher releases the ball, the wrist snaps after coming over the top. The arm snaps across the body, and, ideally, the pivot, (ball side) foot swings around to a position that squares the pitcher up to the plate. The pitcher's eyes must be on the target in preparation to field any balls hit back to the mound.

Advanced pitchers can be concerned with the location of their pitches (for example, outside corner). Young pitchers should simply focus on getting the ball across the plate, in the strike zone. Here are some key points to emphasize with young pitchers:

- Make sure the catcher is in the crouching position, providing a target (mitt) at all times.
- Use the legs, not the arm, to shift the weight toward the plate.
- Be relaxed and in control throughout the pitching motion.
- Keep your eyes on the target throughout the pitching motion.
- Don't overthrow.
- Follow through and be ready to field at the end of the motion.
- Make the first pitch a strike every time to get ahead of the batter.